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Corporate Language Policy in a Globalised Era : *Lingua Franca*, Multilingualism or else?

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Abstract

This paper aims to develop a critical review of the English mandate policy for global corporations or companies aspiring to go global. More precisely, this paper draws on relevant theoretical frameworks to critically examine the *Englishnization* project of Rakuten, a Japanese Internet conglomerate.

Given that all employees are required to speak a single language – in most cases English in today’s context – the English mandate is likely to bring both benefits and backlash. The benefits include efficiency and global coverage, whereas the backlash includes challenges and resistance from a workforce unwilling to adopt the imposed language. The existence of a local language may also pose a major challenge to the English mandate.

Rakuten’s *Englishnization* experienced mixed reception from the public. Although some praised *Englishnization* as an overall success, others who believe that English is not the best choice for the Japanese workforce criticised the project. Careful investigations reveal that such criticisms are based on cultural, political, and sometimes ideological beliefs. In contrast, it will turn out that *Englishnization* successfully diversified their workforce in terms of nationalities represented. Moreover, recent studies indicate new perspectives on bilingualism, and an English mandate such as Rakuten’s can improve an organisation’s overall performance if it allows employment of all multilingual resources available.

I Introduction

‘[. . .] the decree should be written on a stela of hard stone, in sacred writing, document writing, and Greek writing, and it should be set up in the first-class temples, the second-class temples and the third-class temples, next to the statue of the King, living forever’.
(Simpson n.d.)

The previous sentence, with many foregoing others constituting the decree of ancient Egyptian

Pharaoh Ptolemy V, was engraved in the Rosetta Stone a few thousand years ago in *three* different writings, i.e., hieroglyphic, demotic, and ancient Greek, to get the message across to the subjects of his kingdom (Anon n.d.). Strikingly, ancient Egypt had to resort to three different linguistic resources to fulfil the government's administrative needs. Even more striking, the type of language(s) that businesses also would or should use for their success today still seems an important and complicated issue.

Indeed, the past few decades have witnessed an increase in interest in the language policies of global business organisations. As the geographical, political, and economic boundaries throughout the world become more blurred, businesses must cater to more diverse needs of customers, employees, and other stakeholders. Given such an environment, the company's choice of language used to communicate with customers and employees becomes an important issue. In the Japanese context, the media has repeatedly featured Japanese companies determined to adopt English as their sole language, even for internal communications (Ohnsman 2013, for example). The Japanese public, including the media and 'Corporate Japan', has responded to this move with a mixed tone, including criticism that condemns it as 'stupid' (Neeley 2012 : 118).

Currently, language policies are regarded as important as other strategic aspects of a global business, such as operational excellence and public relations efforts, because they directly affect employees' (dis)satisfaction, commitment, and contribution to the organisation for which they work (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta 2012). A study on corporate language policies is hardly minor or marginal and can be a hot topic for global business communication studies, at least for the time being.

Thus, the current paper attempts to develop a critical review of one of today's typical corporate language policies – the English mandate – which requires all employees to speak or use English for their work, wherever they are and regardless of what they do. First, theoretical frameworks are introduced for the sake of the argument put forth in this paper. Then, an overview of a particular English mandate policy is presented. Finally, drawing on the foregoing theories and overviews, discussions are developed on a few unresolved issues regarding the English mandate.

II Theoretical frameworks for global corporate language strategies

Global corporations' language policies are a hot topic in current business studies and provide ample fodder for public debate. For the sake of argument in the current paper, I

introduce a recently presented tripartite classification, followed by an analysis of the idiosyncratic features of English as a *lingua franca* and the introduction of a new concept, *the local language paradox*.

II.1 Categorisation

Global businesses' language policies take a variety of forms and shapes, as does any other business strategy. A set of unique and innovative language or communication strategies carefully selected from myriads of approaches give any business a competitive edge in today's business context. One can easily imagine that a company selects either one language or many ; however, Janssens and Steyaert (2014) argue that corporate language policies can be placed in three different categories : 1) monological *lingua franca*, 2) monological multilingualism, and 3) *multilingual franca*. Whereas the first two are relatively well known to scholars and practitioners, the last category is a recent invention proposed by two researchers and others, making it worthy of close investigation on those terms.

However, before continuing, defining an important concept – *lingua franca* – apparent in the terms previously introduced might be useful. Historically, *lingua franca*, which literally means the language of the Franks, was a hybrid common language for trade spoken in the Mediterranean region from the 15th to the 19th centuries. *Lingua franca* was based on various languages, such as Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Turkish, Greek, Arabic, and Persian (Seidlhofer 2011, for example). In today's sociolinguistic context and inheriting its historical origin, *lingua franca* means a language used as a *common language* between speakers whose native languages are different (Jenkins 2007). As a shared, common language between speakers of different languages, *lingua franca* is a very important concept for understanding the following discussion.

According to Janssens and Steyaert (2014), monological *lingua franca* refers to the situation in which a common language and other accompanying practices are made mandatory for business communication on the assumption that the designated single language will – as a 'neutral communication vehicle' – remove the communication barriers generated by the diverse languages and cultures of the business stakeholders. Followers of monological *lingua franca* believe in the universality of citizens and cultures around the world (Janssens & Steyaert 2014). In today's business context, English tends to be such a designated, single common language (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta 2012, Neeley 2012 : 117, Neeley et al. 2012 : 236), and examples exist of companies and businesses that adopted English as their external/internal communication language, as subsequently discussed. When English is chosen as the

shared, common language, it is called English as a *lingua franca*, or ELF. The idiosyncratic features of ELF are analysed in a subsequent section.

In contrast, monological multilingualism acknowledges the multiple languages, customs, and cultures existing in any given business entity and attempts to give equal status to each of those co-existing linguistic, cultural ‘systems’ (Janssens & Steyaert 2014). Businesses that adopt such an approach are aware of – and perhaps cherish – the cultural and linguistic diversity and, therefore, the particularities of the people constituting the business. Finding companies implementing this approach is difficult because pursuing multilingualism, particularly when it is unrestricted, can be quite inefficient (Neeley 2012). Thus, for businesses that are efficiency-oriented in nature, adopting monological multilingualism is difficult. However, one such example outside the business circle is the European Union, which assumes and pursues multilingualism of as many as 24 languages within its organisation for historical, political, and ideological reasons, and spends significant funds on translation and interpreter activities every year (Ginsburgh & Weber 2011).

Janssens and Steyaert (2014) claim that both *lingua franca* and multilingualism as previously discussed are monological because they are mutually exclusive by definition. In other words, the choice of either of them is practically equal to the prioritisation of either ‘universality’ by *lingua franca* or ‘particularity’ by multilingualism. Although they seem to be two remote sets of values, what they stand on is quite similar.

Multilingual franca is unique because it does not take an *either-or* stance. Instead, it perceives language as a ‘social practice’ in which those involved in the communication process negotiate contextually and ‘manipulate the multilingual resources they have available to them’ to express their voice (Janssens & Steyaert 2014). Worth noting is that, in this context, *lingua franca* need not be single; instead, two or more sources of communication may exist, such as in a company in which the mix of English and Japanese functions as the *lingua franca* of the workplace (Otsuji & Pennycook 2011). Another salient difference with the aforementioned two approaches is that the choice of *either lingua franca-oriented universality or multilingualistic particularity* is not ideologically forced. Instead, a rather flexible stance is promoted regarding the linguistic sources available to interactants in corporate communication.

Table 1 provides a summary of the three approaches introduced thus far.

Among these classifications, the current paper’s main topic, i.e., the English mandate, is considered to fit the first classification – monological *lingua franca*. Therefore, English chosen as the sole common language within an organisation is addressed as ‘monological *lingua*

Table 1 Three research approaches to the study of language in international business (Janssens & Steyaert 2014)

	Research approaches		
	<i>Monological lingua franca</i>	<i>Monological multilingualism</i>	<i>Multilingual franca</i>
Main assumptions			
Language	Language as discrete, unified, pre-existing system	Language as discrete, unified, pre-existing system	Language as social practice
Globalization	Universality is given precedence over particularity	Appreciation for the particularity of multiple cultures within the universal	Entanglement of universality and particularity
Understanding linguistic performances in global settings			
Conception of global work setting	Global community in which individuals connect and engage	Space where individuals are adapted to recognize the different cultures	Site where local practices reflect global embeddedness and where the global cannot be thought of without the local
Conception of language	<i>Lingua Franca</i> as a unifying code	Multiple local languages as multiple codes	Language use or speakers' bricolage of multiple linguistic resources
Conception of multiple languages	Preference is given to a common <i>lingua franca</i> as it is the evident side of mutual understanding and the way to overcome linguistic diversity	Preference to parallel, coexisting linguistic systems and their adherent ideologies to overcome the danger of linguistic imperialism and hegemony	Translingual practices as the inventional use of multiple language varieties for purposeful, multivocal effect
Conception of communication	Language is a neutral vehicle to communicate	Language is connected to cultural meaning and power position	Language is negotiated, situated practice to express voice within socio-political context
Conception of corporate language policy	Strategic lingua franca policy	Inclusive policy of recognizing multiple local languages	Emancipatory politics through allowing mixed language use

franca English' in subsequent sections.

II.2 Monological *lingua franca* English

Examples of businesses adopting monological *lingua franca* English, the main focus of the current paper, are found extensively from Europe to Asia, including in 'Daimler AG, Kone Elevators, SAP, Siemens, Philips, Nokia, Alcatel-Lucent, Nissan, Technicolor, Rakuten and Microsoft in Beijing' (Neeley et al. 2012). Worth noting is that the examples listed include companies originating from and primarily operating in a country or region located in what Indian-origin sociolinguist Braj Kachru calls the expanding circle. According to Crystal (2012), the expanding circle includes '[. . .] nations which recognise the importance of English as an international language, though they do not have a history of colonisation by members of the inner circle, nor have they given English any special administrative status [. . .] [so] English is taught as a foreign language' (p.60). In other words, the expanding circle includes companies determined to adopt English as the monological *lingua franca* for their internal communications in a country in which the language holds no official status and, therefore, is not spoken as a mother tongue by almost everyone.

Such a strategy infers a very important aspect of monological *lingua franca* English, i.e.,

English shared and used by non-native speakers. Researchers such as Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) call English spoken by business people who are non-native speakers of English ‘Business English as a Lingua Franca’ (BELF), and summarise its features as follows : 1) complicated structures are avoided, 2) it is highly specialised, and 3) it reflects the ‘mother tongue discourse practices’ of the interactants. They perceive BELF as a kind of ‘simplified English’ in which ‘successful communication’ is prioritised over ‘complicated phraseology, idiomatic expressions, [. . .] complex sentence structures [. . .] [and] grammatical correctness’, as confirmed in the following quotation : ‘[a]s long as the core message gets across, your English doesn’t need to be perfect’ (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta 2012 : 266). In fact, some argue that native speaker-like idioms, expressions, and usage of English may sometimes function counterproductively when English is used as a *lingua franca* (Deterding 2013 : 98).

Such an approach poses a critical challenge to the traditional view of English or English language learning. Traditionally, second- or foreign-language speakers of English in the world learnt the language to communicate and trade with nations of advanced economies, in which English *happened to* be the first language ; therefore, the primary purpose of English language learning was to assimilate to native speaker norms (Crystal 2012). Seidlhofer (2011) contrasts such traditional English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) approach and the English-as-a-lingua-franca (ELF) approach, arguing that the former assumes non-native speakers’ imitation or adoption of native-speaker norms, whereas the latter prioritises the accommodation of or adaptation to speakers of different languages and from different cultures in the communication process (18). This argument infers that, as far as the ELF approach is concerned, non-native speakers of English may depart from the rules and norms provided by native speakers and may eventually begin to use English more freely and creatively, as Deterding (2013) reports of non-native speakers’ ‘innovative’ or inventive use of English in terms of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and so forth. Higher English takes off as a *lingua franca*, and lower English is learnt as a foreign language (Graddol 2006).

The deviation from, or even the denial of, native speaker authority inherent in ELF-related concepts sometimes makes ELF itself a less favourable choice because ELF or any other English spoken by non-native speakers seems like diminished, impoverished, or pidginised varieties (Tsuda 2006 : 19, Torikai 2010 : 27, Seidlhofer 2011 : 200, Deterding 2013 : 168). Such negative views of ELF are typically emphasised by critics against the English mandate policies, as subsequently discussed.

II.3 *The Local Language Paradox*

Whether with *lingua franca* or multilingualism, a powerful local language, if any, makes the English mandate less justifiable or more vulnerable in global business communications. Examples of such local languages include the Japanese language for a Japanese company and the Nordic language for Scandinavian businesses. In such scenarios, employees are required to speak English or any other *lingua franca*, whereas the local language is shared by the majority of the people concerned. The most prominent factor that makes such a local language a threat to the choice of English is the employees or other stakeholders who, especially when from the local community, might enjoy significantly more benefits by choosing the local language – more often than not their mother tongue – than using English.

Generally, people are believed to perform better in their first language than in their second or foreign language(s). The mother tongue is the first language that individuals learn when in the arms of their mothers and is the most embracing vehicle for humankind to use when voyaging to the outer world. Keysar et al. (2012) claim that, although individuals speak and think spontaneously or intuitively in their first language, they *have to* behave more deliberately in a second or foreign language. Some argue that non-native speakers require a significantly longer amount of time to understand a message addressed to them and to construct their own message in a foreign/second language, tasks that native speakers have no trouble with, thus giving control of the communication to native speakers (Torikai 2010 : 37, for example). For most people, the first language is a much more useful and powerful choice in a professional context, whereas monological *lingua franca* English or any other linguistic alternative may cause deterioration of the mental or performance level.

Another issue is *code switching*, which is ‘the practice of moving back and forth between two languages or two dialects or registers of the same language’ (Nordquist n.d.). In reference to multilingual societies such as Brunei, Deterding (2013) argues that, when the interactants know that they share more than two languages, code-switching between those shared languages is regular and natural ; therefore, avoiding code-switching or sticking to one language is regarded as strange or ‘putting on airs’, particularly in informal settings (123). This concept applies to the English mandate environment. When employees know that they share both their local language and English, imposing on them the requirement to speak English is only likely to create uncomfortable feelings in the workplace.

Therefore, using English in the presence of the other shared tongue, particularly when it is the local mother tongue, is paradoxical. For the sake of argument, I call this phenomenon the *local language paradox* in the English mandate policy. The local language paradox was

publicly asserted in 2010 by Takanobu Ito, CEO and President of Japanese automobile giant Honda, who condemned a Japanese company's English-mandate policy by stating that, '[i]t's stupid for a Japanese company to only use English in Japan when the workforce is mainly Japanese' (Neeley 2012 : 118). Such a criticism is also echoed by studies, such as Tsuda (2006) and Torikai (2010), which maintain the view that ELF is a less favourable variety.

III Current climate of the English mandate – Rakuten's case

As previously discussed, a number of examples exist throughout the world of the implementation of an English mandate policy. This paper critically examines the case of Rakuten, a Japanese Internet company, because its language policy stirred a public debate in Japan and throughout the world.

III.1 Rationales

As discussed so far, the English mandate policy can be a radical and sometimes even problematic choice. However, several possible rationales exist for adopting such a policy. Mikitani (2012), the founder of Rakuten, reflects on his rationale as follows. First, a rapidly shrinking Japanese market drove him to adopt new initiatives as soon as possible. As is presented in a Goldman Sachs' report, Japan's share in the world's GDP is expected to decrease from approximately 12% in 2006 to 3% in 2050 from the rapidly shrinking Japanese population. Therefore, Mikitani saw little hope in the domestic market and developed the belief that entering the overseas market, which is 20 times larger than Japan's entire market, is a key success factor to making Rakuten a truly global player with a broad worldwide customer base, rather than just a competent player in the Japanese domestic market. Although Rakuten had expanded into the global market by then through a series of mergers and acquisitions (M&A) (Neeley 2012 : 118), Mikitani believed that he need to take a further step and, thus, concluded that English is mandatory for his company.

Second, Mikitani thought that communication efficiency could be improved if all employees speak English as a common language. Although Rakuten's employees were already engaged in a global business by then, translators and interpreters were regularly hired for a knowledge-sharing process in which employees' ideas and opinions were exchanged face-to-face or through documents, thus offsetting the speed and productivity brought by Internet technology, i.e., the business' main service and strength. The process failed to efficiently use resources because, as Kameda (2009) points out, constantly hiring translators and interpreters is

problematic in terms of cost. Thus, the improvement in efficiency related to knowledge sharing became a grave matter (Katsuragi 2013). To Mikitani, the monological *lingua franca* English seemed an answer to this problem.

In fact, Mikitani also believed that Japanese functioned as a language barrier to attracting global talent, which he believed was required for global success. Given the nature of the company's primary domain, i.e., the Internet business, in which creativity and constant innovation are required to produce original services, Mikitani believed that continuous intake of talent from around the world was vital. In his view, language was an issue. Previously, Mikitani believed that Japanese was sufficient to maintaining Rakuten's business, and he demanded that non-Japanese employees learn Japanese. He also hired translators and interpreters when necessary, as previously mentioned. However, as Rakuten's expansion overseas continued, he realised that language was an obstacle not only in terms of recruiting global talent but also in developing corporate solidarity across all of the employees who were already globalised to a certain degree. To Mikitani, changing the corporate language from Japanese to English seemed reasonable.

Finally, Mikitani believed that an English-only policy would change how his employees saw the world and eventually lead to a more global mind-set. One of the drives that induced Mikitani to think in such a manner was the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posits that the language(s) that one speaks influence how s/he thinks or behaves (Mikitani 2012, Pavlenko 2014 : 13). In addition, Mikitani believed that English, i.e., a language much more frank and far less honorific than Japanese, is more suitable for the upfront and speedy communication style that Rakuten needed to be a truly global company. In this regard, Mikitani believed that the change from Japanese to English was for the benefit of both his company and all of Japan, and he believed that he was responsible for making his company and his country more global (Mikitani 2012, Neeley 2012 : 118).

Another element worth noting about Mikitani's rationale is that he deems English quite functional. The functionalist view on English assumes that the language is nothing more than a neutral tool or function for business (Tsuda 2006). Mikitani's own remark was, '*takaga eigo* (it's only English, after all)', which well explains his functionalistic view. Moreover, his statement that Rakuten employees should try to speak not *perfect* English but *Globish*, a variety of business English spoken by non-native speakers with a small vocabulary of 1,500 selected words and simple grammar (Mikitani 2012), confirms his functionalist approach to English. Mikitani's view also matches the definitions of BELF by Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) as mentioned in the previous section. After all, for Mikitani, the son of

an economics professor who gave him the chance to live in the United States with his family and a Harvard MBA, learning and speaking English for work was a natural life choice. However, in the beginning, as Mikitani (2012) reflected on himself, he did not expect that his decision would create such turmoil.

III.2 Implementation

As drastic as it is challenging is the implementation of an ambitious corporate language policy, such as Rakuten's *Englishnization*. Since its inception in January 2010, when Mikitani announced that English would be the sole official language for internal communications effective that year, the policy has attracted significant public attention. Such intense attention is attributable to factors including the policy's radicalism, thoroughness, ambition, and so forth. However, one possible reason is that the company originated and operates in the expanding circle, as previously mentioned.

Before investigating Rakuten's language policy, a brief overview of the company is useful. Rakuten, founded by Hiroshi Mikitani, began in 1997 as a small start-up with only five employees. As of 2012, headquartered in Tokyo, the company employed more than 8,000 people worldwide, and had a market capitalisation equivalent to approximately USD 14 billion. Its business domains include e-commerce, travel services, banking, and finance, to name a few (Katsuragi 2013). Although the company is young, it is considered one of the leading Japanese Internet companies.

Despite his own reflection in 2012 in which he concludes that *Englishnization* was a success (Mikitani 2012), the path taken was rather rocky. As Mikitani recalls, when he announced the new policy in January 2010, not many of his employees took it seriously (Mikitani 2012). However, a series of actions occurred soon after, including the '[o]vernight' replacement of cafeteria menus written in Japanese with an English version, and the rather abrupt announcement of TOEIC score goals for all employees, from executives to new recruits, depending on their positions and levels, which were to be achieved within two years; failure to meet these goals resulted in 'demotion or even dismissal' (Neeley 2012 : 118). Subsequently, in a gradual but quick manner, English penetrated various scenes and events of Rakuten's daily operation, including board/executive meetings at which important decisions are made, and internal all-company meetings called '*chōkai*' (morning meeting) at which knowledge sharing occurs (Matsutani 2012, Katsuragi 2013 : 14). To fully enforce the new initiative, Mikitani even forbade executives to speak any Japanese in the English-only meetings (Mikitani 2012).

Such a thorough and sometimes draconian initiative was naturally subject to backlash. Neeley (2012) reports the frustrations and anxieties felt by Rakuten's employees that arose from the lost confidence in their feeble English proficiency, the perceived denial of their national pride, and the fear of job security (118). In fact, some people did not want to follow the policy and eventually left the company, although staff turnover was much lower than expected (Matsutani 2012). Drawbacks such as these are not unique to Rakuten but are universal. After observing several similar cases worldwide, Neeley et al. (2012) claim that the English-only policy 'hurts' employees who are not particularly good at speaking English by making them feel: 1) restricted and reduced as an independent, contributing member of the organisation and 2) apprehensive and anxious about their future job security (237–238). These feelings can eventually lead to an 'unhealthy divide between native and non-native speakers' and damaged overall productivity (Neeley 2012 : 124).

The overall result of this endeavour is, at least in the view of Mikitani (2012), a success. Employees' average TOEIC scores improved by 32% between 2010 and 2012 (Wakabayashi 2012), and the overall English proficiency of Rakuten employees seems to have improved to a certain degree. Recruitment efforts also seem to have paid off. As of 2012, half of the six executives in their engineering departments were non-Japanese individuals who did not speak Japanese at all (Neeley 2012 : 118). As of April 2012, more than 70% of the entire workforce at Rakuten engaged in daily operations in English (Mikitani 2012). As of 2014, the workforce was diversified, as represented by the fact that more than 80% of Rakuten's new mid-career engineers are non-Japanese, and the growth of gross merchandising sales both in Japan and overseas is attributed to the company's English-mandate policy (Rakuten n.d.).

III.3 Reception

As previously discussed, a monological *lingua franca* English policy can receive a mixed reception from the media and the public, as did Rakuten's *Englishnization*. Neeley (2012) concludes that Rakuten's decision to adopt English, the fastest growing language in the history of humankind, was in line with its needs and the pressures it faced to globalise and was, after all, successful: '[t]he English mandate has allowed Mikitani to create a remarkably diverse and powerful organization' (118). Drawing on the case of Rakuten and other companies that adopted similar policies, Neeley (2012) suggests that a successful single language policy should involve: 1) commitment of the entire workforce, 2) management's responsibility to fully enforce the policy, 3) native speakers' adjustment, and 4) full compliance of non-native speakers (121).

However, criticisms are also in order. Among well-known critics, Torikai (2010) condemns this move because she believes that it unilaterally benefits native speakers in the communication process. She argues that one's thoughts are best formulated and articulated in one's mother tongue because the second/foreign language proficiency never suffices to express the subtle, delicate ideas (36–37). To improve English proficiency, non-native speakers such as the Japanese should migrate to inner circle countries to be able to slightly upgrade their shabby position in the English proficiency pyramid to the top, where native speakers reign (29). Except for executives, who account for only 3% of the entire workforce, the remaining mediocre Japanese who primarily deal with local customers, have no need for English proficiency (74–75); therefore, they should carry out meetings or press conferences solely in Japanese or, at most, with professional translators and interpreters – but never only in English (15). Torikai (2010) also fundamentally disagrees with Mikitani's belief that English, with its frank and upfront rhetoric, is more suitable than Japanese for efficiency-oriented business communication (12). Her ideal sociolinguistic situation is the EU-like monolingual multilingualism, in which all languages have equal status and which represents the one truly sustainable situation because expressing one's thoughts in one's mother tongue is a fundamental human right acknowledged by the United Nations (41).

Another group of critics claims that English-only policies promote the linguistic imperialism of English. In fact, long before Rakuten's *Englishization*, Tsuda (2006) argues that English as the world's standard language is equal to the hegemony, or even imperialism, of English over all other languages and cultures throughout the world. Under this hegemony, non-native speakers who will never be able to speak English like native speakers are seriously disadvantaged, leading to the unfair distribution of wealth and inequality among the world's citizens (Tsuda 2006 : 12). Because English often affects the vocabulary, rhetoric, and views of speakers of other languages (Tsuda 2006 : 44–45, 102), the world's cultures are being and will be further Americanised (63) or, in the worst-case scenario, wiped off the earth (50). Moreover, Tsuda (2006) predicts that if English is made an official language of Japan or a compulsory subject in Japanese primary education in the near future, the younger generations will sooner or later become bilingual and may eventually abandon Japanese, a fairly significant language in the world today (60–61). Worth noting is that Tsuda (2006) also condemns English as a *lingua franca* approach through which the native speaker authority tends to be discounted, thus promoting English divide because ELF will never be given equal status to other, more prestigious native-speaker varieties, such as American or British English. Thus, ELF will end up being another discriminated version of lesser English (18).

Furthermore, Tsuda (2006) claims that ELF promoters, especially in Japan, can be latent nationalists who insist that national virtues should be advertised using localised, nativised English, thus giving such an approach no value (18). He also describes the situation in which the Japanese speak English even when in Japan as self-orientalism (144–145).

More generally, other critics argue that monological *lingua franca*, such as the English mandate, ignores the profound relationship between language and culture, or that imposing a single language is simply wrong (Anon 2012 b).

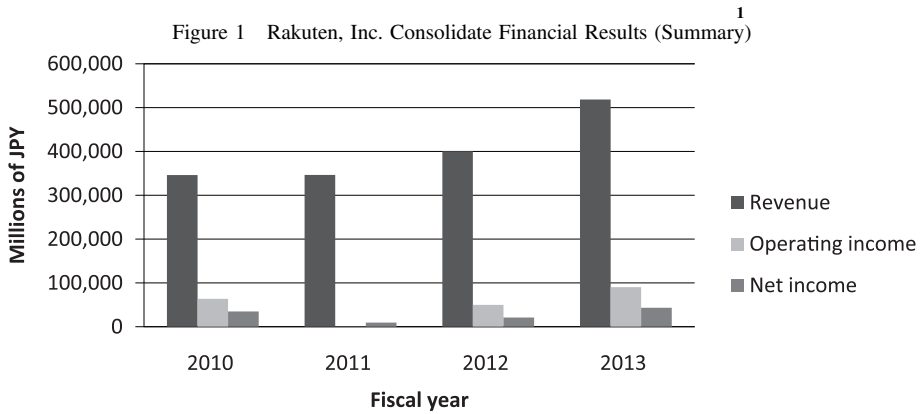
IV Issues related to the English mandate

The English mandate policy has had a mixed reception, as previously discussed. In this section, I critically review the arguments from both proponents and opponents of the English mandate and address a remaining, fundamental problem, i.e., the local language paradox. Finally, I attempt to present an alternative view of the corporate language policy.

IV.1 Review

First, as Rakuten claims, *Englishnization* seems to have contributed to the diversification of the company's workforce (Rakuten n.d.). However, its contribution to the growth of their business is unclear, especially in terms of finance. The company's recent financial performance review, as shown in Figure 1: Rakuten, Inc. Consolidate Financial Results, indicates that growth in revenue, operating income, and net income was firm and steady during the 2010 inception of *Englishnization* and during 2012. The influence of the Great East Japan Earthquake on 2011 results was compensated by expansion overseas through vigorous M&A activity (Anon 2012 a). The steep increase in revenue from 2012 to 2013 is the result of enlargement of the customer base and large sales events executed in the company's e-retail domain (Anon 2014). As previously mentioned, although the company claims that its gross merchandise sales growth is the result of diversification from *Englishnization* (Rakuten n.d.), Rakuten had already engaged in overseas M&A activity before 2010 (Rakuten n.d.). Therefore, the degree to which, if any, the language policy and the accompanying diversification contributed to Rakuten's financial growth cannot be determined.

Rakuten's claim regarding improvements in employees' English proficiency should also be subject to critical investigation. Although TOEIC is a relatively well-known test of English, particularly in the Japanese industry and, in fact, one in which Rakuten's employees improved significantly, it has its own shortcomings. Therefore, we must carefully interpret the true



indication of the improvement in the score regarding Rakuten employees' English proficiency (Sato 2013).

Criticisms against the English mandate policy are also flawed. Both Tsuda (2006) and Torikai (2010) suggest that translators and interpreters should be employed more in the business process instead of with a single language policy; however, hiring such linguistic professionals, particularly good ones, is expensive. Therefore, such hiring does not support the cost- and efficiency-orientation of the business. Given today's 'rampant' globalisation that has resulted in national or ethnic consumer pride (Cleveland et al. 2015), Tsuda's and Torikai's belief in monological multilingualism is understandable or probably even right in light of political correctness. However, again, unlimited multilingualism is expensive (Ginsburgh & Weber 2011, Neeley 2012 : 119). Crystal (2012) argues that unlimited multilingualism is viable when 'only two or three languages are in contact' but is not a practical solution for communities in which many languages are spoken. Therefore, multilingualism may be possible for organisations such as the EU, which can afford the more than one billion euros cost – as of 2005 – to hire 2,500 staff annually for translation and interpretation (Ginsburgh & Weber 2011), but is impractical for businesses which have to be cost-oriented by nature.

Critics' implicit, or sometimes explicit, worship of native-speaker authority and their contempt for non-native speaker variety does not fit the reality of the business world. As Crystal (2012) argues, those who speak English as a second or foreign language outnumber native speakers by three times, thus, 'no one can now claim sole ownership' of English. In fact, English is estimated to be used on far more occasions involving only non-native speakers than in settings involving native speakers (Haberland 2011 : 939). Non-native speakers are now producing innovative or creative expressions that deviate from native speaker norms (Deterding 2013), thus contributing to the expansion of the English vocabulary. In fact, the

¹ IFRS is applied except for the 2010 results.

Globish variety was born from the communication between non-native speakers (Nerriere & Hon 2009). In contradiction to the imperialistic view that some critics hold against English as the standard global language, Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) argue that, to use English in business settings (BELF), its neutrality stands out, even compared with ELF (264). The dynamics of global business communication significantly differs from what critics against the English-mandate policy apprehend.

As discussed, on the one hand, praise for the English mandate lacks numerical or financial evidence of its success, although the policy clearly contributes to workforce diversification and enhancing employees' English proficiency. On the other hand, opponents hold quite idealistic and ideological views of corporate language policy and fail to respond to the fundamental needs and realities of the business world. However, despite all possible flaws on both sides, both parties are able to predict one common negative factor of the single language policy. Neeley, Tsuda, and Torikai all point to the possibility that productivity might decline because of the English mandate – a point related to the local language paradox previously introduced.

IV.2 Discussion

The local language paradox is a concept introduced in the current paper to address a fundamental problem inherent in the English mandate policy in communities with a powerful, more reasonable, and sometimes even better alternative – the local mother tongue. For example, this problem applies when employees of a company are forced by management to speak a second or foreign language despite the existence of a local tongue, such as *Englishnization* at Rakuten, for the purposes of smoother global business communication. Although this mandate has justifiable rationales, as previously discussed, it also brings undesirable results to the business.

Proponents of the English mandate, such as Neeley (2012), let alone opponents, admit that the policy could cause a variety of repercussions arising from both native and non-native speakers. Even if those obstacles are eventually eliminated and the policy contributes to workforce diversification in the end, does this result come at too high a cost? The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which Mikitani (2012) himself refers to, plays a key role in answering this question.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis assumes that the language one speaks affects his or her cognitive and behavioural process, and this assumption is one of the triggers that drove Mikitani to attempt the English mandate. Through the mandate, Mikitani (2012) expected his employees to obtain new perspectives, broaden their cognitive capacity, and depart from the

ways they used to see things when they spoke only Japanese (Mikitani 2012). Among the rationales of the English mandate discussed in the previous section, the change in the cognitive/behavioural pattern of employees is different from the other two rationales – expansion into overseas markets and workforce diversification. The first rationale is about changes within individuals, whereas the latter two relate to organisational performance.

Generally, people demonstrate better proficiency in their mother tongue because they must think less automatically and more deliberately or analytically in a second or foreign language (Keysar et al. 2012). From a neurosurgical perspective, a first language and a second language, especially those learnt in adulthood, are known to be processed in different parts of the brain, and the processing of a second language takes more time (Ijalba et al. 2013 : 71). Moreover, adult second language learners arguably cannot develop native-like proficiency in some areas, such as pronunciation (Runnqvist et al. 2013 : 257). This statement infers that company employees, who are adults and are past the best period of their lives for learning a new language, have little hope for developing second language proficiency to the level that they can fully operate in the workplace. From these perspectives, the choice of an imposed second or foreign language over one's mother tongue – regardless of the how globally the imposed language is spoken – is less justifiable.

However, some researchers argue that certain contexts exist in which second or foreign language speakers outperform native speakers. Keysar et al. (2012) claim that the time-consuming nature of thinking in or speaking a second language, i.e., deliberation and analysis, reduces emotional influences and, thus, leads to more rational and better decision making than in the first language. Lazar et al. (2014) draws on Keysar et al. (2012) and confirms the same tendency among second language speakers. These studies imply that, in contrast to general assumptions, whether people perform better in the second language than in the mother tongue depends on the context.

This paper also sheds a new light on the assumptions for and definitions of bilingualism. In prevailing assumptions, people perform lower when using a second language than when using the mother tongue and develop less in the second language, never reaching the level achieved in with first language, as previously argued. Common sense dictates that a bilingual person is 'someone who has learned two languages since birth and has a balanced knowledge and use of those two languages' (Montrul 2013 : 168). Yet, this definition of bilingualism is rather narrow.

However, recent studies in linguistics indicate that some people become bilingual in adulthood, and they are considered *late bilinguals* (Goto Butler 2013 : 112–113). In fact,

some researchers cast doubt on the existence of a critical period, i.e., ‘a limited developmental window during which native-like language attainment is possible’ (Goto Butler 2013 : 123), which determines the boundary between early bilinguals and late bilinguals. This critical period threatens the validity of the common belief that children are always better language learners than adults are.

Furthermore, researchers now argue that late bilinguals can acquire ‘subtle aspects’ of the second language (Kroll & Dussias 2013 : 217). In addition, an increasing amount of research indicates that the first language influences the understanding of the second language, and vice versa – the second language affects the usage of the first language, thus indicating that the two languages interact in the bilingual mind (Kroll & Dussias 2013 : 217). All such fruits of recent research imply that being bilingual is a far more broadly definable concept, as follows :

[. . .] anyone who actively uses two languages at a relatively proficient level will be included, regardless of the age at which the L2 was acquired, the circumstances of immersion, or the relative dominance of one language to the other. (Kroll & Dussias 2013 : 217)

This broader definition of bilingualism clarifies the concept that language learning gives us newer perspectives and broadened cognitive capacity regardless of our age, location, and activities. This broader definition of bilingualism indicates exactly why and how the English mandate positively enhances a company’s overall performance, despite the local language paradox. If the purpose is to nurture employees’ bilingualism to destruct their biases, unsaid assumptions, worldviews, and values, then the company can benefit from newer types of innovations and breakthroughs that would never result from a monolingual workforce. Whether or not Mikitani was fully aware of this condition when he decided to adopt the English mandate, I would say that he made the correct decision.

IV.3 Proposal

Neeley et al. (2012) conclude that, for the English mandate to be successful, the following factors are required: 1) empathy between native and non-native speakers, 2) help and compromise of the native speakers to speak in a manner that non-native speakers can understand, 3) full commitment and compliance of non-native speakers to speak only English, and 4) a safe environment for communication (240–241). Although all essential factors, completely absent in their illustration is native speakers’ commitment to learn local languages

and local cultures.

The language and the rhetoric one employs are influenced by the culture(s) from which one comes. Kameda (2014), by analysing the rhetoric that the Japanese typically employ when speaking English, well explains how culture influences language and communication. He infers that conversion or unification of the language to be used in an organisation is not sufficient if the process is not supported by a cultural understanding, or at least an attitude to learn a cultures other than one's own. In Neeley et al. (2012), such an attitude from the native speakers' side is completely missing. In their depiction, the non-native speakers do their best to adjust to the English mandate, and the native speakers are required only to accommodate the non-native speakers' efforts – a situation that certainly does not give an organisation a competitive edge.

Monological, unrestricted multilingualism is impractical and, in most cases, too expensive for businesses, as previously argued. Therefore, the single language policy can be an attractive option for a global company. However, implementing the English mandate as a monological *lingua franca* policy creates a situation in which a monolingual workforce is transforming into another monolingual workforce, with just a different language being spoken. In such an organisation, the merits of bilingualism, such as stretched cognitive capacities, innovations, and employee breakthroughs, are present only in a limited manner.

Therefore, Janssens and Steyaert's (2014) *multilingual franca* approach may be a persuasive alternative for global companies. In this approach, as explained at the beginning of this paper, multiple languages are regarded as a combined source for communication, indicating that all interactants in the communication are expected to behave as bilinguals or multilinguals. In other words, the choice is not for *either* monological *lingua franca* or unrestricted multilingualism, but is the pursuit of the benefit of *both* the efficiency of a single language policy *and* the richness of multilingual resources. To participate in such a communication environment, everyone should learn different languages, cultures, or values regardless of their nationalities, ethnicities, positions, and first/second/foreign languages, regardless of whether they are expatriates or from the local area.

In the case of Rakuten, the use of Japanese seems suppressed, at least at this stage, as seen in Mikitani formally prohibiting executives from speaking Japanese in board meetings² (Mikitani 2012). However, at the same time, Rakuten is attempting to globally spread its knowledge, values, and philosophies, including those accumulated in Japanese before

2 In fact, the execution of the English mandate is reported to be rather 'spotty' at the lower levels, as in Neeley (2012) and Neeley et al. (2012).

Englishnization (Katsuragi 2013). Therefore, Rakuten's English mandate does not completely take a monological *lingua franca* approach but is rather a single language policy with an aspect of *multilingual franca*. This approach shows hope. If Rakuten's employees' bilingual proficiency improves and the multilingual resources of both native and non-native speakers improve in the future and become readily available, then an English mandate as strict as today's may no longer be necessary.

V Conclusion

The current paper has attempted to critically review the English mandate, a language policy implemented by global corporations or local companies aspiring to go global. More precisely, this paper draws on relevant theoretical frameworks to critically examine the *Englishnization* project of Rakuten, a Japanese e-commerce giant.

The English mandate is likely to result in both benefits and backlash because it requires all employees to speak a single *lingua franca*, in most cases English today. Because unrestricted multilingualism is expensive and impractical for businesses, a typical benefit realised by a single language policy is efficiency given that everyone speaks the same language, causing the language barrier to disappear. If English is chosen as the single language, then the company can literally expand its geographical coverage on a global scale because English is the fastest growing *lingua franca* in human history. In contrast, imposing a single language on the workforce regardless of employees' English proficiency may result in internal challenges, resistance, undesirable divides, and other issues as repercussions of such a strict policy.

A fundamental issue in the English mandate is that, if another language is widely shared among employees, such as the local mother tongue, then forcing employees to speak only English may result in restrained productivity and uncomfortable feelings in the workplace. In the current paper, the author calls this phenomenon *the local language paradox*.

Rakuten's *Englishnization* has received a mixed reception from the public in Japan and throughout the world. Although some researchers praise the policy as an overall success, it has received harsh criticism from those who believe that English is not the best choice for the Japanese workforce. Careful investigations reveal that such criticisms are based on cultural, political, and sometimes ideological beliefs. In contrast, although the degree to which the language policy has contributed to the company's financial performance is unclear, it has certainly diversified the workforce in terms of ethnicities and nationalities represented. Moreover, recent studies present different views on bilingualism, which posit that language

learning in adulthood can still contribute to one's cognitive development. Therefore, the influence of an English mandate such as Rakuten's on each employee's cognitive and behavioural patterns can improve the organisation's entire performance if it does not suppress but rather manages to exploit all available multilingual resources. After all, an effective corporate language policy in a globalised era should result in mutual understanding, firm solidarity, newer perspectives, broadened views, stretched capacities, further innovations, more breakthroughs, and so forth, to enhance both employees and the entire organisation.

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