



AN ANALYSIS OF THE
IMPLICATIONS OF ENGLISH AT THE
UN COP23 WHITE PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change held their twenty-third Conference of the Parties in November of 2017. One-hundred ninety-four parties, one observer state, 1,084 observer organizations, and 539 media organizations attended the conference (UNFCCC 2017a). Collectively, they spoke over 400 languages¹. However, translations were only offered in six of those languages, and only one was used as a common language of communication not only in negotiations, but through security lines, ordering food, checking a coat and basic maneuvering through the conference. Even for a casual observer, English dominance at the conference was almost undeniable. English proved to be a default language for effective communication. However, many present at the conference were not native English speakers, requiring them to communicate in a second or third language. We need to address the growing use of English and the hegemony it presents in world negotiation contexts, before results are irreversible.

This paper will examine the history of English as a language gaining international dominance, its role in international organizations, including the United Nations,

and the potential implications of a trajectory toward monolingual negotiations. A presentation and analysis of interviews with delegates at the 23rd Conference of the Parties (COP23) will supplement this historical research. These delegates come from a diversity of countries, linguistic backgrounds, and areas of the negotiations. In addition, two translators at COP23 were interviewed on their perspective on and experiences with language at the conference. These resources will inform a summation of the current issue and suggestions will be made to mitigate potentially negative effects in the future.

ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

English emerging in countries across the world is not a recent trend. The spread of English can easily be traced back to colonial times, as English speakers moved throughout the world spreading their language as they went. Then the rise of the US as a dominant world power and the fall of the Soviet Union further affirmed the power of the US and English (Pennycook 2017). As technology progressed, globalization connected people from around the world. English has emerged not only as a means of communicating with native speakers but also between nonnative speakers of different languages. When it is used in this way, English is considered a

¹ In the world, there are an estimated 6,000 living languages. Four hundred is based on an approximation of the number of languages spoken in

the countries that attended COP23 that have over one million speakers internationally (Carnegie Mellon Robotics Academy n.d.).

lingua franca (Pennycook 2017), a common language that both parties can understand. Very few would argue against the importance of English in today's society. From its dominance in academic publication (Ferguson 2007), to business meetings (Morrison 2016), to international negotiations (Crystal 2003), English is a critical part of most global interactions. Walking into a hotel where the host can help a customer in English or going to a restaurant in a foreign city where there will be English menus available for diners demonstrates the pervasiveness of English around the world (Crystal 2003). English is now the most widely taught foreign language in over 100 countries around the world (Crystal 2003). The rise in one language over others calls into question the equality of those interactions. With language comes power. Because of its past ties to British imperialism and current ties to corporatization and globalization, English wields power and prestige that other languages do not. Encouraging people around the world to teach and learn English in order to navigate systems of power is therefore not necessarily promoting a solution, but propagating a problem (Rubdy 2015).

PROBLEMS WITH A GLOBAL ENGLISH

The potential problems with the continuing spread of English focus on comfort and fluency differences and the resulting power imbalance. Those communicating in a second language may be unable to effectively negotiate or achieve a higher status generally. It is possible that people communicating in their native language will be able to think and

work quicker in English negotiations. They will not only have the upper hand in negotiations but also lay the groundwork to maintain higher status in the future (Crystal 2003). It will also likely take more time and more effort to draft written texts such as commitment proposals, for nonnative English speakers. In addition, negotiators may feel constricted linguistically by a limited vocabulary and an inability to fully express themselves (Ferguson 2007).

GROWTH OF ENGLISH IN THE UN

It is not surprising that the trajectory of language at the UN mirrors the spread of language in the world. In fact, the founding of the UN demonstrates a critical starting point for English language growth because prior to that time, there was less of a need for a common language. Founded in 1945, the UN was the biggest forum for international political communication. Following that were the founding of the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization. The creation of these international organizations pressed to the forefront the necessity for a lingua franca through which to conduct their business (Crystal 2003).

In 1946, the UN established Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish as official languages with French and English as the working languages. By 1973, Arabic was added as an official language and Russian, Spanish, and Chinese were included as working languages. Within the next two years, Arabic became a working language as well (United Nations 2017). The UN pledged equality among the six official languages, but

proceedings continued to shift toward monolingual English. This did not go unnoticed by parties to the UN. In 1995, 18 states wrote a letter on the subject to the secretary general of the UN which was published in *The Guardian*. In it, they addressed the dangers of sliding into virtually monolingual negotiations and requested that multilingualism be addressed at the next annual session of the general assembly taking place later that year. All but three of the complaining countries were francophone, meaning their primary language of communication, French, had once been a lingua franca, but had since been replaced by English (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 1996).

Despite explicit attention, the imbalances associated with the rise of English as a global language have also been demonstrated in the UN negotiations. Studies in the late 80s-early 90s found that those who had to present in English as a nonnative language were at a disadvantage to English speakers who presented in English (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 1996)². In addition, delegates to the most recent climate change negotiation conference, COP23, also noticed the differences in ease of communication for native and nonnative speakers.

VIEWES OF THE DELEGATES, COP23

Admasu Feyisa Anna was a finance delegate from Ethiopia. His native language is Amharic, and he said all finance negotiations

² This text references a number of studies including one by a UN interpreter on the disadvantages of people whose native language is not one of the six

had been conducted in English. A common language is important, but Anna believed that people could explain themselves better in their native language, and the negotiations would benefit from increased presence of multiple languages. Mayumi Quintos Natividad, a delegate from the Philippines with native languages of Tagalog, also believed language could act as a barrier for nonnative delegates not only because of limitations based on knowledge but also issues with understanding due to accents.

Both delegates from native English speaking countries, Leehi Yona from the United States, and Brian Sieben from Canada, perceived their proficiency in English as an acute advantage. “Most things are in English so I feel I have an advantage,” Sieben said. “If I was coming from a country where English was my second language or I was speaking through an interpreter, I suspect it would be fairly difficult to easily participate.” Sieben was no stranger to balancing language priorities in policy. He came from the Northwest Territory in Canada where there are 11 official languages, nine of them indigenous. Sieben cited vocabulary inconsistencies as a communication concern. Many of the words used in negotiation rooms are technical terms relating specifically to climate change. In addition to a lack of knowledge, certain languages may not even have words for such concepts.

Yona also believed native proficiency in English offered delegates an advantage. She

official UN languages (Piron 1994) and another about German scholars and the issues with presenting their work in English (Ammon 1989).

acknowledged the discrepancy between the support countries needed and their ability to employ English to accomplish that goal. For many small island nations, English is a secondary or tertiary language so though they are most affected by climate change, they are less effective in negotiations than larger native English-speaking countries. In addition, Yona suggested that a delegate's ability to understand UN processes and venue may be compromised if that delegate lacked a mastery of English, placing them farther behind English-speaking peers. "Everything about the UNFCCC space is English and that makes it very difficult to do anything here, not just the negotiations themselves," Yona said.

Interestingly, none of the interviewed delegates believed language was a barrier for them or members of their delegation. Though Anna (Ethiopia) and Natividad (Philippines) were not native speakers of English, they both explained that governmental matters in their respective countries were conducted in English, and as such, they were accustomed to the vocabulary and to presenting in the language. Saryono Hadiwidjoyo, a delegate from Indonesia, native language Bahasa, expressed similar confidence based on past experiences. He stated that representatives from Indonesia used English in all international matters and therefore he felt no disadvantage communication in English. In fact, Hadiwidjoyo went a step further by affirming that it was better to negotiate in a nonnative language because everyone would be able to participate.

There is some merit to this. An article published by the BBC (Morrison 2016) found

that native English speakers were often the worst at communicating with nonnative business partners in meetings. Nonnative speakers tended to understand each other better than native speakers because they maintained simplicity in presentation which promoted common understanding. This heightened level of understanding, however, was only present when nonnative speakers dominated the conversation. As the article pointed out, native speakers dominate meetings about 90 percent of the time. Based on observation of negotiations at COP23, it is likely that high percentage of native-English participation is reflected in UNFCCC negotiations as well.

VIEWS FROM THE INTERPRETERS, COP23

In addition to the delegates, language interpreters expressed awareness of the inequality among different languages. The UN hires interpreters with high fluency in multiple languages to perform simultaneous translation. This means that interpreters listen to a presentation then translate on the spot for the delegates. The UN provides headphones for those who need to listen to the translations. Translations at the negotiations were only offered in the six official languages.

Martine, who did not want to provide her last name for reasons of privacy, did simultaneous translation between French and English. She said there is a difference in how native and nonnative speakers navigate the conference, "It definitely gives native English speakers an advantage if everything is in English." Martine sees her role as essential to the conference because she

believes that interpreters have the potential to mitigate some of the disparities between native and nonnative speakers. “When you have interpreters, it shouldn’t make any difference,” she said, then added a caveat. “But my point is, you can’t have interpretation for every language. It’s just impossible.”

Zheng Chen, who did simultaneous interpretation between Chinese and English believes in the importance of the role of interpreters as well, but also sees a number of barriers to interpretation as the definitive solution. In addition to the constraint on capacity, Chen said a lack of foundational knowledge and understanding can impede successful translation. “For an interpreter like myself, I work for the conference, I don’t specialize in environmental protection or renewable energy.” She said the ideal situation would be to receive documents in advance and be able to meet with the speaker prior to the presentation so that interpreters would have the opportunity to ask questions about the subject matter and clarify points in the presentation.

FINDING A SOLUTION TO LINGUISTICALLY BASED INEQUALITY

These issues have been documented and continue to persist in the UN, but it is exceptionally important to find a solution for the UNFCCC proceedings specifically. While much of the UN negotiations may be looking for compromises between nations, the UNFCCC proceedings are looking for a solution for all nations. The outcomes of COPs are not nation-specific because global

climate change is not nation specific. It is important to find a solution that levels the playing field of participation, especially for small island and developing nations who are most immediately being affected by climate change. The impacts are global, the solutions are global, so the negotiations must be global as well.

Solutions must be multidimensional. It is not enough to improve communication for nonnative speakers of English. Since negotiations require all parties working together, native English speakers must also improve their ability to communicate. Solutions must also be realistic and cost effective. It is unrealistic to hire translators for all languages spoken at the conference as the UN is already one of the largest employer of language professionals in the world (United Nations n.d.) and half an international organization’s budget could already be allocated to translation (Crystal 2003). It is equally unrealistic to expect every delegate to achieve near-native linguistic proficiency prior to attending a conference. The proceeding solutions will address actions for both native and nonnative speakers to minimize disparities in communication and maximize understanding and equal participation.

- For nonnative delegates: Compile a glossary of words relevant to negotiations and produce a collection of translations for those words. This could be initiated by the UN, but would be more successful if lead by an NGO because it would be more likely to be produced in languages besides

the six official languages. Encourage delegates to attend pre-conference sessions to learn these important words and phrases for communication. For presentations, provide translators a text version of documents in advance when possible. This is already an expectation for speeches made on behalf of countries at high-level segments (UNFCCC 2017b), and should be generalized to all negotiations and side events.

- For native delegates: Encourage delegates to attend pre-conference sessions on communication with nonnative speakers including training on presenting ideas simplistically and slowly in order to minimize miscommunication. In addition, native speakers should also be expected to present documents to translators in advance and meet with translators prior to presentation when possible.
- For the UN: Offer incentives or requirements for participation of or collaboration with countries whose native language is not English during negotiations. This can simultaneously decrease dominance of conversation by native-English speakers and increase understanding through more clear and concise presentation.

The current trajectory of language at the UNFCCC conferences predicts English suppressing other languages in international negotiation. This purely hegemonic promotion of English in negotiation is

unhealthy for productive conversation and could result in irreversible consequences on world politics and global climate. It is important to acknowledge the current sentiment towards language and actively address the use of language at the UN climate change conference and in international interactions in the future.

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