

Professional Inefficiency of Using an Adopted Language in Communication

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- Sajid Ahmed -

Most businesses in India use English as the mode of written communication. With India's diversity of language, English made sense as the lingua franca at the dawn of the republic, but from a purely business perspective, English has proved to be a poor medium that has created false hierarchies within organizations.

The irony of this piece being written in English is not lost on the author. However, in no way am I denigrating English. It is one of the most advanced and constantly advancing languages in the world. Not only is it among the most spoken tongues on the planet, it is also the language that has produced the greatest literature, in volume and style. But in the limited context of Indian business, it adds layers of confusion that can be avoided.

Humans experience the humorous as well as serious effects of bad communication on a daily basis. Inadvertent puns and comical typos on signages are ubiquitous, but they are only the visible examples of sub-optimum communication. In the Indian professional world, what passes as corporate professional language, namely English, adds an additional layer of inefficiency.

India is uniquely primed for linguistic chaos; it is the cost of our diversity. For an overwhelming majority of us, English is not our first language. In most cases, it is not even our second. Yet, most professional organisations operating in India insist on using English as the exclusive mode of written communication. In multinational firms, this is ineluctable, since reports and emails are shared with professionals from multiple countries, but in Indian organisations, it is an avoidable cause of inefficiency.

Corporations in Europe as well as in major Asian economies have long figured out that using their mother tongue drowns out much of the noise from corporate communication. Indeed, factory safety instructions written in a language not understood by factory workers cannot be called safety instructions at all. The usage of one's mother tongue for written communication is not a phenomenon reserved for developed economies. Companies in countries that are on the path to development have also realised that for quick and seamless communication, employees must use the language they are most comfortable with.

As a society, we persist with English and insist on using it as hours of productivity melt away. Perhaps what's needed is an outsider's gaze to make sense of this choice. My own experience in the corporate world abroad was that communication is much more efficient when business is conducted in the language everyone is proficient in. Something frightful happens when people begin to write in an adopted language. They seem to lose their capacity for self-criticism and have a way of sounding careless. After all, the advantage of business writing over business speech is an opportunity to be more articulate and precise.

In India, a staggering amount of an employee's time is spent on activities like clarifying and repeating written messages on the phone, or other activities directly linked to language inadequacy. Badly punctuated emails, misconstrued instructions, and criminal spelling errors can start a chain of misunderstandings that require diplomatic gymnastics to salvage. Also, in a country where ego plays a big part in transactions, the potential cost of such confusion is huge. Clearly, opting to communicate in a language which most employees are not proficient in is a conscious choice to accept inefficiency in a crucial aspect of running a business.

It's not right to call English a 'foreign' language as it does hold a position as one of many national languages of India and it has been widely adopted despite its origins lying elsewhere. There is no doubt that teaching English in public schools and learning English, even as an adult exposes one to a vast amount of texts for personal and professional development. That is certainly a fruitful exercise, but one cannot replace one's mother tongue. Only in rare cases does one develop more command over an adopted tongue than over one's mother tongue.

What is surprising is that companies that obsess over inefficiencies in operations and nitpick to reduce overheads by employing the latest management philosophies do not act on the flagrant linguistic inefficiencies they are propagating. The foundation of approaches like 'Lean' and 'Six Sigma' is an attempt to cut waste to run a tighter unit, but these approaches are largely ignored when it comes to written communication.

The obvious question that arises from all these hullabaloo is, "What language should be used for corporate communication in India?" To me, the answer is clear. To avoid crippling loss of productivity, companies ought to insist on using the language of the hallways as the official written medium of communication. The language that employees use to converse in during breaks and to discuss personal matters and wellbeing is the best mode of official communication as well. In much of north India, it will be Hindi, whereas in Maharashtra it will be Marathi and in Bengal, Bengali, and so on. Before you jump to conclusions based on preconceived notions, there is an example of the world's second biggest economy.

Before the 1980's, communist China was closed to the rest of the world by an Asian iron curtain of sorts. Once China opened its doors to globalisation, multinational investments poured into the country. Through its rapid rise - double-digit GDP growth throughout the nineties and oughts - China did not adopt English as its language of business. To this day, internal and external corporate communication is conducted in Mandarin and Cantonese. Astonishingly, this trend has outlasted the computer revolution.

Computer keyboards in China are in the local language. The same is true for Japan and many other developed as well as developing countries. The apprehension that switching away from an English keyboard would mean that Indian companies would suddenly have to stop using their swanky spreadsheets and graphic interfaces is mislaid. On the contrary, all major corporate software companies offer multilingual versions of their products. Chinese versions exist of every imaginable software. With widespread adoption of Indian languages by companies, Indian versions of software will certainly follow, considering the size of the user base in India. Many such offerings are already in the market today.

Comparing India's overall corporate efficiency to that of China is ultimately futile. In fact, no two countries can be fairly compared due to differences in regulatory regimes, macroeconomic factors, and business culture between countries. But China's, or for that matter, Japan's, perseverance with their own languages to maintain productivity is a precedence worth emulating.

Another advantage of encouraging the use of one's mother tongue in business communication could be the development of the mother tongue itself. Despite efforts by the government, Hindi and other major regional languages are not growing as dynamically as their counterparts in other countries. Being from Delhi, my Hindi is abundantly sprinkled with English words in regular conversation.

Try conducting a harmless social experiment. Ask people you meet - socially, professionally, and accidentally - if they know the Hindi translations of commonly used English words used by Hindi speakers. The more recent the phenomenon, the less likely that someone would know the translation. Hindi words for 'internet', 'email', or even the 'coronavirus' do not exist, and if they do, no one knows them. Meanwhile, a recent news article claimed that more than 1200 new German words related to the pandemic were coined in the past year. Why are no new terms being coined in Hindi? And why do we co-opt the English coinage wholesale into our languages? Lexical laziness is rampant.

Languages grow only if they create new words to accommodate new knowledge, as opposed to merely borrowing words from another language. Apart from the two most familiar languages in Newspapers - Hindi and Urdu, so is the English. In almost every sentence, their liberal use of English words written in Hindi or Urdu is pathetic and embarrassing. If journalists don't stay true to the language they write in, what hope is there for the rest of us?

On the other hand, European, South American, African, and other Asian languages are dynamic and

growing. As the use of computers became widespread, Latin languages came up with new words to refer to new technology. A computer is 'el ordenador' in Spanish, 'ordinateur' in French, both words roughly meaning 'organizer' in their respective languages. The Germans, though not known for their indolence, stayed with the English 'computer'. Is there a Hindi word for a computer? Google tells me its 'sanganak', a word never uttered by a Hindi speaker. The language is not growing in any real sense.

Hindi has not been agile enough to incorporate new words for concepts like 'router', 'double-breasted jacket', 'mobile phones', or 'hippies'. These are just some examples of concepts adopted into other languages by coinage and widespread use of their own words.

The Anglicisation of Indian languages has stagnated their development. A diminished sense of self-worth is the inevitable flip side of cultural mimicry of the West. For companies, an all-around embrace of Indianness is the only sure-fire ticket to productivity. This approach has worked everywhere else. Through widespread corporate use, Hindi and other regional languages can regain lost ground and begin a trajectory towards growth, boosting productivity of Indian companies in the process.

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