Englishization in offshore call centers: A postcolonial perspective

Mehdi Boussebaa, Shuchi Sinha and Yiannis Gabriel

Journal of International Business Studies

Abstract

The spread and use of English as the *lingua franca* of international business – 'corporate englishization' – has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years but the focus has mostly been on the communication benefits and challenges of using English as a shared language inside multinationals. In this paper, we examine how English is used externally in the provision of business services and apply a postcolonial perspective to frame our analysis. Drawing on fieldwork in India within the call center units of two outsourcing organizations serving Anglo-American firms, we show how corporate englishization (1) relies on, and contributes to producing, *comprador managerial cadres*; (2) serves to construct a *transnational intra-linguistic hierarchy* of power and privilege; and (3) undercuts its own effectiveness by simultaneously eliminating and maintaining the alterity of the 'Other' through processes of *mimicry*. We thus show how corporate englishization does not merely overcome or, conversely, worsen transnational communication problems; it also (re-)produces colonial-style power relations between the 'Anglosphere' and the 'Rest'. Our analysis deepens our understanding of corporate englishization and opens a new avenue for postcolonial research on the role of language in international business. Our analysis also advances the field of postcolonial organization studies and has implications for international business scholarship more generally.

Keywords: call centers; imperialism; India; language; offshore outsourcing; postcolonial theory

INTRODUCTION

The English language is said to have emerged as the undisputed *lingua franca* of international business (Tietze, 2004). Indeed, multinational corporations and internationalizing firms from various countries are increasingly implementing English-only policies to facilitate communication with foreign customers and subsidiaries. Those that have not yet done so are advised to respond quickly in order to remain competitive in the face of 'globalization'. A similar phenomenon is observed in offshore outsourcing organizations, where the use of English is generally a crucial condition of collaboration with Anglo-American corporate partners. This general, economically driven adoption and use of English in business settings around the world (hereafter, 'corporate englishization'[i]) has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years but, to date, the focus has mostly been on the communication benefits and drawbacks of using English as a shared language inside multinationals – for some, the process helps overcome the 'language barrier' that linguistic diversity creates within the firm and is therefore a positive force (e.g. Neeley, 2012); for others, it produces inter-group hierarchies and polarizations and is thus by no means a panacea (e.g. Piekkari & Zander, 2005). Missing from this work is an understanding of how English is used externally in the provision of business *services* to foreign clients and customers and, importantly, an appreciation of the linkages between corporate englishization and processes of *imperialism* in the modern world economy.

To address these deficiencies, we examine the use of English in customer service interactions within the offshore outsourcing industry and draw on postcolonial theory (e.g. Frenkel, 2008; Jack et al., 2011; Prasad, 2012) to frame our analysis. We argue that postcolonial theory sensitizes and enables us to understand the complex ways in which corporate englishization (re-)produces international power relations that are rooted in the history of European imperialism and which continue to characterize the world economy in the current era of US-led global capitalist expansionism. Empirically, we draw on fieldwork conducted in India in the call center units of two major outsourcing companies serving Anglo-American corporations. Our analysis focuses on the enactment of English in these organizations, concentrating in particular on how employees were trained to speak 'pure' English and then tasked with serving Anglophone customers on the telephone.

Based on our analysis, we elucidate three important aspects of corporate englishization that have gone unnoticed in prior research: (1) how it relies on, and contributes to producing, *comprador managerial cadres*; i.e. local groups of managers and administrators who are subordinated to Anglo-American capital and whose function is to recruit, train, and manage the local labor required by such capital; (2) how it serves to construct and maintain a *transnational intra-linguistic hierarchy* of power and privilege based on English-language 'purity'; and (3) how it undercuts its own effectiveness by simultaneously seeking to eliminate and maintain the alterity of the 'Other' through processes of *mimicry*. In this way, our analysis reveals how corporate englishization does not simply lead to improved transnational communication or, conversely, merely generate tensions between native speakers and non-native ones; it also (re-)produces, discursively and materially, colonial-style power relations between the Anglosphere and those doing business with it.[ii]

Our analysis contributes to a better understanding of corporate englishization and opens a new avenue for postcolonial research on the role of language in international business. Our analysis also advances the emerging field of postcolonial organization studies: first, by providing a rare insight into the experience of West/Rest power relations within an actually existing corporate context and, second, by adding to recent efforts to balance the field's "overwhelmingly textual" concerns (Srinivas, 2013: 2) with a focus on matters of global political economy. Furthermore, in offering a rare example of an organizationally grounded postcolonial analysis, our study develops our understanding of how postcolonial theory can be used to advance international business (IB) scholarship more generally.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Existing approaches to corporate englishization

Previous research on corporate englishization – and on the role of (natural) language in international business more generally – can be split into two broad perspectives: functionalist and critical. The functionalist perspective portrays linguistic diversity as a 'barrier' to effective transnational communication, work and organization, and generally presents English as *the* solution (e.g. Neeley, 2012; Neeley et al., 2012; Ohmae, 1990). Various reasons are given to justify the necessity to use English as opposed to any other language but the general view is that 'globalization is a fact' (Ohmae, 2005), that 'global business speaks English' (Neeley, 2012) and that, as a result, companies around the world must adopt and use English as their corporate language in order to survive and remain competitive – in short, they must 'englishize' themselves. Implementation difficulties (e.g. communication breakdowns and divisive dynamics resulting from varying degrees of English fluency) are acknowledged but these are typically subsumed under the umbrella concept of the 'language barrier' (Feeley & Harzing, 2003) and seen as resolvable through appropriate language policies. From this perspective, English is generally viewed as a neutral 'strategic tool' (Luo & Shenkar, 2006: 322) and its worldwide spread as a quasi-natural and positive development (see also Lauring & Selmer, 2012).

In contradistinction, the critical perspective highlights the negative consequences and power implications of corporate englishization (e.g. Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio, 2011; Maclean, 2006; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a/b; Piekkari & Zander, 2005; Welch et al., 2005). It reveals the existence of significant differences in English proficiency among different national groupings and how these can in fact cause additional, rather than fewer, communication problems. It also shows that the imposition of English as a *lingua franca* generally creates informal language-based status hierarchies within organizations. For instance, Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999a) showed how a Finnish multinational's use of English as the firm's *lingua franca* produced a 'shadow' organizational hierarchy in which native speaking groups were at the top, the Spanish at the bottom and the Scandinavian and German ones somewhere in between. Thus, native speakers were placed in a position of power and non-native groups accorded a lower status and, hence, relatively devalued depending on their abilities to speak English (see also Neeley, 2013; Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012; Vaara et al., 2005). Such language-based differentiations have been shown to generate processes of empowerment/disempowerment and inclusion/exclusion and, as a result, a host of inter-group tensions, including animosity, conflict, and stereotyping, if not outright racism (see also Laurie, 2008; Steyaert et al., 2011). Unsurprisingly, corporate englishization is often perceived more as a bane than a boon and indeed resisted – through, for instance, ‘code-switching’ (i.e. by reverting to one’s own native language in the course of multi-lingual encounters). From a critical perspective, therefore, corporate englishization is a problematic and power-laden process and, hence, not a wholly neutral and beneficial solution (see also Harzing et al., 2011).

Together, these two perspectives have advanced our understanding of corporate englishization, especially in the context of multinational corporations (MNCs). In particular, the critical perspective has shed much light on the communication challenges and organizational power consequences of this phenomenon. However, in framing the discussion in terms of a battle between imposed monolingualism on the one hand and linguistic pluralism on the other, neither perspective has sought to situate corporate englishization in wider power relations between the Anglosphere and the rest of the world. This is surprising given that the global spread of English has gone hand in hand with British colonialism and present-day US imperialism (Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992). Moreover, in being focused on englishization inside MNCs, both perspectives have neglected the role of English in the provision of services to external clients and customers. This is again surprising in light of the growing significance of the services sector in the world economy and the fact that a key reason why companies use English is to serve customers internationally (e.g. see the case of Rakuten in Neeley, 2012). In what follows, we argue that a postcolonial perspective can provide a framework and methodology with which to address these significant deficiencies in prior research.

A postcolonial approach to corporate englishization

Postcolonial theory (also referred to as 'postcolonial studies' and 'postcolonialism') is a broad field of inquiry whose *raison d'être* is to investigate, reflect on, and challenge "relations of domination and subordination – economic, cultural and political – between (and often within) nations, races or cultures, which characteristically have their roots in the history of modern European colonialism and imperialism and which, equally characteristically, continue to be apparent in the present era of neo-colonialism" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997: 12). Postcolonial theory is thus concerned with not only the history of colonialism and its impact on present-day West/Rest relations but also neo-colonialism or what is also referred to as neo-imperialism. What distinguishes neo-colonialism from its predecessor is that it generally occurs not through conquest and settlement but via processes of political-economic and cultural domination. Further, it is driven by not only dominant Western states, as in colonial times, but also the international organizations which they have set up to govern the world (e.g. International Monetary Fund, World Bank) and, importantly, the MNCs they have engendered and which now constitute "the major agents of the new imperial order" (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2001: 12).

The core preoccupation of postcolonial theory has thus far not been endorsed by IB scholars despite the oft-mentioned link between neo-imperialism and international business in the media and more generally (e.g. Korten, 2001; Vidal, 2013). That being said, some important forays have been made by critical organization studies scholars in recent years (see e.g. contributions in Banerjee et al., 2009; Jack & Westwood, 2009; and Prasad, 2003, 2012). On the whole, this work makes the argument that international business, as a body of theory and as a set of practices, is rooted in Western colonialism and plays a key role in the (re-)production of West/Rest power relations in the current era of economic 'globalization'. From this perspective, it follows that corporate englishization, as an aspect of international business, is also complicit in neo-imperialism and, therefore, calls for a postcolonial theoretical approach to the phenomenon.

In saying this, it is important to note that postcolonial theory is by no means a theory in the strict sense of the term or a unified field of inquiry for that matter; it is internally contested and characterized by multiple theoretical formulations: culturalist, materialist, discursive, and psychological (see McLeod, 2007, for a useful review). It has nevertheless been strongly influenced by discursive theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Edward Said whose work was inspired by poststructuralist thought, especially the ideas of French philosopher Michel Foucault. This influence is also clearly evident in postcolonial organization studies where the bulk of research has adopted a discourse-analytical approach, investigating the ways in which West/Rest power relations are (re-)produced in text and talk about international business (see e.g. Fougère & Moulettes, 2012; Frenkel & Shenhav, 2006; McKenna, 2011). However, as is the case in postcolonial studies more generally, materialist formulations (e.g. Mir & Mir, 2009; Murphy & Zhu, 2012) and analyses fusing together the discursive and the material (e.g. Banerjee, 2008; Gopinath & Prasad, 2013) are becoming more common and, indeed, increasingly being called for as a means of broadening the field and making it more attentive to political-economic processes (see Jack et al., 2011).

In this paper, we also seek to combine the discursive with the material. From a discourse-analytical perspective, we find Bhabha's work especially useful for our purpose. In particular, Bhabha's notion of 'mimicry' helps us appreciate that the West/Rest encounter is fundamentally ambivalent and mutually constitutive. That is, the 'West' represents itself as 'developed', 'advanced', and interested in transforming the 'Other' in its own image, yet at the same time maintains difference through representations of much of the world as 'undeveloped', 'backward', etc. – doing otherwise would in effect delegitimize and bring to an end the social structures and practices perpetuating West/Rest power relations (see also Fanon, 1952; Memmi, 1957). In this context, the 'Other', itself a site of great cultural diversity that can never fully be assimilated into the 'West', is led to 'mimic' rather than replicate Western ways of being, to be "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994: 89), a process that inevitably produces 'hybridity' rather than sameness. Here, hybridity is not to be viewed in 'neutral' terms as some kind of 'blending' of previously distinct subjectivities and practices, but as a form of resistance in the sense that its presence threatens the 'purity' of imperial identity and continually frustrates the colonizer's ability to fully reform and control the 'Other'. Frenkel (2008) fruitfully extends Bhabha's theorizing to the study of IB, arguing in particular that our understanding of transnational knowledge transfer can be advanced by conceptualizing it as a discourse of 'mimicry' and, hence, as an expression of both "enforcement and resistance" (Frenkel, 2008: 933; see also Shimoni & Bergman, 2006).

This perspective is very useful as it allows us to approach corporate englishization, itself a form of knowledge transfer, as a power-laden and hybridizing relational process and, hence, as one that can neither simply be viewed as neutral nor merely be seen in terms of a binary, native/non-native polarity, as typically done in language-sensitive IB studies. That said, whilst taking seriously the notion of mimicry, and the discursive/relational conception of power underpinning it, we also agree with recent calls for greater attention to the political-economic dimension of the West/Rest encounter (see e.g. Jack et al., 2011). In this respect, materialist formulations of the postcolonial condition (e.g. Miyoshi, 1993; Parry, 2004) and imperialism more generally (e.g. Amin, 1973; Harvey, 2003; Petras & Veltmeyer, 2001) have much to offer. These focus on the agents, roles, structures, and practices through which West/Rest power relations are (re-)produced, and the variety of interests and motives that fuel them, thereby allowing us to ground discursive struggles in their material context.

In particular, materialist contributions offer two insights that seem especially useful for our purpose. First, they indicate that a key element sustaining the new imperial order is the 'comprador' class, i.e. that segment of the periphery's elite which is subordinated to foreign capital and whose *raison d'être* is to act as "a kind of staging-post and direct intermediary for the implantation and reproduction of foreign capital in the countries concerned" (Poulantzas, 1976: 42). In the colonial phase of imperialism, this function was performed by the colonizers themselves (together with small, emerging indigenous elites) but in the present era, it is mostly played by compradors (see e.g. Jones, 1993, for a discussion of the role of compradors in the expansion of British banking in Asia). The presence of this group in the West/Rest encounter suggests that corporate englishization may be mediated by locals who stand to gain from it, thereby calling for a more differentiated understanding of the phenomenon than a Bhabhaian discursive perspective allows.

Second, and related to the previous point, materialist contributions point to the crucial role of 'natural' language in maintaining West/Rest power relations. They show how neo-imperialism, as in colonial times, is accompanied by 'linguistic imperialism' (Phillipson, 1992), i.e. policies and practices aimed at displacing local languages and diffusing the language of the center, which in the current era of US-led global capitalist expansionism happens to be English. As in colonial times, the process serves not only to facilitate communication with, and shape the reality of, the 'Other' but also to produce new, language-based hierarchies of power and privilege that create and legitimize conditions for imperialist economic exploitation within the subordinate societies. These processes direct attention to the possibility that corporate englishization, beyond its function in constructing dominant/dominated identities, may also serve to constitute material inequalities within the 'Other'.

In this paper, therefore, we approach corporate englishization as a discourse of mimicry, thereby taking into account the importance of discursive struggles in shaping this phenomenon, but also seek to locate this discourse within its material context as a means of paying attention to its political-economic underpinnings and consequences. This approach seems well suited to understanding corporate englishization, a process that, ultimately, cannot be separated from international relations of domination and subordination that are rooted in the bygone era of British colonialism and that continue to shape the world in the current era of US-led capitalist imperialism.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study emerged from a wider research project on the nature of work in the offshore IT-BPO (Information Technology & Business Process Outsourcing) industry in India. As relatively little was (and still is) known about work in this industry (Doh et al., 2009; Manning, 2014), we entered the field with an open mind and used a qualitative research methodology. Our aim was to capture the rarely heard voices of those working within an industry that is known to be exploitative (Levy, 2005) and typically requiring employees not only to work in a different (Western) language but also, curiously, to pose as Westerners and, in the case of call center work, to mimic their accents over the phone (see Das & Dharwadkar, 2009; Mirchandani, 2004; Poster, 2007). We were advantaged by the background of the Indian member of our team who was able to secure a rare level of research access despite offshore outsourcing organizations' concerns about data protection (cf. Russell, 2009).

The empirical data on which this paper is based was drawn from research conducted in the call center units of two leading offshore outsourcing organizations located in the city of Noida. These businesses delivered services in English, but, in addition, adopted English as the unchallenged medium of communication, training and management inside the organization. They thus proved to be a very appropriate empirical site in which to investigate the phenomenon of corporate englishization. Their location in India also proved very useful. Not only is India "the world's leading global sourcing destination for IT-BPO services with a share of 58 per cent in 2011" (NASSCOM, 2012: 7) but it also is a major former colony of the British Empire – the so-called "jewel in the Crown" – and thus a theoretically meaningful terrain in which to explore corporate englishization from a postcolonial perspective.

The empirical investigation took place over the course of two years: first in Telcom in 2007 and then in Utilcom in 2008 (we use pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality). This two-phase approach was not motivated by a 'replication logic' (Eisenhardt, 1989); rather, we returned to the field in 2008 in order to probe deeper some of the insights that had emerged from our research in 2007, paying particular attention to how the English language was used and experienced in the call centers. We had hoped to complete Phase 2 in the same organization but were not granted access a second time. We therefore turned attention to another organization (Utilcom). This change of organizational setting was theoretically unproblematic given that the two companies were very similar on many important counts. Both were leading offshore outsourcing organizations providing similar services to Anglo-American corporations (more details on the nature of these services are provided below) across a range of industries (e.g. Banking, Healthcare, Insurance, Retail and Telecoms, Utilities). They were located in close proximity to each other and many of the research participants had worked for both organizations. Further, nothing indicated that the management and HRM practices of the two organizations and the attitudes of their employees were different with regards to the phenomenon under study. We therefore treated these two organizations as a single work setup rather than two different research settings.

Data collection and analysis

In the initial phase of the project, which took place over a period of four weeks in 2007, we conducted sixteen interviews at Telcom – the sample included 1 general manager, 1 HR manager and 14 front-line operatives, i.e. employees who served customers on the phone (we provide more details on this work below). We were also given access to internal documents and company intranet pages containing information on induction and promotion policies (none of which can be quoted directly to preserve the organization' anonymity). The aim here was to collect information on HR policies, increase our familiarity with call center work, understand the key challenges and opportunities facing the organization and its employees, and sharpen our research focus. The interviews took place on-site, were conducted by the Indian author in English (and, in some cases, punctuated with phrases in Hindi), and lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. The researcher had flexibility to choose the participants, although she needed to inform the HR manager before conducting the interviews and ensure the front-line operatives' routine was not being disrupted. In addition, the Indian author spent approximately 140 hours observing the work of Telcom staff, taking detailed field notes on the nature of this work and on the interactions between different types of employees. She also spent a considerable amount of time 'hanging out' with front-line operatives (during commutes, coffee breaks, lunches and dinners), and recording stories and insights (Westney & VanMaanen, 2011: 603). Her nationality and fluency in the local language meant that she had a deep understanding of the study's cultural context and was thus "inherently gifted with budding participant observer skills" (Birkinshaw et al., 2011: 574). Furthermore, she conducted several ethnographic interviews (i.e. informal, non-recorded conversations, see Moore, 2011) with front-line operatives and the HR manager. Most of these were conducted before or after the informants' calls or during their lunch breaks, allowing the opportunity to capture spontaneous reactions and emotions of the front-line operatives towards their work, colleagues and customers.

We analyzed the data from this first phase in an inductive manner (Locke, 2001), beginning with a descriptive round of coding around such themes as 'recruitment', 'training', 'promotion' and 'performance management'. As we grew to understand the data better, our coding became more interpretive, using explanatory codes to identify recurrent themes, patterns and connections. In so doing, a number of themes became increasingly salient, a major one of which concerned the importance of English, both as a part of the service offered by the call centers and as the uncontested language of organizational communication within these business units. Based on this initial data analysis, we moved on to a second phase of fieldwork to probe deeper the findings of the earlier phase, paying particular attention to how the English language functioned as an instrument of power.

The second phase of the study took place in Utilcom over a period of three weeks in 2008. We conducted a total of thirteen semi-structured interviews with various employees (1 HR manager, 1 quality assurance analyst, 1 voice-and-accent trainer, 6 front-line operatives and 4 team leaders). All the interviews were performed in English and lasted on average for forty-five minutes. In addition, limited non-participant observation was carried out. Whilst not granted the same level of access obtained at Telcom in the earlier phase, the researcher was given an office space to conduct the formal interviews, which offered her an opportunity to observe the physical space and conduct some observation of employee behavior and interactions. A team leader offered a brief tour of the calling floor, where the researcher had the opportunity to observe the overall physical layout, employees' work stations and visual displays of the messages around customer satisfaction and company values posted by management.

In this second phase of research, we also conducted eleven additional interviews (semi-structured and ethnographic) outside the two organizations in homes and cafes (with front-line operatives, team leaders and general managers). Lasting between forty-five minutes to two hours, these interviews allowed the researcher to get closer to call center employees and to interview them in greater depth and at leisure (unlike the on-site interviews, which were time-bound due to the shift timings and limited duration of the lunch breaks). While these interviews did not change the overall picture obtained from the on-sites interviews, the extra candor afforded by the informal setting and greater distance from the work place, greatly enhanced our confidence in our findings.

On completing this second round of data collection, together with an initial analysis, the limits of our interpretive approach became clear and the benefits of drawing on existing postcolonial theory recommended themselves. This led us to re-interrogate the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) from this perspective. In this manner, we worked backwards from the phenomena we observed (e.g. language-based selection, accent neutralization, client pressures, and customer complaints) through to their putative causes (see Welch et al., 2011). Through multiple iterations between data and theory, we gradually reduced the empirical material to three overarching themes: (1) the central role played by *comprador managerial cadres* in facilitating the diffusion of English at the local level (and the function of englishization in producing these very cadres); (2) the resulting emergence of a *transnational intra-linguistic hierarchy* of power and privilege based on English-language 'purity'; and (3) the *mimicry* permeating the discourse of English as a transnationally shared language of communication.

We attempted to collect and analyze our data as systematically as possible but, as is generally the case in qualitative research, the process was less than perfectly planned and executed. In practice, we adopted a pragmatic approach making the best of opportunities we encountered in the field and cross-fertilizing them with theoretical perspectives that opened up new insights and explanations. That said, our methods are consistent with criteria of data 'trustworthiness' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): we had a 'prolonged engagement' with the research site over two separate data collection phases and 'triangulated' different sources of data, including interviews at multiple hierarchical and functional levels in order to capture diverse viewpoints (Moore, 2011). Aware of the dangers of essentializing the 'Other' (Jack & Westwood, 2006), we maintained a reflexive vigilance by drawing on our own experiences as migratory academics, bringing a variety of perspectives onto our subject matter. Along with other qualitative researchers, we do not claim that our interpretation is the only possible one, but we were careful at each stage to question our own premises for drawing the conclusions we did.

FINDINGS

In this section, we report on our findings. We first provide some additional details on the organizational context of our study, describing the type of services that Telcom and Ulticom provided and the employee type that clients expected from these companies. We then unpack the three overarching themes that our theoretically informed data analysis produced. The interviewees are identified by their work title and the name (pseudonym) of their company (e.g. 'HR Manager, Telcom').

Organizational context

Telcom and Ulticom provided a range of voice, web and back-office services to Anglo-American corporate clients. We focused on their 'voice' services business as it constituted their core activity and also the key target of englishization efforts within the organizations. The 'voice' services were effectively provided by 'call centers' and delivered through the front-line operatives (hereafter, 'operatives') who handled mostly inbound calls from customers based in the UK, the USA and Australia. The nature of these calls varied depending on the type of industry being served. For instance, in the telecoms industry, operatives responded to technical questions and assisted customers in using their software or equipment, whereas in the banking and utilities sectors, operatives typically handled routine billing, accounts and payments inquiries. Some of the operatives also made outbound calls to collect outstanding bills and to introduce existing and potential customers to new products and services. Most calls lasted a few minutes and operatives typically followed precise conversation scripts, including opening and closing lines and pre-defined responses to specific questions relating to, for instance, technical problems.

The Western corporate clients (we use ‘customers’ to describe ‘callers’, differentiating them from corporate ‘clients’ outsourcing the work) serviced by the call centers required the latter not only to provide voice services efficiently but also to employ operatives who could speak the kind of English that they believed was ‘standard’ in many parts of the native English-speaking world – grammatically correct and shorn of local accents. In other words, clients expected to have their customers served by employees able to speak a ‘pure’ form of English, not some kind of ‘Indianized’ English.

Relying on comprador managerial cadres

Our observations and interviews revealed that the clients of Telcom and Utilcom had little *direct* input into the making of ‘pure’ English-speaking operatives. The task was instead largely left to the call centers’ managers, voice-and-accent trainers, and team leaders, as will be shown below. The clients did, however, share some training materials with the call centers and also helped them in hiring appropriately qualified and experienced consultants and trainers. They also offered some of the high-performing team leaders and managers visits to, and training in, the West, which strengthened their CVs in the local labor market and enhanced their identification with their Anglo-American partners.

They also offered some of the high-performing team leaders and managers visits to, and training in, the West, which strengthened their CVs in the local labor market and enhanced their identification with their Anglo-American partners.

An Here, it is also useful to note that all of these managerial employees had been educated at English-medium private schools in India. The same applied to the companies’ senior executives, many of whom also held MBAs and had worked in the West for some years and/or worked for the subsidiaries of major Anglo-American MNCs such as CocaCola and PriceWaterhouseCoopers. The managerial tiers of Telcom and Utilcom were thus linguistically and culturally closely related to their clients. Indeed, such was their identification that they put the operatives through a rigorous training programme applying the clients’ standards with great rigor and closely monitoring their performance, as will be discussed presently.

That said, the economic bond between the clients and their service providers was also strong, if not stronger than the cultural bond. It is worth highlighting that the success and indeed survival of Telcom and Utilcom was entirely dependent on meeting their clients' expectations. One manager, for instance, recounted how his company had lost a US client due to its failure to provide the required 'pure' English service experience:

> "They (client) were getting a cost benefit by outsourcing business to India, but later they realized there were a lot of issues with the language […] they [operatives] will never be able to match the language or the accent no matter how much we train them on UK or US accent […] We had one of these voice programs [to deal with the problem] and the client said 'we are happy with this kind of trouble shooting and everything that is going on, but we feel that customers would like to talk to somebody they can relate to' […] so they decided to take it [voice services] back and deliver it from the US." (Manager, Telcom)[iii]

Thus, in many ways, the managerial tiers of Telcom and Utilcom strongly resembled the indigenous administrative elites of colonial times and the compradors of the post-colonial period (cf. Gopal et al., 2003): they were to some extent culturally assimilated or bound into the Anglosphere, their economic interests were aligned with those of Anglo-American corporations, and they very much functioned as intermediaries between such corporations and Indian labor. In all these regards, they constituted what may be termed *comprador managerial cadres* and, in this capacity, not only played a crucial role in 'englishizing' Indian labor but also, as we show in the next section, produced future generations of compradors whilst at the same time contributing to the (re-)production of a transnational language-based hierarchy of power and privilege.

Creating a transnational language-based hierarchy

To respond to client demands and ensure the survival and success of their local business, the comprador managerial cadres of Telcom and Utilcom dedicated much time and effort to transforming Indian labor into anglicized employees. We identified four key mechanisms through which this was achieved: (1) recruitment; (2) language training; (3) cultural training; and (4) performance management.

Recruitment. The transformation process began with selection, which comprised several rounds. In the first round, candidates were asked open-ended questions expected to generate informal conversation (e.g. "How did you spend your weekend?" "What is your favorite cuisine and why?"). Many were rejected at this stage for grammar or pronunciation mistakes. The rest were screened by the 'voice-and-accent' trainers, primarily for accent and diction. In this round, they were asked to read sentences that included trap words intended to capture prominent 'mother tongue influences'. Candidates with strong regional accents and mother tongue influences were rejected. The rest were given a written test to check their grammar, sentence construction and logical reasoning. Following this, candidates were telephonically interviewed by a line manager to screen them for telephone etiquette, listening skills, and voice clarity. Successful candidates went through to a final HR round where they were informed about of the pay structure and the nature and conditions of work. This rigorous selection process not only rendered indigenous languages (e.g. Hindi) obsolete but also presented the English spoken by the candidates (especially those from rural backgrounds whose English was seen to be significantly 'tainted' with mother tongue influences), as inferior, as not 'pure' enough. The few candidates who were fortunate to be near-proficient in 'non-indianized' English, a skill typically attained by attending English-medium private schools, some of them dating from the days of the British rule in India, were immediately advantaged over those who were not.

Language training. Once accepted, new recruits were put through a rigorous 'voice-and-accent' training program aimed at 'neutralizing' any remaining mother tongue influences, rectifying pronunciation and grammatical errors, and carefully 'correcting' Indian idioms. Most training personnel did not hold formal qualifications in language instruction – it was their fluency in English (owing in part to their education in private schools and training at work) and experience of serving Western customers that authorized them to determine what 'appropriate' English sounded like. In most cases, they had been operatives who, through strong performance, high customer-satisfaction scores and support from their team leaders, had been promoted to their current positions and been admitted into the comprador managerial cadre. Like the managers above them, these trainers had internalized the ideal of 'pure' English as appropriate and legitimate. Field observations highlighted a persistent sense among these employees that, unless decontaminated of mother tongue influences, 'Indian' English was inadequate, impure and unsuitable to release onto a native English-speaking public.

Cultural training. The comprador managerial cadres also spent considerable effort on socializing new recruits into what they believed to be Anglo-American culture(s). The aim here was to minimize the cognitive distance between the operatives and the customers, thereby giving the latter the impression that they were being served by fellow country-(wo)men. This was achieved by providing the new recruits with an overview (in English) of the social, historical, cultural, and geographical aspects of the customers' countries. The operatives were also introduced to different accents found in the Anglosphere and taught a variety of popular terms and phrases used by customers. In addition, they were shown selected popular Anglo-American TV shows, movies, and sitcoms.[iv] Furthermore, the call centers created an Anglophone working environment, using English terms to describe all aspects of life within it (job titles, roles, responsibilities, activities, tasks, beverages, snacks, etc.). In one of the units which served UK customers, every room in the building was named after London landmarks – Embankment, London Bridge, Piccadilly and so forth. The call centers also had flat TV screens showing 24-hour English-speaking news coverage provided by Anglo-American channels such as BBC World News and CNN.

Performance management. On the front-line, the operatives' performance was extensively monitored and managed. Service Level Agreements (SLAs), based on contracts between the call centers and their clients, prescribed quantitative measures (e.g. call-handling times, call volumes) and also specified qualitative criteria. SLAs also dictated that operatives adhered rigidly to scripts. As one interviewee put it, "*the client defines what we can say and what we can't say*" (Manager, Telcom). The team leaders and managers, together with the quality assurance experts, worked to ensure that the operatives fulfilled the SLA requirements hoping to meet the expectations of corporate clients and individual customers. Customer feedback was critical in the evaluation of the operatives' performance. Operatives receiving appreciation calls had a better chance at securing financial rewards and promotions. Indeed, several of the trainers, team leaders, and quality assurance experts whom we interviewed had previously been 'appreciated' operatives and, as a result, moved up the career ladder. The following except from an interview with a member of the quality assurance team at Utilcom, shows how appreciation from a customer while working as an operative brought her into the spotlight and made her a 'star employee':

> "I was taking this one call where after I had helped the customer a lot… the customer said, I want to speak to your team leader (TL). I went to the TL and said 'I have tried my best to help this guy but I don't know why he wants to speak to you.' When my TL took the call, the customer actually appreciated me. So the TL said 'this girl got an appreciation from the customer, let's tell everyone about it.' He then sent a mail out to everyone telling them about my appreciation call. He sent it to the entire organization and even the client organization. After this […] whenever people from the client organization would come to India for any kind of inspection they would be very keen to […] sit and listen to my calls. So I always had an extra headphone attached to my machine and almost every day there was someone listening into my calls […] then the client team suggested to our manager that my calls should be used for training the new members." (Quality Assurance Analyst, Utilcom)

As shown in the above quote, the clients also played a role in the performance monitoring process (cf. Poster, 2007). They regularly inspected and assessed the service provided by the call centers. All the calls handled by the operatives were recorded and made available to client representatives on their visits. Clients were also given online access to transcripts of the calls and real-time data appearing on the operatives' screens so that they could monitor the performance of individual operatives from the comfort of their own offices in the West. Clients were in direct contact with the Indian quality assurance analysts and often asked to be connected to operatives' calls so they could listen in. Operatives identified as being proficient in 'pure' English, typically ended up being rapidly promoted.

In sum, the use of English in the call centers not only served to groom certain segments of the Indian labor pool to become comprador managerial cadres but also contributed to producing a transnational language-based hierarchy of power and privilege in which Anglo-American clients (and their customers) were at the top, the operatives at the bottom and the comprador managers somewhere in between. That being said, as the next section shows, the process was not without its problems.

Producing mimicry and resistance

In analyzing the accounts provided by the research participants, we identified a fundamental ambivalence in the englishization discourse running through the call centers, an ambivalence that resulted in the operatives being simultaneously drawn into the Anglosphere and excluded from it. This ambivalence manifested itself in two ways: first, in the accounts provided by clients and their customers, as discussed by the research participants and, second, in how the operatives expressed their relation to the English language. We discuss these in turn.

Clients (and their customers). According to the research participants, clients held the view that the successful outsourcing of their voice services to India was vitally dependent on the operatives' mastery of 'pure' English; yet they were, paradoxically, unwilling to become directly involved in the messy business of selection, training, and socialization at the local level, leaving all these tasks to the comprador managerial cadres, as mentioned earlier. One manager put as follows:

> "They [clients] do get involved in qualifying processes, i.e. whether it meets our criteria or not. That they would do happily, but they don't invest the time, why would they invest the time, they want a trained resource." (Senior Manager, Telcom)

Clients were also reported to offer limited financial support towards the training of the operatives. They were in fact said to be unwilling to provide greater financial resources towards the running of the call centers more generally and, indeed, to show a readiness to move their voice-related services to cheaper and more pliant alternatives, as one interviewee explained:

> "The amount of money clients spend… affects the quality of people that call centers are hiring. So, clients who are ready to spend more are taking their [voice] processes back [to their home countries]. They think that if they have to spend that much money, then, why not take it back and spend a little more and give customers the same accent and let them [customers] talk to their own people, rather than they talking to somebody in South-East Asia." (Senior Manager, Utilcom).

Thus, clients indirectly maintained the 'otherness' of the operatives (and the call centers more broadly) while purporting to be in search for exact replicas of an imagined 'pure' English-speaking employee. The alterity of the 'Other' was further accentuated by the customers, who mounted countless verbal attacks on the operatives on the grounds that their English was 'different', 'poor' or 'inadequate', not up to 'standard' – in short, not 'pure' enough. Many of the operatives reported facing regular criticism and rejection from customers. The notion of 'pure' English was, of course, fiction. Our interviewees repeatedly emphasized not only that British English was different from American English but also that each included innumerable local variations, including 'Indian' English. Furthermore, resulting from India's colonial past, there was a perception that UK English was 'correct' and polite, American accents being somehow inferior. As one interviewee commented:

> "The accent [we train our employees in] is British, because British English is what English is. American English is not proper English. They say wanna, gonna and that is not correct English." (HR Manager, Utilcom)

Yet, customers continually reminded the operatives that their English was not 'pure' enough. Indeed, by far the commonest grievance concerned customers requesting to speak to a different operative, one who could communicate in 'proper' English. It was also reported that customers tended to perceive the operatives as being not 'competent' enough for the job. Several interviewees reported that customers often asked whether operatives were sufficiently trained to address their problems. Sometimes clients even demanded that their calls be transferred to home-based operatives, who they felt could understand their problems and had greater knowledge of processes (e.g. billing, address update, technical issues, etc.). One interviewee put it as follows:

> "Many times, [customers] call and ask us to transfer calls to a UK operative. I get very angry when they do that. We have the same knowledge but still they [customers] say that we [Indian operatives] will not understand them." (Operative, Telcom)

By 'knowledge', the operatives meant that they were equally, if not more, educated than customers and that their English was as good, if not better, than that spoken by customers. Indeed, the operatives sometime challenged customers' assumptions of linguistic inferiority and incompetence, with the latter having little to say in return, as the following quote demonstrates:

> "Once this happened, and this happens many times, a UK customer called and asked me, 'where are you from?' I said, 'I am Abhinav from India'. He said, 'I want to speak to a UK person'. I asked him 'why?' and he said 'because Indians have very bad English and they are not able to understand. This is a very *English problem* and I want to speak to a UK person'. I said, 'you have been speaking to me for the last ten minutes and has there been any difficulty in understanding me?' He said, 'you are different, I can understand you'. That is when I said to him 'that is why your call has reached *me*' [smiles]." (Operative, Telcom)

That being said, cases of talking back to the customer were less common than responding with docility and servitude, in line with organizational rules. Failure to follow the rules could potentially lead to customer complaints and, hence, negative consequences for the operatives. Moreover, calls were monitored and thus any direct resistance to customers would have a detrimental impact on individual performance evaluations:

> "When [customers] abuse us, we cannot react or hang up the phone. We have to politely tell them to not do it. If you react angrily then they can escalate the call. If they complain against us, it affects our quality scores." (Operative, Telcom)

Thus, customer attitudes towards the operatives created another fissure in the englishization discourse, namely a contradiction between, on the one hand, a rigorous selection process and training program that certified operatives as competent English-speaking employees and, on the other, customer remarks that continually called into question the linguistic standards and professional competence that the operatives were meant to have attained.

Operatives. Ambivalence in the englishization discourse was also identified in the ways in which the operatives viewed and used the English language. On the one hand, these employees were very positive about their 'pure' English language training. The vast majority agreed with the view that "call centers are a perfect place to learn correct English" (Operative, Utilcom) and earn higher salaries than they would earn otherwise. For instance, they acknowledged that they got paid considerably more (twice or even three times) than domestic call center operatives (i.e. those who served Indian customers in India) and employees involved in back-end, non-voice related services. Some of the operatives reported on how learning 'pure' English helped them to develop universal communication skills that enabled them to not only communicate 'properly' but also get exposed and connect with the West: "People join because they get a lot of exposure, talking to people from the other side, the Western part of the world" (Operative, Telcom). Proficiency in 'pure' English was also perceived as a symbol of success and, indeed, the operatives we observed did not hesitate to flaunt their skills in offline interactions, using Western English accents while chatting with team leaders and other members of the comprador managerial cadres.

Thus, in many ways, the operatives had internalized the discourse of 'pure' English. Yet, the operatives also expressed resistance to this discourse in their accounts of how they experienced the English language. One recurrent theme among the research participants was that the use of English was generally accompanied by discomfort and sometimes by a feeling of being oppressed, something that is expressed below in a highly hybridized form:

> "I feel more comfortable talking in Hindi. Calls kahatam hone par hum apna comfortably baat karte hain. Kyonki English apni language to hai nahin to bahut comfortable nahin feel kate hain." (Translation: After the calls are finished, we talk comfortably. As English is not our own language we don't feel very comfortable in it.) (Operative, Telcom).

> "English mein thoda straightjacketed feel hota hai" (Translation: I feel a bit straightjacketed in English) (Operative, Utilcom).

Thus, English was experienced as something alien and unwanted, as something that oppressed the operatives and that restricted their ability to express themselves freely. Indeed, the operatives often switched to Hindi or a mixture of Hindi and English with other operatives on completing their calls. Some even did so during calls while putting customers on hold. As one interview put it, "If we want to talk to each other in the middle of a call, we put the call on mute and speak bindaas [freely] in Hindi." (Operative, Utilcom)

The operatives therefore resisted English by not only distancing themselves from it in their accounts but also by code-switching and by producing hybrid linguistic forms. That being said, the effects of such resistance on the englishization process itself was inevitably limited given that the use of 'pure' English during calls was crucial to receiving positive customer feedback and, therefore, to moving up the corporate ladder. In other words, the operatives could not directly resist their englishization without compromising their career prospects in the call centers. Nevertheless, the use of code switching and the production of hybrid linguistic forms by the operatives indicated a degree of subversion on the part of the employees. Whilst they could not directly challenge the englishization process, they had a degree of freedom to subvert it by creating out-of-sight spaces that could not be controlled by the comprador managerial cadres and their Anglo-American masters. This appears to us to sum up accurately the englishization predicament in our empirical site: it consisted of simultaneously internalizing and resisting the English language.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although research on the spread and use of English as the *lingua franca* of international business – corporate englishization – has been limited and mostly functionalist in orientation, a number of scholars have begun to highlight the negative and power consequences of this phenomenon (e.g. Lauring, 2008; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a/b; Piekkari & Zander, 2005). Our aim in this paper has been to develop this emerging body of work by turning attention to a previously unexamined yet highly significant international business setting – offshore service outsourcing – and by locating corporate englishization in wider power relations between the 'Anglosphere' and the 'Rest'. We did so by deploying a postcolonial framework of analysis and by drawing on fieldwork conducted in India within the call-center units of two outsourcing organizations serving Anglo-American corporations. Our analysis shows how englishization in this particular international business setting (re-)produces a complex set of colonial-style relations played out through interactions between service providers (Indian call centers), their clients (Anglo-American companies), and their customers (individuals based in Anglophone markets). Figure 1 depicts this tripartite relationship.

"Figure 1 goes about here"

More specifically, our analysis shows how corporate englishization vitally depends on, and indeed helps to produce, *comprador managerial cadres*, i.e. collaborative local corporate actors who play a mediating role between Anglo-American capital and local labor. Like the indigenous elites of colonial times, these modern-day compradors are engaged in a mutually beneficial – albeit asymmetric – relation with Western (Anglo-American) corporations upon which they come to depend for their survival and growth at the local level (cf. Amin, 1973; Poulantzas, 1976). In this capacity, they work towards meeting Anglo-American capital's needs, including access to labor pools that are 'cheaper' than those found in the West. To this end, they also put considerable effort into surmounting the 'language barrier' that separates their Anglo-American clients from local labor by channeling the latter through rigorous selection and training rituals. In the process, they also help in recruiting and nurturing new generations of compradors and, indirectly, contribute to producing locals who, in their ambitions, language and attitudes, bear the imprint of the colonialist vision of British politician and spin doctor Lord Macaulay: "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835). In this way, they not only contribute to the global spread and dominance of English but also to the (re-)production of relations of domination and subordination between the Anglosphere and the rest of the world.

Our analysis also shows how the englishization process serves to produce a *transnational intra-linguistic hierarchy* of power and privilege that is crucial to maintaining and legitimizing the observed West/Rest power relations. At the top of such a hierarchy are Anglo-American actors (client and customers), whose effortless command of the language gives them the status of being 'born in the club' (Friedrich, 2007). These dominant actors dictate the terms of engagement and impose 'pure' English as the norm. Below them are the comprador managerial cadres who enter the club by submitting themselves to Anglo-American capital and becoming linguistically and culturally close to those above them. Lower down the hierarchy are those who remain in the club's periphery, not so much because their command of English is inadequate but because it is 'tainted' by local influences. If they succeed, as some do, in ridding themselves of these influences and 'mastering' the English language, they may enter the club and become part of a privileged local labor elite and, in the longer term, members of the comprador managerial class. Further down still are those whose English is fatally 'tainted' and who are liable to only get a distant vision of the club without ever being let in – they are the aspirants who are rejected in the early stages of recruitment and those who are recruited but then let go due to low customer satisfaction scores. Thus, as in colonial times, englishization in present-day international business settings serves to not only overcome the 'language barrier' but also to create a new kind of barrier or rather a new language-based hierarchy of power and privilege that, ultimately, serves to maintain and strengthen the global dominance of the Anglosphere.

Thirdly, our analysis shows how the corporate englishization process, as a discourse, somewhat also undercuts its own effectiveness through processes of *mimicry*. That is, it carries a fundamental ambivalence that continually frustrates the possibility of overcoming the 'language barrier' and producing 'pure' English-speaking local employees. On the one hand, it holds the promise of reducing language diversity, thereby drawing the 'Other' into the Anglosphere's linguistic/cultural system. Yet, on the other hand, it excludes – to varying degrees depending on where different segments of the 'Other' are located on the transnational social hierarchy discussed above – by continually highlighting differences between an imagined 'pure' English speaker and the 'Other'. At the same time, the englishization process produces ambivalent local employees who, while having embraced the English language, simultaneously express resistance to it by consciously distancing themselves from it, by code switching whenever possible, and by producing (less consciously) hybrid linguistic forms that continually challenge the ideal of 'pure' English. The depiction of English as a 'straightjacket', the furtive conversations in the indigenous language, the constant slippage of indigenous words into conversations in English, the continuing presence of 'mother tongue influences', and the persistence of highly creative and uniquely indigenous mutations and abbreviations of English words and idioms all work in ways that, ultimately, challenge corporate englishization and, in so doing, prevent Anglo-American capital from totally dominating its subordinate foreign business partners.

Implications

Our analysis makes three sets of contributions. To begin with, we advance language-sensitive studies of international business by shedding light on the complexities of corporate englishization in the context of offshore service outsourcing. We reveal the distinct importance of English in this particular context (locals serve in English and hence must speak not only English but also a 'pure' version of it);

the distinctly significant efforts invested into ‘englishizing’ local employees (locals must undergo rigorous training in, not merely be encouraged to use, English and their performance must be tightly monitored); and the considerable challenges involved in the process (cf. Lockwood, 2012). Further, our analysis uncovers a different kind of language-based status hierarchy emerging from englishization than that generally discussed in IB studies, namely one based on varying degrees of English-language ‘purity’, as opposed to different levels of language ‘proficiency’ (Marshcan-Piekkari et al., 1999a; Neeley, 2013), and one that extends beyond the boundaries of the organization to include external clients and customers. More importantly, our analysis reveals how the observed dynamics are intertwined with *neo-colonial* relations of domination and subordination. In particular, we show how englishization in our context relies on, and indeed serves to produce, comprador managerial cadres. In subordinating themselves to Anglo-American capital and embracing the Anglosphere’s linguistic/cultural system, compradors in effect serve as carriers and promoters of English at the local level, thereby directly contributing to the englishization of their local context. This highlights the need to go beyond the binary linguistic polarity that sets native speakers against non-natives. It calls for a more differentiated understanding of the ‘native’ category and greater sensitivity to the variety of interests and motives that underlay it. Moreover, we show how differences in language mastery, or rather ‘purity’ in our case, do not simply produce organization-bound processes of empowerment/disempowerment and inclusion/exclusion; they also serve to maintain and legitimize wider West/Rest power relations and the material conditions for imperialistic exploitation that accompany them. In all these regards, our analysis calls for more context-sensitive studies of corporate englishization as a means of broadening the field beyond the existing focus on intra-MNC language dynamics and, importantly, highlights the need to locate the phenomenon within the wider global political economy. Finally, our analysis reveals how corporate englishization, beyond its material underpinnings and consequences, also generates a degree of mimicry and hybridity. In this sense, our analysis also highlights the ambivalent and mutually constitutive nature of the relation between native speakers and non-natives and, therefore, again calls for the need to transcend binaries in our understanding of such a relation.

Second, our study advances postcolonial organization studies, a research program that "is still a somewhat quiet and tentative voice" (Jack et al., 2011: 275), especially in the field of IB. Building on the work of Frenkel (2008), we analyze corporate englishization as a discourse of 'mimicry' (Bhabha, 1994) and shed light on the ambivalence and hybridity produced by it. That being said, we also give attention to the material, political-economic context in which such a discourse is situated. In particular, we shed light on the role of 'compradors' in mediating West/Rest power relations, showing how these actors maintain a vested interest in the center's global expansion and to some extent also embrace its cultural-linguistic system into which they become assimilated via their schooling and training at Western educational institutions. Thus, we show that compradors, whilst forming part of the 'Other', are in actual practice more akin to those they are subordinated to than to those whom they govern locally. Our analysis therefore highlights the need for a more nuanced view of the 'Other' and its engagement with the center than that adopted in discursive analyses. In addition, we bring into the discussion the function of 'natural' language in maintaining West/Rest power relations. We show how the English language, beyond its function in shaping dominant/dominated identities, is also a material resource, the use of which as the *lingua franca* of international business serves to (re-)produce and legitimize the material conditions for imperialist economic exploitation. Overall, then, we advance postcolonial organization studies by providing a rare insight into the experience of West/Rest power relations and deploy an equally rare theoretical approach in which the "mutual imbrication of the material and the ideological" (Prasad, 2003: 8) is taken into account. In so doing, we add to recent efforts to address the over-emphasis placed by postcolonial studies on text and representation at the expense of lived experience and political economy (e.g. Jack et al., 2011; Srinivas, 2013).

Finally, our study contributes to IB research more generally by demonstrating the usefulness of postcolonial theory in the study of internationalization processes. We believe that such a perspective can enrich the field by locating internationalization within wider West/Rest power relations (cf. Frenkel, 2008). In particular, it can complement or extend institutionalist analyses of MNCs (e.g. Boussebaa & Morgan, 2008; Kostova & Roth, 2002; Muzio & Faulconbridge, 2013) as well as functionalist studies (e.g. Andersson et al., 2007) and more sociologically oriented investigations (Ferner et al., 2005) of power and politics within such organizations. Whilst such studies offer useful insights into the relationship between national contexts and intra-MNC organization and power, they provide conceptualizations and explanations that are largely divorced from the history and present-day reality of capitalist imperialism (cf. Boussebaa & Morgan, 2014; Boussebaa et al., 2012, 2014; also Boussebaa, 2009). We believe that addressing this problem is especially important in the study of offshore outsourcing arrangements given these are, ultimately, designed to facilitate the exploitation of 'Third-World' human resources by 'First-World' companies that "arrogantly treat the globe as their playground" (Gopal et al., 2003: 237) and that can largely dictate the terms of the transactions and threaten, as they regularly do, to take their business elsewhere. We encourage studies of this industry (e.g. Demirbag et al., 2012; Doh et al., 2009; Lewin et al., 2009; Manning, 2014) to look beyond strategic and operational issues and to work towards developing our understanding of the ways in which, and extent to which, offshore outsourcing arrangements are reproducing old patterns of imperial domination, and to what effect.

Concluding remarks

The main contribution of our study is to demonstrate that corporate englishization plays a significant part in (re-)producing colonial-style power relations between the Anglosphere and those doing business with it. This core finding resonates strongly with the view among many prominent postcolonial theorists and scholars of empire (e.g. Harvey, 2003; Parry, 2004) that "imperial pursuits continue determinedly today in the guise of transnational corporations [and] global capitalism" (McLeod, 2007: 7) – and, we should also add, corporate englishization. In this sense, our understanding of corporate englishization needs deepening and broadening, by shifting attention away from a discussion of the organizational merits and drawbacks of the phenomenon towards questions of global political economy and empire.

That being said, we do not suggest that nothing has changed since the formal decolonization of the world and that corporate englishization merely serves to extend Western colonialism into the twenty-first century. As discussed earlier, the present-day imperialist order has taken on a new form – it is driven more by capitalist power than "gunboat diplomacy" and is as much a result of US-led global capitalist expansionism as it is the outcome of internal colonialism. Yet, at the same time, the West/Rest lines of domination and exploitation that were drawn in the colonial phase of imperialism remain, as our study shows, all too visible. At the very least, our analysis shows that the English language has by no means detached itself from the global political economy and relinquished its function as a language of empire. If anything, its role in (re-)producing, discursively and materially, West/Rest power relations has expanded in light of it becoming today's undisputed global *lingua franca*, going hand in hand with the new demands of US-led global capitalist expansionism.

What remains not so clear is how far and how deep corporate englishization will go. As Ostler (2010) has powerfully argued, the continued dominance of English in the world should not be taken for granted. Equally, like earlier world languages (e.g. Greek, Latin, Persian), the commanding position of English as the principal medium of international business is unlikely to be maintained forever. Indeed, with the emergence of new powers – the so-called BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) – and the resulting shift to a multi-polar, 'post-American world' (Zakaria, 2009), one can expect English to be challenged by other languages vying for more influence in the global political economy. This raises a fascinating set of questions around the present-day impact and future of English as a global *lingua franca* and opens up an important research avenue for scholars interested in the role of language in international business.

REFERENCES

Amin, S. 1973. *Neo-Colonialism in West Africa*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Andersson, U., Forsgren, M., & Holm, U. 2007. Balancing subsidiary influence in the federative MNC: A business network view. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 38(5): 802–818.

Banerjee, S. B. 2008. Necrocapitalism. *Organization Studies*, 29(12): 1541–1563.

Banerjee, S. B., Chio, V., & Mir, R. 2009. *Organizations, Markets, and Imperial Formations: Towards an Anthropology of Globalization*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward-Elgar Publications.

Barner-Rasmussen, W. & Aarnio, C. 2011. Shifting the faultlines of language. A quantitative functional-level exploration of language use in MNC subsidiaries. *Journal of World Business*, 46(3): 288-295.

Bennett, J. C. 2004. *The Anglosphere Challenge: Why the English-Speaking Nations Will Lead the Way in the Twenty-First Century*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Bhabha, H. K. 1994. *The location of culture.* London & New York: Routledge.

Birkinshaw, J., Brannen, M. Y., & Tung, R. 2011. From a distance and generalizable to up close and grounded: Reclaiming a place for qualitative methods in international business research. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 42(5): 573–581.

Boussebaa, M. 2009. Struggling to organize across national borders: the case of global resource management in professional service firms. *Human Relations*, 62: 829–850.

Boussebaa, M., & Morgan, G. 2008. Managing talent across borders: the challenges faced by an international retail group. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 4: 25-41.

Boussebaa, M., & Morgan, G. 2014. Pushing the frontiers of critical international business studies. *Critical Perspectives on International Business,* 10(1/2): 96-106.

Boussebaa, M., Morgan, G., & Sturdy, A. 2012. Constructing global firms? National, transnational and neocolonial effects in international management consultancies. *Organization Studies*, 33(4): 465-486.

Boussebaa, M., Sturdy, A., & Morgan, G. 2014. Learning from the world? Horizontal knowledge flows and geopolitics in international consulting firms. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(9): 1227-1242.

Das, D., & Dharwadkar, R. 2009. Cultural Mimicry and Hybridity: On the work of identity in international call centers in India. In B. Bannerjee, V. Chio & R. Mir (Eds), *Organizations, Markets, and Imperial Formations: Towards an Anthropology of Globalization*: 181-197. Cheltenham, UK: Eward-Elgar Publications.

Demirbag, M., Mellahi, K., Sahadev, S., & Elliston, J. 2012. Employee service abandonment in offsore operations: A case study of a US multinational in India. *Journal of World Business*, 47: 178–185.

Doh, J. P., Bunyaratavej, K., & Hahn, E. D. 2009. Separable but not equal: The location determinants of discrete services offshoring activities. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 40(6): 926–943.

Dor, D. 2004. From Englishization to imposed multilingualism: Globalization, the Internet, and the political economy of the linguistic code. *Public Culture*, 16(1): 97–118.

Eisenhardt, K. M. 1989. Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4): 532-550.

Fanon, F. 1952/1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto.

Feely, A.J., & Harzing, A.W.K. 2003. Language management in multinational companies. *Cross-Cultural Management: An International Journal*, 10(2): 37-52.

Ferner, A., Almond, P., & Colling, T. 2005. Institutional theory and the cross-national transfer of employment policy: the case of “workforce diversity” in US multinationals. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 36: 304–321.

Fougère, M., & Moulettes, A. 2012. Disclaimers, dichotomies and disappearances in international business textbooks: a postcolonial deconstruction. *Management Learning*, 43(1): 5-24.

Frenkel, M. 2008. The multinational corporation as a third space: Rethinking international management discourse on knowledge transfer through Homi Bhabha. *Academy of Management Review,* 33: 924-942.

Frenkel, M., & Shenhav, Y. 2006. From binarism back to hybridity: A postcolonial reading of management and organization studies. *Organization Studies*, 27(6): 855-876.

Friedrich, P. 2007. I want to be part of the club: Raising awareness of bilingualism and second language writing among monolingual users of English. In P. Friedrich (Ed.), *Teaching academic writing*: 177-190. London: Continuum.

Gopal, A., Willis, R., & Gopal, Y. 2003. From the colonial enterprise to enterprise systems: Parallels between colonization and globalization. In A. Prasad (Ed.), *Postcolonial theory and organizational analysis*, pp. 233-254. London: Palgrave.

Gopinath, C., & Prasad, A. 2013. Toward a critical framework for understanding MNE operations: Revisiting Coca Cola’s exit from India. *Organization*, 20(2): 212-232.

Harzing, A. W., Köster, K., & Magner, U. 2011. Babel in Business: The language barrier and its solutions in the HQ-subsidiary relationship. *Journal of World Business*, 46(3): 279-287.

Harvey, D. 2003. *The new imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jack, G., & Westwood, R. 2006. Postcolonialism and the politics of qualitative research in international business. *Management International Review*, 46: 481–501.

Jack, G., & Westwood, R. 2009. *International and Cross-Cultural Management Studies: A Postcolonial Reading*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Jack, G., Westwood, R., Srinivas, N. & Sardar, Z. 2011. Broadening, deepening and re-asserting a postcolonial interrogative space in organization studies. *Organization*, 18(3): 1-28.

Jones, G. 1993. *British Multinational Banking, 1830–1990*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Korten, D.C. 2001. *When Corporations Rule the World*. Bloomfield: Kumarian Press.

Kostova, T., & Roth, K. (2002). Adoption of organizational practice by subsidiaries of multinational corporations: Institutional and relational effects. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45: 215–233.

Lauring, J. 2008. Rethinking social identity theory in international encounters: Language use as a negotiated object for identity making. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 8(3): 343–361.

Lauring, J., & Selmer, J. (2012). International language management and diversity climate in multicultural organizations. *International Business Review*, 21(2): 156–166.

Levy, D. 2005. Offshoring in the new global political economy. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(3): 685–93.

Lewin, A., Massini, S., & Peeters, C. 2009. Why are companies offshoring innovation? The emerging global race for talent. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 40(6): 901–925.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. 1985. *Naturalistic inquiry.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Locke, K. D. 2001. *Grounded theory in management research.* London: Sage.

Lockwood, J. 2012. Are we getting the right people for the job? A study of English language recruitment assessment practices in the business processing outsourcing sector: India and the Philippines. *Journal of Business Communication*, 49(2): 107–127.

Luo, Y., & Shenkar, O. 2006. The multinational corporation as a multilingual community: Language and organization in a global context. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 37(3): 321–339.

Macaulay, T. 1835/1965. Minute of 2 February 1835 on Indian Education.

Maclean, D. 2006. Beyond English: Transnational corporations and the strategic management of language in a complex multilingual business environment. *Management Decision*, 44(10): 1377-1390.

Manning, S. 2014. Mitigate, tolerate or relocate? Offshoring challenges, strategic imperatives and resource constraints. *Journal of World Business*, 49(4), forthcoming.

Marschan-Piekkari, R., Welch, D. E., & Welch, L. S. 1999a. In the shadow: the impact of language on structure, power and communication in the multinational. *International Business Review*, 8(4): 421-40.

Marschan-Piekkari, R., Welch, D. E., & Welch, L. S. 1999b. Adopting a common corporate language: IHRM implications. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 10(3): 377-90.

McArthur, T. 1998. *Concise Oxford companion to the English language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McLeod, J. (Ed.). 2007. *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

McKenna, S. 2011. A critical analysis of North American business leaders' neocolonial discourse: global fears and local consequences. *Organization*, 18(3): 387-406.

Memmi, A. 1957/1967. *The colonizer and the colonized*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Mir, R., & Mir, A. 2009. From the colony to the corporation: studying knowledge transfer across international boundaries. *Group & Organization Management*, 34(1): 90-113.

Mirchandani, K. 2004. Practices of global capital: gaps, cracks and ironies in transnational call centers in India. *Global Networks*, 4(4): 355–73.

Miyoshi, M. 1993. A borderless world? From colonialism to transnationalism and the decline of the nation-state. *Critical Inquiry*, 19: 721-751.

Moore, F. 2011. Holistic ethnography: Studying the impact of multiple national identities on post-acquisition organizations. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 42: 654–71.

Moore-Gilbert, B. 1997. *Postcolonial theory: Contexts, practices, politics*. New York: Verso.

Murphy, J. R., & Zhu, J. 2012. Neo-colonialism in the academy? Anglo-American domination in management journals. *Organization*, 19(6): 915-927.

Muzio, D., & Faulconbridge, J. 2013. The global professional service firm: 'one firm' models versus (Italian) distant institutionalized practices. *Organization Studies*, 34(7): 897-925.

NASSCOM. 2012. The IT-BPO Sector in India: Strategic Review 2012. New Delhi, India: NASSCOM.

Neeley, T. 2012. Global Business Speaks English. *Harvard Business Review*, 116.

Neeley, T. 2013. Language matters: Status loss and achieved status distinctions in global organizations. *Organization Science*, 24(2): 476–497.

Neeley, T., Hinds, P. J., & Cramton, C. D. 2012. The (Un)Hidden Turmoil of Language in Global Collaboration. *Organizational Dynamics*, 41(3): 236–244.

Ohmae, K. 1990. *The borderless world: power and strategy in the interlinked economy*. London: HarperCollins.

Ohmae, K. 2005. *The next global stage: Challenges and opportunities in our borderless world*. London: Pearson.

Ostler, N. 2010. *The last lingua franca: English until the return of Babel*. London: Allen Lane.

Parry, B. 2004. *Postcolonial studies: A materialist critique*. London: Routledge.

Peltokorpi, V., & Vaara, E. 2012. Language policies and practices in wholly-owned foreign subsidiaries: A recontextualization perspective. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 43(9): 803-833.

Pennycook, A. 1994. *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. Longman.

Petras, J., & Veltmeyer, H. 2001. *Globalization Unmasked: Imperialism in the 21st Century*. London: ZED Press.

Phillipson, R.H.L. 1992. *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Piekkari, R., & Zander, L. 2005. Language and communication in international management. *International Studies of Management & Organization,* 35(1): 3–9.

Poster, W. R. 2007. Who's on the line? Indian call center agents pose as Americans for U.S.-outsourced firms. *Industrial Relations*, 46(2): 271-304.

Poulantzas, N. 1976. *The crisis of the dictatorships*. London: New Left Books.

Prasad, A. (Ed.) 2003. *Postcolonial theory and organizational analysis: A critical engagement*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Prasad, A. (Ed.) 2012. *Against the grain: Advances in postcolonial organization studies*. Copenhagen Business School Press.

Russell, B. 2009. *Smiling down the Line: Info-service work in the global economy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Shimoni, B., & Bergman, H. 2006. Managing in a changing world: from multiculturalism to hybridization. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 20(3): 76–89.

Srinivas, N. 2013. Could a subaltern manage? Identity work and habitus in a colonial workplace. *Organization Studies*, 34(11):1655-1674.

Steyaert, C., Ostendorp, A., & Gaibrois, C. 2011. Multilingual organizations as “linguascapes”: negotiating the position of English through discursive practices. *Journal of World Business*, 46(3): 270-278.

Tietze, S. 2004. Spreading the management gospel – in English. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 4(3): 175-189.

Vaara, E., Tienari, J., Piekkari, R., & Säntti, R. 2005. Language and the circuits of power in a merging multinational corporation. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(3): 595-623.

Vidal, J. 2013. Indonesia is seeing a new corporate colonialism. *The Observer, Guardian*, 26 May.

Welch, C., Piekkari, R., Plakoyiannaki, E., & Paavilainen-Mantymaki, E. 2011. Theorizing from case studies: Towards a pluralist future for international business research. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 42: 740–762.

Welch, D., Welch, L., & Piekkari, R. 2005. Speaking in tongues. The importance of language in international management processes. *International Studies of Management and Organization*, 35(1): 10-27.

Westney, D. E., & Van Maanen, J. 2011. The casual ethnography of the executive suite. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 42(5): 602–607.

Zakaria, F. 2008. *The post-American world*. London: Penguin.

---

[i] The terms 'englishization' and 'anglicization' are often used interchangeably in the IB literature and more generally. Neeley (2012) also reports on the use of the term 'englishinization' (with an 'n') in Japanese firm Rakuten. We prefer 'englishization' as this is more elegant and grammatically correct than 'englishnization' and more accurate than 'anglicization', which is generally defined as the process of making "someone or something English in nationality, culture, or language" (McArthur, 1998), and hence used to refer to a broader phenomenon. We employ the term 'corporate' to signal that our focus is on englishization in the specific context of the corporate world (see Dor, 2004, for a more general discussion of englishization).

[ii] The concept of the 'Anglosphere' was introduced by Bennett (2004) to describe a loose coalition of English-speaking nations based on a common language and cultural heritage. Such coalition includes a former colonial power – Britain – and today's economically and politically most dominant nation – the USA.

[iii] Quotes have been slightly edited for clarity.

[iv] The term 'sitcom' is a widely used abbreviation for 'situation comedy', which refers to a (mostly) television programme in which characters share a common environment (e.g. a home or a workplace) and engage in humorous dialogue. Notable sitcoms include *The Office* in the UK and *Friends* in the USA.