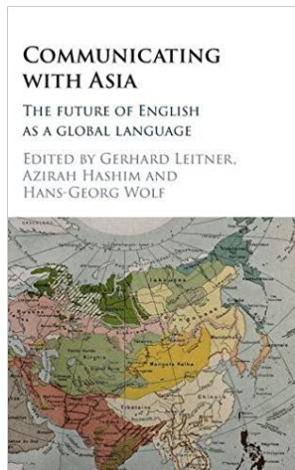


## Book Review



### **Communicating with Asia: The future of English as a global language**

Gerhard Leitner, Azirah Hashim and Hans-Georg Wolf (Eds.). Cambridge University Press, 2016.  
366 pp. ISBN: 9781107062610

Reviewed by:

Simon Scanlon

*Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong*

Perhaps owing to decolonisation and China's rising economic significance, the modern age is often feted as the Asian Century. This book documents the role, status, and development of the English language across Asia in the post-colonial age, and how it facilitates communication within the region as well as with the wider world. Divided into three parts, the book charts the transformation of English from acting as a colonial government's means to disenfranchise the local population to an important asset for modernization and integration with the wider world in the late twentieth century. For better or worse, English has now established a key role in exercising power and authority but more recently has become a means of self-expression with a local flavour.

Part one looks at how societies have evolved after gaining independence and in particular how they have integrated English into their national identity. Most remarkable is the case of Singapore which in less than 50 years has succeeded in stabilising a local variety of English that is accepted by its citizens thanks to the government's Speak Good English campaign in tandem with recognising the importance of English for economic survival. Perhaps as a further sign of globalization and linguistic self-confidence, young Singaporeans have begun to fuse British English syntax with American phonology. This rapid development is in contrast to neighbouring Malaysia whose policy of switching from English to Malay and back to English as medium of instruction (MOI) over the years has produced less consistent results. The book describes similar uneven usage in Pakistan, where English possesses elite status as the language of the judiciary, government, and education, and indirectly acts as a 'class oppressor' (p. 26). Japan, however, has resisted fully embracing English largely due to

its counter-productive attitude of '*native speakerism*' (p.28) and reliance on Anglo-American forms which has rendered it difficult to communicate with speakers of other World Englishes.

At first glance, part two seems to focus on the standing of and occasional competition between other major languages in Asia. Hindi-Urdu, Malay, Russian, and Chinese have established themselves in their home territories, as well as jostling for space in neighbouring areas leaving little opportunity for English to make its presence felt. Nonetheless, closer analysis reveals that English plays an important neutralizing role and is often the beneficiary where there is tension between two other main languages as with Russian and the Turkic languages of the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, among the nearly two dozen official languages in India, and between Putonghua and Cantonese in Hong Kong. Perhaps one of the few positive remnants of colonial rule is that English may have caused divisions in the past but today brings people of distant and diverse backgrounds together.

Part three investigates English and its application in specific contexts, most notably as the lingua franca of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and increasingly as the MOI in the tertiary sector. What is revealing is how far English has evolved in post-colonial societies with a reduced dependence on norm-providing forms, utilised as a tool, in the words of Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, "*to exchange our ideas with the rest of the world*" (p. 290). This book demonstrates that with increasingly assertive ownership, English should now be recognized as an Asian language and appropriate adjustments should be made to enhance comprehensibility when interacting in a group of native and non-native speakers.

*Communicating with Asia* provides an excellent detailed account of how post-colonial states and certain monolingual countries have used English as a modernising force and to engage with each other. It illustrates how local varieties have flourished even when its users knowingly add incorrect localised features. It also acknowledges other major languages in the region that indirectly keep English in check, thus underlining how language choice is often based on power rather than practicality. There is no mention of less developed countries in the Indochina region, and perhaps some analysis on their language policies and practices would have given a more complete picture of whether English benefits all countries in the same way.

Despite English's dominant position, this does not imply there is a standard variety or that one should be used in Asia. Indeed, the book understands that the number and proliferation of Asian Englishes suggests that awareness of these would be helpful in enhancing communication. This book will be of interest to those who have contact with a range of countries in Asia by highlighting the linguistic differences influenced by complex social, cultural, and political factors. Improved communication will in turn empower Asian countries to make their own variety of English thrive.

### About the reviewer

Simon Scanlon teaches academic literacy courses at the University of Hong Kong.