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Introduction

"If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.

—THE TOWER OF BABEL (GENESIS 11:1–9)

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. . . . A crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?"

—THE HOLY SPIRIT COMES AT PENTECOST (ACTS 2:1–11)

Two well-known stories from the ancients showcase the fundamental role that language plays in human interaction and demonstrate its power to be a prelude to chaos or a herald of new understanding. The story of the tower of Babel testifies to the inevitable scattering that follows linguistic confusion. When communication breaks down, no one can move forward; they are unable to understand or be understood. Big plans come to nothing. In contrast, the story of the

Pentecost demonstrates how, despite differences in "native language," it is possible for each person in the crowd to understand perfectly what is being said. Although they originate in different cultures and locations, the people are no longer separated from one another; they are joined in clarity.

Today, language holds a similar weight in global organizations as it did for the confused people in the story of Babel and the amazed onlookers in the story of the Pentecost. There is urgency for global employees to communicate effectively so that all can engage and participate in the work required, and indeed, global organizations are at the frontier of changes in language use. For over three decades, American and British political, economic, and technological power on the world's stage has propelled English as the *lingua franca* (common language) of international business. Approximately 52 percent of multinationals today use English for some capacity of cross-border work. Yet despite the clearly established link between language and societal macro-forces, there is a surprising absence of research into how shifts in language and culture play out longitudinally at the organizational level. Adopting a lingua franca, which by definition is foreign to a portion of the employees, is not only a matter of mastering vocabulary lists and grammatical tenses. Nor is it simply a matter of having to learn the particular culture that any given language is said to embody; learning French certainly doesn't bestow knowledge of fine cheeses, nor does learning Farsi carry a proclivity for knotting intricate carpets.

I have studied the lingua franca phenomenon in global organizations for nearly fifteen years. The seed of my interest was first planted when I was part of a study at Stanford University examining the cross-cultural experience of globally dispersed teams at a German high-tech company. As many as 70 percent of employees we interviewed in Germany, India, and the United States attributed collaboration hardships of one sort or another to language. One of my first interviewees teared up when describing an ongoing sense of ostracism as a result of other team members' habitual switch to a foreign language. Others described difficulty speaking the dominant language as the source of isolation in their teams and their

organizations. Many saw language differences as the most divisive aspect of their global teamwork.

As soon as I left those interviews, I turned to the literature to make sense of what I had heard. I was surprised to find very little existing research that could explain the emotionally charged experiences that employees had recounted, and even more surprised that such a knowledge gap existed about one of the most fundamental means for global workers to communicate. Since that first study, I have been motivated to go as deep and wide as I could to systematically study and write about language and the role it plays in global work.

The story of how language can affect employees and organizations in the course of a lingua franca adoption, and consequently, how our previously held notions of language and culture become upended, especially in one e-commerce high-tech giant—Rakuten—is the subject of this book. Rakuten is a leader in Japan's e-commerce space, and its CEO is regarded as a maverick in business and cultural change, but its challenges with language and cultural diversity are germane to many global organizations.

Founded in June 1997 in Japan as an e-mall service, Rakuten Ichiba was part of the mid-1990s Internet growth that ushered in an era in which the buying and selling of products and services moved online in what has become the e-commerce industry. Although in the past two decades traditional brick-and-mortar retail businesses have increasingly adopted online shopping capabilities or participated in third-party online marketplaces, Rakuten has been strictly an e-commerce business from its founding. Approximately 75 percent of growth in retail sales since 2000 can be attributed to e-commerce.[1] In Japan and elsewhere, this surge was driven in large part by the growth in Internet accessibility, with 46 percent of global households having access to the Internet and 43 percent of people globally using the Internet in 2015.[2] Consumers increasingly look globally for e-commerce purchases of products otherwise unobtainable in their domestic market and because they are motivated by lower prices, greater selection, higher quality of products, and assurance against product counterfeiting.[3]

Rakuten's platform allowed retailers, product manufacturers, and other service providers to build online storefronts, operating within a B2B2C (Business to Business to Consumer) model. Major consumer electronics retailers sold Sony, NEC, Nintendo, Panasonic, or Hitachi-branded items on Rakuten's platform. In return, Rakuten generated revenues from its merchants (retailers) through fixed monthly fees, sales of advertising and other services, and a percentage of gross merchandise sales. As the intermediary between sellers and buyers, Rakuten did not handle inventory for the vast majority of its business (books and media were the only exceptions). Rakuten later expanded into other Internet services, including cashback sites, travel-booking sites, and digital content, such as e-books and video streaming, as well as financial services, including Internet banking, online securities trading, a Rakuten-issued credit card, and life insurance.[4] Rakuten also pursued online mobile messaging and communication, management of its professional baseball team, the Tohoku Rakuten Golden Eagles, and other niche businesses. Similar to Amazon.com, which also pioneered e-commerce before diversifying its businesses into online payments, e-readers, digital content, and cloud infrastructure services, Rakuten would eventually host business services in the global marketplace.[5]

In March 2010 the CEO of Rakuten, Hiroshi Mikitani, mandated a company-wide English language initiative, effective immediately. I learned about Englishnization at Rakuten several months later and began to interview employees and conduct what would become a five-year, in-depth, longitudinal study of Rakuten's English language strategy. Throughout the study, Mikitani granted me total access to his company, inviting me to go anywhere in the world to talk to any of his employees and without imposing a single condition. I talked with people as many times as I deemed necessary to develop a rich understanding of lingua franca and cultural phenomena as they unfolded in real time. I employed a hybrid approach to collect qualitative, quantitative, and archival data. The qualitative data comprised 650 interviews across eight country sites—Brazil, France, Germany, Indonesia, Japan (headquarters), Taiwan, Thailand, and the United States—that were conducted in five languages. The quantitative

data were collected at two points in time, totaling 3,056 surveys. I also collected over 20,000 pages of archival documents. The data I collected eventually informed the findings that I present as Phase One and Phase Two, capturing two key stages of the lingua franca adoption processes. Further details about my research methods can be found in appendices A and B, where I delineate how I analyzed the quantitative data.

As I reviewed and analyzed the data, three distinct social groups emerged and led me to conceive of workers in the global organization as expatriates in their own countries. Expatriates (often shortened to "expats") are people temporarily or permanently residing as immigrants in a country other than that of their citizenship. I have repurposed the word "expat" to mean people who are temporarily or permanently detached from their mother tongue or home culture while still operating in their own country. The change to a lingua franca is the catalyst for all employees to become an expat of one sort or another in their daily organizational work while still living in their native country. The expat perspective that I conceptualize rests on the assumption that everyone is at least slightly uncomfortable detaching from a native language or culture.

This book lies at the intersection of language, national culture, and organizational culture, and before we go any further, let me say a little more about definitions. Here, "language" means the lingua franca. "Culture" refers to a national culture—for example, Japanese, American, German, Thai, or others. My definition of "organizational culture" is one articulated by O'Reilly and Chatman as "a system of shared values (that define what is important) and norms that define appropriate attitudes and behaviors for organizational members (how to feel and behave)."[6]

Theoretical and empirical focus on language and globalization continues to dramatically lag the realities that employees face on the ground, as will become apparent in this book. Understanding the evolution of a language mandate over time and across groups enables us to develop insights into how people who work in global organizations learn to communicate and negotiate linguistic and cultural differences. Language is everywhere. It flows across and

touches the entire spectrum of global organizational processes: values, norms, attitudes, customer service work, product design, marketing, hiring, evaluating, and promoting employees, internal reporting, post-merger integration, innovation, process improvements, teaming, and much more. A language change affects these processes and practices simultaneously.

In addition, my study of the lingua franca mandate and employees' experience at Rakuten demonstrates that a foreign language can be appropriated and used as a conduit to spread a native culture. In looking closely at how English lingua franca is currently used in a global workplace, I discovered what can happen when a language and culture are productively *de*coupled. I unpack the ways in which the English language transported Japanese national cultural traditions and beliefs throughout the globalizing organization at Rakuten. I draw attention to the ramifications of the decoupling of language and culture throughout the book. As I studied these ramifications over a five-year period, I found that each of the three social groups that emerged at Rakuten grappled with and eventually found a way to integrate the changes—linguistic, cultural, or both—that were a consequence of the firm-wide lingua franca adoption.

The first group comprised employees who lived in their home country, Japan, yet had to give up their mother tongue when they entered their place of employment or signed into a conference call. Their organization demanded that they shed the ease of their native language, making their daily work experience fraught with language challenges. Conceptually, one might think it is comparable to immigrants' transformative experience of having to learn and adopt a foreign language when moving to a foreign country; however, the twist, one that fundamentally alters how we understand what it means to adopt a new language, is that they had to do so while remaining in their home country. I call this group *linguistic expats* precisely because they became language expatriates in their own country.

The second group comprised native English-speaking employees who lived and worked in Rakuten's U.S. subsidiaries. Initially, the native English-speaking employees were euphoric when the CEO stipulated the English lingua franca mandate. The vast majority of

the native English-speaking employees initially felt privileged; they believed that they were the beneficiaries of the change, having increased capacity to contribute to the organization and anticipating myriad new opportunities for career advancement. This group did in fact become beneficiaries of improved communication, but what eventually happened, once the Japanese employees became more proficient in English, overturned their—and my—assumptions. Contrary to expectation, the company-wide mandate to adopt the English language became a gateway for the spread of Rakuten's organizational culture—one built on the Japanese national identity—into the U.S. subsidiaries.

The Americans' sense of good fortune—that they happened to be native English speakers operating in their home country—fell away with the onslaught of foreign organizational and cultural values into their daily work practices and processes. As this group struggled to adjust to such new practices as being monitored by supervisors to ensure they were wearing the prescribed Rakuten badge, correctly pinned, at all times, they became *cultural expats*—forced to detach from their native cultural norms and adopt organizational cultural practices that rubbed against their American grain. The fundamental twist for this group was that the shift to their native language ironically opened the door to cultural changes in organizational practices more reflective of Japanese national culture than of their own native culture, within which they were working.

The third group also surprised me. It was composed of employees who were neither native English speakers nor members of the Japanese-headquartered native group. Rather, they worked in Rakuten's non-native English-speaking foreign offices: Brazil, France, Germany, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Thailand. One might expect that those who had to shed their foundational languages *and* cultures, who were *linguistic-cultural* (or *dual*) *expats* in their home country, would have experienced a double jeopardy. This group had the easier linguistic adjustment to English and the easier cultural adjustment to the Japanese ways ushered in by the lingua franca mandate, although they too had to master steep learning curves to gain higher language proficiency and engage in new culturally unfamiliar work practices.

Once the dual expats overcame the frustrations of communicating and coordinating work across borders, they were surprisingly open and receptive to languages and cultural practices that were foreign to their locale, nationality, or identity. These attitudes are what will make dual expats, in my estimation, the employee group most likely to be effective for global organizations of the twenty-first century.

There is a fourth category, bilingual employees, that deserves brief mention. Fluent in Japanese and English, they were playing a necessary intermediary role in the organization pre-mandate. This small group, who held positions in every division (e.g., engineering, human resources), also served as translators between colleagues. However, after the lingua franca mandate took hold and people's language fluency evolved, the demand for these bilinguals lessened and then became nearly nonexistent because they were no longer unique. I do not focus on this group because they represent a very small subset of the employee population, and consequently I do not have sufficient data to capture as robust a story as I was able to develop for the other three groups, though I touch on them in chapter 6.

Adopting an expat frame allows me to look closely at how a workforce meets the challenges of belonging to a global organization. My hope is that after reading this book, scholars and practitioners will be sensitive to the fact that each of the three social groups—linguistic expats, cultural expats, and dual expats—has new roles and responsibilities to themselves and to the organization. A lingua franca mandate leaves no organizational process or practice untouched. In ways tangible and intangible, superficial and profound, the organization itself is changed.

While some aspects of my analysis are unique to Rakuten—its e-commerce industry, the Japanese corporate and national culture in which it is embedded, its charismatic CEO, and the comprehensive approach he took to rolling out the lingua franca mandate—there are lessons to be learned for many global companies as they will likely confront similar language and culture challenges. The reality is that both kinds of challenges are already occurring within firms that operate across national boundaries. The experiences of the three social groups I identify provide theoretical and empirical purchase in our

understanding of workers in global organizations. Importantly, the expat perspective allows us to see the extent to which some people will feel linguistically estranged, others will feel culturally estranged, and some will experience distances on both ends depending on whether they are native or non-native members.

There are two organizational scenarios that are likely to give rise to these three social groups. The first scenario is global organizations with an English lingua franca that are headquartered in an English-speaking country—for example, the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia—and thus do not have linguistic expats but do have cultural expats and dual expats in their workforce. The second scenario consists of the reverse; in organizations that adopt an English lingua franca and are headquartered in a country where the native language is *not* English—for example, Brazil, Germany, or China—linguistic expats, cultural expats, and linguistic-cultural expats are likely to exist. In organizations where English is both the native language and the lingua franca, people may still categorize as cultural expats if there is a mismatch between the culture of the headquarters and that of the subsidiary. For example, an Australian employee who is part of a U.S.-based organization would be required to adhere to American values and cultural norms. Australians become cultural expats because they share a common native language with their U.S. employer (English), while still having to adapt to different cultural norms (American). On the other hand, Malaysian employees of that same company who work in Malaysia would hold the position of dual expats when they must adopt a non-native language (English) and operate within a non-native organization (U.S.) and national culture (American).

If we look at the alternative scenario, an organization situated in a country where the native language is not English, then all three categories of employees (linguistic expats, cultural expats, and dual expats) would likely exist, similar to the situation at Rakuten. For example, if a company is headquartered in Germany and adopts the English lingua franca (e.g., SAP or Siemens), employees who work in Germany would fall into the linguistic expat category. Employees who are native English speakers would be cultural expats,

while those who are non-native English speakers and non-Germans would fall into the linguistic expat categories.

In the end, each social group has distinct challenges and rewards. Regardless of where each social group begins, the book takes the reader through the separate journey each group followed to become expats in their own countries. With the exception of the CEO and select executives who have spoken publicly about the language strategy, I refer to interviewees by pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Chapter 1 sets the stage with the dramatic announcement by Hiroshi Mikitani, CEO of Rakuten, informing his 10,000 employees, of which over 7,100 are Japanese nationals, that from that day forward they must speak English in the workplace. In two years, they will be required to clear a proficiency test or risk demotion. In this first chapter we meet three employees who represent the categories that make up the core of the book: Kenji, a Japanese engineer gripped by shock and fear that his years of hard work with the company will count for naught, who then receives the technical and emotional support to practice new English language skills; Robert, a native English-speaking marketing manager from the United States, thrilled that the company is switching to his native language and who anticipates an easy career advance only to have his sense of privilege curtailed by new, daily work requirements, followed by a trip to Japan where his cultural blinders begin to loosen; and a German IT technician, Inga, pleased by the announcement, who hopes it will streamline her work process—and learns that it does once she climbs the steep and often frustrating learning curve. To contextualize this chapter, I weave in trends, theories, and empirical evidence that deepen our understanding of the development and effects of English as a lingua franca in global organizations more broadly.

Chapter 2 follows Mikitani's thinking and leadership development with regard to the Englishnization mandate. Initially, Mikitani believed the English language mandate would succeed if employees were independent and entrepreneurial, taking full responsibility—financially and otherwise—for learning English. However, after nearly a year and a half, upon discovering that progress was dismal, he led a major shift. I introduce and discuss Mikitani's promotion of

the mandate during the second phase of "English only"—learning English while retaining one's native culture. I assess how Mikitani's leadership influenced employee attitudes and English language proficiency scores.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 follow the three employees introduced in chapter 1 and draw from the experiences of others similarly positioned in the organization to trace, through an expat perspective, how each group develops and changes over time. Importantly, the expat perspective provides new insights about the interplay between language and culture. What does it mean for employees to detach from their original language or culture, and for some, both? Chapter 3 focuses on the Japanese linguistic expats and their linguistic shock, which initially presents a barrier to learning a foreign language. The results of the seemingly insurmountable challenge at the mandate's announcement—base English language proficiency for the Japanese domestic workforce—are provided and discussed in chapter 3. Chapter 4, which focuses on the native English-speaking cultural expats, takes up the corresponding culture shock they undergo as a result of inundation from a foreign (Japanese) culture, presenting a barrier to cross-cultural communication. Chapter 5, about the linguistic-cultural expats, describes how this group's lack of either linguistic or cultural shock eventually presents the lowest barrier to living in and learning a foreign culture. This process, although challenging for many individuals in the first two groups, emerged as freeing for the dual expat employees and allowed them entry to more adaptive attitudes and behaviors.

Chapter 6 documents the largely beneficial results of the lingua franca mandate on Rakuten over a period of five years, including the rise in international acquisitions, accelerated post-integration activities, centralized technical platforms, and knowledge sharing. An expanded and global talent pool changed hiring patterns within the Tokyo headquarters and worldwide, particularly in the engineering ranks. While many advances were made in the advent of the English language mandate, this chapter also highlights enduring challenges.

In addition, chapter 6 shows examples of Rakuten's influence beyond the confines of the organization. When I first met Hiroshi

Mikitani, he told me that he was passionate about empowering and renewing Japanese society and that he viewed Rakuten as an important conduit for societal-level changes. The English language mandate was chief among the changes that his company could effect nationally, particularly because Mikitani's globalization ambitions for his company were deeply intertwined with his ambitions for Japan. The prime minister of Japan tapped Mikitani to join a newly formed advisory body, the Industrial Competitiveness Council, to aid in developing a globalization agenda. A national language strategy was rooted in the actions that the council adopted. These activities demonstrate the role that companies can have in shaping societal growth and character.

Chapter 7 considers how the insights from this research and other in-depth work that I have conducted can serve as a guide for practitioners at three levels in the organization—top leaders, managers, and employees—who are seeking to better navigate shifts as they adopt practices for their organizations' lingua franca and cultural transitions. I detail the factors that top leaders need to consider when assessing the appropriateness of a lingua franca and corresponding implementation tactics. Without a broader understanding of how language changes affect their workforce, and what is needed for implementation, many organizations will falter in their lingua franca mandates. I also highlight how managers can practically support and accurately evaluate employees who are operating in a cross-lingua environment. Finally, the chapter provides communication strategies for employees in their everyday interactions globally.

Language can affect every aspect of global organizational life. If leaders can integrate language changes effectively, they will open untold opportunities to unleash previously untapped talent in their workforce and increase their company's ability to maximize what is too often an unfulfilled promise of globalization. A lingua franca is the closest we have to the "tongues of fire" that allow people to hear and comprehend any language as if it were their own. Only by learning to communicate—with words and culture—can we go forward, into the future world and work of global business.

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