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Mandating a common language in the multinational enterprise: The case of cummins in india

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Abstract

In this study, we answer the call for integrating insights from different language-related research areas in international business. We investigate the antecedents and outcomes of mandating English as a common language in the Indian subsidiaries and joint ventures of Cummins, a large US-headquartered industrial, multinational enterprise (MNE). Our Transaction Cost Theory lens shows how the mandated adoption of English significantly improved the Indian subsidiaries' position in the MNE's network. Through retrospectively analyzing the experience of the authors in top and middle management roles with Cummins in India and utilizing a range of publicly available information, we also identified the significant role of English in fostering inclusion in India, where the broad societal context of diversity and inclusion is very different from that prevailing in the MNE's home country.

Keywords Common language · Corporate language · English · India · Transaction cost theory · Diversity and Inclusion

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Introduction

“When I was a trainee around 10–11 years back, our company’s Chairman and CEO Mr. Tom Linebarger visited our plant...I was selected to interact with Tom and the team and explained about the work processes and problem-solving techniques and how these techniques benefit us in our daily work... That day I realized the importance of English language and fluency” (a female shopfloor associate in one of the Cummins factories in India, with a technical high-school level education).

English is now the official language or the *lingua franca* in numerous firms in India. It is used for contracts and other documentation, email, and may be spoken in meetings at senior levels (Datta et al., 2023; Krishnaswamy & Krishnaswamy, 2011). However, it is uncommon for factory workers without a college degree such as the employee quoted above, to fluently speak and write in English (Azam et al., 2013).¹ Our study of Cummins, which manufactures engines and components in over a dozen Indian factories, reveals that the mandated use of English was not an end in itself, but was linked to initiatives meant to improve diversity and inclusion (D&I). These initiatives were also meant to engage employees through a team-based work system and to improve communication between Cummins employees in India and at the corporate headquarters and other locations. In this paper, we investigate through a transaction cost theory (TCT) lens, the antecedents, roles, and outcomes of this mandated practice for the Cummins subsidiaries and employees in India.

The use of a common language in the MNE has been researched using a variety of perspectives and methodologies. For example, utilizing a social identity perspective, Reiche et al. (2015) found (unsurprisingly) that a common language is positively related to knowledge inflows from the head office to subsidiaries in an MNE. Peltokorpi and Vaara (2012) adopted a recontextualization perspective to understand how language policies and practices took on new meaning in Japanese subsidiaries of various MNEs. Methodologies deployed in language-related research have included quantitative studies using survey data as well as case studies and literature reviews. However, there have been very few studies of language in the international business (IB) field specific to India, as demonstrated by our systematic literature review, which identified only six relevant papers in this realm (see Appendix 1). This paucity of studies represents a significant research opportunity due to the fact that India is an important country of operation for numerous MNEs and is also unique in several respects. A multitude of languages are spoken in India, whereas English speakers are concentrated among the educated or ‘elite’ (Rukmini, 2019). In addition, in the Indian context, women are under-represented in the labor force in general² and more so in sectors, such as heavy manufacturing, and the caste

¹ As per the 2011 Census of India (Singh & Nakkeerar, 2022), 10.6% of Indians spoke English as a first, second, or third language. Azam, Chin and Prakash (2013) reported a higher percentage of fluent English speakers among college graduates (35.3%) than among those who have attended secondary school (6%).

² In 2022, 23.5% of the labor force was female (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=IN>).



system “is still intrinsically present in aspects of Indian day-to-day life” (Anand, 2021; Bapuji et al., 2023; Cooke, 2010; Laleman et al., 2015 p. 437).³

Our study makes three contributions. *First*, we reached the opposite conclusion of a prior study published in *JIBS*, the leading IB journal, that suggested the adoption of English in an organization in India created power imbalances and compradores⁴ (Boussebaa et al., 2014). Specifically, we found that the use of English enabled the *inclusion* of under-represented and marginalized groups and created *value* for employees in terms of their status in their communities. It also increased their engagement, which in turn benefited Cummins by contributing to employee productivity and retention. Inclusion refers to the “removal of obstacles to the full participation and contribution of employees in organizations,” a concept distinct from diversity, which refers to differences in demographics between people and at a deeper level, differences in values and ways of thinking (Roberson, 2006 p. 217; Wang et al., 2019). We identified how D&I can have a different meaning in the countries where the MNE operates, and the important role of language in fostering inclusion.

Second, we theorize that the widespread use of English in a foreign subsidiary or joint venture (JV), including on the shopfloor, contributes to the locational attractiveness of the subsidiary or JV as perceived by the MNE’s corporate head office and could therefore drive *value creation* for the local entity in terms of greater investments by the MNE in the country. We focus on value creation through efficient governance (Hennart & Verbeke, 2022), including the role of language in mitigating bounded rationality (covering a myriad of information access and processing challenges), and bounded reliability, which refers to imperfect efforts to adhere to open-ended commitments (Kano & Verbeke, 2015).

Third, we tentatively explore the linkage between operating mode and the adoption of a common language in a host country, a relationship that has not been studied in the prior literature. Operating mode refers to an MNE establishing, for instance, a JV managed by a local partner, versus a wholly owned subsidiary in a particular country.

The above allows us to bridge the gap between several streams of literature: inclusion and value creating impacts of common language adoption in the MNE, head office—subsidiary relationships, and operating mode choices. We answer the call for “the integration of insights from different academic disciplines as an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of language complexity in IB” (Tenzer et al., 2017 p. 842).

³ For a detailed discussion on the caste system in India and its impact, see Bapuji and Chrispal (2020).

⁴ “A person within a country who acts as an agent for foreign organizations engaged in investment, trade, or economic or political exploitation” (Oxford Languages). Boussebaa et al., (2014, p. 1153) refer to compradores as “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.”



Literature review

Role of common language in an MNE

There are cases where the same language is prevalent in all major countries where the MNE conducts business (e.g., English in the USA, the UK, Canadian provinces other than Quebec, and Singapore; Spanish in Spain and most countries in Central and South America). However, the more likely situation facing large MNEs is that at least some sales offices, factories and R&D facilities will be located in countries where the prevailing language is different from that in the MNE's home country. In their review paper, Feely and Harzing (2003) highlighted the negative consequences of a language barrier between different countries in an MNE's network. MNEs have adopted varying approaches to address this issue and there have been several studies of mandating a common language in the MNE.

Boussebaa et al. (2014) classified prior studies of English as a common corporate language in the MNE into two categories. First are those that adopt a functionalist perspective, meaning that they focus primarily on why it makes sense for foreign subsidiaries to adopt English and on ways to mitigate problems arising in this regard. Second are those that adopt a critical perspective, meaning that they focus mainly on the negative aspects, such as power imbalances, resulting from usage of English as a common language. As an example in the first category, Neeley et al. (2012) provided lessons for those who collaborate globally and for international managers to mitigate the potential negative impact of a mandated common language across the MNE. In the second category, Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999) investigated the use of English as a common language in a Finnish MNE and found disparity in the relationships and networks of subsidiary employees who possessed strong English skills as compared to those who did not.

Reiche et al. (2015) found a positive impact of language commonality on knowledge inflows from the head office to subsidiaries, and also that this relationship was moderated by subsidiary type (stronger in acquisitions as compared to greenfields), utilizing 817 survey responses from seven countries, not including India. This moderation is relevant to the current study since English was adopted as a common language, both in entities where Cummins took over management control from a local partner and in greenfield operations. Luo and Shenkar (2006) developed a model for global language design in the MNE that takes into account the evolutionary process of internationalization and bounded rationality constraints. They theorized that global language design has control implications (with a focus on the link between information and power), strategy implications (with a focus on the trade-offs between global integration and local responsiveness), and performance implications related to communication, coordination, and learning within the network. Kuznetsov and Kuznetsova (2014) focused on emerging economies and argued that gaps in the professional vocabulary in certain languages can affect the quality of discourse, thereby increasing the cost of doing business for the MNE, which is of interest due to our focus on value creation for employees and subsidiaries in India, an emerging economy.



English in india

Several studies have investigated the use of English in India from a communications and linguistics perspective (e.g., Graddol, 2010; Krishnaswamy & Krishnaswamy, 2011). Among those that assessed the usage and role of English in India, Azam et al., (2013 p. 365) found that “hourly wages are on average 34% higher for men who speak fluent English and 13% higher for men who speak a little English relative to men who speak no English” after including various controls in their models. Senior industry leaders and policy makers interviewed by Graddol (2010) stated that fluent English speakers were promoted to the level of supervisors in fast food restaurants faster than others, and migrants (from one part of India to another) who were fluent in English could land a higher paying ‘front-office job.’ Crystal (2003) quoted author Salman Rushdie, who suggested that the anti-colonial or post-colonial debate regarding English in India is irrelevant and that younger Indians see English as one of the tools at their disposal to get ahead.

In our systematic literature review, described in Appendix 1, we screened over 3,000 search-results and identified six studies on the usage of English in India that were directly or tangentially related to IB. The relative absence of IB studies on English in India may be due to the widespread use of English as a business language in that country; it could lead one to assume that the language utilized in Indian subsidiaries or JVs is a non-issue. In reality, English speakers are in the minority in most foreign manufacturing subsidiaries and JVs in India where the workforce includes a large number of employees who are not college graduates, such as those who work on the shopfloor. The impact of language selection on outcome variables such as inclusion and value creation in these foreign MNE subsidiaries and JVs in India thus merits more attention from an IB perspective.

Among the six papers considered most relevant in our literature review, three of these were only tangentially related to IB.⁵ Boussebaa et al. (2014) studied the impact of English usage on call center employees in India. Lockwood (2012) analyzed the hiring of business process outsourcing employees in India and the Philippines. Cayla and Bhatnagar (2017) assessed the positive and negative effects of English on gym trainers and coffee shop employees. These studies were conducted in significantly different research settings than MNE manufacturing facilities and offices and did not examine issues such as value creation for the local operations.

Boussebaa et al., (2014 p. 1154) put forward the view that prior studies of English as a common corporate language ignored the linkage between English adoption and “British colonialism and present-day US imperialism.” Through their ethnographic investigation in call centers of two offshore outsourcing organizations they identified compradors who transformed “Indian labor into Anglicized employees” (p. 1159). Although the authors found that some employees appreciated the improvement in their English skills and salaries, they concluded that the experience of English was “alien and unwanted” (p. 1162). Similarly, Cayla and Bhatnagar (2017 p. 192)

⁵ These papers were either published in an IB journal or used data that included MNE employees, but the studies did not examine issues, such as MNE location choices, operating mode effects, or corporate head office—subsidiary interactions.



concluded that English acted as a “violent boundary” to exclude customers as well as employees who did not speak English fluently, while also recognizing that English helped employees gain respect and recognition in their communities.

Coming to the three studies from our systematic literature review that are more closely connected to IB, Hinds et al. (2014) studied a German software MNE with teams in India and the USA that had implemented English as the official *lingua franca*. The Indian employees in this study were fluent in English whereas many German employees were not. The authors found that the mandated usage of English led to negative feelings among both German and English speakers and to divisive subgroup dynamics. Kulkarni (2015 p. 128) and Kalra and Szymanski (2023) examined cases of multilingualism in organizations in India, where the use of languages not spoken by all employees (e.g., Malayalam) excluded non-speakers and caused “feelings of being devalued.”

In our study of Cummins, we do consider the potential negative impact and imbalances created by English. However, our setting is the manufacturing industry rather than a call center or coffee shop and hence speaking in ‘proper’ English is not a core part of a person’s job as a production worker, engineer, or junior manager across functional areas. More importantly, we assess how mandating English as a common language benefited employees in India, including historically marginalized groups, and created value for Cummins in India.

Diversity and inclusion (D&I)

A detailed review of studies on diversity is beyond the scope of this paper. However, an award-winning meta-analysis⁶ (Stahl et al., 2010) did not find a direct relationship between cultural diversity and performance but found a significant relationship between cultural diversity and creativity. These authors recognized that cultural diversity has a different meaning in different countries. A more recent meta-analysis found no significant relationship between surface-level diversity (observable characteristics of people) and team creativity or innovation, but a correlation of 0.16⁷ “between deep-level diversity in culturally diverse teams and team creativity/innovation,” with ‘deep-level’ referring to differences in values and thinking styles as opposed to surface-level characteristics, such as national origin (Wang et al., 2019 p. 700).

While comparing HR practices between the UK and India, Budhwar and Khatri (2001 pp. 804–805) pointed out that “in Britain, diversity often comes down to race, age or gender, but in India it comes down to class, background, geographic and linguistic origin, caste, and religion.” Haq (2012) surveyed public sector (state-owned) firms as well as private businesses in India and found that diversity initiatives in the former focused on caste (aligned with Indian constitutional provisions)⁸ and in the latter on gender. Maji and Saha (2021) found a significant positive relationship

⁶ JIBS 2020 Decade Award.

⁷ Steel, Beugelsdijk, and Aguinis (2021) classify an effect of this size as small.

⁸ In government departments as well as state-owned companies in India, a percentage of jobs is reserved for members of specified castes and tribes, which does not apply to privately owned companies.



between gender diversity at the workforce level as well as the board level on the financial performance of firms in India.

Companies started focusing on inclusion in the 1990's and early 2000's and the practitioner literature differentiated between the terms diversity and inclusion before the academic literature did so (Roberson, 2006). An alternative definition of inclusion to the one we provided in the introduction, is: "the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness" (Shore et al., 2011 p. 1265). This definition suggests that employees desire to contribute fully to activities in their work groups, while retaining their unique identities, whether this be their culture or language spoken at home. Cummins Inc.⁹ appears to have changed its terminology from 'Diversity' to 'Diversity and Inclusion' around 2014.¹⁰ Lauring and Klitmøller (2017) suggested that the role of a common language in promoting inclusion has received limited attention in the context of MNEs and through a survey of 676 employees of Danish 'multi-cultural organizations' found a significant positive relationship between use of a common corporate language (by management) and performance, as measured by a five-item scale that evaluated group success.

Summerville et al. (2024) studied the relationship between linguistic features (such as gender pronouns) and cultural value dimensions of individuals such as collectivism and power distance and suggested that language relates to D&I beliefs and potentially D&I initiatives. In the Indian context, Singh and Tir (2023) found that threats spoken in the most widely used language in India, Hindi, could be more dehumanizing than in English. From our review of language and D&I studies, we found that the few references connecting these two areas have focused mainly on exclusion rather than inclusion. Our own focus is to examine the role of a common language in value creation, and its possible linkage with inclusion.

TCT and bounded reliability

With regard to value creation for the MNE and its subsidiaries, we briefly review TCT because its focus is "ultimately about safeguarding and fostering joint value creation and capture by the parties involved" (Hennart & Verbeke, 2022 p. 1559). In our case, as IB scholars, we seek to understand the value created for the parties involved, which include the MNE (Cummins Inc.), JV partners and shareholders in India, and employees of various Cummins-managed entities in India. Several dimensions of TCT are particularly relevant to our study. *First* is that TCT attaches great importance to institutions (Hennart & Verbeke, 2022; Williamson, 1996). As defined by North (1991 p. 97) institutions are:

"The humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interactions. They consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos,

⁹ We use 'Cummins Inc.' to refer to the parent company with its head office in the USA.

¹⁰ Cummins Inc.'s 2013–14 annual Sustainability Progress Report utilized the former whereas the 2014–15 report utilized the latter.



customs, traditions, and codes of conduct) and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights)."

Interestingly, institutions include not just a country's laws, court system, educational system, etc., but also informal institutions, such as customs and traditions, closely related to an individual's identity, which in turn is associated with language (Reiche et al., 2015). In this realm, Fuentelsaz et al. (2020) found a significant negative relationship between informal institutional distance (i.e., differences between informal institutions in home and host country) and MNE location choices.

The *second* aspect of TCT that we will draw on is that "economic agents are permitted to disclose information in a selective and distorted manner" (Williamson, 1996 p. 56). This observation is directly related to Williamson's two behavioral foundations or microfoundations, namely bounded rationality (various challenges of accessing and processing information) and opportunism, against which firms and economic actors more generally attempt to protect themselves. Verbeke and Greidanus (2009) went beyond the notion of opportunism and proposed the broader concept of bounded reliability as a microfoundation, which includes reneging on commitments for benevolent reasons, such as scaling back on overcommitment. Drawing upon these microfoundations helps understanding the behavior of managers, including decisions by head office managers to invest in a particular country. A common language among employees in India (across levels and functions) and the corporate head office can reduce perceived bounded reliability by corporate level management. TCT and its international version, namely internalization theory, posit that an MNE internalizes (i.e., invests in a foreign subsidiary or JV) when the transaction costs are lower than those associated with other modes of international expansion and similarly, the decision about which country to invest in, is driven by this assessment (Rugman & Verbeke, 1992). Lower (perceived or actual) bounded reliability linked to a location will contribute to selecting this location for foreign direct investment. We considered both these aspects of TCT, i.e., institutional distance and bounded reliability, as we analyzed the Cummins case.

Methodology

One of the authors of this paper was the Chairman and Managing Director of Cummins in India from 2004 to 2017 and is currently associated with a leading business school in India. He was instrumental in changing the culture of Cummins in India in several respects, including setting the expectation that all business discussions and meetings be conducted in English. He has an intimate knowledge of the subject matter since he led the 'English language throughout Indian operations' initiative. Another author managed a greenfield Cummins plant in India¹¹ with a mix of new and existing employees who were tasked with learning English. The

¹¹ Managed greenfield plant from September 2011 to January 2014. He frequently interacted with shop-floor employees at all the other Cummins plants in India as part of an earlier role wherein he led lean manufacturing initiatives across the subsidiaries and JVs.



two authors who worked for Cummins were in positions of different seniority in the hierarchy. This reduces the risk of a biased perspective clouding the findings, with the third author also acting as a check on analysis that would suffer from pattern recognition or social biases.

In addition to the authors' first-hand knowledge of the topic and the Cummins case, we referred to several other sources, including *inter alia*, biographies, and autobiographies of some of the key protagonists, press articles, a published case study on D&I in Cummins in India (Datta & Shah, 2022), and a variety of publicly available information on this MNE's Indian operations. For example, the autobiography of a leading Indian industrialist whose family co-owned and managed the first JV that Cummins formed in India helped us understand management thinking at the time (Kirloskar, 2003). Press reports helped us understand external perspectives on D&I efforts at Cummins in India.

Our methodology can be termed a "retrospectively constructed observational study" (Kuznetsov & Kuznetsova, 2014 p. 583). Miller et al. (1997) found that retrospective studies are often conducted in the strategic management and organization theory areas, typically by involving CEOs. These authors provided guidelines to improve validity such as focusing on "simple facts and concrete events," which we incorporated into our methodology (Miller et al., 1997 p. 201).

Introduction to the cummins case

Cummins Inc. was founded in Columbus, Indiana (USA) in 1919 as Cummins Engine Company. Clessie Cummins, an inventor who patented improvements to diesel engines, was the first president. The company was financially backed by his erstwhile employer, a local businessman William G. Irwin, whose great-nephew (sister's grandson) J. Irwin Miller served as President of Cummins Engine Co. (later renamed Cummins Inc.) from 1947 to 1951 and then as Chairman from 1951 to 1977 (cummins.com/timeline; Kriplen, 2019). Miller, who was also a civil rights activist and philanthropist, left a major legacy which included Cummins' strong belief in diversity in terms of hiring and including people from different backgrounds (Cummins, n.d; Kriplen, 2019).

Cummins entered into the first JV in India in 1962, partnering with S. L. Kirloskar, a prominent Indian industrialist (cummins.com/timeline; Kirloskar, 2003). Cummins subsequently entered into several other JVs and wholly owned subsidiaries in India, culminating with a 224-acre manufacturing campus with 10 plants that commenced production from 2010 onward and a sophisticated technical center in Pune (Cummins, 2014, 2018). Cummins' revenues in India in 2023 were USD 3.2 billion (including JVs), whereas global revenues amounted to USD 34.1 billion (Q4 2023 Earnings¹²). It was ranked in 146th place in the Fortune 500 list in 2023.

¹² <https://investor.cummins.com/events-presentations/presentations>



Findings

We classified our findings as shown in the process model (Fig. 1) into antecedents, actions, intermediate outcomes, and longer-term outcomes. As indicated by the three arrows toward the left of the figure, the antecedents all contributed to the D&I strategy of Cummins in India, distinct from the global strategy to achieve D&I. The D&I strategy in India triggered the adoption of English as a common language across all the entities in India and all levels of the organization. As indicated by the two arrows from the 'English' box and as explained subsequently, the adoption of English enabled inclusion of a diverse group of employees including those from different parts of India and more interestingly, of women and people from all castes and religions, and it also reduced bounded reliability challenges between managers at the corporate head office and in India. Inclusion led to several benefits for individuals, whereas reducing bounded reliability had an impact on increasing the attractiveness of the Cummins subsidiaries in India to decision makers at the corporate head office. The benefits to individuals also affected the entities in India as indicated by the downward arrow. At the same time diversity initiatives and English language adoption led to concerns from some employees and opposition from certain local players, as indicated by the arrow pointing toward the bottom of the figure. We now explain in more detail each of the elements in the figure.

Antecedents

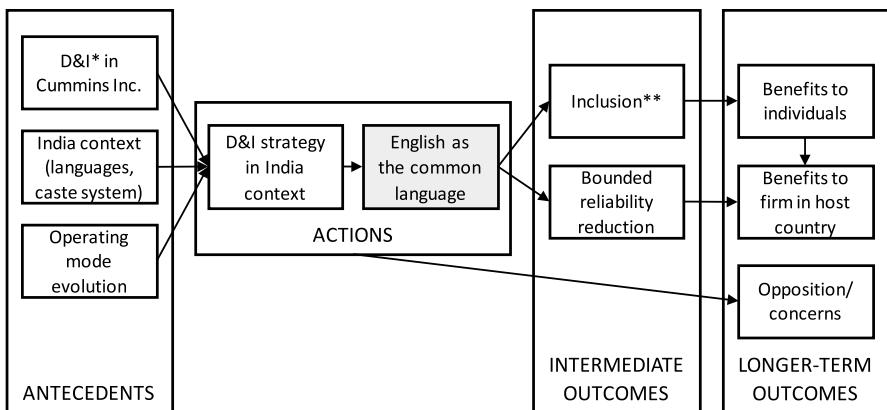
D&I in cummins inc.

One of the six corporate values that erstwhile Cummins Inc. chairman Tim Solso released in 2000 was diversity: "embrace the diverse perspectives of all people and honor both with dignity and respect" (Cummins, n.d.). Solso, Chairman and CEO from 2000 to 2011, was strongly influenced by J. Irwin Miller who was Chairman from 1951 to 1977. In fact, a quote by Miller is displayed in the boardroom of the corporate head office in Indiana, USA as well as in Cummins offices across the world:

"Character, ability, and intelligence are not concentrated in one sex over the other, nor in persons with certain accents or in certain races or in persons holding degrees from some universities over others. When we indulge ourselves in such irrational prejudices, we damage ourselves most of all and ultimately assure ourselves of failure in competition with those more open and less biased" (Cummins, n.d.).

Based on this widely disseminated quote, it appears that Miller saw a connection between diversity and value creation (in contrast to the mixed results from the literature described earlier) and he may have been ahead of many of his peers in terms of his views on D&I. Miller's beliefs were put into practice by his successors, and Cummins Inc. has been recognized many times for its diversity initiatives and results, including by Fortune in its ranking of the '50 Best Places to Work for





*Diversity and Inclusion

** The adoption of English helped with inclusion of diverse employees.

We therefore use the term 'Inclusion' rather than D&I.

Fig. 1 Process model for the antecedents and outcomes of English as the common language at Cummins India

Minorities' and by DiversityInc, which included Cummins Inc. in its list of 'Top 50 Companies for Diversity' for ten consecutive years and also recognized the company as the 'Best Workplace for Asian-Americans' (Horiuchi et al., 2006; Cummins Inc. 2016–17 sustainability progress report).

Indian context

There are three aspects of the Indian socio-cultural environment that are highly relevant to this study. The *first* is language: "there are 270 identifiable mother tongues which have returned 10,000 or more speakers at the all-India level" (Census of India, 2018 p. 5). Almost half of these mother tongues (language spoken by the mother to the person when he/she was an infant) are grouped under 22 languages recognized by the constitution. Besides these 22 languages, there are "demands for inclusions of 38 more languages" (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2017). Some states have the same prevalent or majority language (e.g., Hindi and its dialects are spoken by the majority of residents in nine out of 29 states), whereas other states have multiple languages spoken by a significant portion of the population (e.g., in the state of Karnataka which includes India's IT capital Bengaluru, 66% of people surveyed reported Kannada as their mother tongue, which means that the other 34% grew up speaking other languages). If a firm wishes to recruit people from across the country, even if these comprise only a small percentage of the workforce, it would appear detrimental to business activities conducted inside the company for language barriers to exist and persist. Coming to English, the focus of this paper, official statistics indicate that it is spoken by 10.6% of the Indian population as a first, second, or third language (Singh & Nakkeerar, 2022), whereas a 2019 survey

found that 6% of respondents speak English but they are “very much India’s elite” (Rukmini, 2019).

The *second* factor relevant to this study is the typical nature of the working environment in manufacturing companies in India in the early 2000s, when one of the authors took charge as the Chairman and Managing Director of Cummins in India. This included the traditional role of workers in manufacturing companies in India, and the under-representation of women. Shopfloor workers were expected to perform physical work and not mental work, such as solving problems and taking decisions. Kirloskar, who entered into a JV with Cummins Inc. in 1962 says in his autobiography that he later concluded based on an internship on the shopfloor in the USA that “men of a certain intelligence must be given a repetitive task instead of variety,” suggesting a narrow view of worker capabilities (Kirloskar, 2003 p. 35). This way of thinking undoubtedly changed in the USA and other countries subsequently, perhaps aided by the widespread adoption of techniques pioneered by Toyota that emphasized workers playing a lead role in problem-solving (Liker, 2020), but changes in attitude were slower in India. In addition, there was often a significant divide between blue-collar and white-collar employees in manufacturing companies in India. For example, manufacturing companies in India had separate cafeterias for workers, office and supervisory staff, and managers. When visitors, including top management from overseas, toured the factories in India, workers were not expected to speak to them (and language was not the only reason). Shopfloors of heavy manufacturing companies were exclusively male (Anand, 2021) and “women have begun to trickle in only in the last decade or so” (Chanda, 2018). As we argue below, the adoption of English as a common language helped empower workers and also reduce the gender imbalance.

The *third* relevant factor is caste. “Despite modernization, caste system and untouchability are still practiced by a considerable portion of the Indian population and Indian diaspora” (Bapuji & Chrispal, 2020 p. 537). Kirloskar (2003), referred to earlier, mentioned his caste in the first sentence of his autobiography, even though he was educated at MIT in the USA. A former employee of the Kirloskar Cummins JV explained to one of the authors that he left the company because people of ‘lower castes’ could not rise to the level of management (at least this was his perception). Indian managers interviewed by Jodhka and Newman (2007) stated that people in certain organizations (not their own) were hired on the basis of caste, whereas other respondents (including the HR manager of an MNE) stated that they considered ‘family background’ while hiring, which implicitly excluded people from ‘lower castes’ whose parents were not educated. The importance of caste for MNEs that operate in India (as well as in other countries with a significant number of Indian employees) was recently highlighted by Bapuji et al., (2023 p. 212) who concluded that the “caste influence [is] expected to be strong” in Indian operations of foreign MNEs and that entry mode is one of the factors influencing caste diversity in these entities.



Entry mode evolution

Prior research has found that MNEs use a variety of operating modes when expanding internationally and may switch between modes over time (Benito et al., 2009). Along these lines, Cummins employed a variety of operating modes in India at different points in time (Table 1) including arm's length agents, JVs managed by local partners, JVs managed by Cummins, and wholly owned subsidiaries. As mentioned, Cummins entered into a JV in 1962 with the Kirloskar group, a large diversified Indian family enterprise. The plant was set-up in Pune, in the state of Maharashtra, and Chandrakant Kirloskar, who was grandson of the founder of the Kirloskar group, was the first managing director. Chandrakant's father, Kirloskar states in his autobiography (2003) that there were frequent disagreements with Cummins expatriates, leading him to offer to buy out Cummins' stake and Cummins in turn agreeing to withdraw their personnel and hand over management entirely to the Kirloskars. The fact that the JV 'Kirloskar Cummins' was managed by the Kirloskars, who were presumably not proponents of Miller's views on diversity or the later interpretation of D&I by Cummins India in terms of hiring people from different parts of the country, meant that the language used in the first Cummins plant in India was Marathi, which is spoken by people native to the state of Maharashtra. Professionals (white-collar employees) who did not speak Marathi, although a minority, were not fully included in managerial meetings and discussions. Cummins bought out Kirloskar's stake and became the majority shareholder in 1997, and the name of the entity was changed to Cummins India Ltd.

Besides the Kirloskar Cummins JV, Cummins entered into two JVs with the Tata group: Tata Cummins in Jamshedpur (a Tata company-town), now in the state of Jharkhand in the eastern part of India, and Tata Holset in Indore in the state of Madhya Pradesh in the central part of India. Hindi and its dialects are the predominant languages in both these places. Holset was a British company acquired by Cummins Inc. and managers from the UK were actively involved in the Tata Holset JV including an expat who served in the dual roles of plant manager and managing director of the JV and lived in Indore for several years. In addition, Cummins entered into a JV with an Indian family firm called Crompton Greaves, which set up a factory in Ahmednagar in the state of Maharashtra, where Crompton Greaves had other manufacturing facilities. Similar to Kirloskar Cummins, the JV called 'CG Newage' was managed by the local partner, in this case Crompton Greaves. Hiring people from different parts of India did not appear to be a priority, and Marathi was the language spoken by the employees including workers, professional staff, and managers.

In the early 2000s, Cummins decided that all future manufacturing plants would be located on a new greenfield site. The plants were inaugurated from 2011 onwards, on a site in a rural area 110 km from Pune, again in the state of Maharashtra, where Marathi is the local language. Some of these plants were part of a 100% subsidiary of Cummins Inc., other ones part of Cummins India Ltd. (successor of Kirloskar Cummins) and a third set consisted of JVs with Tata. All were managed by Cummins and had a common set of human resources practices, including the mandated use of English at all levels in the new factories.



Table 1 Main operating modes utilized by Cummins in India

Year	Entity	Description	Comments
Early 1950s	Blackwood Hodge	Agent responsible for selling and servicing Cummins engines	Blackwood Hodge was a subsidiary of a UK-based MNE
1962	Kirloskar Cummins	JV managed by Kirloskar family (Chandrakant Kirloskar, grandson of group founder Laxmanrao was the first Managing Director). Large factory in Pune (state of Maharashtra) where Marathi is spoken by locals	Laxmanrao's son Shantanu went to MIT with Cummins President R. Huthsteiner Cummins bought Kirloskar's stake in 1997 to become majority owner. Renamed Cummins India Ltd., listed on Indian stock exchanges
1987	Fleetguard Filters	Cummins licensed its filtration technology to a firm set-up by a former Chairman of Kirloskar Cummins: Arun Kirloskar. First factory was in the state of Maharashtra	Not managed by Cummins. Not within the scope of this paper
1992	CG Newage	JV between Crompton Greaves (listed in India) and Newage (UK subsidiary of Cummins). Factory in Maharashtra	Crompton Greaves divested its stake to Cummins India Ltd. in 2002. Renamed Cummins Generator Technologies India Pvt. Ltd
1993	Tata Holset	50–50 JV between Tata and Holset (UK subsidiary of Cummins). Factory in Madhya Pradesh state where Hindi is spoken by locals	Cummins bought out Tata's stake in 2007. Renamed Cummins Turbo Technologies India Pvt. Ltd
1994	Cummins Technologies	100% Cummins-owned entity	From 2011 onward, inaugurated several new domestic and export-oriented factories and in 2018 a technical center in the state of Maharashtra
1995	Tata Cummins	50–50 JV with Tata. Managed by Cummins. Factory in the state of Bihar (now Jharkhand) where Hindi is spoken by locals	Subsequently, set up two factories in the state of Maharashtra
2003	Cummins Research & Technology India	50–50 JV between Cummins Inc. (US) and Cummins India Ltd	Provided engineering analysis services to different Cummins entities. Not a focus of this paper



Actions

D&I in cummins india

The onboarding training program for new Cummins employees in India included a detailed discussion on the business case for diversity. In India, diversity manifests itself not in terms of race (which is an important factor in the USA, where Cummins Inc. is headquartered), but in terms of gender, languages spoken (related to state of origin), religion, and caste (Budhwar & Khatri, 2001). Cummins India's senior leadership team realized the disconnect between Cummins' global value of diversity and the situation in Cummins India in the early 2000s. In that period, 96% of the employees of the largest Cummins entity in India, Cummins India Ltd. (which had before been managed by JV partner Kirloskar) were male, as were 100% of the shopfloor workers (Datta & Shah, 2022). These were mostly people from the state where the factory was located (Maharashtra) and they spoke Marathi, including in the office and in meetings. The situation was similar in CG Newage (which was at that time a JV with Crompton Greaves). Records are not available, but as mentioned earlier, it was alleged that members of 'upper castes' were over-represented in what had been Kirloskar Cummins.

The top management team (TMT) of Cummins India set out to achieve the corporate value of diversity by hiring people of different genders, castes, and religions, from different parts of India, who had different mother tongues or first languages, and with varying degrees of fluency in English. The target was for 50% of employees to be women (The Economic Times, 2012) and also to have representation from people from all states of India, who in turn spoke different languages, so as to create a 'microcosm of India' and correct the situation where Cummins in India was "lopsided in the representation of many segments of the society" (Datta & Shah, 2022 p. 4). Creating inclusion for these employees required the use of a language that had widespread use in India and overseas. Another driver of D&I initiatives may have been the desire to have a degree of uniformity and cohesion or an "undivided India organization" across engineering and R&D centers, and manufacturing facilities in India (Venkatesan, 2013 p. 82). Here, firms like Cummins wished to promote and execute on the same set of values and associated initiatives in their manufacturing plants as were being implemented in tech centers and other office environments.

From the perspective of the Cummins corporate head office regarding the customization of the global diversity program, the parent company's leadership including the long-time Chairman Irwin Miller and one of his successors, Tim Solso, were strong proponents of diversity, as noted above. Solso believed in relying on each country manager to pursue the firm's overall strategy (Venkatesan, 2013). Accordingly, Cummins' TMT in India interpreted and adapted the D&I approach from the corporate head office in a locally meaningful way.



Adoption of english as a common language

We identified three distinct paths to adopting the English language, with adoption related to the operating mode and presence of expatriate management. The Cummins entities in India and their success with adopting English in the workplace (including at the shopfloor level) are summarized in Table 2. The *first path* was followed by Tata Holset (later renamed Cummins Turbo Technologies), wherein a British expatriate, who was managing director of the JV, and his Indian colleagues and successors drove adoption of English across this entity, including among the shopfloor workers. The use of English was coupled with many other initiatives to empower hourly team members and motivate them to take initiatives to improve key performance indicators (KPIs) collectively called the Team-Based Work System. New employees were trained in English and other business practices by a reputed external party, the British Council Library in Bhopal (capital of the state of Madhya Pradesh, where the plant was located), since managers felt that the use of an external party would provide the required language-teaching expertise and ensure that the initiative would be given the expected priority and importance. Hourly workers at this JV, who were not college educated, progressed to take on roles as supervisors, quality engineers, service engineers, etc. in the organization, which is atypical in India. The role of an expatriate was prominent in this path of mandated adoption of the English language, but the CEO of Cummins Inc., Tim Solso, did not believe in heavy reliance on expatriates (Venkatesan, 2013).

The *second path* to adopting English in the firm became prevalent when Cummins launched its megasite in Phaltan (state of Maharashtra). Hourly hires (workers) came almost exclusively from surrounding areas and spoke Marathi. Mandating the use of English was among the initiatives adopted as part of the effort to make this site 'world class.' Gender diversity was another key focus, including on the shopfloor. A majority of the women hired did not have a technical education. Rather, many were college graduates looking for employment in a reputed firm.¹³ In addition, numerous employees were transferred from Pune and also Jamshedpur in Eastern India, with the latter not speaking Marathi. New people were hired on the basis of their technical knowledge and attitude rather than their proficiency in English. They were taken through formal English classroom training by a teacher from a local college and English conversation groups were started in some of the factories for workers transferred from other Cummins locations.¹⁴

The *third path* toward adopting English, involved increasing its usage in factories that were older JVs in India (Kirloskar Cummins, CG Newage, Tata Cummins), all of which had unionized plants. In the case of Kirloskar Cummins and CG Newage, these were managed by Indian JV partners rather than by managers who reported

¹³ Like many of her male colleagues but unlike the other females, the person quoted at the front end of this paper had attended a technical program to become a diesel mechanic after 10th grade and was not a college graduate.

¹⁴ For example, at one of the factories, a shopfloor worker who had had prior knowledge of English had been promoted to assistant manager and led the conversation group. He was respected due to his technical knowledge and career growth, and this may have helped make other workers interested in learning English.



Table 2 Paths of English language adoption in Cummins subsidiaries and JV's in India

Cummins entity in India	Inception	Management	Unionized	Expatriate-led management	Path #	English adoption
Kirloskar Cummins/Cummins India Ltd.	1962	Kirloskar: 1962 Cummins: 1997	Yes	No	3	Late & slow
CG Newage/Cummins Generator Technologies	1992	Crompton Greaves: 1992 Cummins: 2002	Yes	No	3	Late & slow
Tata Holset/Cummins Turbo Technologies	1993	Holset (Cummins UK)	No	Yes	1	Early & fast
Tata Cummins	1995	Cummins	Yes	No	3	Late & slow
Tata Cummins: plants 2 & 3	2011 (plants)	Cummins	No	No	2	Early & fast
Cummins Technologies India	2011 (plants)	Cummins	No	No	2	Early & fast

directly to the Cummins organization. In the 1990's and 2000's, Cummins achieved some success with adopting English among white-collar employees in these entities along with efforts to improve gender diversity and regional diversity. However, local languages continued to be predominant on the shopfloor including in meetings and training involving shopfloor personnel.

In summary, we found that Cummins was successful in adopting English across all categories of employees in one JV initially led by an expatriate, as well as where a large number of people were hired for employment in new factories. In contrast, adoption was slower and less successful among blue-collar employees in the older JVs. A parallel can be drawn here with IB research that shows the importance of time needed to reach specific business targets, whereby the requisite time for each target is intimately related to entry mode choices and their evolution (e.g., Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Verbeke, 2003). In both cases, circumstances change, and the impact of a decision taken—as a result of comparing feasible alternatives at one point in time—can have an impact on value creation at a subsequent time.

Intermediate outcomes

Inclusion

We found that English served as a 'leveler,' enabling people in Cummins in India from different states, castes, religions, and genders to contribute to individual, team, and company goals, thereby achieving inclusion. This is understandable, considering that English was positioned after Indian independence from the British as a language: "divorced ...from local cultural paradigms of caste, religion, and territory" (Bharadwaj, 2017 p. 14). By January 2022, 25% of the Cummins workforce in India were women, including 17% on the shopfloor, 33% of professionals, and 32% of trainees (Datta & Shah, 2022).¹⁵ Women working on the shopfloor faced resistance from some of the men, since the men were not used to women on the shopfloor at Cummins or at other companies (Datta & Shah, 2022). Many of the female hires on the shopfloor had completed diplomas in engineering¹⁶ or held bachelor's degrees in various fields, as opposed to many of the male hires who had only completed trade school and apprenticeships. Hence, the women were more conversant in English and could convey their team's views, problems, and achievements during daily and weekly team meetings, thereby accelerating the acceptance of the women among their colleagues. Similarly, with respect to employees from other states or 'lower castes,' we found that the use of English improved their self-confidence and stature (see below) and again helped them speak up and find their rightful place among their colleagues. This is in line with Graddol (2010, p. 120) who argued that "English in India has historically been a key part of the mechanism of exclusion, because of its very unequal distribution in society. Ironically, it is now seen, possibly by hundreds of millions of people, as a means of inclusion."

¹⁵ Some factories in Phaltan achieved as high as 50% gender diversity (Datta & Shah, 2022).

¹⁶ An engineering diploma in India typically takes three years after Grade 10, whereas a degree in science, arts, or commerce takes three years after Grade 12.



Bounded reliability reduction

Although it is difficult to claim causality, we propose that open inter-level communication between Cummins employees in India, in the USA, and in other countries was a contributing factor to the prominence of Cummins India in the global network (in terms of large investments in manufacturing facilities and engineering centers). By ‘open communication,’ we mean that communication between personnel in different countries did not have to be ‘routed’ through a manager proficient in English. As related in the vignette at the start of this paper, during one of his visits to Phaltan in 2012, the Chairman and CEO of Cummins Inc., Tom Linebarger had a conversation with a female worker on the shopfloor who not only explained a quality improvement project to him but was able to answer his questions without the use of an interpreter, or intervention by a supervisor or manager. As another example, when a Cummins Inc. business-unit president visited a factory in India and shopfloor workers explained (in English) the initiatives they had taken to improve the flow of material and the quality of products, she remarked that she had been frequently informed about lean manufacturing initiatives in different countries, but it was in the Indian factory that she saw it in action for the first time.

As predicted by TCT, managers make choices among alternatives and their expectation that contracting parties will fulfill their commitments is instrumental to these choices (Hennart & Verbeke, 2022). Managers thus evaluate the extent of bounded reliability that they might have to deal with. When a TMT member interacts directly with employees (including the employees on the shopfloor in the examples above) who appear motivated and engaged, the latter can communicate the importance of what they do on a daily basis (such as how a task impacts a quality parameter that is important to a customer) and demonstrate that they are taking ownership for improving KPIs. Such information is likely to play a pivotal role in corporate TMT decision-making processes, whether or not this is stated explicitly. Our first-hand experiences suggest that the adoption of English in Cummins subsidiaries and JVs in India contributed much to reducing bounded reliability (and the expectation of future bounded reliability) perceived by corporate head office managers and facilitated their communication with managers and employees in India.

Longer-term outcomes

The benefits to Cummins employees in India, and the Indian subsidiaries and JVs, are summarized in Table 3.

Benefits to employees in india

Inclusion has been shown to increase job satisfaction (Brimhall & Mor Barak, 2018) as well as employee well-being and organizational commitment (Findler et al., 2007). As discussed, we observed that women and other employees from



Table 3 Firm-level and individual-level benefits from adopting English as the common language in Cummins India

Firm (Cummins in India)	Individuals (employees in India)
English helped bridge the divide between people from different states, new hires vs. existing employees, education levels, etc. thus contributing to inclusion, which Cummins believes to be a performance driver	Proficiency in English (language of the “elite”) increased the stature of the employees in their families and communities
English documentation from other factories could be directly adopted; easier for expats to train workers, therefore easier to streamline processes at new plants	More female shopfloor employees were proficient in English than men, enabling them to gain confidence and contribute to their teams
Mandating English enabled high-performance shopfloor teams to take ownership of their own performance metrics. These initiatives contributed to avoiding unionization in some plants, with non-unionized plants achieving higher productivity	Proficiency in English helped certain employees move from shopfloor roles to office and professional roles (e.g., Planning, Purchasing)
When the Cummins Inc. TMT visited India, it could directly speak to employees at all levels, including shopfloor workers. This increased its confidence in the Indian team and contributed to much higher investments and sales in India as compared to China	Numerous employees from Cummins India have become expatriates and have moved to overseas roles (Cummins US and UK)

marginalized segments of Indian society were included through the mandated use of English, found acceptance among their co-workers, and were able to contribute fully to their teams, thereby improving their job satisfaction.

In addition, we saw several examples of employees fluent in English who were able to progress from the shopfloor to office roles, such as purchasing and planning. We also observed several instances of engineers and managers taking up roles within Cummins in other countries. Moreover, we observed that benefits to employees extended beyond the workplace into their social networks and communities. People who spoke English improved their stature and self-confidence, as well as their employment prospects. According to Graddol (2010 p. 14): “English is seen as an access route to the middle classes and geographical mobility within India and beyond.”

Benefits to cummins in india

One of the clearest benefits of mandating English as a common language, was related to bounded rationality reduction, in that documents could be utilized without translation. For example, the Tata Holset plant in Madhya Pradesh produced products concurrently manufactured in factories in the UK and the USA. Work instructions, ISO-9001 documentation, etc. could be readily utilized in the new plant, making it easier to implement established processes. Cummins employees from other countries who visited the new plants in India for training and for solving



problems could communicate in English with all levels of employees in India, while utilizing English language documents. Hence, there was a reduction in transaction costs related to the MNE (Cummins) choosing to manufacture in India.

In locations implementing fully the mandated use of English as a common language, we found that this was a key element of a larger initiative to improve company culture in terms of involvement and empowerment of employees at all levels. As an integral part of a focus on continuous improvement, teams (including hourly workers) took ownership of their performance in terms of improving safety, quality, on-time-delivery, output per shift, and other metrics. Worker-led teams in several plants conducted meetings at the start of the shift, and some of these plants also put in place weekly team meetings to dive deeper into the main challenging issues and longer-term initiatives. All these meetings were conducted primarily in English, with supervisors and managers playing a supportive and coaching role, rather than telling workers what to do. Our direct observations of these processes led us to conclude that such initiatives increased job satisfaction. Previous studies have found a negative relationship between job satisfaction and workers' perception of the need for unionization (e.g., Premack & Hunter, 1988) and Table 2 shows that in plants which successfully adopted English as well as other initiatives to involve workers, they did not unionize. In addition, we found that English—along with other initiatives that motivated and empowered employees—contributed to retention. In one of the Cummins plants in Phaltan, over 60% of the women hired shortly after inauguration of the plant were still employed by Cummins ten years later, which reflects a substantially higher retention rate than prevailing in other organizations in India (Ranganathan, 2018; Venugopal, 2018).

Another significant outcome was that the share of Cummins global investments going to its subsidiaries and JVs in India far outweighed the share of domestic sales—i.e., sales from factories in India to customers in India—in global sales (in contrast to the situation in China, for instance).¹⁷ Kumar et al. (2009 p. 661) made a similar point in the context of offshoring: “the culture gap manifests itself as a language gap, which, for complex, highly sticky work, from a Western (the USA, the UK, and Western European) perspective, gives Indian work sites an advantage over China.” This made India an export hub for manufactured products, as well as engineering and technical services. As we argued earlier in this paper, the mandated adoption of English in India and the consequent improvement in communication between the corporate head office and subsidiary employees at all levels, including interactions during corporate TMT visits to the shopfloor in India, contributed to a reduction in concerns about bounded reliability, thereby making India a more attractive investment destination.

Concerns and opposition

We have discussed a number of positive outcomes achieved through the mandated adoption of English as a common language by Cummins in India, both for employees and for the Indian subsidiaries and JVs. However, the authors are aware of instances

¹⁷ See appendix 2 for details.



where employees (e.g., engineers) complained that their careers were not advancing as fast as their peers', despite their competency in core job requirements (e.g., design, manufacturing engineering). These employees blamed English language skills being prioritized by managers in India over core job skills, for their slower advancement. Employees' command of the English language was not explicitly mentioned in performance targets or evaluations, but it is reasonable to assume that proficiency in English (as exemplified by presentations to foreign managers or senior management in India, or by the quality of communication during team meetings) was factored into performance appraisals and promotion decisions by managers. Nonetheless, even though proficiency in English had become an important skill inside Cummins, an employee's proficiency on this performance dimension alone would not have overridden the evaluation of operational performance outcomes based on technical skills.

Initiatives to improve English skills at Cummins in India were originally an off-shoot of the focus on hiring a diverse group of people and creating an inclusive environment for them. This hiring of people from outside the state where a plant was located did meet with resistance from some quarters (The Indian Express, 2008, 2009). For example, a political party organized a demonstration outside the Pune factory and offices in 2008, accusing Cummins of having "over 70% of the employees from outside the state" and stating "if the company fails to remove outsiders and recruit Maharashtrians, the Sena will intensify the stir" (The Indian Express, 2008). We did not find any evidence of opposition by external stakeholders to hiring women or individuals belonging to 'lower castes.'

Discussion and conclusion

Discussion of findings

The mandated usage of English at Cummins in India contributed much toward achieving the inclusion of under-represented and marginalized groups. Our evaluation contrasts sharply with that of Boussebaa et al. (2014), who chose to focus on negative perceptions of English, perhaps due to the post-colonial lens they adopted. We found that the mandated use of English was an integral part of initiatives to empower and motivate employees, including the Team-Based Work System which Cummins implemented in India. Prior research has found a direct link between work teams and employee participation on the one hand and business performance on the other, irrespective of culture (Dastmalchian et al., 2020). In addition, Ramaswamy and Schiphorst (2000, p. 677) theorized, within the Indian context, that "worker involvement in shopfloor decisions on quality, productivity, and work organization would develop an interest in the firm which compromises their sense of adversity." In this realm, we found a connection between adopting the English language and the absence of unions at some of the Cummins factories in India.

In TCT, the strength of one institution-related parameter can affect other institutional dimensions of locational advantage and in this instance country-specific



advantage (Hennart & Verbeke, 2022). Indeed, we found that the mandated use of English as a common language helped alleviate institutional constraints specific to the Indian context such as local customs or sanctions likely to inhibit value creation, for example, the exclusion of employees from lower castes or those who do not speak the local language. Here, mandating the usage of English increased the perceived country-specific advantages of the affected affiliates within the MNE network. In addition, the common usage of English helped create a situation of lowered institutional distance between Cummins' corporate head office in the USA and subsidiaries in India. Our findings are aligned with several prior studies that have established a positive relationship between common language and knowledge transfer (Holtbrugge & Berg, 2004; Kumar et al., 2009; Reiche et al., 2015) as well as a negative relationship between institutional distance and investment in a country (e.g., Flores & Aguilera, 2007).

Factors that could affect the future use of English in corporate India include the 2020 National Education Policy. This policy recommends that students should be taught in their mother tongue. It has resulted in a number of post-secondary institutions, including engineering colleges, switching to local languages as the medium of instruction (Gangapure, 2021). It remains to be seen whether this will create opposition to the use of English in corporate India, including in Indian subsidiaries of MNEs. In the Cummins case we found that at some of the plants, employees were trained in English as part of a larger set of initiatives to make their workplace 'world class' and such training did not face opposition from shopfloor workers.

As to the applicability of mandating English as a common language in the broader context of developed economy MNEs operating in Asia, our findings indicate that employees in most cases are likely to benefit from learning English, as this may improve their skillset and self-esteem. The magnitude of lowering transaction costs, whether resulting from the improved ability to absorb documentation and codified knowledge from MNE locations in English-speaking countries, and improved communication across all levels and locations inside the MNE (i.e., an entire spectrum of improvements in the sphere of bounded rationality reduction) or from bounded reliability economizing, will always be firm specific. The situational context includes the countries where the corporate head office and other subsidiaries are located; the language spoken by local customers; the attitude toward learning English among employees in the focal Asian affiliates; the possible opposition from stakeholders in local communities, etc. Cummins India was successful in mandating English as its common language due to senior executives who felt that this practice was critical to improving the inclusion of people from across the diverse Indian population. They also believed that the generalized usage of English would promote a team-based culture, which would in turn improve local performance and foster the participation of India-based JVs and subsidiaries in corporate-level decision-making.



Limitations and future research

We acknowledge that this retrospectively constructed case study wherein two of the authors are former employees of Cummins in India bears some risk of a biased or one-sided view, but we are confident that our findings, especially on the role of English in achieving inclusion of women and marginalized groups were not preordained. We would encourage further research to include formal interviews with employees at Cummins, including TMT members in India and at the corporate head office in the USA, and employees on the shopfloor. This would likely yield perspectives beyond those described in the present paper.

Future research could also explore in greater detail the specific facets of bounded reliability explicated by Kano and Verbeke (2015) that were mitigated using a common language in the MNE. This research could help confirm deductively our preliminary findings regarding the role of operating mode choice in the successful adoption of a common language in MNE subsidiaries. With public debate continuing—both in India and in developed countries such as Canada—about the role of local languages and the ways to implement D&I, MNE managers will likely face the ongoing challenge of ‘language choices’ as a firm-level governance issue. Academic research outcomes such as those presented in our paper can contribute to this debate and to the decision-making in this realm.

Conclusion

This is one of the first IB studies that has focused on adopting English as a common language in the subsidiaries and JVs of a foreign MNE in India, a country with a multitude of languages and institutional features, such as the caste system, with vulnerable individuals from lower castes and the under-representation of women in the workforce. We have identified the role of English in achieving inclusion of these vulnerable groups. Our results are aligned with those from prior research by Graddol (2010) outside of the MNE context and fill a gap in the IB literature, as identified by Lauring and Klitmøller (2017). For the individuals affected, being included is likely to have been associated with an increase in their job satisfaction, well-being, and commitment (with benefits to the firm as well).

From the firm’s perspective, we have identified how English has contributed to the attractiveness of India as a manufacturing location. It allowed reducing the head office’s TMT challenges in assessing and curbing bounded reliability, in addition to alleviating more mundane bounded rationality problems, for instance, related to translating documents between sites in the MNE’s network and communicating with the corporate head office. We also explored the role of operating modes in adopting English, which was touched upon in the context of caste by Bapuji et al. (2023) but had not been studied before in MNE language research.

Our analysis contributes to the literature on language selection in MNEs and also to the broader conversation on whether English is a colonial legacy that should be deprioritized in favor of local and indigenous languages. Local languages are undoubtedly important in the social and cultural identity of individuals and groups



(Lauring & Klitmøller, 2015), but we found that English fostered inclusion of under-represented groups in the workplace while improving the social standing of people in their local communities. Based on our observations, it is easy to see how D&I programs supposedly aimed at ‘decolonization’ could lead to exactly the opposite outcomes of what was intended. Common governance tools, such as a single mandated language in business, if implemented effectively as was the case at Cummins, may be the best guarantor of inclusion of the most vulnerable employee groups. The mandated common language will allow them to improve their economic position as well as their status, both with the firm that employs them and in the broader societal context.

Appendix 1: Systematic literature review of international business studies of language in india

1. General: We utilized HubMeta (Steel et al., 2023) to upload search files and screen papers, and followed the principles of PRISMA (Steel et al., 2021). When searching international business (IB) and international human resources (HR) journals, we utilized the terms Language AND India. When searching databases, we also included the terms multinational OR international to help us find relevant papers (as opposed to those from the field of medicine, for example). The initial number of titles included was 4327. Deduplication resulted in 3569 titles, following which seven were added manually (see below).

2. Sources:

Source	Search details	Number of titles (after deduplication)
Web of Science	All databases, Topic Search (includes title, abstract, and indexing) RIS files uploaded to HubMeta	1174
ProQuest	All databases (including ABI Inform). Source type: scholarly journals, dissertations and theses, conference papers, & proceedings RIS files uploaded to HubMeta	869
Business Source Complete (EBSCOhost)	RIS files uploaded to HubMeta	358

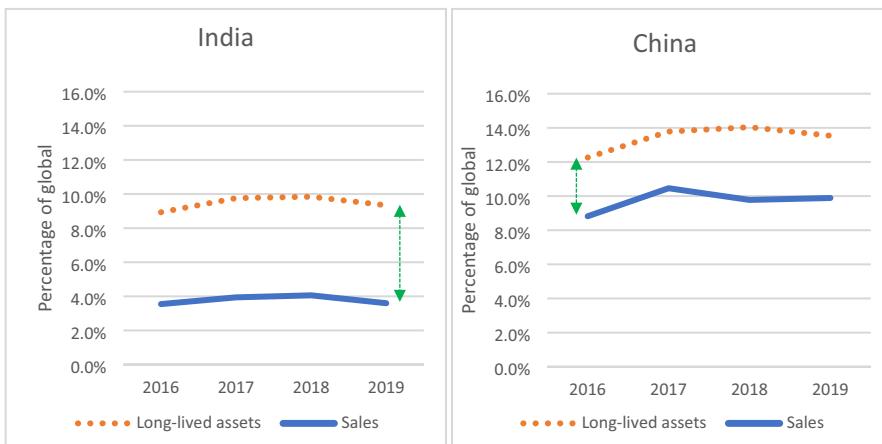


Source	Search details	Number of titles (after deduplication)
Journal of International Business Studies (through JSTOR)	RIS files uploaded to HubMeta	274
International Journal of Human Resource Management		325
Journal of World Business (through ScienceDirect)		192
Global Strategy Journal (Wiley Online)		75
Journal of International Management (through ScienceDirect)		152
Management International Review (through JSTOR)		150
Management & Organization Review (MOR)	No RIS download available. Manually screened titles and abstracts and verified that papers that appeared relevant had not already been included in previous searches. Five papers from AB&M and one each from MOR and APJM were included for full text screening	1
Asia Pacific Journal of Management (APJM)		1
Asian Business & Management (AB&M)		5
Total		3576

3. All duplicates identified by HubMeta based on title, authors, etc. were reviewed by the authors.
4. For title screening, we used the ‘AI Assist’ feature in HubMeta, which uses an approach to “constantly sort the remaining articles based on researchers’ previous choices, until these researchers reject (screen out) a substantive number of articles in a row, whereupon screening stops” (Steel et al., 2021 p. 37). We halted the iterations when we had over 400 papers manually rejected in a row.
5. Full-text screening was done for 178 papers, with the exception of six Chinese/Korean language papers where the full text was not available.
6. Six papers were identified that dealt with issues of language in India in the IB context.



Appendix 2: Comparison of cummins' sales and investments in india and china (from 10-K filings)



Sales to customers geographically located in India made up approximately 4% of global sales, whereas value of net assets in India was approximately 9–10% of global assets. In contrast, the overall allocation of investment to China (in comparison with domestic sales) was not as significant, as indicated by the arrows.

International sales mix is not broken out by country in years prior to 2016 in Cummins' 10-K. Later years not shown in graph due to COVID-related disruption in China.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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