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# The (Un)Hidden Turmoil of Language in Global Collaboration

Tsedal B. Neeley, Pamela J. Hinds, Catherine D. Cramton

## INTRODUCTION

If you cannot express your ideas because you lack language skills, the collaboration becomes a nightmare. You lose interest to continue and you feel you are devalued. (Nonnative English speaker at a French company)

My coworkers from Germany; they don't tend to realize that there's a non-German person and they would just start talking in their own language that you don't know – excuse me, what are you talking about, you know? It's like whether it be at the lunch table, be it in a meeting, be it's like you and me are talking and they would just start off. I felt that was very, very rude. But now I'm used to it. I'm just used to it. (Native English speaker at a German company)

Companies are increasingly stipulating a lingua franca or common language policy to expand their global reach and facilitate employee collaboration across national and linguistic boundaries. English is the common business language of choice in the 21st century, regardless of company origin or headquarter location. Daimler AG, Kone Elevators, SAP, Siemens, Philips, Nokia, Alcatel-Lucent, Nissan, Technicolor, Rakuten and Microsoft in Beijing are examples of global companies that have set English-only policies in recent years. Ironically, although lingua franca mandates are intended to increase efficiencies and enhance coordination of global work, mandates can instead spawn emotions and behaviors, as illustrated in the opening quotes, that introduce inefficiencies and erode collaborative efforts, leading to losses in productivity and performance.

Language-related inefficiencies take numerous forms: loss of information, added work, loss of learning opportunities, and disruption of the collaborative process. Information is lost to native English speakers when nonnative English speakers dodge meetings and conversations, switch language

mid-meeting, or boil a complex discussion and decision process down into a quick English language summary. Similarly, non-native English speakers lose out on needed information when they avoid meetings for reasons of language-related apprehension and anxiety.

Many of these inefficiencies remain unknown or overlooked, as companies focus on the potential benefits of linguistic integration in responding to a globalizing market. Companies are adopting English for three key reasons. The first is pressure from outside global players. As suppliers, customers, partners, and competitors increasingly use English as the language of business, companies feel pressure to follow suit. The second is the diversification of company tasks among countries. When corporate goals rely on departments in different countries working in harmony with each other, language becomes a primary bottleneck. By reducing the multitude of languages into one, companies can work toward their goals more efficiently. A third reason that drives multinationals to mandate English as a business language is mergers and acquisitions of companies worldwide. For example, Swedish Astra and British Zeneca established English as their corporate language during the course of their merger that formed "AstraZeneca" in 1999. Japanese Nippon Sheet Glass (NSG) made English its official language after buying U.K. glass-maker Pilkington PLS in 2010.

Yet, the implementation of language mandates often does not match the panacean potential that drives companies to implement them. Indeed, the transition from a babel of voices to a common tongue is often not easy, and the experience of working in another language or working with a nonnative speaker is, not surprisingly, difficult. For one early adopter of an English language mandate, the Swedish company ABB, only one-third of the workforce spoke English natively, setting the stage for potentially extreme difficulties. The Japanese employees of GlobalMoves, for example, whose chief executive officer (CEO) unexpectedly began speaking English to them and mandated they do so as well,

experienced significant declines in productivity and increased anxiety.

Our analysis of English-only policies across several global companies revealed decrements to collaborative efforts as well as losses in productivity and performance. The negative dynamics for global collaboration spurred by language mandates, however, are not inevitable. With recognition of the dynamics of lingua franca usage, as well as forethought and planning, we assert that companies can avoid these pitfalls and better realize the potential of a common language.

## WHEN ENGLISH-ONLY POLICIES HURT

In this article, we use pseudonyms to refer to the multibillion dollar global companies whose language mandates we discuss: GlobalTech (German company), FrenchCo (French company), GlobalMoves (Japanese company), CarCo (U.S. company), and ChipCo (U.S. company). A misconception that plagued each company was the belief that people would adjust to the new communication protocol, given time, and that business would move forward as usual. The leader of FrenchCo, speaking about the English policy he set two years earlier noted, for example: "We actually never talked about [the implementation of the mandate]. We made the announcement and never brought it up again." Or in the case of GlobalMoves, the CEO assumed a vision of working for a globalized company and the threat of demotion would suffice.

Yet missing from these conceptions of language mandates were the emotional and psychological impact of working under a mandated language, both for nonnative *and* native lingua franca speakers. Below we show the emotional impact of language mandates for employees and highlight the effect these emotions have for global collaboration and company productivity. We conclude this article with lessons for global collaborators and managers who are operating under a language mandate.

## THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF EMPLOYEES UNDER A LANGUAGE MANDATE

### Restricted and Reduced

When GlobalTech established English as its business language, German employees said that the mandate to speak and to write e-mails and documents in English was "a bottleneck," "a handicap," and something that held employees back from effective communication. Said one employee, "The English expression is not really making the point that you are trying to make, and you are maybe an inch away from it." Another offered this analogy:

It's like walking through jelly. You could walk so much easier if you could talk in German. But it's this language which is holding you back.

In the high-tech company FrenchCo, nonnative speakers who were mostly French nationals provided similar accounts. One employee noted: "Unless I am perfectly focused, when I have to speak English, it pains me to have to reduce drastically what I want to say because I lack the sophisticated language skills."

Likewise, Japanese employees at GlobalMoves said that a task that would take thirty minutes in their native language could take four hours to complete in English. Even then, employees constantly feared committing discrediting errors. Worst of all, the worry loomed constantly about having to defend their work in their relatively poor English. A U.S.-based ChipCo employee explained the added time to routine work as follows:

Sometimes you just can't get past the level setting or the base-lining on a problem you're trying to solve, and you can't get to the brainstorming or exploring ideas that should take five minutes for an hour. That's very, very, very frustrating.

More importantly, despite different levels of English fluency, almost all nonnative speakers experienced a feeling of diminished professional standing as their companies designated English as an organizational sine qua non. Two employees at FrenchCo highlighted this feeling of status loss (emphasis added):

I feel more of an expert in my natural language. Speaking your own language helps you to master your communication. When you don't speak your native language, you are *diminished* because you lose a great proportion of your abilities.

Japanese employees at GlobalMoves reflected on similar experiences. One employee explained:

Many disgruntled engineers who work very hard were confused about the English mandate. They knew that no matter how hard they worked they won't have a chance unless they spoke English. They feel demotivated ... Employees who cannot speak English are feeling inferior. At meetings, they cannot articulate their opinions.

Feeling both restricted by language ability and reduced vis-à-vis their organizations created difficulties for nonnative speakers, because the gap between their mother tongue and English remained stark. This hidden turmoil had drastic consequences for employees and their global collaborators.

### Apprehensive and Anxious

Similar to the fears expressed by the Japanese employee at GlobalMoves, a Chinese engineer at ChipCo described what was at stake for him with the language mandate: "You have to speak very good English, otherwise you fail." Nonnative employees near universally expressed apprehension at the thought of interacting in English. Common in these accounts is an emphasis on heightened anxiety due to the mandate. An engineer with a doctorate from a prestigious French institution described this new feeling of trepidation:

When you're in a big group, you are expected to have proper English; so, you better be careful about your English. Then, you focus too much on your English. I think it [the mandate] is bad luck. For me, I worry that my English mistakes are more visible now. Before, when I was on a conference call in English ... I knew that I wasn't

expressing myself well and that I might not have been very easy to understand, but I was confident about the fact that I had information.

Even if they were typically confident and vocal in their native language, many nonnative speakers became reluctant to talk with others in English due to performance anxiety.

Accounts from native-English speakers corroborate and may provide some credence to these anxieties. On one hand, the experience of navigating discussions can be fractious with nonnative speakers. In research with CarCo on precisely this question, one native English speaker spoke of these language problems:

When I was over in Germany at our workshop, I was using the word "leverage," and they had more of a meaning of, like, "balance;" I don't know why . . . But sometimes, it takes a while to discover that stuff, because you're sitting there arguing about a point, and it's like, "Why don't they understand it?"

On the other hand, not all native speakers respond well to the misunderstandings and poor language skills of their nonnative counterparts. Yet another project leader at ChipCo noted:

So I've been in conversations where the English has been poor. And if a person's English is bad [my] American colleagues will just attack the guy: "What are you trying to say? How did you build this model? What do your simulation results mean? What are you telling me?"

Although we don't have good data on the prevalence of such "attacks," not unsurprisingly, the experience of speaking English was more time consuming and stressful for nonnative lingua franca speakers than using their native language.

Yet performance apprehension for nonnative speakers of the lingua franca was often, and understandably, coupled with job insecurity. Echoing the threat of failure noted by the Chinese engineer quoted above, a FrenchCo employee rhetorically questioned: "What's going to happen to my career if I don't master the English that's considered to be so important that [our] executives are imposing it in meetings? What's my future?" Almost two-thirds of Japanese employees surveyed at GlobalMoves noted feeling "afraid" when thinking of the language mandate. Employees across the companies reported similar anxieties and apprehensions.

### **Mistrust, Avoidance, and Exclusion Disrupt Collaboration**

Not only were these emotional experiences common and detrimental for nonnative speakers, they negatively impacted their interaction with native English speakers. First, nonnative speakers often came to resent and mistrust native speakers in the face of language mandates, creating "us" versus "them" divisions. Some nonnative employees saw the language mandate as furthering the insensitivities of English speakers. As one French speaker explained:

I'm not really happy with English people thinking that we don't need any other languages, that English is the most

shared language . . . and they believe "we can go anywhere and we can do better than you because at least we are native-speakers" . . . It's annoying.

Another echoed: "Arrogant [English-language] natives who know only one language, do not understand difficulties of nonnatives." Coupled with this frustration was a keen worry that the language advantage will be abused by native speakers. One FrenchCo informant noted: "We need to be extra cautious, because the Americans' mastery of the language may lead them to take advantage of us and try to fool us."

Second, to manage the anxiety that came with having to use English, nonnative employees exhibited a variety of withdrawal behaviors. Some employees attended meetings, but consciously failed to contribute, withdrawing any contributions a priori. Said one FrenchCo employee:

I understand [English] because I'm trained in English, but I might not say anything or may stop talking during the meetings [with U.S. counterparts] because I'm afraid of looking silly [and of] making mistakes.

A German employee at GlobalTech explained why he and his colleagues skipped meetings in English:

[It's] not because you don't like Americans, [but] because you don't like searching for words. Because you don't like listening to somebody who can speak even less English than you.

Some nonnative speakers simply avoided situations where English was required.

Third, avoidance behaviors easily became exclusionary. When GlobalTech German employees had control over a meeting's invitation list, they sometimes only invited German-speaking members of the team. If a meeting had to include native English speakers, said one German respondent, he refused to participate. "If we are going to extend the meeting to a larger forum, if we have to talk in English, then I say no! No, I don't want to do this," he admitted. Others said that they sometimes made decisions about whom to include in their communication based on whether involving that person would require them to speak English. One German employee at GlobalTech, for instance, admitted that he seldom phoned his English-speaking coworker in India to address a concern. Instead, he searched for colleagues in the German home office who could help him, even if those colleagues were less knowledgeable than their Indian coworker.

Strategies used by some coworkers to alleviate their emotional distress shifted that distress to others, who in turn often reacted in ways that perpetuated or even escalated the cycle. Native English-speaking colleagues often felt excluded if they became aware of nonnative-only meetings, for example. We call this dynamic around language discomfort the "hot potato."

Language sensitivity was "a hot potato," an issue that evoked so much anxiety that people tried to escape it by foisting it on to others as depicted in Figure 1. When nonnative speakers of the lingua franca avoided native speakers or reverted to speaking in their native language to ease their anxiety, these behaviors often upset their native English-speaking colleagues. Native English speakers described

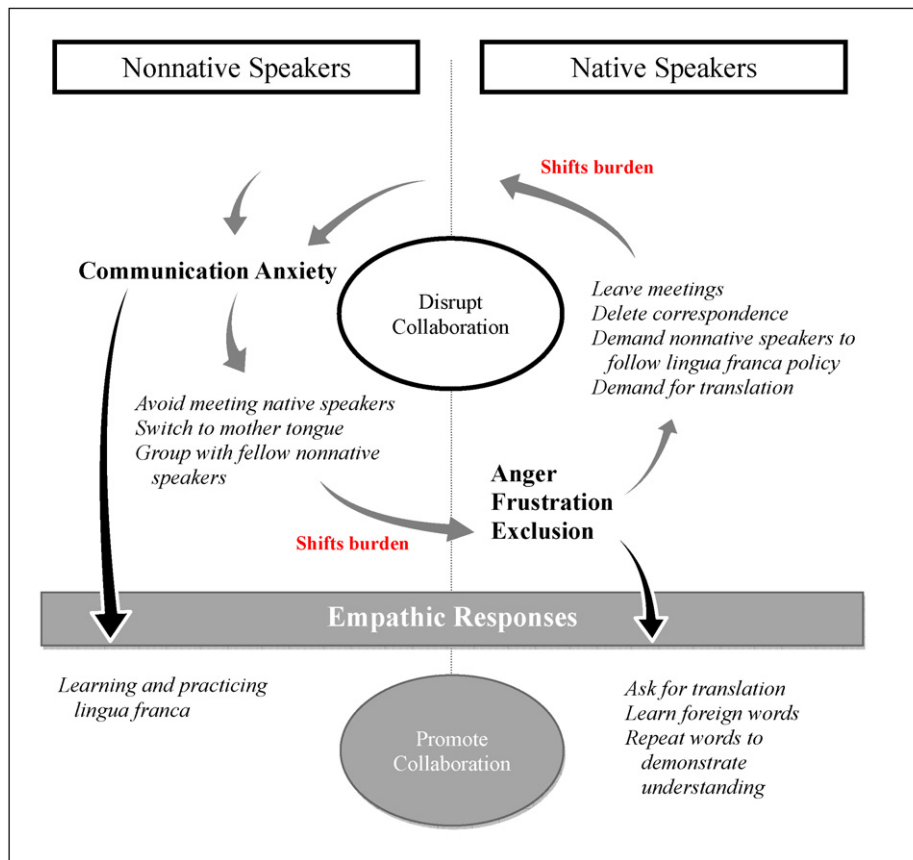


Figure 1 Effects of Lingua Franca Policy on Global Collaboration.

feeling angry, frustrated, and discouraged when their colleagues excluded them from meetings or when their colleagues switched languages during conference calls, a linguistic practice known as code-switching. This dynamic gave rise to a negative cycle of emotional reactions starting with the nonnative speakers’ anxiety about English and their strategies to avoid it, followed by native English speakers’ anger and frustration about the language lapses and their own strategies to deal with those negative feelings. Most of the strategies to which both sets of colleagues resorted had the effect of eroding their collaborative spirit, leaving them more critical of each other and sensitive to language failures than before.

In response to nonnative English speakers’ coping strategies, for example, native English speakers themselves sometimes resorted to avoidance: They left meetings. One GlobalTech team member from India explained, “I don’t stay, because I feel it’s a waste of my time and perhaps of theirs because I will not understand it. If you miss two words, you miss the whole idea of what they are talking about.” Some employees said they were considering whether to return to previous assignments in which they “would not have to deal with all of these issues.” Other responses included asking for explanations or translations, describing their colleagues’ behavior as rude, invoking the company’s English language mandate, and requesting explicitly that meetings, documents, and e-mails be in English. This contributed to a destructive cycle by shifting the emotional

burden – and sometimes the burden of work – back to the nonnative English speakers.

The rampant code-switching we unearthed by German speakers at GlobalTech, for example, sparked especially strong emotional responses on the part of the native English speakers, including feelings of being devalued, disrespected, neglected, lonely, and isolated. To be sure, when German colleagues reverted to German for all or part of a meeting, they apologized before switching languages and almost always provided summaries after the German interchange. However, study respondents said that the summaries were finished thoughts that excluded them from participation in the shaping and questioning of ideas. One engineer in India explained that when meetings were diverted into German, “we can’t go to the root of the problem or whatever the discussion is ... which will be helpful in our analysis.” In these situations, the native English speakers often expressed displeasure with their German-speaking colleagues, or became resigned to their fate.

### PRODUCTIVITY LOSS AND PROCESS DECREMENTS

Our analysis clearly shows that the strategies workers use to cope with painful emotions arising from lingua franca mandates can have damaging interpersonal effects. Regulating

such emotions is hard work. The individuals we interviewed and observed across a variety of industries and countries grappled daily with language-related stress. In several interviews, people came to tears when describing their feelings about the language issue. The comments of others were laced with anger. This work-related emotional toll, often called “emotional labor,” sapped people’s energy and eroded their morale.

In the language process we have observed and studied, negative emotions are too hot for individuals to handle very long, like the idiomatic potato just roasted in the hearth. Avoiding the uncomfortable situation by shifting the language burden tended to trigger more negative emotions in distant colleagues. How people interpreted each other’s intent also influenced the “hot potato” cycle. When nonnative English speakers avoided collaborations, excluded their colleagues from meetings, or switched language in the middle of a discussion to mitigate their anxieties, native English speakers often interpreted nonnative speakers’ behavior unfavorably: They believed that their colleagues didn’t value them or that they wanted to ostracize them. This belief contributed to a downward spiral.

These negative dynamics impacted the bottom line through process decrements and productivity losses, often out of sight of managers and coworkers. Central to learning is the capacity for coworkers to feel safe taking interpersonal risks, such as making mistakes for the purpose of learning. Language mandates created a context in which not only were nonnative speakers generally apprehensive about language performance, the divisive nature of the language haves and have-nots further undermined the trust needed for effective collaboration. Work process suffered and productivity was impaired.

Many of the quotes above speak to process decrements; other instances are more striking. As we noted above, nonnative speakers often withheld their contributions due to language-related apprehensions. One astounding example comes from a FrenchCo engineer. Too anxious to further the complex argumentation needed to make his point, this engineer avoided noting a technical issue he discovered during a team discussion. When the problem finally surfaced, it took the project team two weeks to resolve, extending an already delayed timeline. German GlobalTech employee noted a similar behavior: “If I needed perhaps to write documentation, it would have to be in English. It’s too hard to write in English, so I don’t do it.”

Consider another illustration. Ulrich, a project manager at GlobalTech, tackled an emergency complaint from one of the company’s most lucrative customers. A malfunction in a software application had shut down the multimillion dollar customer’s operations for a full weekend. As we watched, Ulrich began to pull together a high-level troubleshooting team to travel to the customer site to remedy the situation. He called Arpan, a key team member in GlobalTech’s Indian office, to discuss the technical points that needed to be addressed. “Have you read the summary of the issues?” Ulrich asked anxiously. “Not most of it,” replied Arpan, his voice equally laced with stress. “The document is in German. Only part of it was translated into English.” Ulrich groaned at this new setback, thinking, “Language again.” Un-translated or withheld documents and unknown

or unspoken contributions derailed work process. And work unnecessarily suffered.

## KEY LESSONS FOR GLOBAL COLLABORATORS

We recommend the following lessons for native and nonnative speakers of language mandates that prevent unhealthy divides from emerging among coworkers and enhance the overall productivity of collaborators.

### Exercise the Power of Empathy

Nonnative and native English speakers can cut short negative sentiments that may arise by being empathic. Our research shows how empathy enabled collaborators to reframe painful situations in ways that fostered more positive responses.

A German speaker in our study of GlobalTech, for example, explained how he empathized with non-German speakers:

[If] you sit in a group of Germans and they talk German to each other and you don’t know if they’re talking about you or not . . . I would feel uncomfortable being in China and them just talking Chinese and me not being able to understand anything. So, being sensitive, I guess we try to talk English as much as we can and try to involve people.

One nonnative English-speaking FrenchCo employee also noted how important English-language interactions were for her: “There was a colleague — she’s no longer here — but she was Canadian. Having conversations with her was very good practice. Working in English is a very, very good way to improve our English.”

Native English speakers also sometimes reframed their thinking about nonnative speakers’ plight, by viewing conversation as a challenge that required everyone to participate. And some native English speakers empathized with the plight of their nonnative English-speaking colleagues, transforming their anger into compassion. Empathy seemed to defuse some of the tensions associated with uneven language proficiency by encouraging engagement and helpfulness. One U.S. interviewee described how he adapted his behavior to accommodate his German colleagues’ language skills:

They feel very comfortable with the German language . . . they have to adjust to working with us. I’m sure it was a major irritation for them . . . you know they are trying their best to see that we are getting what they want us to get.. The habit I had was to repeat their words, information that was exchanged, so that they know that I have got it. So it’s a little adjustment here and there.

When coworkers empathized with the plight of their distant colleagues, they often behaved in ways that were less likely to be interpreted as threatening or devaluing. For example, they listened more carefully, worked harder to involve their colleagues in project-related interactions, and took pains to avoid causing offense in their communication. The simple expression of understanding and concern for

their distant colleagues helped people interpret their coworkers' actions in more forgiving ways.

### Native Speakers Must Help

Native speakers can take concrete steps to help their nonnative colleagues contribute to conversations and thereby limit backlash. By trying to help nonnative speakers understand more clearly what is being said during a meeting and making sure they are given equal or greater airtime, native speakers can improve their own communication and help restore power to nonnative speakers.

### Nonnative Speakers Benefit From Sticking to English

Nonnative speakers should actively seek to be understood and to understand what their colleagues are saying. By reducing the number of times they avoid or ostracize native speakers, nonnative speakers can contribute to the smooth operation of the company. Equally important, sticking to the company language leads to several hours of practice each day, known to aid in the development of verbal agility.

## LESSONS FOR GLOBAL MANAGERS

We recommend the following important lessons for global managers charged with overseeing internationally distributed collaborations in a company that has mandated a lingua franca, English or otherwise.

### Anticipate the Challenges and Coping Strategies

Managers must understand the communication challenges that people face when they have a low level of proficiency in a lingua franca mandated by a company. They also need to anticipate and understand the impact of coping strategies that workers may use—such as avoiding meetings, excluding native lingua franca speakers, code-switching, asking for translations, and pointing out failures to use the mandated language. With this understanding, managers sweeten the odds of developing effective solutions for managing the emotional dynamics of differential language proficiency.

### Create a Safe Communication Environment

To interrupt the “hot potato” cycle, managers should create inclusive, psychologically safe communication environments. In particular, they can watch for and remove communication barriers that threaten their employees' sense of belonging. In our study, for example, some employees expressed fears about the stigma associated with admitting that they were having difficulty with the language, since English was a required job skill. This made it difficult for them to get the support they needed to be more effective (and less anxious). Managers should actively support accelerated language training for employees who would like to improve their ability to speak and write in the company language.

### Encourage Practice

Managers can encourage people to practice the lingua franca and provide settings that are not threatening. In our study, we found that many nonnative English speakers were quite fluent in English, but lacked confidence and thus experienced anxiety. To facilitate practice, managers can sponsor lingua franca brown-bag lunches, at which collocated colleagues of varying fluency can gather and practice chatting in the mandated language. We met employees who held “English Fridays,” during which everyone spoke only English, as a way of gaining comfort with the language. As employees' language skills and confidence strengthen with practice sessions, their apprehension about their communication abilities eases. This in turn reduces the temptation to adopt coping strategies that trigger the “hot potato” cycle.

### Encourage Empathy

Perhaps most important, managers can encourage perspective-taking and empathy by promoting conversations that reveal peoples' experiences as they grapple with the challenge of working across languages. They can foster open acknowledgment of the hardship faced by workers and discuss the impact on everyone involved. In our study, for example, few of the native English speakers were aware of how hard their German colleagues were working to converse in English. Similarly, few of the Germans knew about the feelings of exclusion and ostracism experienced by some of their non-German speaking colleagues when the Germans fell back on their native tongue. When we raised these issues in discussions with teams after the study, members were often eager to change their own behavior to be more accommodating. Promoting candid sharing of experiences and emotions enables all parties to empathize with each other, which can lighten the emotional burden for everyone.

### Test Assumptions

Finally, managers can help global collaborators identify and test the assumptions they make about the intentions behind their colleagues' behavior. It is helpful to describe a specific moment. Consider this example:

I noticed that you left the meeting early after I reminded everyone about sticking to English. I wondered whether that had anything to do with what I said. I do think about how hard it must be to work in a second language, but I really wanted to understand what you were saying so I can do my part in our effort. Can you think of something else you and I could do to try to help us all master this language challenge?

Testing assumptions that others can immediately recall can provide managers an opportunity to generate mutual understanding and even address a problem directly.

## CONCLUSION

Use of a common business language can facilitate the exchange of information and the development of social

relationships essential for high-performing global collaborators. However, as our research shows, lingua franca mandates can activate intense and destructive emotional dynamics. Such mandates must be managed carefully. If company leaders, managers, and employees are attuned to these emotional dynamics, they'll have a greater chance of minimizing them. Potent practices, such as creating safe environments for language practice and encouraging globally dispersed workers to empathize with one another, can help. What

happens next regarding the (un)hidden problems associated with language mandates can and should be in the hands of managers and employees.



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**Tsedal B. Neeley** received her Ph.D. from Stanford University, and is an assistant professor of business administration in the organizational behavior unit at Harvard Business School. Her research focuses on interpersonal dynamics in global collaboration, with emphasis on the impact of language, culture, power, status, and emotions on global collaboration. She also studies the use of multiple media to accomplish work goals. Her research has been published in *Organization Science*, *Management Science* and *Harvard Business Review* (Harvard Business School, Morgan Hall 347, Boston, MA 02163, United States. Tel.: +1 617 495 6776; fax: +1 617 496 6554; e-mail: [tneeley@hbs.edu](mailto:tneeley@hbs.edu)).

**Pamela J. Hinds** holds a Ph.D. in organizational science and management from Carnegie Mellon University, and is an associate professor and co-director of the Center on Work, Technology, & Organization at Stanford University. She studies the effect of technology on groups and the dynamics of geographically distributed work teams. She has work published in more than a dozen leading academic journals, including *Organization Science*, *Academy of Management Journal*, and *Academy of Management Annals* (Center for Work, Technology and Organization, Department of Management Science & Engineering, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-4026, United States. Tel.: +1 650 723 3843; fax: +1 650 723 2826; e-mail: [phinds@stanford.edu](mailto:phinds@stanford.edu)).



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**Catherine D. Cramton** earned her Ph.D. from Yale University in organizational behavior and is an associate professor in the School of Management, George Mason University. Her research focuses on global work teams, and explores issues such as cross-cultural adaptation, cultural differences in coordination practices and in meetings, information sharing, and attribution, as well as language issues. Her research has appeared previously in *Organizational Dynamics*, *Organization Science*, the *Journal of Management*, and *Research in Organizational Behavior* (School of Management, George Mason University, Mail Stop 5F5, Fairfax, VA 22030-4444, United States. Tel.: +1 703 993 1814; fax: +1 202 318 4319; e-mail: [ccramton@gmu.edu](mailto:ccramton@gmu.edu)).