

On the Use of English in Regional Cyber Communities

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The notion of community has become a central construct in thinking about the way humans organize their lives. In the electronic age, particularly in the age of the Internet, this organization of human activities has become more complex with the availability of fast, efficient, and powerful means of communication that can have a significant impact on the way we organize the communities we live in and interact with. (Mitra 55)

There are countless regional communities in cyberspace where the users are connected through shared regional, social, and cultural memories. A regional community in cyberspace is a cultural terrain for the community members to interact and continue their offline social relations. Within these communities, members maintain connectedness mainly through texts, though visual and audio messages also form the tools of communication. Barriers—both temporal and spatial—are surpassed and virtual communities of local regions are, in fact, started to supplement or replace their offline counterparts.

The cyber avatar of a region is also an instance of resistance—resistance against the globalizing politics of the capitalist economic regimes. As a part and parcel of modern technological advancements, a global interconnectedness is effec-

tuated through internet, and the concept of the world as a whole becomes stronger through this process. In this entry of the global whole, the local and the native are mostly neglected and hence forgotten. Simultaneously, the elite systems of production and the culture that these elite sections of the world carries with them are taken to be accepted and modular, making one to understand that what is global is not really global, but just turned to be global through planned ideological moves. Viewed against this backdrop, Cyber regional communities can be viewed as a platform to resist the inroads of global culture by projecting the local and native culture pertaining to each region. Though these communities are technically functioning in a modern global platform, they are actually locating their specific regional locale in the cyberspace by asserting their uniquely native identity.

But this resistance to global culture and the colonizing tendencies of the hegemonic foreign culture gets complex when it comes to the issue of the language used by the members to interact. Every region has its own specific variety of language that the members of that region use to interact with other members of that community. Through this language it is possible for the members of the same community to establish a feeling of solidarity among themselves. And this regional language is a repository of varied cultural experiences of each region. Hence, it can be considered

as an identity marker of each region. Its ability to be a medium of communication makes it an important tool of identity establishment. Through language, one can convey one's thoughts, intentions, beliefs etc. Likewise a community can communicate, showcase, and establish its specific practices, shared systems of thoughts and beliefs through a language that in many ways exhibit and emphasize its identity.

Replacing the regional language with a foreign language can therefore be seen as an intrusion into the culture of a community. It can be also seen as a part of colonial hegemony, where the language of the colonized is forcefully made inferior in status to the language of the colonizer.

A close observation of the language used by the regional communities of India in the cyberspace manifests the continuation of colonial or neocolonial hegemony. To explore this, we have focused on the language used by some regional cyber communities of Kerala.

There are umpteen Kerala communities in cyberspace. The arguments of this paper are anchored on the analysis of some selected Facebook communities, namely "Ente Keralam-Community" (My Kerala), "Ente Keralam-Ente Keralam (in Malayalam)-Community," "Keralam-News/Media website," "Keralam-Community," "Keralam (in Malayalam)-Tours/Sightseeing," "Kerala Tourism-Tourism & Sightseeing," "Kerala-Keralam(in Malayalam)-Historical Place," and "Kerala-Community", as the interactive nature of communication among the users is more discernible there.

What is revealed through a scrutiny of these communities' structure, posts, and comments is that despite their options to use Malayalam language to create the community, and to interact among themselves, they still follow English language mostly. See what the 'about' page of "Keralam-Community" says: "Keralam, the land of kera or coconut, is a never-ending array of coconut palms, sun blanching beaches, kettuvallams over enchanting backwaters, magical monsoon showers, silent valleys vibrant with flora and fauna... Welcome to Kerala benign and beautiful!" Similar-

ly, the 'about' page of "Kerala-Community" goes as follows:

Kerala is a state in the south-western part of India. It was created on 1 November 1956, with the passing of the States Reorganisation Act bringing together the areas where Malayalam was the dominant language. The state has an area of 38,863 km² (15,005 sq mi) and is bordered by Karnataka to the north, Tamil Nadu to the south and the east and the Arabian sea on the west. The major cities in Kerala are Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Kozhikode. Kerala is also known for its many small towns that are scattered across the state, thus creating a higher density of population.

Even most of the community names, except "Keralam-Tours/Sightseeing" and "Kerala-Keralam-Historical Place", are in English. The funniest part is that some of the community names are transliterations of Malayalam words in English, as in "Ente Keralam-Community" (My Kerala), "Keralam-News/Media website", "Keralam-Community." Even the 'about' pages of these communities, except that of "Kerala-Keralam -Historical Place," also use English language to describe their regional landscape called Kerala.

The members of these communities also use either English language or English script to express their views and opinions. There is a picture of Bekal Fort posted by "Kerala-Community" on 13th October 2016 at 12:00 pm. Below that, a person named Muhammad Azhar has commented on the same day as "our own kasaraGOD. Bakal fort." Even the feeling of belongingness is expressed in a foreign language here. There are also instances to show how paradoxically a foreign language has been used to express the nostalgia of people for their own lost culture. For example, in the same page was posted a picture of a sowing man on 3rd October 2016 at 8:07pm, and there is a comment below this photo by a member named Gopal Nair

where he says that "A rare sight nowadays...as machines have taken over" (on 3rd October 2016 at 8:29pm). Although there are initiatives taken by the group administrators of these communities to post and share opinions using Malayalam language, the tendency of the group members to post English comments below these Malayalam suggestions/directions is a disheartening reality. For instance, the Facebook group titled "Ente Keralam-Ente Keralam (in Malayalam)" has posted a picture of jasmine flower with its corresponding Malayalam name "Mullappoo" using Malayalam type script on 5th October 2016. 1100 people have liked this photo and five people have commented. Among these five comments, two comments were in English. A person named Reja Kumar has commented, "Even the feeling spreads sweet smell" (on 5th October 2016); and another person named Daniel Raju has posted "How can we forget the sweet smell" (on 8th October 2016). One person commented using only emojis and another person has commented both in English and in the transliteration of Tamil. Among the five comments below this photo, only one person has commented in Malayalam, and that too is not in Malayalam type script, but using English language.

Another observed phenomenon is the trend among the members to use English language even when their skill to use this language is not praiseworthy. See one comment posted in the "Keralam-News/Media Website" on 26th August 2015 at 7:52pm as a reply to the Happy Independence Day wishes of the administrator: "Os.when we all are free from 5vicess 5matter attraction that is real freedom.that day is the mahabali." To cite another example, there is a photo under the title "Kodoth" (in Malayalam) posted by the community "Ente Keralam-Ente Keralam (in Malayalam)" on 9th October 2016 at 9:57 pm. Below this photo, there is a comment which reads: "I m Love this place" (on 9th October 2016 at 11:25pm). Many such instances can be seen throughout these communities.

With the invention of Malayalam type script and the introduction of many Malayalam writing tools that are the offshoots of the efforts to popularize Malayalam computing, it has become easier to use that language in cyber conversations. Yet those who use Malayalam to communicate in cyber Kerala communities are very limited. English language still reigns over cyber communications. Since English is considered as the global language, it is mainly used for communication purpose in cyberspace as it is supposed to be known to all. But within the regional communities, when the opportunity to interact in regional language is available, the use of English language to communicate is prone to questioning. Since it is a regional community, all the members, or most of them, are naturally efficient in their own regional language. Then what is the need of using a foreign tongue to communicate?

If this is done in the name of English being celebrated as a global language, we have to realize that such a celebration is a well-manoeuvred agenda of global capital which caters to the hegemony of neo-imperial forces. See what Robert Phillipson says in this regard:

What does 'English as a world language' refer to? Only a tiny fraction of the population of most countries in the world, including those often described as 'English-speaking' countries in Africa and Asia, actually speaks English, meaning that terms like 'English as a world language' grossly misrepresents the reality of the communication experience of most of the world's population. More seriously, such terms as 'global English', 'anglophone Africa', or reference to English as a 'universal' lingua franca conceal the fact that the use of English serves the interests of some much better than others. Its use includes some and excludes others. (28)

Hence this trend of following a foreign lan-

guage even in a native environment indicates the fact that the colonial hegemony still continues latently through the tool of language. Here we find that the local, native expressions of a community are articulated through a foreign tongue, that too the language of a country that has dominated us for years. The prevailing trend in regional communities in cyberspace indicates the fact that still the pluralistic native cultural identity is not completely reclaimed. The unbeaten supremacy of English still lies deep within the minds of the people of different regional locations and what is shown through their selection of a so-called global language is their unconscious submission to the hegemony that still permeates in the local regional societies.

As Phillipson argues, "Globalization and Englishization are discretely penetrating a mass of economic, political, and cultural domains in complex ways" (30). He further explains the way in which linguistic neocolonialism operates:

Linguistic neoimperialism entails the maintenance of inequalities between speakers of English and other languages, within a framework of exploitative dominance. As in earlier linguistic imperialism, this is achieved through penetration, fragmentation, marginalization, and supremacist ideologies in discourse. Acceptance of the status of English, and its assumed neutrality implies uncritical adherence to the dominant world disorder, unless policies to counter neolinguistic imperialism and to resist linguistic capital dispossession are in force. (137)

Drawing insights from Phillipson's notion, we argue that with respect to cyber communi-

ties a thorough reconsideration of the language of transaction is an inevitable mission to counter linguistic imperialism. And a linguistic resistance using regional language in a global platform can be performed if the cyber regional community members could fathom the real significance of using their own language, instead of a foreign imperial tongue, to assert a native cultural identity. Going back to one's language is a vital move in reclaiming one's culture. Since cyber culture spreads faster than any other manifestation of culture, this linguistic decision has significance of wider dimensions.

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