

A Content Analysis of Buddhist Discourse: Convergent Perception of Multinational Buddhist Leaders

Kunlaphak Kongsuwannakul, Suranaree University of Technology,
Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand

Abstract: The research objective of this paper is to analyze the speeches and messages expressed by Buddhist leaders from various countries on the occasion of the United Nations Day of Vesak 2009. The focus of this study is on similarities in content and linguistic features shared by the texts, particularly as the culturally mutual perception manifested through the Buddhist discourse on the international event commemorating Buddha's tripartite life sequences. The discussion shows the role of English as a global language serving as an international bridge connecting people of different nationalities, especially those whose native languages are not English, a situation in which the English language is not stable but adopts certain indigenous features into use. Moreover, the paper also discusses the interplay of a common religious adoption (i.e. Buddhism) and diversity in linguistic backgrounds, a situation where common religious practices are followed to show a sense of community.

Keywords: Buddhist Discourse, Content Analysis, Linguistic Features, English as an International Language

Background and Rationale

IT IS A well-established concept that English is now a global language in the sense that it is used worldwide. It is one of only few languages that are taught as a second language or a foreign language in almost all continents across the globe. Just as Crystal (1997) put it rationally, English has been at the right place and at the time so that it becomes a, if not the only, truly international and most influential language of the world. He also mentioned the 'evolution' of how English plays a significant role in multinational and international organizations and cross-cultural communication.

However, it cannot be denied that there are more and more varieties of English emerging in our world. At least, we can clearly recognize American English and British English as two most commonly known English varieties—which bear distinctive features in all levels of language, from pronunciation to word usage and from certain idiomatic expressions to discursal patterns. According to Kachru (1990, as referred to in Jenkins, 2003), the use of English can be divided into three levels of range and depth: English as a first or native language (ENL), English as a second and official language (ESL), and English as a foreign language (EFL). Therefore, the English language used in each country or area is often described in the light of the conceptual framework of world Englishes as undergoing *nativization*, aka. *acculturation*, insofar as it adopts certain changes and thus can serve the communicative needs and cultural identity of local people in that particular region (e.g. Crystal, 2003; Crystal, 1997; Kachru, 1990).

To take this premise of English diversity optimistically, it is the adaptability of English and non-attachment to merely a single culture or way of life that is reckoned as its strength and thus helps promote its rapid widespread on a global scale (Bhatia, 1997). Quick adjustability of English to multicultural contexts leads this lingua franca to the unprecedented significant position of meaning carrier among world populace.

When we consider this predominant situation of English on a global scale in multicultural and multinational communication, it is therefore challenging to investigate the English language used in an international communicative situation in such a way whether among speakers of various countries, there can still be any distinguished linguistic and content similarities shared by them or not. From one perspective, the inquiry originates from the fact that people normally adopt certain means of communication when being in a similar situation. For example, when one is writing a business letter, some basic patterns of language can be expected to be at his/her disposal. Such patterning is normally tackled by means of genre analysis, assuming that texts of the same genre should carry more or less the same set of language similarities. To put this proposition briefly, the paradoxical interplay between diversity of world Englishes and patterning of genre studies is an effort worth pondering upon here.

As a result, a communicative situation where multinational users of English are in contact with each other as in a United Nations meeting is sought after here. The primary objective of the current research is, therefore, to explore linguistic and content similarities shared by English users from various countries in international settings—here a conference on the UN Day of Vesak 2009—in order to better understand the relationship between the theory of world Englishes and the concept of genre analysis. That is to say, the focus is on whether English when used by people of different linguistic backgrounds remains the same as it is used by native speakers of English; and if no, what factors can come into play.

Data Collection and Preliminary Analysis

The data used in this study are 33 speeches and messages of Buddhist leaders from 16 nations, which were made on the occasion of the United Nations Day of Vesak 2009. Originally, they were gathered and distributed at the sixth International Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak (ICUNDV), Bangkok, Thailand, organized during May 4-6, 2009. The data were collected from the website of the ICUNDV 2009 conference since they were also published online too. They were all in English, which for the current research were changed into text files and constituted a collection (aka. *corpus*) of 33 files of the documents insofar as they could also be processed and analyzed by computer programs.

There is a computer program used here for analyzing the fundamental qualities of the corpus. It is the freeware Concordancer for Windows (Version 1.3), which was developed by Zdenek Martinek from the University of West Bohemia and Les Siegrist from the Technische Hochschule Darmstadt, Germany. This program is used in this study for creating a word list, word frequency list, and statistical information about the corpus, and retrieving concordance lines for discussion.

The general information about the corpus created is that it contains 33 files of users of English from 16 nations, as mentioned above, constituted out of altogether 11,813 words with approximately 536 sentences and 2,330 lexical items used therein. Approximately 50 percent of the total words in the corpus are composed of 65 lexical items (See Appendix A).

The average length of each sentence in the corpus is 22.04 words, which is relatively a little shorter than, for instance, the average number of words in one sentence in theses and dissertations' English acknowledgements, which is 22.34 (Kongsuwannakul, 2005). This indicates that the speech genre under discussion is generally more like spoken language than written language in terms of sentence length even though its communicative situation is formal and it is originally in the form of written texts. One plausible explanation is that the relatively shorter sentence length is due to the fact that the texts are aimed to be read out at the international conference; too long sentences, plausibly, are not appropriate for drawing attention and getting the meaning across. The speeches and messages are in this way rather of spoken language used in a solemn atmosphere.

Linguistic Similarities

Just as Tan (2002) asserted clearly, a) frequencies of words used in a text or a body of texts, b) collocations, and c) distinctive structures can greatly benefit our understanding of 'a particular kind of language variety' (p. 3). On the assumption that speeches and messages produced by Buddhist leaders on the occasion of United Nations Day of Vesak belong more or less to the same kind, the probe into their characteristic linguistic features should be warranted for an insight into the genre.

An overall impression derived from Appendix A is that the majority of sentences in the speeches and messages should plausibly deal with a) date, venue, and occasion of the conference (i.e. time, place, and cause for the conference), and b) related ideas of the conference (i.e. organizers, participants, and related concepts).

With the aid of the frequency list, the date, venue, and occasion of the conference are shown through the highly frequent usage of the content words *day*, *Vesak*, *united*, *nations*, *May*, *Thailand*, *celebration*, and *celebrations* (Cf. Appendix A; Note that the words retrieved by the concordancer are not capitalized, as used in the appendix). The set of these frequently used words indicates that in a speech or message, there is a tendency that the date, venue, and occasion are mentioned and included as part of the produced text. The following is an example display of a couple of the aforementioned words in the form of a concordance:

the Sixth Annual United Nations Day of Vesak **Celebration** 2009 May 4th, 2009 By Vice President, (CN1)
 his birth and his enlightenment makes the Vesak **celebration** of utmost importance to the international (INS2)
 Not only that Vesak is a day worthy of great **celebration** but also that to celebrate this day with so (TW1)
 Vesak Celebrations which will be held from **May** 04th-06th, 2009 to celebrate the Birth, Enlightenment (CAM1)
 on the occasion of United Nations Day of Vesak on **May** 4-6, 2009 at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya (TH9)
 United Nations Day of Vesak, with the Conference from **May** 4 to 6, I am so honored to have the chance to express (TW5)

Figure 1: A Concordance of *Celebration* and *May*

With regard to the related ideas of the conference, it is found that the content words such as *university*, *president*, *government*, *international*, *Buddhism*, *Buddhist*, and *Buddhists* are used with high frequency to convey the message concerning the organizers and participants of the conference (Cf. Appendix A). Moreover, the corpus also contains high frequency of such content words as *world*, *global*, *crisis*, *peace*, *lord*, *Buddha*, *Dharma*, *teachings*, *human*, *beings*, *life*, *good*, and *great*, which can be deemed as signifying certain main concepts of this conference. The frequent occurrence of these two groups of idea-indicating words suggests that in a speech or message, there is also likelihood that ideas of a particular conference and, most plausibly, the titles of the organizing body or the participating parties are reiterated as

part of the produced text for emphasis or honor-giving. The following are some concordance lines for a few of the words here:

Rector of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University and **President** of International Council of United Nations Day (MAL1)
 Message from Hiroshi Matsumoto, **President**, Inner Trip Reiyukai International (ITRI) It is (JAP1)
 LEMANH THAT Chairman UNV 2008, Vietnam, Vice **President**, Vietnam Buddhist University in Ho Chi Minh (VNM1)
 can help in resolving many burning problems of our **human** society. (FR1)
 in science and technology as an effort to serve **human** interests. (ITL1)
 an extraordinary person would ever remain in the heart of **human** beings. (MYM1)

Figure 2: A Concordance of *President* and *Human*

Another linguistic distinctive feature is the frequent occurrence of the negative adverbial *not*. Normally, we can expect to find chiefly positive and neutral messages addressed in an international forum for diplomatic reasons. However, the adverbial is used quite frequently in the corpus. From Appendix A, there are 29 occurrences of *not*—when compared with 31 occurrences of *good* and *great* each—which should be worth investigating in detail. With the help of the concordancer, 9 occurrences of *not*—approximately almost one third of all its 29 occurrences—are found to be used in the structure of *not only/merely... but also...*, showing that they are employed to add further details to the propositions/statements being made. The rest are mostly used in the ‘reminders’ as if the speakers would like to teach or remind the listeners of statements/propositions existing in Buddhism. In this way, the use of the adverbial is ultimately not for creating a negation to anyone’s argument, but for giving a lesson to the audience. The following are concordance lines of the two major usages of *not* found in the corpus:

This celebration should **not** only focus the discussions and deliberations on various (MAL1)
 life, teachings, achievements and contribution **not** only to entire human civilization but also to others as (IND1)
 Let us hope that this international celebration will serve **not** merely as another important opportunity for Buddhist (TH2)
 principles, as enshrined in the UN Charter, are **not** dissimilar from the teachings of the Lord Buddha (TH10)
 Buddhist wishes to be involved in politics, they should **not** misuse religion to gain political power then use the (CAM1)
 But it cannot be the sole purpose of life and is **not** the true pathway to happiness. (JAP1)

Figure 3: A Concordance of Two Usages of *Not*

All the above aspects are considered on the basis of the concept of English as an international language. However, according to Bhatia (1997) and Crystal (1997), English, when undergoing nativization, will adopt several indigenous elements insofar as it can well answer communicative needs of each local area, and in many cases certain elements, especially loanwords, will find their way to the recognition of the global English community. Some concrete examples of this latter case include *igloo* from Canadian English, *koala* and *kangaroo* from Australian English, and *caste* from Indian English. As a result, loanwords widely used in these international speeches and messages should be reckoned closely as they can suggest manifestation of English significance on a global scale.

From the word frequency list in Appendix A, it is obvious that there are certain loanwords—mainly from Pali and Sanskrit—getting into common usage among Buddhist leaders of this United Nations conference. They are *Vesak*, *Buddhist*, *Buddhists*, *Buddhism*, *Buddha*, and *Dharma*. Quite interestingly, these loanwords are used by users of various countries and show mechanics of English word formation extensively. To be specific—except for *Buddhism*, which is taken solely as a proper noun and can be found in a dictionary—the words can be

claimed as undergoing or having undergone anglicization to a certain degree. For example, the word *Buddhist* itself (100 occurrences in number) can function as both an adjective and a noun and thus can take the plural form *-s*, thereby resulting in *Buddhists* (33 occurrences in number) (Cf. Figure 4 below). On the other hand, the word *Vesak*—meaning the sixth lunar month when the commemoration takes place—seems to be a proper noun but cannot yet be found in ordinary dictionaries, indicating its specificity to this particular communicative situation. However, as the word is used to a great extent (111 in number) in this international genre, it could plausibly be argued with confidence that people coming into contact with the event should decode its meaning with little difficulty. Perhaps, it is undergoing the process of anglicization and will finally be intelligible to world populace just as the words like *Sabbath* and *Ramadan* can be and find their way into an international version English dictionary.

experts around the world in order to find ways of using **Buddhism** 's principle to solve Global Crisis through (TH9)
while this complex revolution is undercutting traditional **Buddhism**, it is also stimulating oriental Buddhism; and in (ITL1)

The worldwide **Buddhist** community is strengthened by the wisdom of the (TH8)
The Los Angeles **Buddhist** Union Congratulatory Message United Nations (US1)

delegation from France to convey you the greetings of **Buddhists** in France and also their prayers for a sustainable (FR1)
this memorable occasion it should be the resolve of all **Buddhists** to spread and practice of the principles of loving (SL1)

who provided me with this opportunity to join the **Vesak** celebrating in Bangkok again. (CAM3)
On **Vesak** Day it is perhaps appropriate to pause and ponder (IND2)

Figure 4: A Concordance of *Buddhism*, *Buddhist*, *Buddhists*, and *Vesak*

A note that should also be made here is that plausibly the words *Buddhist* and *Vesak* above are undergoing grammaticalization. In other words, they are in transitional period of changing from proper nouns to common nouns or even adjectives. However, as this paper aims to discuss the data in synchronic terms, not diachronically, to study the grammaticalization of the words is out of focus and is left for further research in the future.

Regarding *Dharma* and *Buddha*, their usages are truly of interest. The Sanskrit form *Dharma*, 24 in number, together with its Pali form *Dhamma*, 14 in number, seemingly begins to be used as common nouns, though the majority (84% of all their occurrences) still with capital letters. Again, the word is plausibly under the process of anglicization, which is especially clear when its contexts where it is used with determiners and modifiers (See Figure 5 below) are considered closely. Similar cases also occur to the Pali loanword *Buddha*, whose majority of 87 occurrences—i.e. 43 (approximately 49.43%)—are used with the determiner *the*, undoubtedly signifying its original part of speech (namely, an adjective, meaning *knowing* or *awakened*). The following are some of their concordance lines:

Nalanda and on behalf of the followers of the **Dhamma** send my good wishes and the goodwill message (IND1)
let us make every effort to walk on the path of noble **dhamma** without letting the cloud of darkness embrace us. (MYM1)

its consideration for the significance of widely practiced **Dharma**—has since December 15, 1999 recognized Vesak (TH5)
matter when he speaks of human suffering and offers his **Dharma** as a way out of its clutches. (IND2)

On the propitious occasion of observing Vesak, Lord **Buddha**'s Birthday, under the blessing and aegis of Lord (TW4)
This constitutes the essence of the **Buddha**'s teachings or, what may be justifiably called, (INS2)

Figure 5: A Concordance of *Dharma*, *Dhamma*, and *Buddha*

Shared Content and Perspectives

As mentioned earlier in this paper, English is currently functioning as a carrier of more than one culture. Thus, to understand the way English works as a cultural ‘ambassador’, a conceptual framework for pondering upon the speeches and messages is needed. Moran’s (2001) framework for illustrating the interplay of five interrelated dimensions of culture is chosen for this purpose due to its clarity and concreteness (See Figure 6 below).

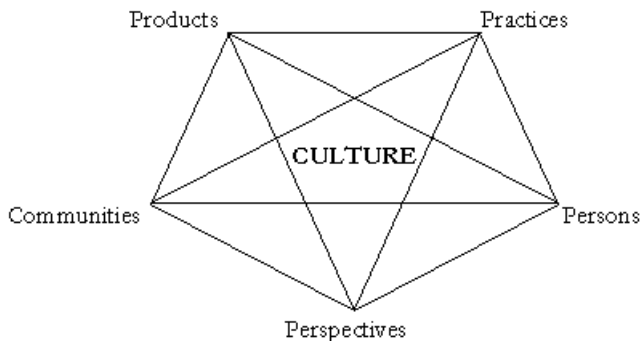


Figure 6: The Five Dimensions of Culture (Moran 2001, 24)

Considering the situation at hand, it is apparent that the persons communicating in this genre are from different linguistic backgrounds. That is, almost all of the members of this communicative situation do not have English as their native language at all. However, fully recognizing the importance and usefulness of the English language, they opt for the same practice of communication. That is, they use English to get their meaning and intention across to the other people in this same International Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak 2009. Thus, the products of their encoded message in their mind are in the form of English speeches and messages, to the degree that they are mutually comprehensible in this Buddhist community, notwithstanding varied Buddhist sects. Certainly, it should also be noted that the ‘community’ here does not belong chiefly to any particular area in geographic terms as appeared in general sense. Rather, the community here should be ascribed to the cultural, religious community of Buddhism practice.

The last and, to me, most critical aspect of this genre is the perspectives shared by the persons of this community. They all are Buddhists and from the frequent occurrences of *good* and *great*, it can be implied that they psychologically perceive the conference as a great chance for seeing and learning from each other.

In addition, from the other dimension of the frequently occurring *may*—with altogether 28 out of 52 occurrences or 53.85% of all its occurrences—it can be asserted with reliability that a primary and common objective of the speeches and messages is the ‘goodwill’ that these Buddhist leaders would like to convey to the world. This is due to the fact that these 28 occurrences of the word are used in the ‘blessing’ expression; they are employed in a ‘prayer-like’ manner, as in:

May our actions be guided by compassion and a genuine desire to spread the teaching that promises (IND2)
 May the Triple Gems bless all of us here with peace, happiness and success in our righteous endeavours (TH10)
 the crisis, May we, and all beings, enjoy well-being, happiness, and peacefulness. (TW4)
 May the message of Buddha reach all beings throughout the universe. (US1)

Figure 7: A Concordance of *May* for Blessing

Conclusion and Research Implications

Just as this paper tries to put forward, English is now the language of the world in the way that it can be used to convey the meaning in various cultures and perspectives. In this way, the language becomes the world's property; no single nation can claim the sole possession of the language anymore. The bottom line here is therefore not only that one needs to have higher exposure to varieties of English so as to create mutual intelligibility and understanding of people of different cultures, but also that one needs to additionally try to compromise and facilitate other people's understanding and communication, at least to the degree that miscommunication does not happen.

From this research, it is clear that even though a group of people may come from different linguistic backgrounds, they can share certain similarities in their communication, especially when they recognize the same communicative genre and have their perspective and tradition in much the same way. In such a case, English seems to be the most promising lingua franca since they are open to change and adaptation (Bhatia, 1997).

Further research can focus on a similar genre of a different language. For example, an international conference where, say, Spanish or French is the medium of communication may provide a deeper insight into the ways people of different cultures use and adjust the same language to get their meaning across. Or else, a different genre where people of different cultures and linguistic backgrounds can be the focus of research insofar as other linguistic strategies or words and expressions for communication can be explored. The implications for the corpus-based approach as used in this paper are that a specialized corpus can be built up for research purposes with not so many pieces of data encompassed. Of course, in principle, the bigger the corpus is, the better. But when there are a limited number of data available, especially when they involve a special occasion like the ICUNDV of this paper, a specific, specialized corpus can still yield an interesting result to a certain degree.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to Asst. Prof. Phanintra Teeranon, Ph.D. from the School of Liberal Arts, Mae Fah Luang University for providing valuable comments for the first draft of this paper.

References

- Bhatia, V. K. (1997). Introduction: Genre analysis and world Englishes. *World Englishes*, 16 (3), 313-319.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a global language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, J. (2003). *World Englishes*. London: Routledge.

- Kachru, B. B. (1990). *The alchemy of English: The spread, functions, and models of non-native Englishes*. Urbana, US: University of Illinois.
- Kongsuwannakul, K. (2005). *Characteristic features in English acknowledgements written by Thai graduates: Indicators for Thai English* (Master's thesis). English department, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.
- Moran, P. R. (2001). *Teaching culture: Perspectives in practice*. Victoria, Australia: Heinle & Heinle.
- Tan, M. (2002). Introduction: Corpus linguistics in language description and language education. In M. Tan (ed.), *Corpus studies in language education*. Bangkok, Thailand: Institute for English Language Education (IELE) Press.

Appendix A: Word Frequency List of the Corpus

No.	Lexical item	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percentage
1	the	878	7.432	878	7.43
2	of	593	5.020	1471	12.45
3	and	483	4.089	1954	16.54
4	to	407	3.445	2361	19.99
5	in	233	1.972	2594	21.96
6	a	167	1.414	2761	23.37
7	is	144	1.219	2905	24.59
8	day	118	0.999	3023	25.59
9	for	114	0.965	3137	26.56
10	this	114	0.965	3251	27.52
11	vesak	111	0.940	3362	28.46
12	all	109	0.923	3471	29.38
13	that	104	0.880	3575	30.26
14	world	104	0.880	3679	31.14
15	buddhist	100	0.847	3779	31.99
16	as	87	0.736	3866	32.73
17	buddha	87	0.736	3953	33.46
18	it	87	0.736	4040	34.20
19	on	82	0.694	4122	34.89
20	i	77	0.652	4199	35.55
21	we	75	0.635	4274	36.18
22	be	72	0.609	4346	36.79
23	by	63	0.533	4409	37.32
24	our	60	0.508	4469	37.83
25	with	59	0.499	4528	38.33
26	peace	57	0.483	4585	38.81
27	from	56	0.474	4641	39.29
28	nations	56	0.474	4697	39.76
29	united	55	0.466	4752	40.23
30	may	52	0.440	4804	40.67

31	are	50	0.423	4854	41.09
32	which	49	0.415	4903	41.51
33	thailand	48	0.406	4951	41.91
34	human	40	0.339	4991	42.25
35	international	39	0.330	5030	42.58
36	us	38	0.322	5068	42.90
37	will	38	0.322	5106	43.22
38	can	37	0.313	5143	43.54
39	life	36	0.305	5179	43.84
40	have	35	0.296	5214	44.14
41	at	34	0.288	5248	44.43
42	buddhism	34	0.288	5282	44.71
43	message	34	0.288	5316	45.00
44	university	34	0.288	5350	45.29
45	buddhists	33	0.279	5383	45.57
46	beings	32	0.271	5415	45.84
47	good	31	0.262	5446	46.10
48	great	31	0.262	5477	46.36
49	my	30	0.254	5507	46.62
50	celebration	29	0.245	5536	46.86
51	global	29	0.245	5565	47.11
52	not	29	0.245	5594	47.35
53	an	27	0.229	5621	47.58
54	celebrations	27	0.229	5648	47.81
55	crisis	27	0.229	5675	48.04
56	has	27	0.229	5702	48.27
57	his	27	0.229	5729	48.50
58	lord	27	0.229	5756	48.73
59	s	25	0.212	5781	48.94
60	dharma	24	0.203	5805	49.14
61	or	24	0.203	5829	49.34
62	president	24	0.203	5853	49.55

63	but	23	0.195	5876	49.74
64	government	23	0.195	5899	49.94
65	more	23	0.195	5922	50.13
66	teachings	23	0.195	5945	50.33
67	their	23	0.195	5968	50.52
68	would	23	0.195	5991	50.72
69	its	22	0.186	6013	50.90
70	who	22	0.186	6035	51.09
71	wish	22	0.186	6057	51.27
72	also	21	0.178	6078	51.45
73	happines	21	0.178	6099	51.63
74	conference	20	0.169	6119	51.80
75	enlightenment	20	0.169	6139	51.97
76	event	20	0.169	6159	52.14

About the Author

Kunlaphak Kongsuwannakul

I graduated from Chulalongkorn University, majoring in Secondary Education (English and German) for my B.Ed. and in English for my M.A. My thesis is “Characteristic Features in English Acknowledgements Written by Thai Graduates: Indicators for Thai English,” which is a study under the theory of world Englishes. Therefore, my interests lie in characteristics of new Englishes, English language and teaching, and applied corpus linguistics. At present, I am working for Suranaree University of Technology.