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Publication date:
2006

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Tange, H., & Lauring, J. (2006). *What kind of English is that? Dilute and contained communciation in the global workplace.*

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What kind of English is that? Contained and dilute communication in the global workplace

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Abstract:

This paper looks at intercultural communication as a social and linguistic practice in the global workplace. Taking as our point of departure a series of qualitative research interviews with employees from fourteen Danish multicultural companies, we challenge the notion of English as a neutral, corporate medium. Previous research has demonstrated how linguistic barriers within an organisation affects cross-cultural knowledge sharing, communication, and social networks, which reduces international managers' capacity to control and coordinate activities in a global market. However, the empirical findings presented in this paper suggest that the confinement of knowledge to specific social groups is not the only communicative issue confronted by multicultural corporations, and that a general dilution of communication is equally important to communication management in multilingual environments.

Introduction

Research into cross-cultural management has demonstrated how language differences can create a difficult situation with great implications for cross-cultural communication (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch et al. 1999, Welch, Welch et al. 2005). The size of the problem increases with the number of languages co-existing within a corporation, and an obvious strategy has been to introduce a single corporate language in order to improve managers' capacity to control and coordinate international activities (Feely and Harzing 2003). The introduction of a company language has proved helpful to internal and external communication because it provides a common medium for all members of the organisation and thereby offers easy access to official information channels such as company reports or employee magazines. Yet it remains unclear to what extent this has also resulted in a more effective cross-cultural communication. In the current paper, we seek to answer this question by exploring possible connections between linguistic anthropology and cross-cultural management studies, taking as our point of departure an understanding of language and communication as essential parts of social interaction (Tajfel 1982, Bourdieu 1991). Hence, we shall attempt to explain the effect of language diversity on interpersonal communication in

international business environments by presenting a qualitative study of linguistic and communicative practice in fourteen Danish multicultural and multilingual organisations.

Language in the global organisation

The notion of multilingualism implies a co-existence of more than one language within the same organisation or society. In this context, “language” refers to national languages (i. e. English or Danish) and to the specific codes and registers adopted by social and/or professional groups (Hymes 1967, Morgan 2004). Within a speech community defined on the basis of a linguistic standard (i. e. a national or corporate language), one is thus likely to encounter actual multilingualism since individual members adopt specific codes to express alternative social and/or cultural identities (Silverstein 1998). The scale of multilingualism increases in a multinational environment. To facilitate easy information transfer, individuals may therefore have to employ a foreign language, which influences their range of available registers and codes. This has consequences for corporate communication at the organisational as well as the individual level.

At the organisational level, the nature of multilingualism depends on our perception of language. If, on the one hand, we adopt a meta-linguistic view of language as a standardized system based on the idea of a national speech community (Kroskrity 2004), multilingualism suggests a co-existence of competing national languages within the same corporation or society. From this perspective, linguistic barriers run parallel with national divides, which reduces the significance of professional and social codes within the national speech community. As a result, language management – in the form of a common, corporate code – becomes a practical solution, with the meta-language of English overriding rival speech communities based on employees’ native languages. This perception of the organisation as a single speech community does not reflect observed linguistic practice, however (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch et al. 1999). On the contrary, individuals resist processes of language standardisation, which represents a global challenge to the local knowledge, status, and values of professional and/or social groups (Morgan 2004, Kroskrity 2004). Arguably, the adoption of a common language does not remove linguistic barriers within a corporation, but merely shifts the problem down one level from international to inter-group and/or interpersonal relations.

At the individual level, multilingualism affects members’ access to the predominant codes and registers within an organisation (Aghad 2004, Woolard 2004). Although linguistic standardisation does not imply a complete take-over by the international business language of

English, new speech varieties and repertoires are adopted to fulfil certain “lingua franca functions” (Blommaert 2003: 609), which has implications for individual members whose social status and influence are determined by their awareness of such codes. At the institutional level, this is relatively unproblematic since communication is mostly formal in character and undertaken in the jargons of specific professional communities (Keating and Egbert 2004). At the everyday level, on the other hand, language users find themselves confined to a relatively limited repertoire of linguistic registers, often catering for professional exchanges rather than gossip or small talk. In order not to expose their linguistic weaknesses, interlocutors may choose to withdraw from informal interaction with their colleagues, which is how the problem of “dilute” communication emerges.

In short, an effective management of communication and knowledge sharing demands an understanding of the communicative challenges faced by employees when operating in a multilingual environment. We thus need to add to the discussion of language management a social dimension that explains how actual language usage can unite and divide a diverse workforce. In consequence, we propose two barriers that the interrelationship between language and social structure impose on communication in multilingual organisations: contained communication and dilute communication.

Methodology

The empirical foundation of our research is constituted by data collected in an exploratory qualitative study of fourteen Danish multicultural companies. The selection of the companies was based on their percentage of employees with a national background other than Danish, and they represent some of the most culturally and linguistically diverse organisations in Denmark. All companies had English as their official corporate language, which is common in Denmark because of the relatively limited size of the population and the growing need for Danish businesses to engage in international activities. Only a small percentage of the employees spoke English as their first language, however, which makes knowledge of the Danish language important to the facilitation of communication flows across the organisation.

The aim of our research was to provide a general picture of communication and language usage, and we therefore opted for a broad range of organisations rather than an in-depth study of one or two sites. In cooperation with organisational gatekeepers (Bernard 1995), we identified key informants, carrying out a total of eighty-two interviews with managers and employees. Forty-three of the interviewees were Danish, while thirty-nine represented other nationalities, and interviews

were performed in Danish as well as in English. However, with a single exception, all English interviews were conducted with non-native speakers.

The interviews took the form of a dialogue between the researchers and the informants, in the course of which questions were asked about the effects of cultural diversity on communication and knowledge sharing (Bernard 1995). The purpose was to invite informants to describe specific situations where they found that linguistic and/or cultural diversity had affected their daily working routines. During the practical stage of the fieldwork, data analysis was intertwined with the collection of information in order to allow for the continuous integration of new themes and ideas into the interview guide (Spradley 1980; Miles and Huberman 1994). Statements and observations were organized thematically in taxonomy trees (Spradley 1980; Bernard 1995), and the main topics emerging from this analysis were cross-cultural communication, language usage, cross-cultural knowledge sharing, and the developmental potential of cross-cultural interaction.

Communicative practice in multilingual settings

Management literature puts forward cultural diversity as an important source of knowledge to be utilized in internationalisation strategies, marketing, decision-making, and the development of organisational networks (Cox and Blake 1991; Thomas and Ely 1996). Similarly, multilingualism is often perceived to be a strength to international business (Charles and Marschan-Piekkari 2002; Dhir and Goke-Pariola 2002), which also comes across in the interview data. Accordingly, informants claim language diversity is an asset to their corporation, and that the choice of a common language presents the Danish companies with a number of advantages: “It gives you hair on your chest, and you get used to writing in English”.

Informants’ emphasis on the positive aspects of linguistic internationalisation reflects a tendency among Danish multicultural organisations to request that employees perform routine tasks in English. In part, this can be ascribed to the relatively small size of the country, which means that any kind of international activity demands the acquisition of a new language. Yet one may encounter a belief among the population that Danes have a special capacity for the learning of foreign languages in general and English in particular. This makes it difficult for non-professional language users to admit to language weaknesses, preferring alternative communicative strategies that enable them to protect or even strengthen their social position within the organisation (Park et al. 1996). One possible result of this is the emergence of a competition between the corporate

medium of English and Danish as the local language, which directly or indirectly, motivates the practices of contained and dilute communication.

Contained communication

Although a shortage of language skills is frequently identified as a negative factor in cross-cultural communication, the ability to speak a second or foreign language does not necessarily lead to a more successful communication (i. e. Marschan-Piekkari, Welch et al. 1999). In addition to variation with regard to individual member's fluency, one encounters differences arising from employees' membership of alternate speech communities (Risager 2006), and such discrepancies may initiate a social dynamic of cultural boundary creation and social categorisation (e.g. Barth 1971; Jenkins 1997). Hence, as Bourdieu observes (1991), one needs to recognise language as an object of social inclusion and exclusion strategies, determining to what extent members are involved in or become marginalized from communication.

The interviews suggest a connection between language usage and social categorisation. Although all appear to be competent English speakers, most informants express a certain comfort in speaking their native language. When encountering a problem, they will therefore consult someone belonging to their own speech community rather than an expert from a rival language group, which underlines the importance of language to social group formation. In addition, foreign employees accuse home country nationals of exercising exclusive behaviour because of their tendency to stay together in Danish-speaking groups, which marginalises the members of other speech communities:

What happens mostly is that people would get together and talk Danish. If you do not, then you will not be invited. You will not be put in the active discussion. It is both in society and work. It is the social things that are the problem. It is very hard to become part of it. Like outside the company. If you start a conversation in English, people cut you short (Italian employee).

This kind of boundary creation is particularly important in relation to employees' integration into the workplace where non-Danish speakers may find it difficult to participate in social events. One Dutch employee describes how, initially, allowances are made for non-natives, but after a while, Danish employees expect colleagues who want to engage in social activities, to learn Danish. Those who do not appear to make the effort, are categorised as unwilling to integrate with the locals, which might result in their exclusion from informal networks:

The language is important. I don't think the technical side is a big problem. But if you don't know the language you get put in a box. Some of my colleagues are put in a box. If I say no to learning or speaking Danish the effect would be that I would be isolated because I am living here. If I were only visiting, it would be different.

In spite of the existence of English as a common language, the social aspects of language diversity appear to create internal boundaries that affect the behaviour of members and thereby undermine the effectiveness of corporate communication. Yet this is not the only problem endured by non-Danish informants, who might find themselves shut out from social interaction because this is undertaken in Danish. A Canadian employee narrates how one afternoon she was confronted by a group of colleagues who asked her why she has not joined them for a beer. She answered that she had not been invited, and they retorted: "but we were standing here speaking loudly and clearly about going... but it might not have been the right language". She concludes from this that non-Danish speakers risk developing weaker social ties to their peers, which can have a negative influence on their status and opportunities within the organisation:

It is not just personal stuff you miss out on but business relations too. If something is going on, if nobody directly tells you, you are not going to know. I would say yes, you can work here without speaking any Danish. You can do your job. But all the learning and what is going of around you, you would miss.

A marginalisation of non-natives deriving from language difference appears to be a common social dynamic in multilingual organisations, generating a sense of isolation from information processes and decision making (Welch, Welch et al. 2005). Hence, our interviews have uncovered a "containment" of communication and information networks to particular national, linguistic, or professional communities, supporting the conclusions drawn in previous research on cross-cultural communication and international management (e.g. Tajfel 1982).

Dilute communication

The phenomenon of dilute communication arises from a combination of linguistic inadequacies and employee uncertainty. Speakers of a second or foreign language do not have access to the same range of linguistic registers as native speakers, and this has implications for their ability to participate fully in social exchanges. Accordingly, Danish international managers and employees may find that they master a very sophisticated technical and/or professional vocabulary and yet are unable to converse in English about private or social matters. Fearing that such linguistic

weaknesses reflect badly on other employees' perception of their professional competence, they choose to abstain from informal communication, and this withdrawal from social interaction, small talk, and gossiping has consequences for information networks and knowledge transfers within the multicultural organisation. For in spite of its negative connotations, gossiping constitutes an important social practice, which contributes to the maintenance of social norms, expresses social roles, and allows for the development of new relationships (Emler 2001). Similarly, informal exchanges represent a mutual effort on behalf of the participants to establish a common, social and/or cultural platform, providing for social and professional knowledge sharing (Keating and Egbert 2004, Slugotski and Hilton 2001). A company, which indirectly restricts members' access to the registers employed in small talk and gossiping by means of a standardized, corporate language, may thus witness a decreased interaction between individuals and groups, which has a negative impact on the speed and quality of knowledge transfers.

A Danish manager describes the situation in a company that has established an international language environment by using English for everyday communication. Although communication is conducted in a common language, his impression is that a lot of information simply disappears:

There are a number Danes who have actually left the organisation because they find it is no longer the same place to work. There is no longer the same consensus. The culture has been shaken. I don't know if this is because of the market or because the company has grown or because of the foreigners. It may have something to do with the joking and the way we communicate - like if you do it like this, then it means that. Like when I don't say hi to anyone one morning, this means that I need to be let alone the first couple of hours. The foreigners don't get that.

Similarly, Danish managers observe how foreign nationals might manage everyday tasks without any knowledge of Danish, and yet miss out on "all the social stuff and all the small-talk across the lunch table". Non-natives characterise their conversations as "less thick" or detailed, which may be due to the disappearance of jokes and sarcasms from interpersonal exchanges. As a result, corporate communication becomes more formal and task-oriented, but as a Canadian employee observes, this does not necessarily lead to a more efficient transmission of messages:

One problem, though, is that if people tell you something, you often get a too neat version. You can't really function in this country without speaking and reading some Danish. We had a colleague from Canada who spoke only English and I could hear that when people talked to her, it always came out in a too neat version (Canadian employee).

The formalisation of communication poses a threat to the coherence and integration of the organisation. As one Danish informant puts it: “The meetings become more formal when conducted in English rather than Danish. There is less ping-pong across the table - less informal talking. That is a bit negative. It can be good to have the informal talk because it strengthens the group socially”. When using a second or foreign language, employees thus find it difficult to uphold the same level of communication, and, directly or indirectly, this has a negative impact on the informal exchange of ideas and viewpoints. To sum up, our data show that the adoption of a common language presents a possible obstacle to internal knowledge sharing and information transfer, prompting members to abstain from social interactions that request their use of a second or foreign language.

Conclusion and implications

The present study has identified two barriers to communication arising from the social use of language in Danish multicultural organisations. As the interviews show, linguistic diversity may encourage the social practices of dilute or contained communication, which disrupt information transfers and result in a disorganized use of human resources. The implications are that social interaction creates barriers for cross-cultural communication, and that the implementation of a common language does not necessarily improve knowledge sharing across linguistic and/or cultural boundaries.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasise to what extent the effectiveness of a corporate language policy reflects individual members’ willingness to engage in social interaction with colleagues from other national and/or professional speech communities. Accordingly, managers will need to ensure that employees have common interests as well as a common language, which requests a focus on social networks, informal communication and knowledge flows, as well as members’ openness to exchanges in a second or foreign language.

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