English Matters in the Multilingual Reality of Multinational Companies

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English matters in the multilingual reality of multinational companies (MNC)

1. English in international management (IM) research

2. English in international business communication (IBC) research

3. Ambiguity of the notion of ‘English’ in MNCs
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English in international management (IM) research:

‘English’ as corporate language in MNCs
Language = a system/pre-existing entity

Chinese

Finnish

Danish

English

Spanish

Swedish
1. ‘English’ as corporate language in IM research

- Since the 1990s, ‘language-sensitive research stream’ emerging

- Language seen to impact inter-unit communication and knowledge sharing, organizational structure, power relations

- Need for a ‘corporate language’ to manage the multilingual organization, English is the language typically selected for the role

- Data: surveys and interviews

- Recently, influences from sociolinguistics visible in conceptualization of language

(e.g. Marschan et al. 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999a; Feely & Harzing 2003; Kassis-Henderson 2005; Luo & Shenkar 2006; Mäkelä et al. 2007; Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman 2007; Piekkari & Tietze 2011; Brannen & Doz 2012; Peltokorpi & Vaara 2014; Brannen et al. 2014; Janssens & Steyaert 2014)
English as a system – a learner’s view

The speaker/writer aims to…

- Imitate native speaker (NS) discourse

Successful interactions require…

- NS-like language skills

Non-native speakers are seen as…

- ‘Learners’

Main source of problems…

- Inadequate language skills

’Culture’ understood as…

- National cultures of NSs

’English’ is owned by…

- Its native speakers

Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen (2013)
English
(as a linguistic system)
English?

- English as Native language – native speakers
- English as Foreign language – learners of English
- English as a World language – speakers of English varieties

= a linguistic system

But what about non-native (NNS) speakers…

- English as Lingua Franca (ELF) – used by NNSs
- English as Business Lingua Franca (BELF) – used in the business domain

= ??
International Business Communication (IBC) research:

‘English’ as corporate language in MNCs
’English’ as a social practice/resource

Swedish

English as business lingua franca (BELF)

Finnish

English

Danish
2. ’English’ as corporate language in IBC research

• Focus on interaction and discourse of ’English’ users in MNCs

• Data: authentic discourse data (emails, meetings)

• Conceptualization of English as business lingua franca (BELF) used in everyday workplace communication
B ELF = Business ELF
(Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005)

• used as a shared resource among speakers of different mother tongues (incl. NSs & NNSs) in global business contexts

• used by business professionals at work to do their work

• used both in-house and with partners in interpersonal communication

• reflects the various cultural backgrounds of its speakers
English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF)

The speaker/writer aims to...

Successful interactions require...

NNSs are seen as...

Main source of problems...

’Culture’ understood as...

’English’ is owned by...

• Get the job done & create rapport (in a specific situation)
• Business communication skills & strategic (communication) skills
• Communicators in their own right
• Inadequate communication skills
• Business community cultures & individual cultural backgrounds
• Nobody or everybody

(Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013)
’Successful’ BELF communication

• Survey with around 1000 and interviews with 27 internationally operating business professionals from European companies
• Approximately 40% Finnish speakers

(e.g. Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2010; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanrantta, 2012)
Communication with native / non-native English speakers

- Native English speakers (1)
- Non-native English speakers (2)
Components of BELF competence

- Business-specific vocabulary (3)
- Wide general vocabulary (1)
- Grammatical correctness (2)
‘Success factors’ in BELF communication

1. Business facts & content – making sure it’s right!
2. Intercultural awareness & ’politeness’
3. Organization & ’readability’ of text

It gets the job done & creates rapport!
(a) Business facts & content – making sure it’s right ….

I always check and double-check.

I need to follow up and confirm in writing – I don’t need to do that when working in Finnish.
(b) Intercultural awareness & 'politeness'
... what Finns said

First you say something nice, then you give the facts, and then you close by saying something nice again.

You should just behave in a non-natural way and realize that it works!
(c) Organization & ’readability’ of text

- Key information front-loaded
- Logical progression & organization
- Clear and explicit
- Brief and ‘simple’
  (=without complicated words & structures)
Model of Global Communicative Competence in business context

(Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011)
3
Ambiguity of the notion of ‘English’ in MNCs
A quotation from a Finnish business professional working for an MNC:

Everyday English with my colleagues is just work but… official English documentation from headquarters is often difficult … often I just ignore it and don’t read it at all…
Two different ‘Englishes’ in MNCs
## ’English’ in MNCs
(Kankaanranta et al., 2015)

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<th>Contextual differences</th>
<th>’Official’ English</th>
<th>’Working language’ BELF</th>
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"The limits of my language are the limits of my world"

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)
Selected references 1/2

Selected references 2/2