



Aalto University
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English Matters in the Multilingual Reality of Multinational Companies

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NEaT ry & ARKADIA International Bookshop

20 April 2016



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

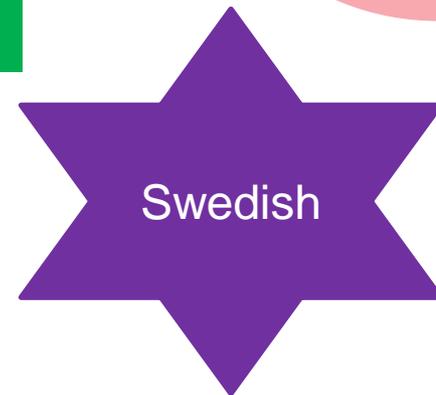
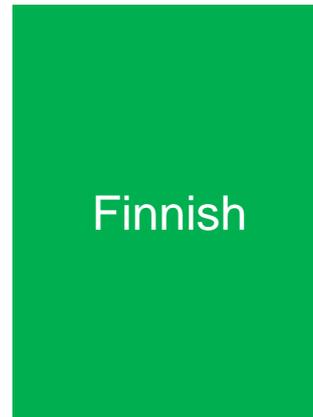
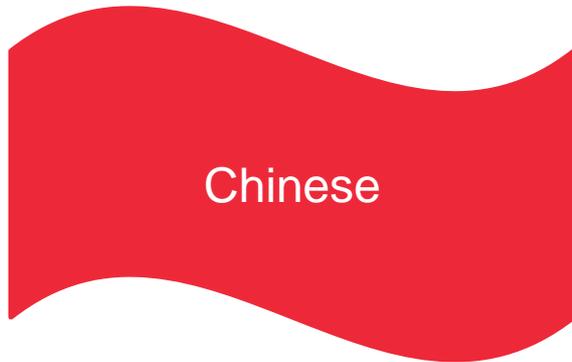
1. English in international management (IM) research
2. English in international business communication (IBC) research
3. Ambiguity of the notion of 'English' in MNCs

1

English in international management (IM) research:

'English' as corporate language in MNCs

Language = a system/pre-existing entity



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...

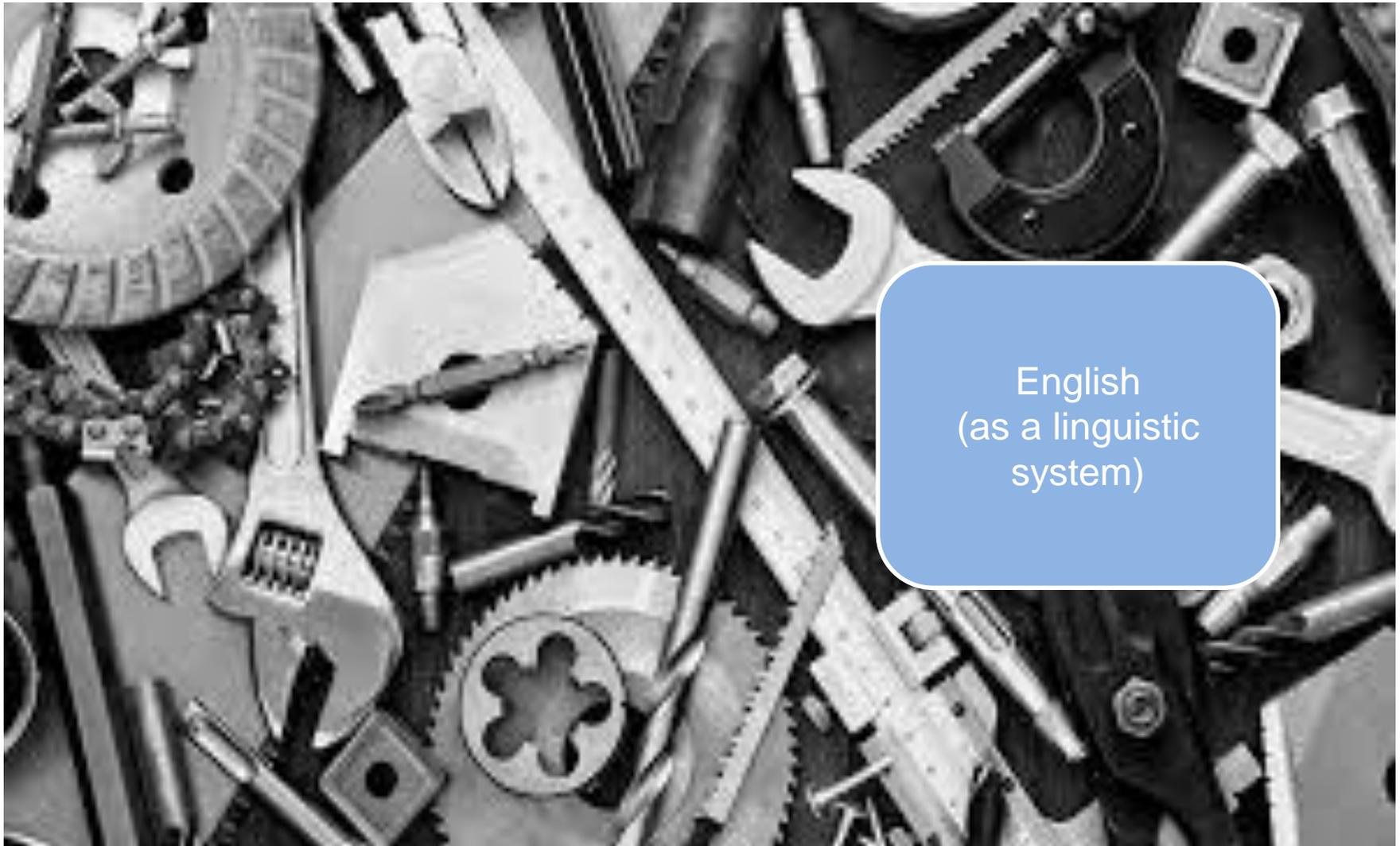
- Inadequate language skills

'Culture' understood as...

- National cultures of NSs

'English' is owned by...

- Its native speakers



English
(as a linguistic
system)

English?

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

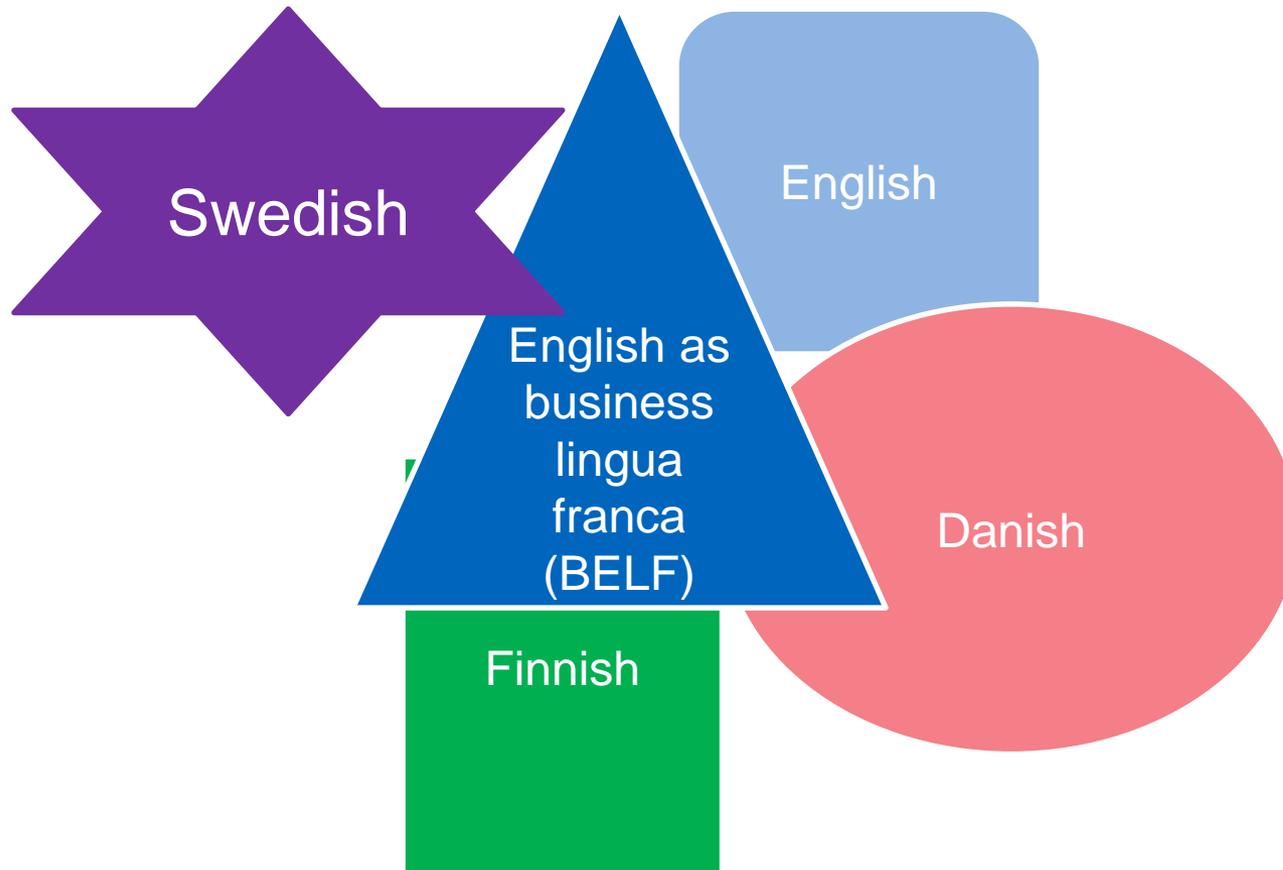
 = ? ?

2

International Business Communication (IBC) research:

'English' as corporate language in MNCs

'English' as a social practice/resource

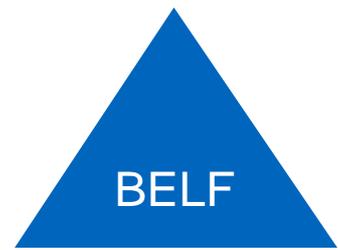


2. 'English' as corporate language in IBC research

- 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

BELF = 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...

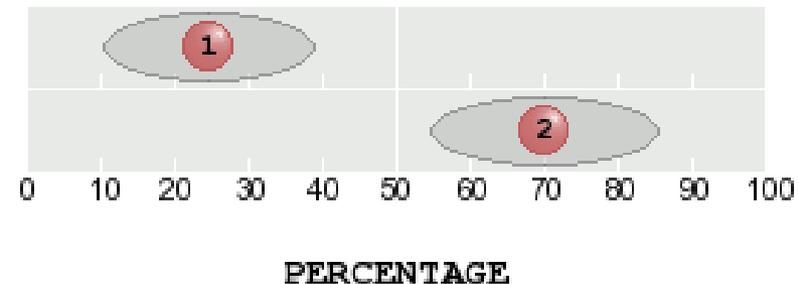
- Get the job done & create rapport (in a specific situation)
- Business communication skills & strategic (communication) skills
- Communicators in their own right
- Inadequate communication skills
- Business community cultures & individual cultural backgrounds
- Nobody or everybody

'Successful' BELF communication

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

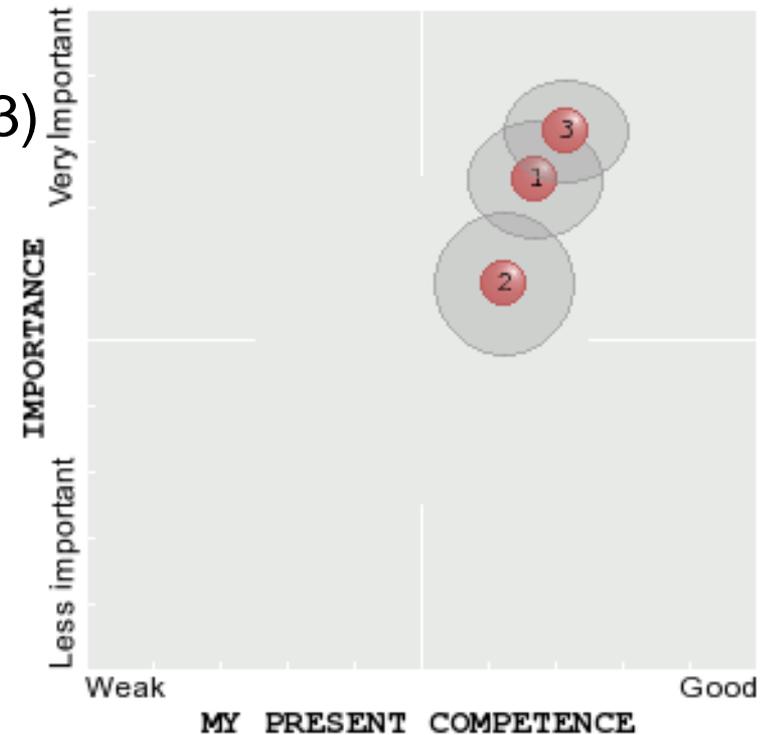
Communication with native / non-native English speakers

- 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.

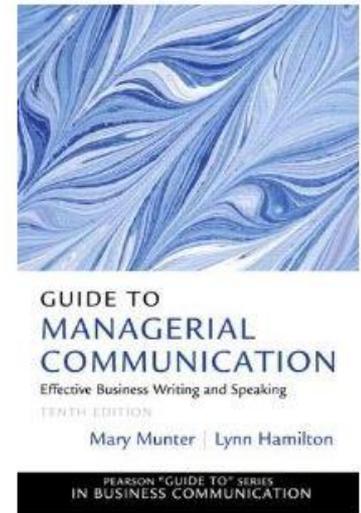
(b) Intercultural awareness & 'politeness' ... what Finns said

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

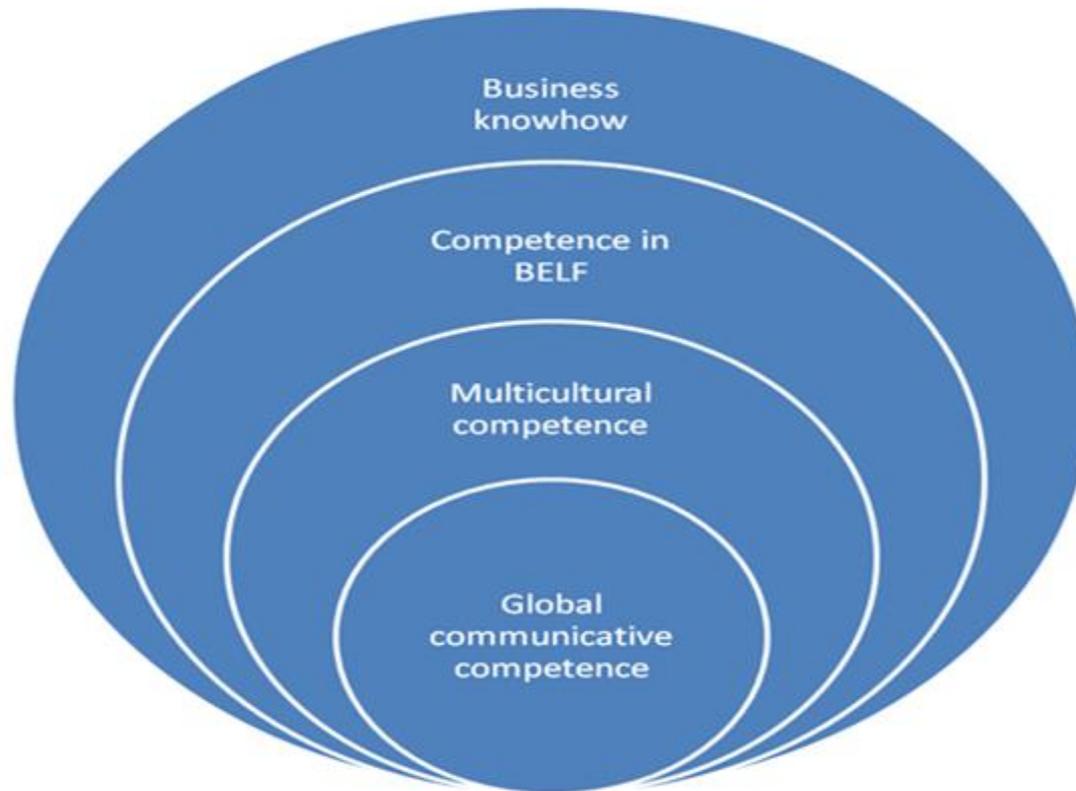
You should just behave in a non-natural way and realize that it works!

(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



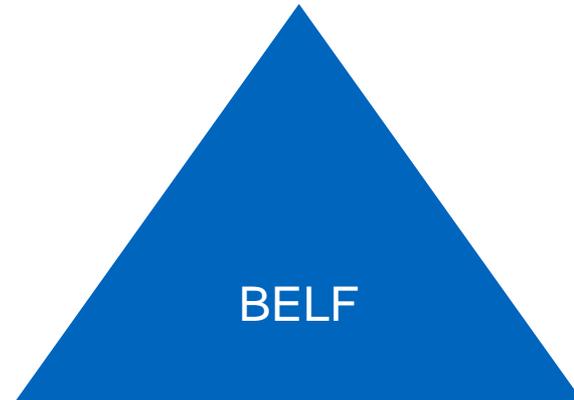
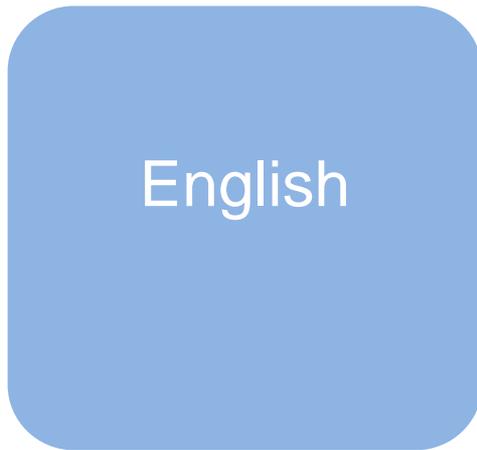
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Ambiguity of the notion of 'English' in MNCs

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)

Contextual differences	'Official' English	'Working language' BELF
Level	Corporate (macro) level: corporate communication	Individual (micro) level: interpersonal communication
Sphere, Voice	Public, corporate – 'official'	Private, individual
Examples of use	External and internal corporate communication genres (e.g. intranet, website, annual report, public presentations)	Email, team meetings, chats at the coffee machine
Rationale	Decision made by management, or not	Pragmatic choice among practitioners in a specific situation
Competence	Intertwined with communication knowledge and skills and/or with native speakers?	Intertwined with business knowhow and multicultural competence
Epistemic authority	Corporate Communication professionals and/or native speakers?	Inherently shared among non-native speakers



”The limits of my language are the limits of my world”

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)

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