

## **Language in multilingual organizations: Power, policies and politics**

### INTRODUCTION

Regardless of employees' position in the organizational hierarchy, their job tasks, location, background and career goals, they all have one thing in common; they need to communicate and they do so through the use of language. A company's language policy affects everyone who works or will work for that company (Thomas, 2008). It is possibly the most wide-ranging policy that any corporation can implement, and it does not come without consequences.

Since the late 1990s (see Marschan, Welch & Welch, 1997), numerous empirical studies have demonstrated the importance of language in and for international business activities. Language has gone from being a relatively narrow topic in international business research, to one which is widely accepted as a critical component when studying companies and organizations that operate internationally (Brannen, Piekkari & Tietze, 2014; Tenzer, Terjesen & Harzing, 2017).

This book chapter focuses on power struggles around language use in multilingual organizations, particularly multinational corporations (MNCs). By drawing on theory and empirical evidence from existing language-sensitive research in international business and management, the chapter starts by examining the power of language, and the ways in which language can be misused in organizational contexts. The chapter then critically examines the relationship between language policies and language practices, with a particular focus on how managerial attempts to regulate employees' language practices can lead to discrepancies between *de jure* and *de facto* language policies. The chapter ends with a discussion on how language practices at the front-line level feeds into macro level politics concerning language use, and vice versa.

### THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

In order to understand the power dynamics associated with language, it is crucial to first understand why language gives power. Let's go back to the very beginning; the very beginning of human communication. Although there is no agreement in the literature as to when humans first started talking to each other – estimates range from 2 million years to 50,000 years ago (Balter, 2005) – it is likely that our ancestors did not all speak the same language, to the extent that we use the term 'language' to refer to our ancestors' form of communication.

As stated by Calvet (1998, p. 15), the world has been multilingual ever since humans first started communicating with one another. Even the most basic, rudimentary use of language could distinguish one group of people from another; their different linguistic codes implied that they were in semiological conflict with each other. Ever since the invention of language, its use has been associated with power, prestige, ability to obtain and act on knowledge, negotiations over status,

reputation and identity. In essence, the evolution of language is a story of power. It is also a story of powerlessness, because wherever there are people with power, there will always be people with less power, or no power at all. Thus, the story is defined by the relationship between the powerful and the powerless.

In the words of Bourdieu (1991), we can think of linguistic exchange as a form of economic exchange. The exchange is established between a producer of linguistic capital – an aspect of symbolic power that has become routinized in social life (ibid., p. 23) – and a consumer of linguistic capital, who is capable of procuring the symbolic good (ibid., p. 66). By following this argument, power can be defined based on unequal distribution of linguistic capital (ibid., p. 57). In other words, some people have more linguistic capital than others, and are therefore able to spend their capital on symbolic products and services that less affluent people cannot afford. As a result, people's linguistic capital can determine their position in the wider society of which they are a part. It can also prevent people from being part of certain societies, or in other ways control who gets to be part of a society.

Language can both divide and unite people. It can create and maintain group boundaries, and it can determine who we think of as 'insiders' or 'outsiders' (Bourdieu, 1991; Harzing & Feely, 2008). We recognize people who speak like us and we think of them as one of us, in the same way that we reject people who speak differently as not being one of us (Calvet, 1998, p. 66). On a symbolic level, language can be seen as a mechanism of social inclusion and exclusion. But there is also a very practical side to language. Its communicative function means that it can serve as an effective mechanism of discrimination, by excluding certain people or groups of people from access to information (Sanden, 2020; Tietze, Cohen & Musson, 2003).

When discussing why language yields power, it is hard to avoid mentioning the different dimensions or perspectives that language entails. It is clear that language is a medium of communication that enables exchange of information between interlocutors. This can be referred to as the instrumental dimension of language. Equally important is the expressive or symbolic dimension of language, as language serves as a bearer of identity, belonging and social capital (Kraus, 2008, pp. 78–80). In this way, language constitutes a compound, value-laden marker of cultural and social identity (Harzing & Feely, 2008; Hinds, Neeley, & Cramton, 2014), while at the same time, presenting itself in a way that Welch, Welch and Piekkari (2005, p. 11) label 'the brutal simplicity of language as a potential barrier to communication', meaning; if people are unable to understand each other 'simply' because they cannot find a common language to communicate in, the communicative function of language has little value. Both dimensions of language – i.e. the instrumental and expressive – contain a number of power-related questions. Where the instrumental dimension of language concerns who gets to know what, when and how, the expressive dimension can lead to more philosophical discussions about identity and belonging.

In a corporate context, the instrumental dimension of language will often come across as more obvious and profound than the expressive dimension, due to the nature of workplace communication.

That does not mean that issues related to employees' professional identity are less important than meaningful interactions. In fact, the two dimensions of language are often interrelated, and the extent to which employees are able to effectively communicate with each other can determine how they feel about themselves in a work situation (Neeley, 2013). However, any successful collaboration between employees is dependent on their ability to communicate in a common language. For this reason, language practices in business organizations clearly intersect with economic motives. The current economic climate increases the importance of language for business organizations. In contrast to the 'old economy', which is typically described as a labor-intensive economy striving to achieve maximum production effectiveness, the 'new economy' is characterized by information-driven organizations and global networks (Duchêne & Heller, 2012). Rather than focusing on the means and methods of production, the new economy is a knowledge-based economy, built up around accessibility and usability of information (Dhir, 2005).

Duchêne (2009) discusses how the new economy ultimately places language at the forefront of a corporation's business activities. For a start, communication and exchange of information is a key factor in the new economic landscape. For companies operating within a service-based industry, information is often part of the service that they deliver to their customers, which means that language skills become a selling point and a part of the end product. The characteristics of the new economy mean that companies often operate on the global market, across national and linguistic borders. As a result, any company with international aspirations will be faced with the multilingual reality of international business at some point, either through their external communication practices, or by attracting foreign professionals with multiple linguistic backgrounds (Piekkari, Welch & Welch, 2014). Multilingualism has become the new norm of the new economy.

## MISUSE OF LANGUAGE

Just as there are several reasons as to why language gives power, there are several ways in which the power of language can be misused. For one thing, the instrumental dimension of language as a medium of communication entails that language skills can be used to obtain access to information. A corporate language policy that regulates the company's language of reporting will to some extent also determine who gets to benefit from easy access to corporate documentation (Thomas, 2008).

Language-skilled employees often take on a role as 'language nodes', either as part of, or in addition to, their normal job tasks (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch, 1999). Language nodes are employees who function as communication channels for people who otherwise would have problems understanding each other, for example in headquarters-subsidiary communication. Bilingual expatriates, who are assigned to work at a foreign subsidiary and report back to the corporate headquarters, can for example serve as an important link between the headquarters and the subsidiary in which they work (Barner-Rasmussen & Björklund, 2005; see also Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014). Once these employees return to the headquarters, they may be able to take on an intermediate role as

repatriates if they have acquired language skills in the host-country during their foreign assignment. The same goes for inpatriates, who are foreign employees, e.g. from one of the company's international subsidiaries, that have been assigned into the domestic management (Feely & Harzing, 2003).

Although language nodes often perform an important role as the main communication channel between the headquarters and its network of subsidiaries, this role puts the language nodes in a potentially powerful position. If employees with certain language skills choose to filter, distort or withhold information to other colleagues without the same language skills, they are acting as 'gatekeepers' of information (Marschan et al., 1997; see also Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002). Gatekeeping behavior is particularly problematic if the gatekeeper is the only person who can communicate corporate information to another group of employees, for example subsidiary staff. As such, relying on language nodes as a channel for disseminating corporate information may lead to abuse of power at the subsidiary level (Welch, Welch & Piekkari, 2001).

This is exactly what Peltokorpi and Vaara (2014) found in their study on the role of language-sensitive recruitment for knowledge transfer in MNCs. In this case, newly recruited host country national employees were acting as language nodes in the MNCs' subsidiaries due to their English language skills. As English skills were limited at the subsidiaries, they were able to promote or impede knowledge transfer across language boundaries, for example by controlling the information transferred from the subsidiary to the headquarters as well as other MNC units. This tendency was particularly evident in small and newly established subsidiaries, as the language nodes could easier bypass hierarchies and thereby transfer, develop, and share information with colleagues in other parts of the MNC network.

Peltokorpi and Vaara's (2014) study reveal how communication through language nodes can have counterproductive effects on intra-organizational knowledge transfer. Yet, the consequences of relying on employees with certain language skills can have more wide-ranging implications for the organization overall, as demonstrated by Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999). In their pioneering study on the impact of language on structure, power and communication in a Finnish MNC, Kone Elevators, Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999) found that communication and collaboration among employees were largely dependent on employees' language preferences. In fact, a new organizational structure appeared on the basis of individual language skills, because employees formed clusters with other speakers of their native language. Consequently, a new 'shadow structure' emerged from the various language clusters and individuals who were acting as language nodes in the organization. The existence of this shadow structure demonstrates the power of language to the extent that it not only influences the internal communicative environment, but actually challenges the functioning of the official chain of command and formal communication lines.

Even if shadow structures do not appear on the basis of language use in multilingual organizations, the existence of multiple languages will in itself have an effect on power relationships

in the organization. Harzing and Feely (2008) discuss how the language barrier in MNCs can lead to a power-authority distortion, especially for parent companies located in countries with less widely spoken languages. Their two coupled vicious cycles model illustrates how lack of a common language between headquarters and subsidiary influences the way in which MNCs manage their subsidiary operations. Communication problems such as loss of rhetorical skills and misunderstandings can lead to uncertainty, anxiety and mistrust between the headquarters and its subsidiary. As a result, attitudes harden, group identities polarize and the risk of conflict intensifies. This increases separation between the headquarters and subsidiary, which again renders communication more formal and guarded. Both headquarters and subsidiary are challenged by their inability to communicate effectively with the other part, and the headquarters-subsidiary relationship is affected in terms of strategic decision-making, organization and personnel selection, global integration strategies, and autonomy and control procedures.

While much of the existing language-sensitive literature in international business focuses on how language affects the relationship between employees and organizational units, it is clear that language can also affect potential and future employees and their role in the organizational hierarchy. Piekkari et al. (2005; see also Piekkari, 2008) discuss how career paths are prone to being language-dependent. On the one hand, language skills may advance individual career development and make it easier to climb the corporate ladder, if the person possesses the right language skills. Knowing a foreign language is an asset that adds to a person's career capital (Terjesen, 2005). On the other hand, lack of language skills can severely limit career opportunities, hamper career advancement, or steer individuals' career paths in a different direction. In both cases, language skills may have broad career implications by shaping, steering or diverting career paths.

Companies' language policy initiatives are inevitably an important piece of this puzzle. The implementation of a common corporate language can act as a glass-ceiling, and prevent promising individuals from advancing in the organization. Piekkari (2008) argues that the top management may not be able to observe this effect, as they are likely to be competent in the common corporate language or other key languages commonly used within the firm. As such, the glass-ceiling effect is out of sight for the company's top echelons, and individuals without the necessary language skills remain effete.

#### LANGUAGE POLICIES IN MULTILINGUAL ORGANIZATIONS: DE JURE VS. DE FACTO

Although multilingualism in many cases is a practical necessity for multinational companies (Duchêne, 2009), there is often a need to streamline communication and decide on some common language practices among linguistically diverse employees. The dominance of English as the global lingua franca means that English often is seen as the most prevalent solution for efficient internal communication (Tietze, 2010).

It is now common practice for MNCs to implement English language policies in order to facilitate smoother and faster exchange of information within the multilingual organization (Neeley 2017; Nurmi & Koroma, 2020). Language policies can be formalized through official language policy documents, or they can be left unstated, and exist as a common understanding about language use in the organization, so called non-formalized policies (Sanden & Kankaanranta, 2018). Regardless of what form they come in, language policies usually contain some element of control or regulation, for example by establishing English as a common corporate language, or by explicitly stating what language or languages are to be used in what situations (Baldauf, 2006).

As with any corporate policy, there is always a risk that employees resist or ignore the policy initiative. If employees disregard the content of a company's language policy to the extent that the policy is not fully implemented in practice, there will be a discrepancy between *de jure* and *de facto* language policy. Previous empirical studies suggest that the official language policy may be undermined for several different reasons, for example due to high workload or time pressure (Sanden & Lønsmann, 2018), or because of more cunning reasons, as deliberate acts of power (Logemann & Piekkari (2015).

A study conducted by Sanden and Lønsmann (2018) in Scandinavian MNCs, found that the companies' monolingual English language policies were inconsistent with the multilingual reality of front-line employees. The three companies included in the study had all implemented English as the common corporate language, but the qualitative interviews with employees revealed that they had to deal with a large number of different languages on an everyday basis. As a result, employees found it necessary to use their 'discretionary power' – a term that refers to employees' ability to make a choice among possible courses of action and inaction (Davis, 1969; see also Lipsky, 2010) – to divert from the companies' English language policies. In this way, employees exercised their discretionary power in order to get their job done.

In other cases, as in the study conducted by Logemann and Piekkari (2015), findings revealed that language can be used deliberately to exercise power. Logemann and Piekkari (2015) investigated headquarters-subsidary interactions in a European MNC where the implementation of English as a common corporate language resulted in a big change in language and communication practices, largely at the expense of other European languages. Their observations show that any process of communication can be sensitive to the power of language. In this particular case, employees both at headquarters and in the subsidiary made use of language and translation to exercise power over meanings. Where the corporate headquarters used their power to communicate corporate mindsets and codes of practice, subsidiary managers used language and translation to resist control from headquarters, for example through local interpretation of standardized rules and norms. At both ends, translation became a political act that led to shifting power positions.

Several other studies demonstrate that the introduction of a corporate language policy often raises a number of issues related to power and powerlessness (Ehrenreich, 2010, Fredriksson, Barner-

Rasmussen & Piekkari, 2006; Vaara et al., 2005). Discrepancies between de jure and de facto language policy can for example occur if employees have different interpretations and expectations of what the language policy actually entails, as observed by Fredriksson et al. (2006) in the German manufacturing company Siemens. In Ehrenreich's (2010) study of another German company, English was seen as the de facto lingua franca, but non-native speakers of English felt that their native English speaking colleagues used their language skills as an 'instrument of power' (ibid., p. 422).

Another case which clearly outlines how a language policy can affect power relations at a multilingual workplace is Vaara et al.'s (2005) study of the Finnish-Swedish merger MeritaNordbanken. In this company, Swedish was selected as the common corporate language, which reproduced post-colonial conceptions of Swedish superiority among the Finnish-speaking employees. The Swedish language policy quickly empowered Swedish-speaking Finns who benefitted from easy access to information, whereas those with limited Swedish skills felt disempowered and handicapped by the language policy. By drawing on Clegg (1989), Vaara et al. (2005) refer to this phenomenon as the 'circuits of power'. The expression conveys the idea that corporate language policies inevitably come with certain power implications, which will empower some employees and disempower others.

A similar observation was made by Neeley (2013) in a French MNC that had implemented English as a common corporate language. Neeley (2013) examined how non-native English speakers responded to the new language policy, and found that all non-native English-speaking employees experienced a status loss regardless of their English fluency level. Employees with medium English level fluency were found to be more anxious than their low and high fluency speaking co-workers. The findings from Neeley's study demonstrate that non-native speakers of the corporate language can find themselves in a linguistically subordinate position compared to native speakers. In contrast, native speakers of the corporate language can experience an 'unearned status gain' (Neeley & Dumas, 2016). This status gain occurs due to 'an unexpected or unsolicited increase in relative standing, prestige, or worth attained not through individual effort or achievement but from a shift in organizationally valued characteristics' (ibid., p. 14).

While a company's language policy can benefit some employees and place them in a more powerful position than before, it is important to also consider the ways in which these employees can exercise the power given to them. Having employees in potentially powerful positions is not necessarily a problem, but it can become a problem if someone decides to use that power at the expense of someone else. Native-speakers of a common corporate language can for example easily obtain information in that language, which in itself is unproblematic. But if they choose to engage in gatekeeping-behavior, the situation quickly turns.

On the other hand, being a language-competent employee is not necessarily only an advantage. In Vaara et al.'s (2005) study of MeritaNordbanken, many Swedish-speaking Finns expressed that they were often overloaded with communication and translation tasks, as there were few people who were able to complete these tasks. Furthermore, due to the political connotation of the Swedish

language policy, Swedish-speakers were sometimes associated with Swedish dominance, and even blamed for some of the problems resulting from the company's language policy.

Other studies support Vaara et al.'s (2005) observation that employees commonly rely on language-skilled colleagues when faced with the need to communicate in a foreign language (CILT, 2011; Piekkari et al., 2005; Piekkari et al., 2013; Sanden & Lønsmann, 2018). In Piekkari et al.'s (2013) study of translation behavior in a financial service company, the authors found that the translation demands largely were forced on employees regardless of whether or not they possessed the relevant language skills. As a result, many employees relied on their networks in order to solve specific translation tasks. These findings show that even though language may empower some employees, this empowerment may imply an increase in workload and expectations to take on additional work tasks. Being in a powerful position also has its drawbacks.

#### THE MICRO PROCESSES AND MACRO POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

In sociolinguistic literature, the term language planning is commonly used to refer to deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others regarding the acquisition, structure, or function of their language use (Cooper, 1989, p. 45). The decision-makers or authority in charge of the language planning, also known as the language planner (Baldauf, 2006) or language manager (Spolsky, 2009), is in a position to develop laws, regulations, rules, pronouncements or statements of intent about language use that apply to others. As discussed by Sanden (2016a), the authority in charge can include a wide range of people in various positions, dependent on which context the language planning initiative is directed towards. In a corporate context, the tasks typically performed by the language planner/language manager will often fall under the responsibility of a business manager or the company's communication department (Sanden, 2016a, p. 530)

Regardless of how, where and by whom the language planning is conducted, those in charge of the initiative will possess a great deal of power. In the words of Calvet (1998, p. 203) 'all planning is carried out by a handful of planners possessing all the power over a people who are planned'. It is quite common that language planning results in unfortunate results for some language speakers. As the goal of a language planning initiative often is to standardize language use in a multilingual community by selecting one language as the standard language, some people will most likely be dispossessed of using their own language (see Linn, Sanden & Piekkari, 2018, for a discussion on language standardization). This observation is true also in international business, as the implementation of corporate language policies often is triggered by the need to facilitate communication between employees with different language backgrounds (Piekkari & Tietze, 2011). Even though the implementation of a common corporate language is meant as a pragmatic decision by the company's leadership, the decision is nevertheless one that will affect employees differently, dependent on their language competences.



This does not mean that those who are subjected to language planning are left without any means to influence the decision-making process. For companies operating across national borders, employees' language practices can be a valuable source of information for strategic language management. According to Reeves and Wright's (1996) linguistic auditing methodology – which provides a set of analytical tools for establishing the strengths and weaknesses of an organization's foreign language communication – a strategic approach to languages should start with mapping the language needs of employees, for example when communicating with external partners and customers. Reeves and Wright (1996) argue that linguistic audits must be incorporated as part of the management's strategic planning; if the company's vision, mission or objectives include international business ventures, a linguistic audit should be the first step in the planning process. The result of the audit would indicate the company's foreign language capabilities, and match these with the company's strategic aspirations (see also Sanden, 2016b).

Another framework that emphasizes the relationship between micro and macro processes is the Language Management Theory (LMT), originally developed by Jernudd and Neustupný (1987). The distinction between simple language management, performed at the micro level, and organized language management, performed at the macro level, is a central component of LMT. Micro and macro planning are two distinct but interrelated mechanisms of language management. While simple language management refers to corrections of individual language use, for example through self-correction, organized language management acts are usually implemented due to language corrective measures defined by a social network or an organization (Nekvapil & Sherman, 2009). Unlike simple language management, organized language management is transsituational, and the implementation of this type of language management requires some degree of organizational control. Yet, while macro planning influences micro planning through top-down measures, micro planning also influences macro planning as language use at the individual level forms the basis for macro-level planning initiatives (Nekvapil, 2006; Nekvapil & Nekula, 2006).

What these frameworks have in common is that even though language planning often is thought of as large-scale macro level initiatives, what goes on at the micro level, among individual employees, can be equally important. As stated by Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011), macro and micro levels of international business communication are not distinctly separate. The two levels are heavily intertwined, and together they constitute the communicative environment of internationally operating businesses.

Multinational corporations can be seen as multilingual communities. Like other multilingual communities, organizations are made up of people who gradually develop communicative patterns and behaviors specific to the linguistic-communicative environment of which they are a part. By drawing on the transnational anthropology developed by Appadurai (1996), Steyaert, Ostendorp and Gaibrois (2010) observe how organizations tend to form specific linguistic landscapes. The term 'linguascapes' describes 'the flow of languages that cross a specific organisational space' (ibid., p.

270). Language and communication practices within the organizational space are discursively mediated by those who make up the linguascape, which means that the formation of the linguascape often is related to power relationships in the organization. The introduction of a common corporate language can for example create an imbalance between different languages and lead to an internal negotiation process between various language practices (see also Steyaert, Ostendorp & Gaibrois, 2016). To avoid high tension between employees with different language backgrounds, Steyaert et al. (2010) argue that it is necessary to understand the position of the new lingua franca vis-à-vis other languages, and how the internal language hierarchy is related to other organizational processes.

The notion of linguascapes suggests that an organization's language and communication practices are constructed by language users as they engage with each other over time. This implies that the language management initiatives implemented at the corporate level alone cannot determine the formation of the linguascape. Instead, the management's attempt to regulate language use must be seen in direct relation to the way in which individual employees communicate as part of their everyday work life. A corporate language policy can stipulate rules or guidelines for appropriate language use, but its practical value may be limited if language choices are managed on a pragmatic basis at the front-line level (Andersen & Rasmussen, 2004; Piekkari et al., 2013; Sanden & Lønsmann, 2018).

As argued by Ferguson (2012), one cannot assume widespread use of English even in MNCs that have adopted English language policies, as MNCs often consist of subsidiaries with different language needs. In the corporate network, English is often confined to particular employees, interactions or genres in the company's internal communication. An English language policy could mean that English is used in formal communication and at the higher management levels, whereas other languages are more common in informal interactions and among employees at lower hierarchical levels. This would imply a mismatch between the company's official language policy and de facto practices, but previous research suggests that such discrepancies are common in multilingual organizations (see e.g. Fredriksson et al., 2006).

## CONCLUSION

As this brief overview has shown, the power of language plays out in many different ways. Language is a resource that can be used to gain power, and exercise power over others without the same resource. It is a power-yielding tool that can be abused if left in the hands of people with ill intentions.

At the same time, any attempt to control language is also an act of power. Multilingual organizations like MNCs exercise power through language when implementing language policies that stipulate how employees with different linguistic backgrounds should communicate with each other. In this way, language and power can be seen as inseparable entities. With a particular focus on the existing literature's coverage of the relationship between language policies and language practices, the

insights discussed in this chapter have shown that it is impossible to circumvent power struggles around language use in multilingual organizations.

Another useful insight from language-sensitive research in international business is the connection between micro and macro processes. A complete understanding of the power of language in multilingual organizations must acknowledge both of these processes and how they feed into each other for the simple reason that language policies and other language management initiatives affect everyone in the entire organization. It is not possible to fully understand the effects of top-down initiatives without examining the implications of these initiatives at the front-line level. In the same way, it is necessary to consider how front-line employees navigate multiple languages in order to understand why companies develop top-down initiatives concerning language use. The power of language affects the entire organizational hierarchy, from top to bottom. And for both sides of the spectrum, the struggle is real.

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