

## 9. BUSINESS AS A SITE OF LANGUAGE CONTACT

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Although business settings have been a site of language contact for many years, the field of “language in business” has changed substantially during the past two decades. The proliferation of topics and approaches has contributed to shaping what is now an eclectic disciplinary field, methodologically diverse. Thus, this review of the field will necessarily move beyond sociolinguistic approaches and theories of variation and change. In particular, the globalization of the workforce and the growth of multinational and multilingual corporations have strengthened the perception of English as the “lingua franca” of international business, though some recent research challenges aspects of this perception in multicultural corporate settings. Intercultural communication, especially recent developments in that field, including its “discursive turn” and its current preference for qualitative studies, has made a significant contribution to the study of multicultural/multilingual business interaction. In the concluding section, we discuss three particular areas of development: (a) the growth in the use of new media and the analysis of that use and its impact on business discourse in context; (b) the shift from the analysis of written to spoken discourse and from simulated data to naturally-occurring corporate language; (c) and the increasing need to study the language of the multilingual workplace. We argue for redressing the balance of research into business as a site of language contact in favor of less well-represented languages and cultures through indigenous discourse studies, and we note in particular the increasing frequency and importance of work involving Asian languages.

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### Language Contact in Business: An Introduction

Although business settings have been a site of language contact for many years, if not centuries, it is only fairly recently that the language of business has been approached in a more systematic way as a discrete area of study. The field of “language in business” has changed in important ways since Ann Johns’ seminal article published in the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* in 1987.<sup>1</sup> In the last decade, the diversification of topics and approaches, and especially the use of natural language data (both spoken and written), have contributed to shaping what is now an eclectic disciplinary field and, arguably, a promising and developing research area on

language contact in its more broadly interpreted manifestations (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2002b; Swales, 2000).

Language contact has been and continues to be a particularly productive area of sociolinguistic research (Sankoff, 2001; Treffers-Daller & Willemyns, 2002; see Milroy, 2002, for dialect contact). Perhaps this is a sign not only of the frequency but also the increasing importance of language contact in the modern world. Sociolinguists have been interested primarily in the linguistic outcomes of language contact, focusing on the speech community rather than the individual. Given this focus, it is perhaps not surprising that Sankoff's (2001) comprehensive review of the field contains no reference to business contexts, though it does mention trade as a historical source of language contact and makes clear that the determinants of the linguistic outcomes of language contact are not only social but also economic, political, and demographic. Milroy's special issue on dialect contact follows much the same approach and is also mainly concerned with language variation and change. The cognitive processes of language contact, on the other hand, tend to be the domain of psycholinguists, who have concentrated particularly on second language acquisition (e.g., Sankoff, 2001).

### **The Effects of Globalization**

However, given the emphasis of sociolinguistics on the speech community in the traditional meaning of that term, any review of business as a site of language contact must necessarily go well beyond sociolinguistic approaches and theories of language variation and change. The language of business, as has been argued, is a relatively new field of study and one which is emerging as both interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse. Equally important, if historically, commerce has been a rich site of language contact, in the contemporary world, globalization has had an impact on corporate issues at both a local and a global level to such an extent that situations involving language contact are probably confronted on a daily basis by a great many multinational corporations (Gimenez, 2002), and the multicultural, multilingual workforce is a reality for many companies. Indeed, Vandermeeren (1999) even suggests on the basis of her survey of 415 European companies representing car components and electronics industries that "in fact, a business interaction is rarely a monolingual event" (p. 276).

While Vandermeeren may be overstating the case, the linguistic needs engendered by the common European market in 1992 led to the involvement of applied linguists in what has become known as *language needs analysis*. Company surveys and questionnaires were widely employed in order to assess which and when languages were needed, for what and by whom (see Coleman, 1984, 1988). Increasingly, such surveys now tend to concentrate on English either as a second language or a lingua franca (Edwards, 2000; Li So-mui & Mead, 2000; Stapp, 1998; Vandermeeren, 1999), and "the ideology of English as the language of corporate enterprise" (Nair-Venugopal, 2001) has strengthened the perception of English as the lingua franca of international business, though some recent research has challenged

aspects of this perception (Gimenez, 2002; Nair-Venupopal, 2001) in multicultural settings.

The recent special issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* on language contact issues (Coulmas, 2001) is a clear illustration of an eclectic methodological approach to language contact, one which is strongly influenced by but goes well beyond the language variation and change focus of sociolinguistics. Indeed, Sealey and Carter (2001) call for a closer collaboration between sociolinguistics and social theory and explore the implications and challenges of such a collaboration for sociolinguistic concepts and methodology (see also Coupland, Sarangi, & Candlin, 2001), particularly in conjunction with the definition and use of social categories, such as gender, class, and race. Several of the articles in this special issue (de Klerk & Barkhuizen, 2001; Kamwangamalu, 2001) explore the political and social implications of language choice in conjunction with ethnic and cultural identities in a new post-apartheid South Africa. When language maintenance and shift are examined (Al-Khatib, 2001; Slavik, 2001), language change tends to be seen in relationship to the use of a particular language in specific domains rather than in terms of phonological, lexical, and syntactic change.

One of the articles (Nair-Venugopal, 2001) does involve a business setting and, in a perceptive and interesting way, presents an ethnographic account of the sociolinguistics of code and style choice evidenced in oral presentations made by trainers and trainees in two Malaysian business organizations. Nair-Venugopal argues that the evidence, comprising recorded spoken data in these contexts, clearly demonstrates the ascendancy of localized forms and patterns of communication (Malaysian English) while the “articulated or tacitly accepted normative code for communication in both organizations is English” (p. 47). Such ethnographic evidence therefore “contests general perceptions about English in Malaysian corporate business and exposes the gap that exists between perceived linguistic norms and actual communicative behaviour in these contexts” (p. 47). Such articles do not, perhaps, ultimately challenge the advantageous international position of North America and the United Kingdom as English-speaking countries or the undoubted supremacy of English as the medium of global trade (Rogers, 1998), but they do undermine the notion that English as the international lingua franca of business is a straightforward and simple one. Further challenges are also offered which question not only the value but even the existence of a universally relevant and teachable variety of business English for use in pluricultural settings.

In North America, the multicultural workforce of the post-war period provided a powerful stimulus to the development of the discipline of intercultural communication in the 1960s. Since then, intercultural communication as a field of inquiry has been surprisingly slow in developing a strong interest in business and organizational settings as sites of language contact. Notable exceptions are a number of contrastive studies which involve English and Japanese, especially since 1980, for example, Marriott (1997), Miller (1994), and Yamada (1997). However, in the aftermath of the “discursive turn” that intercultural communication has taken in

Europe, awareness is growing that research on workplace communication, whether professional, organizational or business communication, can address certain major issues, including language contact, more effectively through the analysis of actual language behavior in “real” business contexts (Deetz, 2001; Lovitt, 1999).

### **The Contribution of Intercultural Communication**

Together with the emerging fields of business discourse (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2002a) and organizational discourse (Bargiela-Chiappini, in press), intercultural business communication provides a primary growth area for language contact studies in business settings. It is regrettable that the second edition of the *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication* (Gudykunst & Mody, 2002) does not include a chapter on intercultural communication in organizational contexts, including business sites as a priority area, nor one on power, ostensibly because “there is insufficient research on power in intercultural interactions on which to base a chapter” (p. 180). Historically, the power asymmetry of much language contact would have been the result of conquest or migration. Arguably, urbanization and trade also can and do generate significant language conflicts and inequalities. In an increasingly multicultural world, intercultural communication is well placed to examine issues of inequality generated by language contact, thus widening the original sociolinguistic emphasis on linguistic outcomes. For this to happen, intercultural communication needs to take on board the insights of the discursive turn of the 1980s and 1990s in the social sciences in northern Europe. These include a preference for qualitative studies of naturally occurring interactions, including close attention to the interplay between language and social contexts and issues of power and inequality. However, the dominant concern in intercultural communication to meet teaching and training needs means that even when a discourse approach to business communication in intercultural settings is adopted, findings sometimes are “diluted” by a prescriptivism reminiscent of management communication textbooks (Pan, Wong-Scollon, & Scollon, 2002).

The contents of the latest edition of the *Handbook* previously mentioned confirm that the intercultural communication research agenda is largely oriented towards improving communicative competence and to addressing issues of miscommunication (Gudykunst & Mody, 2002). Recent empirical studies seem to confirm the traditional preference for a cognitive approach, sometimes combined with statistical analysis (Christian, 1998; Larkey, 1998; Yamaguchi, 1998; but see Harkins & Wierzbicka, 2001, for an example of cross-linguistic analysis). This contrasts with the language-based, qualitative analyses typical of much European contrastive and comparative work in the 1990s and beyond, which we address in the next section (e.g., Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997a; Ehlich & Wagner, 1995; Fant & Grinstead, 1995; Lee-Wong, 2002; Li Wei & Li, 2001; Nair-Venugopal, 2001; Poncini, 2002b).

In her review article of four volumes on intercultural communication published between 2001 and 2002, Claire Kramsch (2002) warns of the dangers attached to a discipline that is characteristically Western (North American) and

increasingly at the service of global capitalism. The bias sometimes invested in a Western understanding of 'culture' and 'intercultural communication' can produce what appear to be constructs of an Anglo-Saxon discourse that decides who, when, and how to communicate. More seriously, Kramsch notes, "the concept of intercultural communication as it is currently used can be easily highjacked by a global ideology of effective communication Anglo-Saxon style" (2002, p. 284).

Intercultural communication thus suffers from the 'English conundrum:' as a discipline, it emerged from the multicultural environment of post-war America and has developed a theoretical, quantitative research paradigm. Because English has become the language of international business and therefore the most widespread language of contact in corporate exchanges, and in many multicultural work-settings, most research in intercultural communication has been published in English in Western countries (Gudykunst & Mody, 2002). Needed to redress the balance in favor of less well-represented languages and cultures are indigenous discourse studies of workplaces and organizational communication, both intracultural (e.g., Kondo, 1990) and intercultural (Gunnarsson, 2000; Poncini, 2002b) that will form the basis for cross-cultural analysis (Jackson & Aycan, 2001; Tayeb, 2001). Recent arguments to this effect are raised from within two primary fields in business studies, international and crosscultural management (Contractor, 2000; Triandis, 2001) and crosscultural organizational psychology (Aycan, 2000).

### **Business as a Site of Language Contact: The 1990s and Beyond**

In this concluding section, we shall attempt to identify very briefly three particular areas of development. These are not in any sense meant to be comprehensive or exclusive of other trends. First, the large growth in the use of computer and other technology in both intra- and inter-firm communication has meant that new media communication in business plays an increasingly significant role in recent research. Nickerson's (2000) work on the genres and discourse strategies used by Dutch managers working in British subsidiary companies in the Netherlands, writing in English, is perhaps the most comprehensive and detailed study involving new media, particularly e-mail. Nickerson (2002) has also explored the ways in which genres associated with new media can be incorporated into the teaching of business English for international purposes, especially with a view to helping students to identify and distinguish communicative genres unique to their own cultures from those used for similar communicative purposes across different cultures.

Akar (2002) has collected data comprising memoranda and fax messages in Turkish and English produced by Turkish business practitioners in four companies. Though her study mainly attempts to identify and explore the macro contextual factors that influence the forms and functions of written texts in Turkish and English, Akar argues that the analysis of this fax-based data reflects more than simple transmission of information and that the fax machine has affected certain texts in nontrivial ways, demonstrating particular rhetorical strategies and the influence of

corporate cultures. Gimenez (2002) examines the role of new media in the form of data from faxes and emails involving communication in English between an Argentinean subsidiary and its European head office. His research reveals how electronically-mediated communication plays a distinctive and important role in the communicative practices of a multinational conglomerate and identifies the communication conflicts which sometimes result within a subsidiary company in a non-English speaking country.

These studies are only a few of those which focus on email in particular as a mode of communication in organizations, many of which do not involve language contact. What they also demonstrate is that though research which does focus on language contact in business sites often involves new media data, the use of new media itself is only one factor in a much more complex process of communication and is difficult to isolate in its effects. Nickerson's (2000) work, for example, takes a genre-based approach to corporate communication in a multilingual and multicultural setting, and the strategies she identifies are only partly determined by mode of communication. Likewise, Gimenez and Akar also explore a much more complex view of possible conflicts between 'globally adopted' and 'socially constructed' local identities which generate such conflicts in situations involving language contact. The use of new media technology and, indeed, even language itself are integral to but not the whole of this clearly multidimensional process of communication in multilingual business contexts.

Second, negotiation, which formerly attracted little attention in applied linguistics, has become a significant area of study in relationship to business as a site of language contact (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997a; Ehlich & Wagner, 1995; Trosburg, 1995). One trend has been a significant shift from written to spoken discourse and, especially from simulated data to 'natural' corporate language (Firth, 1995), as linguists have ventured into companies not only to interview business practitioners but to record negotiations, meetings, and other types of spoken interaction (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997b; Yeung, 1998). A number of these studies have involved multinationals and multilingual settings.

Nair-Venugopal's (2001) study, which involved audio-recorded presentations by and interactions between trainers and trainees in two Malaysian companies, is a good example of an ethnographic account of different varieties of Malaysian English. Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997a) also contains several chapters which explore spoken interaction in a variety of business contexts (see those by Bilbow, Marriott, Neumann, & Mulholland). Bilbow's (1995, 1997, 2002) work, in particular, makes use of a substantial data base involving participants from different cultural and language groups, recorded in meetings in a large multinational airline corporation in Hong Kong. However, the focus of Bilbow's work is mainly on identifying the use of particular speech acts and discourse strategies, and he does this insightfully and rigorously. Though he argues that there are significant differences between Western and Chinese interactional behavior in business meetings, these differences are not explored in any real detail or depth.

Poncini (2002a), on the other hand, examines the business relationship at meetings attended by participants who come from a variety of cultures (12 to 15 countries) and use English as a common language. Her analysis draws on audio-recordings of these meetings in order to examine how possible conflicts are averted or mediated along with the different strategies used by the main company speaker as a means of building common ground among the multilingual distributors associated with the company. She also questions the concept of the homogeneous cultural group and the role of cultural differences in multiparty, multilingual business meetings.

Another recent approach to spoken discourse in intercultural settings is that taken by Spencer-Oatey (2000) in her edited collection on managing rapport across cultures through talk. Building primarily on work in politeness theory, with a particular focus on the notion of “face” widely explored by politeness theory, Spencer-Oatey develops the concept of “rapport management,” defined as “the way that language is used to construct, maintain and/or threaten social relationships” (2000, p. 12). Although rapport management is very much explored in terms of language contact in crosscultural and intercultural situations, only two chapters specifically involve a business setting. Miller’s (2000) chapter draws on naturally-occurring recorded interaction involving American and Japanese coworkers at two advertising agencies in Tokyo. Her concern is to judge how their identities as Japanese or Americans lead to different linguistic and/or cultural assumptions.

The other relevant chapter (Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2000) explores the way that linguistic and communication issues contribute to making the visit of a group of six Chinese business people as the customers of a British company a face-threatening occasion which ultimately proves to be acrimonious and unpleasant. A series of meetings during the ten-day visit was videotaped, allowing an analysis of nonverbal (significantly) as well as linguistic communication. Both British and Chinese participants were also interviewed. Needless to say, this is the kind of case study which should be encouraged as extremely instructive for purposes of intercultural business discourse research. However, it is also a situation which is extremely difficult to negotiate, set up, and record. Few companies are probably as cooperative or as willing as this one was to expose their potentially difficult customer relationships or, especially, to allow the necessarily intrusive process of video recording.

Thirdly, we would like very briefly to refer to workplace language as a development within the field of language contact. Building on the earlier work of Clyne (1994) in an Australian setting, Goldstein (1997) examines a bilingual workplace context (involving first generation immigrants from Portugal) in Toronto. Though her focus is on the role of ESL in the workplace, she argues for a “critical pedagogy” of ESL which “acknowledges and respects the language boundaries that are a part of people’s working and personal lives” (Goldstein, 1997, p. 237). Her study is a substantial one which explores the complexities of and the reasons for worker resistance to learning English, even when they accept the economic

advantages for themselves of doing so. Such full-length empirical studies of multilingual workplaces are still relatively rare.

In summary, then, as we have argued, the globalization of business, technological advances, and international management teams have inspired some of the most recent research on business discourse in and beyond Europe (Akar, 2002; Bilbow, 2002; Gimenez, 2002; Nickerson, 2000; Poncini, 2002a). In fact, the field of business communication has been re-examined in the light of the multidisciplinary, multimethod turn that has been one of the dominant influences on the social sciences in the late 1990s (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2002a). It is almost inevitable that business discourse, as the crucible of language contact studies in work settings, should become a site for 'partnership research' between disciplines (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2001) and between academics and practitioners (Sarangi & Roberts, 1999), and this too has been a fruitful development.

Although English continues to be the international language of business (St. John, 1996; Varner & Beamer, 1995) and the privileged vehicle of management ideas (Fox, 1999), the "English divide" (Rogers, 1998) and the emergence of the Asian Englishes (Enokizono, 2000; Honna, 2000; Said & Ng, 2000; Takeshita, 2000) are several of the most important developments for intercultural business communication. A further noteworthy development of the multidisciplinary turn is the involvement of disciplines such as linguistic anthropology (Duranti, 2001; Wasson, 2000) and cultural psychology (Collier, 1998) in the study of business and intercultural communication.

The role of culture in business interactions emerged as a dominant concern at a symposium on intercultural business communication held in May 2002 (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2002b).<sup>2</sup> Of particular interest to symposium conveners were two factors: the substantial representation from Asian languages, sometimes in contrast with English as a second language or the language of international business, and the still-strong pedagogic priorities that sustain research in this field. The communicative skills and competencies of future international and intercultural communicators remain strong motivators of research in business language contact. Beyond immediate, practice-based concerns, any future agenda for development in this field should also attempt to define more clearly the implications of increased intercultural contact in business, not only in terms of economic gain but also as a shared and conscious effort towards improved dialogue across cultures (Singh, 2002).

## Notes

1.. 'Business discourse' is now a more commonly used term than 'business language,' perhaps reflecting the 'discursive turn' in much of the research on business communication.

2. The symposium was hosted by the European Chapter of the Association for Business Communication (ABC) and included delegates from thirteen European,



Asian, and North American countries (<http://www.sprog.asb.de/abc>). A thematic issue of the *Journal of Intercultural Studies* (2003) which is based on representative work from the symposium (Guest editors: Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini and Catherine Nickerson) is in preparation.

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This study argues that globalization has had a leveling effect on many corporate activities but has also, it is argued, heightened the difference between global identities and local cultures. Making use of new media (faxes and emails) as data, Gimenez explores the communication conflicts which arise when a globally-adopted identity is imposed by a European head office and a socially-constructed identity sustained by the subsidiary, which is Argentinean. The study is a good example of the impact and influence of new media modes in a situation where English is the prescribed language of communication between head office and a subsidiary where most employees are Spanish-speaking. Gimenez explores some of the political, social, and economic implications of language choice and processing.

Goldstein, T. (1997). *Two languages at work: Bilingual life on the production floor*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

This is a substantial empirical study which focuses on the question of which languages people choose to use in the multilingual workplace and the meanings and consequences of particular linguistic choices have for their lives and experiences. Goldstein explores why immigrant workers (Portuguese) who have come to Canada to improve their economic circumstances may resist learning and using English at work even though it is clearly associated with economic gain. Though the main focus of the research is the role of ESL in the workplace, Goldstein's book will also be of interest to researchers concerned with language contact in an urban industrial setting.

Nair-Venugopal, S. (2001). The sociolinguistics of choice in Malaysian business settings. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 152, 21–52.

On the basis of spoken data recorded in two Malaysian business organizations, Nair-Venugopal argues that the normative status of English in Malaysian companies is giving way to the emergence of the speech forms

and styles of Malaysian English as the localized variety. This is a detailed and meticulous study, which combines sociolinguistic methodology with a qualitative pragmatics approach. Nair-Venugopal's work challenges "the bastions of English language use in Malaysia" by demonstrating that Malaysian English and other forms of speech in these Malaysian corporate business contexts contest and contrast with the norms of standard English usage. Such work may also lead us to question the assumed use of standard English in other corporate settings, especially those where English is the language of the former colonial power.

Nickerson, C. (2000). *Playing the corporate language game*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Nickerson's is a full-length study of the genres and discursive strategies used by Dutch writers working in four multinational corporations in the Netherlands. Her main interest is in identifying the most frequently used generic types of texts used by Dutch managers writing in English and how these texts are influenced both by the organizational context itself and the purposes they serve. Nickerson includes a detailed study of the use of new media, and she convincingly demonstrates the crucial role that email plays in generating and maintaining a corporate culture. If it is perhaps sometimes rather too obviously structured in the form of a thesis, her book contains a great deal of material which is relevant to language contact and presents a comprehensive analysis of a certain mode of corporate discourse, selected from a large corpus of authentic written business documents collected in a mainly bilingual company context.

Poncini, G. (2002a). Discourse at business meetings with multicultural participation. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 40, 345–373.

Poncini takes on an area in which relatively little work has been done, i.e., the analysis of multiparty spoken interaction where people from different cultures conduct business using English as a common language. After briefly describing the rationale for identifying the use of a selective number of significant linguistic features, she explores, through the use of audio-recorded data extracts, how a business relationship is constructed. Although she makes use of relatively few extracts, these are analyzed in depth and detail. Poncini argues on the basis of her analysis that often too much is attributed to cultural differences and that organizational roles, the business context, and individual styles are equally important in understanding how a successful business relationship is brought about.

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