

LINEE Project: Language Management in Multinational Companies in Central Europe

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LINEE – Languages in a Network of European Excellence

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The general aim of LINEE is to investigate linguistic diversity in Europe (for details see www.linee.info)

Four thematic areas:

- 1. Language, culture and identity
- 2. Language policy and planning
- 3. Multilingualism and education
- 4. Language and economy

Language and Economy

Three workpackages

- 1. Labour markets, the Knowledge Economy, language and mobility in Europe
- 2. Multilingualism amongst minority populations: a case of trans-cultural capital or social exclusion?
- 3. Linguistic diversity in large multinational companies

Relationships between Language and Economy

1. From the position of linguistics, typically, the functioning of language (communication, interaction) in economic contexts
2. From the position of economics, typically, the analysis of language as a specific type of goods subject to the laws of supply and demand (cost-benefit analysis)
3. Participation of language in the realization of economic processes (mutual elaboration of economic and linguistic variables)

The Main Goals of the Paper

- To demonstrate the roles of three languages, Czech (Hungarian), German and English, in the everyday functioning of Czech (Hungary)-located subsidiaries or branches of companies based in Germany
- How and to what extent do the languages spoken fulfill varying functions
- Presentation of the strategies on various levels of the multinationals used to manage language problems anticipated in future interactions (pre-interaction management)

Types of Project Data

- Visits to subsidiaries of foreign companies in the Czech Republic and Hungary
- Semi-structured interviews with both locals and expatriates employed in various positions
- Observation and recording of naturally-occurring interactions (meetings, telephone conferences), follow-up interviews
- Written materials which reflect company policy
- Observation of “linguistic landscape” (signs inside and outside the company buildings)

Background: Foreign Language Teaching in the Czech Republic

- 1989: Compulsory Russian withdrawn from the Czech education system, principle of free choice of a foreign language declared. Most students (98% in 1997-98) chose German or English.
- English surpassed German in number of total number of learners during the 1997-1998 school year, and the gap between them continues to grow.
- Choice between English and German largely region-dependent. The ratio of German increases in the areas bordering on Germany and Austria.
- Choice between English and German correlates with professional ambitions: German chosen by those who prefer more practically-oriented professions, English chosen by students pursuing academic secondary (and university) education.
- National Plan for the Teaching of Foreign Languages: stipulates the mandatory teaching of 2 foreign languages, one of which must be English.

Types of Multinationals in CR

- 1. branches of German/Austrian/Swiss companies
- 2. branches of American/British/South African companies
- 3. branches of French/Belgian companies
- 4. branches of Spanish companies
- 5. branches of Dutch companies
- 6. branches of Japanese/Korean companies
- 7. branches of Russian companies

The Example of Company X

- German company with subsidiaries and clients all over the world
- Subsidiary under study is located in Czech Republic, has 2182 employees (Czech, Slovak, Polish, others), German, Austrian and Czech top management
- All “expatriates” (5-10) occupy (top) management positions
- Manufacturing of car components, production in subsidiary began in 1996
- “Official corporate language” is English
- Both English and German are taught in the subsidiary only to those who need it for their jobs, 10 English classes, 4 German classes, plus individual instruction, and Czech classes for “expatriates”

Roles of Czech, German and English in Multinational Companies

1. Language for Communication vs. Language as a Symbol
2. Language for Communication vs. Language for Social Purposes
3. Language for Communication vs. Language for Emotion
4. Language for Communication vs. Language for Creativity
5. Language for Communication vs. Language for Privacy

Language for Communication vs. Language as a Symbol

- The Czech and German languages symbolize national identity, the weakening of their symbolic positions in the company (in favor of English) contributes to the creation of transnational identities
- Situations are created in which nobody is speaking his or her native language
- The use of English as opposed to German by Czechs reflects neutrality in power relations, “freeing” themselves from German (or even the Germans)
- Many management jobs in Company X require English, and list German as “an advantage”

Language for Communication vs. Language for Social Purposes

- Nearly all employees in management positions are speaking a foreign language (English), when speaking it, however, they are less likely to make small talk, chat, waste time, they will “use less words” than in Czech or German, they must “get to the point”
- CEO: Czech is nice for social situations, English is good for getting the job done
- The English used in “transnational” interactions need not be grammatically perfect – instead, there is a focus on content in meetings

Language for Communication vs. Language for Emotion

- Czech used for situations when “emotions are high” and English is not sufficient to express everything
- After speakers “calm down”, the switch to English is made and the necessary information is translated

Language for Communication vs. Language for Creativity

Corporate language (any lingua franca) is used and useful particularly for reporting.

High-quality Research and Development (R&D) might be connected to the use of the mother tongue (first language) and working in linguistically diversified environments.

Glyn Williams' hypothesis

- “The generation of knowledge is maximised within contexts of linguistic diversity. This is because of how communities of practice rely heavily upon shared meaning. The negotiation of meaning within bi or multilingual contexts leads to a form of reflexive learning wherein meaning is negotiated. Negotiating meaning in languages which are not the mother tongue requires a much greater degree of reflexivity than is found by reference to negotiating meaning in the mother tongue.”

Four Phases of the Generation of Knowledge (H. Salla & M. Charles)

1. Misunderstandings (based on linguistic diversity?)
2. Multiple understandings
3. Enhanced understandings
4. Knowledge

Language for Communication vs. Language for Privacy

- Czech can assume a “secretive function” in that the local employees speak it while the expatriates tend not to, beyond a few symbolic phrases
- Czech cannot effectively be used for communication, because the expatriates do not often stay at the company long enough to learn it and find it “difficult”
- Expatriates in top management often cannot communicate with local employees in production
- Czech can thus serve as a means of protecting national social networks
- One adjustment to this might be the implementation of Czech language classes for expatriates

Language Ideologies (LI)

- Michael Silverstein (1979) 'Language Structure and Linguistic Ideology'

Here, LI defined as „sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use“

Joseph Errington (2001) “Language ideology refers to the situated, partial, and interested character of conceptions and uses of language“

“Czech is a difficult language” - An Ideology Typical for Expatriates

A consequence: The expatriates cannot master Czech though they would like to.

A consequence of that consequence: The Czechs must master the language of the expatriates or English must be used (which is not acceptable for some Germans).

Citation from an interview

GM = German manager of subsidiary of Company C

Researcher: Does it ever happen or occur that you receive Czech texts from the parent company?

GM: No that (---) that you have to really imagine I can understand, now when I've been here three and a half years, that **to somebody who sits in Frankfurt and who is German, to him Czech looks like Egyptian**. So it's really a language that you you have to like it's really pretty. But at first glance you can't begin anything with it, because it simply (---) you can't tell if something is a noun or a verb. It's simply a completely different language.

“Czech is a small language used only by the Czechs” - An Ideology Typical for the Czechs

A consequence: The Czechs willingly accept that they must accommodate linguistically, they don't expect the expatriates to speak Czech

A consequence of that consequence: The Czechs indirectly discourage the expatriates from learning Czech

Management of Language Problems

- Presentation of the strategies on various levels of the multinationals used to manage language problems anticipated in future interactions
- Two levels:
 1. strategies used by individuals
 2. strategies used by the companies

Pre-Interaction Management

- the language management process done in anticipation of a future interaction, or more precisely, in anticipation of potential problems in a future interaction. This can include looking up words and phrases in a dictionary or textbook, consulting language concerns with a language expert, or, even “avoidance strategies” such as preferring written communication to oral communication, bringing along an interpreter, or avoiding the interaction altogether

Individual Strategies in Face-to-Face and Telephone Communication as Used between the Local Employees and Expatriates

- Avoidance strategies
- Foreigner talk
- Informal establishment of a telephone specialist
- Inserting native language pauses into meetings

In Written Communication

- Language for unspecified addressee -
“when you have to write something and you do not know whom it is for, do not use Czech/Hungarian”
- The use of language class for the preparation for a specific upcoming interaction

Corporate Language Management

Typically

- Establishment of a corporate language
- Organization of language courses
- Hiring interpreters and translators

Corporate Language Management – Establishment of Communication Rules

- In one Czech-Japanese company, in which there were Spaniards in addition to Czechs and Japanese, on the wall of the meeting rooms there was a „rule of meeting“ in which the following is written in English:
“...if any participant wants to say something, he/she has to speak officially in English. Czech, Spanish or Japanese language is prohibited in company meetings”.

5 Principles of Internal Communication

(translated from German and Czech)

- 1. We want open, honorable and topical communication, and not politicking.
- 2. Our aims are clearly formulated and continually discussed on all managerial levels.
- 3. We have the courage to ask in cases when we do not understand some information or decisions.
- 4. We do not tolerate off-topic or personal attacks – mistakes are analyzed and we work on the appropriate improvements together.
- 5. We expect that our discussions will be effective due to the personal preparation of each participant.

Conclusions: Considerations for Potential Action

- Closer examination by companies of the strategies used by their employees to deal with language problems in order to constantly seek new communicative innovations which can be codified as (written) company policy
- Creation of situations in which no group of speakers is at a disadvantage, this means at least passive knowledge of the other's language, and the continued use of a lingua franca, most likely English
- Strong support for the teaching of local languages (e.g. Czech) to parent company employees (e.g. German)

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THANK YOU

Děkuji. Danke.
Eskerrik asko.