Business communication: Mapping a road for the future

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Summary

This is a state-of-the-art paper which explores the challenges that the rapidly developing business world presents to language and communication researchers and teachers. It suggests a way forward in cooperation with international business management researchers in particular, arguing that linguists should increasingly link up their world – research questions, methodologies, data collection, and research paradigms − with that of business. It does this by revisiting a framework useful for seeing how certain areas of linguistic research can reveal business developments, and vice versa: how awareness of current globalization trends can reveal new areas for research, and new and relevant teaching needs and approaches for linguists. In doing this, the paper casts a glance into recent trends in language and communication research and teaching, arguing that constant reconceptualisation of traditionally used concepts like 'context' and 'culture' is necessary, as also are new kinds of data that reflect the current globalized state of business, together with new perspectives on that data.

1 Introduction

The rapidly changing global economy of today, with its reliance on technology oriented communication channels, has revolutionized business operations. The challenges to language, discourse, and communication are huge, and need to be explored in order for language researchers to be able to come up with research and teaching solutions which are truly useful for the corporate world. Arguably, thorough understanding of business developments is one of the main challenges for linguists working with, and for, businesses.

To facilitate that understanding, this paper revisits a fairly simple and practical format − Friedman's (2006) well known analysis of globalization. The paper aims to show that this framework can be used to link up developments in LSP research and teaching with developments in the business world. (For further discussion, see the three papers on which this one is largely based: Charles 2009a&b; 2011.) In doing that, the paper aims to show how analysis of developmental trends in business reveals language use and communication needs; and vice versa: how awareness of language and communication patterns can reveal business developments.

The paper is based on three premises: Firstly, that research and teaching of Language for Business Purposes is essentially business communication research and teaching. The job of business communication researchers and teachers is to help members of the business community to do better whatever it is that they're doing. Both LSP and Business Communication research are therefore highly practical fields of applied research. Secondly, that communication and business are intimately and inseparably linked. No business can survive without proper communication. Thirdly, therefore, communication makes or breaks businesses. Researchers in Languages for Business Purposes and in Business Communication must thus be seen as essential contributors to the international success of corporations.

These premises represent my view on the role that Business Language researchers and teachers play in the current hustle and bustle of the business world. We will next examine that role in greater detail, linking it up with developments in globalization.

2 Globalized business, communication and linguistic research

Friedman (2006) divides globalization into three stages. In the first stage, he claims, globalization concerned countries; in the second, it concerned companies; in the third, it is individuals that globalize. No precise dates for these stages, or any smooth transitions from one to another, can be given. Neither are the various stages separate, but rather cumulative, building upon each other, but also coexisting and merging.

2.1 Globalization stage 1 and LSP

In the business world, Friedman's (2006) first stage of globalization approximated the more familiar term 'foreign trade', with exporting and importing as fairly distinct corporate activities through which countries of the big wide world were linked up. Companies were fairly tightly structured, with export or import departments. In this compartmentalized world individuals had clear cut areas of operation and responsibility (Tapscott & Caston 1998). Some employees were involved in foreign trade − others were not.

For the language teaching world, this state of affairs in businesses meant that only those involved in foreign trade really needed foreign languages on an everyday basis. Those who were not involved, studied foreign languages at school or in their free time; languages were either part of their general education, or the individual was particularly interested in learning a foreign language, and it was a hobby. (Charles 2009a&b) As a response to the specialist language requirements of foreign trade, LSP − Languages for Specific Purposes − came about. Right from the start, LSP focused on terminology and contrastive linguistics, for which there was (and still is) an obvious need. Somewhat later, empirical discourse data from a variety of foreign trade situations was collected for analysis. (Dudley-Evans & St John 1996; Dudley-Evans 1998.)

Looking back at research in this stage of globalization, three significant characteristics emerge. Firstly, research focus seemed to be on 'text' or 'talk' as a communication 'product' produced by the sender – the writer/talker − mostly the seller/exporter (Charles 2009a&b; 2011). The 'sender' of communication was all important, with scant attention given to how the sender's text, or talk, was actually received; nor were situational factors analysed in any great detail. This 'sender' oriented approach seemed to reflect the belief that a well structured communication product, where precise and correct terminology was used, would automatically achieve what it was meant to achieve. Fair enough: companies were product oriented – and so were analyses of what companies were doing.

Secondly, companies were seen as a social context within which people used language. This comes through from the way business communicators were frequently characterized in sociolinguistic, demographic terms. Speakers were described, for example, as 'a middle aged, male export manager'. The professional roles in which the speaker operated – and which we now know largely determine language choices − tended at this stage to be ignored. Indeed, there seemed to be no sense of business reality in linguistic research of the day: no sense of pressure, business roles, hidden agendas, responsibilities, or challenges which might have come into play (Charles 2009a&b; 2011). We were, in fact, describing a relatively static world. Our research paradigm seemed to be "language used in social situations."

The third observation – one that results from this 'social product' perspective described above − is that linguistic research tended to be seen as a fairly isolated activity, clearly separate from – and hardly touching upon – other disciplines (with the traditional exceptions of psychology,

education, and, increasingly, social sciences). Most linguists seemed not to cooperate with researchers in business studies, marketing or management − and of course, researchers in these business fields mostly seemed to feel linguists had little to contribute. Indeed, few linguists felt the need to learn more about the situations or the environment that they were studying.

Of course, exporting and importing activities still exist and play an important role in our lives; people involved in foreign trade still need foreign languages; specialist communication needs, including specialist terminology needs, are also still around. Likewise teachers still need to know the language requirements faced by companies in foreign trade. However, the current business world is much more than importing and exporting. Companies are no more the static, neatly compartmentalized enterprises of that stage Friedman (2006) described in his stage 1. Likewise language researchers and teachers now also have a broader perspective.

2.2 Globalization stage 2, and the cultural context

Globalization stage 2 describes "what corporate speech refers to as 'internationalization', or 'going international'. Though foreign trade obviously continued, the main thrust was that multinationals now started to be created through international acquisitions and mergers. As a result, companies now greatly expanded; individual functions and departments were scattered round the world, forming a matrix of subsidiaries, sales offices, and production facilities. They had thus become multinationals. This meant greater requirements in overseas performance, and keener international competition than ever before (Charles 2011).

This development revolutionized the language teaching world. Foreign language needs now encompassed virtually all corporate activities (Charles 2009a&b; 2011). For example, after a merger, employees in, say, Human Resources at Oslo Headquarters needed to liaise with HR in Barcelona. This meant a huge expansion of research interest. That expansion became even more significant with the realization of the challenge presented by culture, and the impact of cultural communication patterns on the success (or otherwise) of mergers and acquisitions (e.g. Vaara 2002). At this stage, 'culture' mostly meant 'national culture' (see Söderberg & Vaara 2003). The negotiator who previously had been described in demographic terms as a 'middle aged export manager' was now described in terms of nationality: "A Chinese/American/Norwegian manager", who was negotiating with a "Finnish/British manager".

Soon, however, companies also started to be seen as cultural entities (eg. Piekkari et al. 2005). When two companies merged, employees who previously were outsiders − indeed, competitors − all of a sudden became colleagues; communication between employees of these merged companies had become 'internal' − or in-house communication. Employees had to learn that the 'us' and 'them' now had to become 'us' (Poncini 2007). And of course, this was not merely a pronominal problem. As researchers soon realized, overall corporate discourse was profoundly affected. 'Togetherness' had to be communicated. (Kogut & Zander 1993). Research attention focused on what happened when two cultures − different national and corporate cultures – clashed, as frequently happened in mergers.

The cultural challenge that companies now faced was thus quite major. Researchers took up that challenge. As a result, the sender-orientation of Stage 1 was now shifting towards a focus on both parties in communication. Indeed, at this point many linguists started to refer to themselves as 'communication researchers' (Louhiala-Salminen 2009). Companies were no longer seen merely as a social context. They were now the "locus", the "site", in which, and

for the purposes of which, individuals in companies used language and communicated. As a result, our research paradigm became "language and communication IN companies" (Charles 2009a&b; 2011).

Secondly, a focus on culture meant a broadening of perspective. As a result, linguists increasingly looked towards other disciplines to add to their own perspective. Accordingly, disciplinary boundaries started to blur, and information was gathered from a variety of sources, including, increasingly, business sources. Some linguists wanted to learn more about corporations. Hence the third major implication emerged, here referred to as a 'macroperspective' to language use in companies.

This macroperspective originated from communication oriented research in other disciplines than linguistics. Many researchers saw language and communication as important factors in management processes as a whole (Marschan et al. 1997); some enquired specifically into choice of corporate language (Marschan et al. 1997; Feely & Harzing 2003; Janssens et al. 2004;), and the significance of language skills from the management perspective (Andersen & Rasmussen 2004; Welch et al. 2005; Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman 2007). Linguists focused specifically on the business/managerial impact of a shared language − a lingua franca – particularly English (Nickerson 2000; Tietze 2004; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005; Louhiala-Salminen & Charles 2006; Charles 2007).

From this stream of managerial and linguistic research a variety of interesting findings emerged (for a useful survey, see Piekkari 2009). Back in 1994, Marschan (1994) already identified what she refers to as 'shadow structures' in companies. Shadow structures resulted from the fact that, in the daily life of a multinational company, corporate employees communicated with those with whom they could, ie with those with whom they shared a common language rather than with those with whom they would perhaps have needed to communicate from the purely business point of view. Marschan's (1994) argument is that in a multinational, in-house communication flows – thus information and knowledge flows – can be determined by language skills rather than actual business needs. As a result, unofficial groupings tend to emerge, which function over and above the official organizational chart, creating an unofficial, often underestimated communication structure in corporations. (Marschan 1994) In analyzing these communication/information flows, linguists clearly have an important role to play.

Mäkelä et al. (2007) revisit the concept of shadow structure, and explore it further. They argue that not only are shadow structures created by language skills, but also by cultural affinity. In a case study of Kone Corporation, the multinational Finland based lift and escalator manufacturer, they discovered informal subsidiary clusters such as the Germanic, Latin and Scandinavian. Within each cluster there was a lot of communication (and thus knowledge sharing), but between the clusters very little. They thus argue that employees tend to talk to and with people who are within their own cultural comfort zones. As cultures and languages are intertwined, this results in culturally related companies and employees frequently using various other languages than the official corporate language English. So, although the official corporate language of Kone was English, a lot of knowledge sharing and business was actually conducted in other languages, particularly in the various mother tongues of employees. This finding confirms results from previous studies on in-house language use in multinationals (see Louhiala-Salminen 2002, in particular), and would seem to contradict the frequently popularly held suggestion that English is replacing other languages and thus reducing their importance for businesses.

As a result of lingua franca studies in multinationals, the term BELF − Business English lingua franca − was launched (Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005). BELF refers quite simply to English used in the spoken business domain, mostly by non-native speakers (NNSs). BELF speakers are people who are specialists in their own fields and use English consciously as a tool, simply to do a job, with little interest in the language itself or ambition to perfect their language skills to any native-speakerlike degree. (For critical discussions of BELF see Bargiela-Ciappini et al. 2007; Gerritsen & Nickerson 2009.) The linguistic identity of BELF speakers therefore is not that of 'learner' – a term frequently used in LSP; rather, BELF speakers see themselves as communicators in their own right (Charles 2007). Overall, studies seem to suggest that native-speakerlike accents and native-speakerlike English language skills do not guarantee communication success in a global environment. Although language skills are obviously a bonus, other skills are also crucially involved in successful communication and business (Louhiala-Salminen 2002).

To sum up: The breaking down of a compartmentalized world proceeds at great speed. In the second stage of globalization, language, language choice, and culture – as part of a communication package – are seen as managerial challenges which need to be worked on cooperatively by researchers in management and languages. Increasingly, foreign language skills are seen to have a much bigger impact on corporations than they had in the days when they were seen merely as a requirement for export staff. In fact, the distinction between foreign language and mother tongue requirements is now all but disappearing. What you do in your mother tongue, you must now, and in the future, also be able to do in foreign languages Charles 2009a&b; 2011).

This brings us to Friedman's (2006) Globalization stage 3.

2.3 Globalization stage 3, and the Virtual World

Although progression in all Friedman's (2006) stages was fuelled by technology, in this third stage technology is the driving, dynamic force to an unprecedented degree. The emergence of this stage of globalization sees technology being brought down to the level of the individual, becoming part and parcel of our everyday reality, and taken for granted (Charles 2009a&b; 2011). Globalization now affects individuals functioning in their own, local environments, wherever they are physically located. However, as Friedman (2006) points out, it is NOT globalization reaching out to the local, or the individual; it is the local − the individual − becoming global. This he refers to as the 'globalization of the local' − the real challenge.

In this challenge, the individual 'global locals' play a key role: As soon as you operate in English, via IT, your local discourse becomes globally accessible and open in an unprecedented manner. You operate (locally) at your desk, in your office (at home or in the corporate office − the physical location frequently just does not matter) and you create business texts, or you communicate via your computer − social networking, skyping, chatting on social sites – for potentially global consumption.

Companies now seek a competitive edge not only through global subsidiaries and production facilities but through strategic alliances, global networks, and virtual operations − which people access locally. As a result, new communication patterns, a different pace, different working methods, and different communication and language use requirements emerge.

Looking at these global locals we can see that the concept of "business context" takes on a new meaning. Companies are no longer mere social or business "contexts" for language use

and communication. They are the RESULT of the discourse and communication used in their name; they life cycles are created through that discourse, and they are completely dependent upon it. This, indeed, is the Stage 3 view of globalization. For linguists it means that research paradigms should once more shift. From looking at language and communication as a social phenomenon (as we did in stage 1), or seeing business as a backdrop to language use (as we did in stage 2) − business operations now have to be seen as being created through, by, and in communication. (Charles 2011)

To continue to be relevant to the business world, linguistically oriented communication research must now find ways of analyzing and teaching the discoursal and communicative dynamism that creates and enhances this kind of networked virtual reality. The road onwards to the third stage of globalization and beyond requires therefore that we (a) continue to revise the meaning and significance of our basic concepts, (b) acquire new kinds of empirical data, (c) develop new, flexible methods for analyzing our data, and (d) adopt a problem-centred approach to our research, eradicating disciplinary boundaries.

We have seen how the implications and the meanings attributed to "culture" have changed over various stages of globalization. In the current increasingly mobile and virtual corporate world, culture is proving an increasingly elusive concept. Indeed, some recent studies on communication in big multinational corporations argue that cultural backgrounds of employees are in the process of becoming less significant, and being replaced by other considerations. One such study is Kalla (2006).

In her study on communication in a Finland based multinational, Kalla (2006) argues that a national or corporate culture is a less significant communication variable than is shared knowledge or shared knowledge requirements overall. She asked her respondents to identify "My closest colleagues, with whom I communicate on a daily basis." The responses she was given did not have anything to do with geographical proximity ("locus" or site of communication), or shared nationality/culture. They had everything to do with professional knowledge needs and knowledge sharing. Kalla (2006) therefore argues that it is information and knowledge needs which bring people together, irrespective of national, geographical or cultural boundaries. This, of course, has become possible through the sophisticated technology of today.

Huttunen's (2010) study on the discourse of project meetings in a multinational indicates the same trend. In her data, the participants of multinational projects were, in many cases, not even aware of the cultural backgrounds of their team members and communicators. Her results suggest fragmentation of culture into task and expertise based project/team cultures, with individual national culture backgrounds paling in significance. The need for team members to be able to contribute to the task at hand overrode any national/corporate culture considerations. All participants were simply viewed upon as company employees, operating in their professional capacity, using English as a working language, attending meetings either by being physically or virtually present. The global team was working together, communi-cating in BELF; what mattered was the roles they created for themselves in the project job, and the knowledge and skills which the members brought into the meeting, and consolidate to create new knowledge.

These highly sophisticated global companies studied by Kalla (2006) and Huttunen (2010) had become knowledge processing and knowledge creation centres. Research like this

suggests that it is knowledge and information needs which link up people in companies − to form new cultural clusters? Perhaps. More research is needed.

What is quite clear is that different companies are in different stages of globalization. The various stages exist simultaneously. Accordingly, various kinds of discourse and languages are also out there, needing to be explored. Importers and exporters need their specialist terminology; shadow structures and clusters based on language and national culture may well be preventing some stage 2 companies from operating at maximum efficiency; then again, stage 3 companies reveal new linkages, or clusters, formed through expertise, knowledge, and the resulting networking. In reality, of course, most companies will have traces of all three stages merged together.

3 Conclusion

This paper has argued that analysis and understanding of business developments and structures is essential for an understanding of language use and communication in companies. It has presented a fairly simple and practical format − Friedman's (2006) three stages of globalization - for linguists to use in making observations about the corporate world. With the help of this framework, developments in the business world can be linked up with developments in linguistic research and practice. The paper has aimed to show how analysis of communication and language use networks, done from the point of view of business, will reveal language and communication needs useful for teaching situations; and vice versa: how awareness of language and communication needs in business will reveal developmental trends in business.

The paper also argued for the need to reconsider various traditionally used concepts in language studies. It suggested that much used concepts like "context" – once commonly used backdrops to analyzing LSP data – were no longer safe. Context has become a web of global communication creating new, global, contexts, and recreating itself as a result of the nature of the communication taking place. Because of the variety of meanings attributed to it, the "cultural context" is a slippery concept, which can easily lead to misguided generalizations in research settings. Language and communication can no longer safely be taken to reflect and depend on their context; they must rather be seen as the creators of business − the business of business.

For linguists to achieve an adequate level of knowledge and analysis, new types of data are necessary. Business discourse should be supplemented by, for example, interview and focus group data, which are very useful for revealing corporate story telling, information sharing and knowledge creation, which, again, will help us to understand the companies we are investigating. Above all, these new data have to be seen as communication that creates the networked business of our day.

Once linguists' research paradigms have changed from "communication IN business" to "communication IS business", we are ready to join forces with mainstream business researchers in interdisciplinary research projects. We then have a good chance to be able to provide full, rich, and rounded descriptions of corporate reality. Our multimodal complex networks have to be researched in multidisciplinary projects with methodological and conceptual flexibility, co-operating and networking with researchers in other disciplines. There must be the courage to break – indeed, eradicate − disciplinary boundaries and go beyond   traditional   linguistic   methodologies   towards   multimethod   research   in

multidisciplinary teams. Only in this way can we confidently get insightful findings grounded in both global and local environments.

At the current sophisticated stages of globalization, companies are knowledge processing and creation centres. The need to create and process knowledge is uniting people in a way national and corporate cultures used to do. New cultures, based on new "cultural" criteria, are being created, to co-exist with national cultures − the different types of "cultures" constantly having to negotiate places and roles viz a viz each other.

This is the world where we are now living. In this brave new world, linguists − LSP researchers in particular − have a greater opportunity than ever before, to contribute to the creation of new business knowledge, by cooperating with our business studies colleagues. Today, companies are Communicating Devices, with great emphasis on professional teams and knowledge based networks. Analysing business communication means describing and explaining the very essence, the very being, of organizations. Business IS communication. The biggest challenge of all is to see business as communication, unfolding and being created on an everyday basis. Only by mapping that route carefully can we prepare for the future.

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