Crossing Borders: In Research and Business Communication

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Abstract—Cultures play a role in business communication and in research. At the example of language in international business, this paper addresses the issue of how the research cultures of management research and linguistics as well as cultures as such can be linked. After looking at existing research on language in international business, this paper approaches communication in international business from a linguistic angle and attempts to explain communication issues in businesses based on linguistic research. Thus the paper makes a step into cross-disciplinary research combining management research with linguistics.

Keywords—Language in international business, sociolinguistics, ethnopragmatics, cultural scripts.

I. INTRODUCTION

CULTURES play a role not only in cross-cultural communication but also in cross-disciplinary research. An example for such research is the field of language in international business. Though language is essential to (cross-cultural) communication, it is largely ignored by business researchers. Harzing [1] gives three reasons for the neglect of language research in business: firstly, the absence of cross-disciplinary research combining business research and linguistics, secondly, the pre-eminence of Anglophone researchers, and, thirdly, the influence of Hofstede, who did not include language in his analysis of cultures.

This paper addresses the first two aspects by summing up the existing management research on language with a view to how it may be combined with research in linguistics and by describing the ethnopragmatic approach to communication to avoid cultural myopia. It shows how communication in international business and research can benefit from crossing the borders of both the research disciplines management research and linguistics.

II. MANAGEMENT RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE

Though neglected for a long time, language in international business has recently been receiving more attention in management research. Still, in comparison to the vast amount of management literature, the research on language is very limited. Language has long been a '"forgotten factor" [2].

The research that has been done considers language an important element for communication in multinational companies and says that language touches upon every aspect

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in business activities [2], [3].

Language is a factor that affects many international management processes, such as inter-unit communication, subsidiary role and autonomy, social exclusion and power, staff transfer, organisational structure, control and coordination mechanisms, integration processes after Mergers & Acquisitions, and working in multi-national teams [4], [5].

Several articles discuss a common corporate language. Earlier research [2] sees English as a corporate language as a solution to language problems. English as a corporate language was seen as a culturally neutral language and, thus, would neutralise with cultural differences. Recent research [6], [7] looks at problems encountered with English as a corporate language by giving examples from multinational companies, like Siemens and Kone.

Language barriers [3], [5], [8], [9] are pointed out as problems in multilingual companies. Language barriers hinder communication, cause miscommunication [3], and impact on trust formation in multinational teams [5]. In contrast to official statements by companies to have one common corporate language, multinational companies are often multilingual. Language diversity in multinational companies is a known fact, and the problem of language clusters [6], [10] in multinational companies is raised.

Research on language in international business also uses the term competence, or the lack thereof, with regard to language: a lack of language competence, limited language skills, or fluency in the foreign language [4], a loss of rhetorical skills in the foreign language, a need of language competence [6] [8], inadequate language fluency [11], or linguistic inadequacy [10].

III. LINGUISTIC RESEARCH ON ENGLISH IN BUSINESS

English is the *lingua franca* of today's business and academic worlds. In international business, the language of communication is English, and an increasing number of universities are offering degree programmes are held in English as part of their internationalisation strategies, with the result that there is a pre-eminence of Anglophone researchers as pointed out by [1].

Linguistic research on English as a foreign language is principally conducted in two main areas, namely on contrastive analysis of English and another foreign language (EFL – English as a Foreign Language), on the one hand, and on English as a lingua franca (ELF), on the other hand. Research on EFL discusses the differences encountered in cross-cultural settings and frequently offers a contrastive description of a foreign language and culture to a standard

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form of English (e.g. British, American, or Australian). English-German interactions have been researched for example by [14]-[17], English-Russian interactions have been looked at, for example, by [18], and English-Ukrainian interactions have been discussed by [19]. Ogiermann [20] compares English, German, Polish, and Russian requests.

While detailed analyses are available, they focus mainly on the impact of research on education and language teaching and, at the same time, regard English concepts as the benchmark. The other languages and cultures are compared to English.

Research on language in an international context is also mainly done on the use of English in business contexts (English as lingua franca), which is understandable given the role of English as the dominant language in international business and in the language training industry.

Research in English as a lingua franca (ELF) concentrates on the question of which variety of English should be taken as a standard of performance, on the one hand, and on business communication (BELF), on the other [21]. Regarding the standard of English that should be taken as a model for learners, the question of English as a non-native language, for example 'Euro-English', 'International English', or 'Global English', and English as a native language is discussed [22], [23].

As far as BELF is concerned, [24]-[29] provide analyses of English used in business situations: business negotiations, discourse of corporate meetings, discourse and relationship, sales negotiations, and managing rapport. ELF and BELF are very active fields, and the list of research is by no means complete.

IV. LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON MANAGEMENT RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE

Seen from a linguistic perspective, management theory limits the role of language to that of a facilitator providing for the acquisition and transmission for social interaction through social interaction with others. The exact way of how and why language affects communication remains largely an issue not discussed. The nature of language itself, how, and why it impacts on communication is left out.

Management theory on international business uses linguistic terms but does not give linguistic definitions. For example, a description or analysis of what competence or language skills actually mean and how they could be measured is not offered by management research on language in international business.

Language seems to be regarded as a tool just like any other machine or like a clearly defined process with a clearly measurable input and outcome. Management theory does not seem to see the role of language in its full extent: its close connection to identity, to social identity, to cultural identity, and to power, all of which are looked at in linguistic research.

That said there is awareness of the necessity to include research from areas other than management. Research by [4], [8], and [11], [12] include sociolinguistic theory to look at communication issues in multinational companies. Tenzer and Pudelko [13] draw on pragmatic theory to look at communication issues in multinational teams.

Linguistics can offer management research more insight into (business) communication as it can provide explanations for communication problems. Cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics could contribute to the field of language in international business.

Linguistic relativity and cognitive linguistics show the link of culture and language. Linguistic relativity refers to the link between language and thought. A certain ideology and tacit assumptions are part of language [30], and worldview and language are linked [31]. Research now follows the line of language influencing or suggesting thought patterns of interpreting the world [33]. While it cannot be said that people can only think in the (grammatical) structures of their own language, language is a reflection of different experiences in different cultural environments and reveals something about the way speakers of that language think [34].

Sociolinguistics can be defined as the study of the relationship between language and society. It is concerned with language as a social phenomenon and focuses on language used by people for communicating with each other and for developing and maintaining social relationships [35].

Discourse analysis looks at the behaviour of speakers, the type of subject-matter, and at situations. It describes how language is organised in speech. Language is analysed in terms of which linguistic routines a speaker employs in certain speech events and how people use language in certain conversation situations [33].

Pragmatics refers to the way meaning is transmitted in verbal interaction. It is on the discourse side of language and looks at the norms of interaction within a speech community. People follow a set of rules governing conversational exchanges which everyone recognises [33].

With its approach and findings, ethnopragmatics helps in cross-cultural communication and can explain why misunderstandings occur. It divides speech events into endolingual and exolingual speech situations [45], which is a division shedding light on why so-called cross-cultural pragmatic failures occur.

As far as existing management research on language is concerned, linguistics offers explanations for phenomena encountered. Linguistic relativity could explain the link of language and culture pointed out by [12] and the effects of exposure to English and of English culture on behaviour and attitude (language priming) discussed in [36]. Pragmatics gives insight into misunderstandings in so-called exolingual speech events and into the nature of cross-cultural pragmatic failures. As they are less easy to identify, pragmatic failures are often misinterpreted as personal incompetence and impoliteness. The misunderstanding is taken from a purely linguistic to a personal level: a flaw in the other person, a lack of politeness, insolence, impertinence, or poor education [22].

With the pragmatic approach, situations as described in [8] and [10] become clearer: employees fearing "linguistic inadequacies, which indirectly undermines their professional status" ([10], p. 222), people who through their inability to

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talk fluently "may be seen as lacking charisma, confidence, and leadership skills", their behaviour as "inconsistent, mercurial, and even devious", and their reputation as one "of being fickle, unreliable, and deceitful ([8], p. 54).

Linguistic relativity, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics are all relevant for cross-cultural communication and can, thus, contribute to management research with their findings. Management research on language in international business can provide data and structures with which linguistics could work. Cross-disciplinary research being done by both, management research and linguistic research, would be beneficial for both areas.

V. AGAINST CULTURAL MYOPIA

While there is no doubt that English enables communication across cultures, the limitations of English should not be forgotten. The use of a specific language means certain concepts, thinking, worldview, and ideology that are not shared by all.

Tietze's research [30] raises the issue of western or cultural myopia brought upon by the use of English and of English-medium education. In training situations or education, a sufficient proficiency of English is often seen as being the equivalent to cross-cultural competence. Training is based on explaining the differences on the basis of Anglo-Saxon models, using concepts and categories specific to the Anglo-Saxon cultures.

Due to the Anglo-Saxon/North-American predominance in business education, the views on communication and culture most accepted are based on Anglo-Saxon/North-American culture. Management education programmes are based in American tradition. In other words, the concepts of management are taught from an Anglo-Saxon/American viewpoint [12]. Macnamara [32] talks about the predominance and influence of largely American and European models of practice in public relations and mentions western myopia.

The term myopia has also been used by [31], who talks about the dominance of English in academic literature and criticises monolingual marketing scholars at universities and business schools in the English-speaking world for thinking that "anything that is *not* [italics by author] produced in English is unlikely to be of notable theoretical or practical significance […] nor vitally relevant" ([31], p. 86). He discusses different attitudes and behaviours with regard to marketing in sources other than English and argues that more languages mean more world views.

Cultural myopia is by no means limited to management research on language. Also the kind of contrastive linguistics, discussed in Section III of this paper, could be seen as myopic in that it is usually English that is taken as the benchmark against which other languages and cultures are measured.

English is not the solution to all the problems in cross-cultural communication, and awareness of languages, cultures, concepts, and thinking other than English and Anglo-Saxon/North American should be strengthened.

VI. CROSSING BORDERS WITH ETHNOPRAGMATICS

Ethnopragmatics offers a way out of the trap of cultural myopia by using so-called cultural scripts. Applied ethnolinguistics developed by [37] is a useful tool for learning the different cultural norms and values. The model consists of five pathways, namely ethnopragmatics, ethnophraseology, ethnosemantics, ethnosyntax, and ethnoaxiology. Each of these pathways looks at different parts of language [46].

Goddard [38] defines ethnopragmatics as the explanation of speech norms. Speech norms relate to culture internal ideas: to shared values, norms, priorities, and assumptions of the speakers. According to [39], ethnopragmatics offers a basis to understand speech practices with 'cultural key-words', that is in terms which make sense to people concerned, in other words with indigenous values, beliefs and attitudes, social categories, emotions and more. An example is the (Anglo) English concepts *fair* and *reasonable*, which are essential concepts to understand the way of speaking in the (Anglo) English culture.

Goddard and Wierzbicka [41], [42] develop the natural semantic metalanguage theory, which claims that, while languages vary enormously, they share a small but stable core of simple shared meanings, or 'semantic primes', and a universal grammar. In all languages a small vocabulary and grammar can be isolated which have precise equivalents in other languages. Research has identified some 60 semantic primes and their associated grammar, which are common to most – if not all – languages. Examples of such primes in English are *someone/person, something/thing, people, say, words, do, think, want, good, bad, if, can* and *because* [39]

Goddard [39] prefers the use of semantic primes, which are a mini-language shared by all languages, to English-specific terms like *politeness, directness, harmony*, and *collectivism*. In other words, semantic primes and cultural key-words counteract English myopia because they are inherent in all languages and no language is given more value than the other.

One key technique in ethno-pragmatics is the use of so-called 'cultural scripts'. A cultural script is a statement of some particular attitude, evaluation, or assumption within a given speech community. Cultural scripts relate to different aspects of thinking, speaking, and behaviour [39].

Ethnopragmatics can offer an explanation for misunderstandings which could be cleared up with cultural scripts. Tenzer and Pudelko [13] give an example of a failed interaction of a German and an American speaker which in terms of ethnopragmatics could be explained with the difference in cultural scripts. Different (linguistic) behaviours are given high value by Anglo and German cultures. The phrase 'we need to work on this', uttered by the American, is misinterpreted by his German co-worker. The personal pronoun 'we' is interpreted in a different way. While the German sees 'we' as meaning 'me and you', the American clearly meant only 'you' in this instant. 'Need' is seen by the German in its primary meaning, while the American meant 'must'.

The high-level cultural script for Anglo cultures is characterized by a high value of personal autonomy. In other

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words, it is good if speakers can think about their actions: 'I am doing this because I want to do this.' [40]. This means for interactions is that, if a person wants someone else to do something, it should seem like as if it was this other person's idea. With the use of 'we', this other person is seemingly included in the decision making process. Research [14], [15] has found that Americans tend to look for common ground with the person they are having a conversation with, which is why they would use the inclusive term 'we', even if they meant just 'you'.

Anglo cultures avoid strong directives because they would go against the high-level cultural script. Personal autonomy and freedom are important. This is why direct orders are usually not given. 'You must do this' is rather phrased as 'we need to work on this'.

The high-level cultural script for German is something like social discipline and order [37]. In other words, 'we' is clearly seen as consisting of 'me and you' because that would be the primary definition of 'we'. 'Need' just means 'need' and does not carry any connotation of 'must'.

Cultural scripts provide a very useful method in cross-cultural communication, since cultural scripts can easily be written for specific cultures and are easily understandable. Cultural scripts are accessible and transparent. They can be readily transposed across languages and cultures, and, thus, as Goddard ([40], p. 77) argues, make "a 'tutorial' about collectivism vs. individualism, positive politeness vs. negative, high context cultures" no longer necessary.

Cultural scripts are effective in cross-cultural training as the survey by [43] showed. Austrian students were asked to fill in a questionnaire on cross-cultural pragmatic concepts of English. The students taking a course in meetings and negotiations in which cultural scripts were used showed more awareness and deeper understanding of differences between languages and cultures and felt more comfortable in using idiomatic expressions than those students not taking the course. They also developed awareness of possible pragmatic failures.

VII. CROSSING BORDERS

Management research on language in international business and linguistic research should be combined. In linguistic research managers and management theory can find important implications for their work and for research as language touches upon every aspect of business activities. Managers can find information about facilitation of cross-cultural communication, preparation for multi-national teams, creation of awareness for possible conflict areas, possible solutions to communication problems, and more.

Language management has a strategic dimension, which managers unfortunately tend to ignore. As [3] and [7] state, companies underestimate the importance of language as a management issue.

There are several frameworks that help with classifying foreign language competence, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Language [44]. Yet, non-language professionals do not really know what competence levels like B1 or C2 mean. Linguistic could provide support.

For multinational companies [3] suggests linguistic auditing to evaluate a company's foreign language requirements or the less costly language check-up. Management should be aware that standardisation of language and benchmarking linguistic performance are not unproblematic issues. Linguistic research could help.

For communication in international business, several aspects of linguistics are important. The relevance of cognitive linguistics for international business lies, first of all, in the fact that languages and cultures are linked and that there is no such thing as a culturally neutral language. Secondly, just by speaking a foreign language, an employee does not automatically adopt the concepts and way of thinking of the other language and culture, and thirdly, a foreign language might impact on the behaviour and cognitive processes of an employee.

While sociolinguistics seems more reasonable for purely linguistic research at first glance, it also plays an important role when it comes to international business. A company can be regarded as a community with its own culture, geographical regions, hierarchies, various levels of power, in-groups, and out-groups, and language variation. Employees identify themselves and are identified by others through their use of language. Not only a specific jargon used by specific departments, but also the choice of first, foreign, or corporate language give clues about an employee. Likewise an employee might have specific expectations or even prejudices based on the linguistic performance of a colleague. In other words, language has a strong effect on communication and, thus, on the performance of a company.

Language clusters, which have been pointed out as a problematic area in international companies, can be regarded as a sociolinguistic phenomenon: it is only human that people prefer communicating with those who they regard as members of their in-group. Language is often a decisive marker in group membership. Just like states and nations, companies can be home to language minorities and – by extension – to minority groups within one company. Linguistic research can give answers to why certain problems occur and, together with business research, can suggest some solutions.

As language is strongly connected to identity, making one language variety or one national language into the standard corporate language, may result in (silent) rejection, protest, non-compliance, and breakdown of communication. In awarding one language the status of standard, it is given more value than other languages. Thus, employees using certain languages are knowingly and unknowingly given more or less value.

Language planning also has a (company) political dimension. Some decisions can be taken democratically, others not. Some choices made will be more popular with employees, others not. The political factor of language strategies should not be forgotten as language and changes to language policies have an impact on the effectiveness of

communication. Language is connected to power, influence, social and societal values.

All business communication forms, oral as well as written, are affected: meetings, negotiations, presentations, telephone calls, small talk as well as e-mails, letters, reports, all use language. That means that pragmatic behaviour comes into play.

Pragmatics play a role for international companies. For international companies it is important to create awareness of, first, the exolingual nature of their communication, and, secondly, the implications of pragmatic failures. Communication in international companies is both, endolingual and exolingual. Managers, and in turn employees concerned, should be made aware of the nature of their communication situations. In exolingual communication situations, problems may occur in that, although employees do not share a language and cultural background and, thus, are more likely to misinterpret the speaker's intent, they expect fewer misunderstandings and in that a common corporate language does not preclude cultural and/or personal misunderstandings.

Linguistic research has found that most of the cultural norms and values differing from one language to the next, in other words their cultural scripts, can be paired with verbal expressions such as phrases, words, and syntactic patterns. Verbal clues are easier to recognise and find than non-verbal clues. Telling members of multi-national teams to learn those verbal expressions and look out for verbal clues rather than non-verbal clues in the non-native language is a very viable option for preparation for their cross-cultural teamwork.

Discourse analysis looks at specific communication forms and provides the verbal clues helpful in cross-cultural communication. By using appropriate verbal forms, people working in multinational teams can understand each other better as well as produce and receive communication more or less correctly. Communication can be made more effective.

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