FROM LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES TO LINGUISTIC INCLUSION:

BREAKING THE NATIVE SPEAKER STRANGLEHOLD

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• LANGUAGE MOVING FROM BEING “THE FORGOTTEN FACTOR” TO CENTER STAGE IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS
  • Review articles (e.g. Tenzer et al. 2017, Karhunen et al., 2018) covering hundreds of papers
  • Routledge companion to language research (2020)

• CURRENT CONCEPTUALIZATIONS DO NOT, HOWEVER, FULLY REFLECT THE COMPLEXITY OF LANGUAGE ISSUES IN IB
  • Focus is on a mechanistic understanding of language (see Karhunen et al. 2018)
  • Emphasis is on language differences as a “barrier”, non-native speakers as “deficient” and the use of a corporate language (usually English) as a “solution”
OUR CONTRIBUTION

• INTEGRATING THREE DIFFERENT SETS OF LITERATURE
  • Language-sensitive research in International Business (IB)
  • Organizational diversity and inclusion research (ODI)
  • Socio-linguistics and communication studies

• PRESENTING A NEW CONCEPTUALIZATION:
  FROM LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES TO LINGUISTIC INCLUSION
  • Conceptualization of differences as fluid rather than subject to binary distinctions
  • Move away from privileging members of dominant groups and from seeing it as the responsibility of remaining staff to adapt to the dominant norms…
  • … towards emphasizing the importance of reciprocity & collective efforts in addressing language differences

• ILLUSTRATING THE APPLICATION OF THESE INSIGHTS IN IB CONTEXT
  • Empirical study: 79 interviews in subsidiaries of US/French/Japanese MNCs in Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Lithuania, India and Columbia
IMPORTANCE OFLINGUISTIC INCLUSION PERSPECTIVE

IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS RESEARCH

• ORGANIZATIONAL DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION LITERATURE HAS MOVED FROM EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY TO INCLUSION
  • From a focus on anti-discrimination and equal opportunity to valuing the views and contributions of all staff
  • Underpinned by both social justice ["the right thing to do"] and the business case [increased performance, innovation, competitiveness, and engagement with customers]

• LANGUAGE IN IB LITERATURE
  • Has predominantly focused on the divisive and isolating effects of language, researching issues such as:
    • Language as a (dormant) faultline that can be activated by internal power struggles (e.g. Hinds et al., 2014)
    • Language as a social identity leading to language-based clusters (e.g. Kulkarni & Sommer, 2015; Mäkelä et al., 2007)
    • Negative attributions about task competence & trustworthiness based on (corporate) language fluency (e.g. Tenzer et al., 2014)
  • Although more recent approaches are less one-sided, a coherent inclusion approach is yet to emerge
CONCEPTUALIZING DIFFERENCES
FROM BINARY TO FLUID

• DIVERSITY & INCLUSION LITERATURE
  • Moved from binary either/or classifications to embracing fluidity
  • Currently most discussed in terms of gender, where binary male/female is now replaced by a much more fluid understanding of gender, including transgender, non-binary

• SOCIO-LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS
  • Move away from the binary distinction between native and non-native speakers towards fluidity of languages in use
  • Move away from the native speaker model and its shortcomings
    • Implies the existence of a uniform group of speakers with a similar level of superior linguistic competence
    • Assumes linguistic superiority is a reliable predictor of successful linguistic performance; in lingua franca interactions non-standard use of language may be highly effective
  • Use L1 and LX speaker terminology instead and do not assume linguistic superiority equals effective communication
EFFECTIVE INTERLINGUAL COMMUNICATION

FROM PRIVILEGING DOMINANT GROUPS TO RECIPROCITY

• DIVERSITY & INCLUSION LITERATURE
  • Needs of both dominant & non-dominant groups need to be addressed
  • Both groups needs to adjust; traditional diversity management often leads to assimilation or essentialization
  • Inclusion thus requires collective, reciprocal effort

• SOCIO-LINGUISTICS LITERATURE
  • Four modes of communication: reception [listening, reading], production [writing, speaking], interaction [co-construction of discourse], mediation [e.g. mediating in disagreements]
  • Communicative language strategies such as inferring, compensating, monitoring, repairing, cooperating, asking for clarification, adapting language, and breaking down complicated information

• EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN IB REQUIRES RECIPROCITY
  • A strong relational orientation and collaboration, seeing language as a social practice
  • Accommodation through linguistic resources (intra-textual, e.g. redundancy, translanguaging, slow/careful speech) and procedural strategies (extratextual, e.g. sending notes before meeting, use of multiple communication channels)
  • L1 speakers to realise the way they communicate can often be cause of miscommunication/misunderstanding and adapt communication
INDIVIDUALS' LINGUISTIC PROFILES VARY CONSIDERABLY
- Across different modes of communication
- Within a specific mode of communication
- Across time and contexts

DIFFERENCE WITHIN SPECIFIC MODE OF COMMUNICATION

An agent [from India] got promoted to the supervisor’s job. He can talk, he can write, he can understand English. [...] I couldn’t even in my dreams imagine [that he would have problems with English].

A couple of weeks into this new job role, the final check came. A call with a client [...] the client asked for a very small thing [...] but this new supervisor did not understand [...] it was definitely the listening part, the comprehending part [that turned out to be a problem].

He had never before spoken to people from a different country. [...] The client kept repeating the same thing and the tone got harsher. [...] It was alarming for the management to have been unaware about [these possible challenges]. (Susmita, India, case study 9)
Figure 6 – A fictional profile of needs in an additional language – lower secondary CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning)

Source: CEFR Report 2018: 37
Figure 8 – A plurilingual proficiency profile with fewer categories

Source: CEFR Report 2018: 39
EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION

FLUIDITY & INCLUSIVITY (1)

- APPLY JOB-SPECIFIC CRITERIA WHEN EVALUATING LANGUAGE PROFILES, E.G. FOR SALES AND IT STAFF VS MANAGERS

An important criterion for me is fluency when responding to questions. If somebody speaks quite fluently when responding to questions, quickly and in ways that make sense; if they don’t make terrible mistakes, even if they speak with a strong local accent, this is not a problem because I know that they will […] most likely [be talking], to a Romanian or somebody from India. They also understand language in simpler ways. (Antek, Poland, case study 3)

- RECOGNIZE WHEN SUPPORT IS NEEDED AND UNDERTAKE CROSS-LINGUAL MEDIATION

We were doing some tests with some Americans, and I was managing the whole process. I arranged for a technician to be with the other technicians to give support to them and act as a translator in the plant. […] I also had to help to translate. (Alejandro, Columbia, Case Study 10)
REALIZE THAT LX LANGUAGE USE MIGHT BE MORE CONDUCIVE TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION THAN L1 LANGUAGE USE

It is quite easy for me to communicate with people for whom English is not their mother tongue because all of our language shortcomings are similar. Our range of vocabulary can be different but from the first few words we know that we are not English native speakers. It is down to our accent or we produce these strange language constructions. This facilitates communication for me, rather than making it more difficult. I know that when I make a mistake, this will be easily forgiven and I will, most probably, be understood, regardless of how clumsily I say things. (Renata, Poland, case study 3)

THIS IS NOT SIMPLY A TECHNICAL ADVANTAGE (I.E. THE AWARENESS OF SHORTCOMINGS)

• Instead the key might be the heightened consciousness to actively engage in mediation to ensure successful communication
• The need for reciprocity might thus potentially be clearer for LX users than for L1 users
• SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR COMMUNICATION IS ESSENTIAL FOR BOTH LX AND L1 SPEAKERS

• HOWEVER, THE NEED FOR THIS MIGHT BE CLEARER FOR LX USERS

In the middle of our bad English when we are together we can understand, because our bad English is the same for all. The difficult words are the difficult words for all and we realized that we are not ashamed to talk a bad English together. [...] We feel okay, because we are speaking the same way. (Bianca, Portugal, case study 8)

• L1 USERS MIGHT BE UNAWARE OF THE PROBLEMS THEIR COMMUNICATION CREATES

We have a lot of situations when we talk on the phone with native speakers who assume that they do not need to […] adjust their language to us. This creates a barrier. A person for whom English is not their native language uses simpler sentences and expressions. Native speakers do not do this. They do not have this awareness. (Julia, Poland, Case Study 2)
• LX SPEAKERS WITH A HIGH LEVEL OF COMPETENCE AND EXPERIENCE IN COMMUNICATING WITH LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STAFF CAN ADJUST THEIR LANGUAGE EASILY

One to one encounters are hard. I try to use simple words, to speak slowly, repeat questions a number of times and to explain [things]. I try to send notes from meetings. (Darek, Poland, case study 4)

• STRATEGIC USE OF PLURILINGUISTIC REPERTOIRE, EVEN WITH LIMITED COMPETENCE

I’ve been responsible for a team in Europe, for staff in Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece and France. [...] Imagine, with ten team members – if two or three have a good English, they will feel free and at ease to discuss matters, the other ones won’t. So, it helped a little bit to be able to talk to them or at least address them in a few words in their own language [...] as a starting point, because of course my fluency in Italian is not that good, but at least for breaking the ice it was sufficient. In [communication with the] Spanish, I always speak in Spanish. It’s easier. (Amanda, Portugal, Case Study 8)
• LINGUISTICALLY INCLUSIVE BEHAVIOR CAN ALSO BE APPLIED AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

Because we work quite a lot with our Japanese counterparts [...] a lot of us went through a three month-long training program in the Japanese language and culture. [...] And that course was to help us in, at least learning some of the basic expressions; how do you say ‘good morning’, how do you say ‘thank you’, how do you start an e-mail, how do you acknowledge the Japanese culture. And it’s a very good feeling. There is a lot of effort of everybody speaking to be able to accommodate to the other person who is less able to communicate in the common language. (Arjun, India, Case Study 9)

If we have issues and we don’t have the language resources in my team, I’m raising my hand and say: ‘I need someone who can speak Polish’. And I’m calling it out to the other teams and the other teams are sending me somebody with this language resource. [...] It’s very hard to have the right base, to have all languages among 21 people, but I can always rely on other people. (Jonas, Slovakia, Case Study 6)
IMPLICATIONS FOR IB RESEARCH AND PRACTICE (1)

• FROM BINARY CATEGORIES TO FLUIDITY AND A FOCUS ON COMMUNICATIVE PERFORMANCE

• HQ-subsidiary relationships
  • redirect attention to other approaches to ensure effective communication rather than seeing introduction of a corporate language as a simple “solution”

• Selection of expats & identification of global talent
  • recognize the need for more nuanced language profiles and the benefits of plurilingualism

• Multilingual teams
  • no longer see L1 speakers of the team language as “privileged communicators”, especially if monolingual and unable/unwilling to adapt communication styles
SEE EFFECTIVE INTERLINGUAL COMMUNICATION AS A RECIPROCAL RESPONSIBILITY

- HQ-subsidiary relationships
  - Changes dynamics: L1 speakers of HQ/corporate language are expected to invest as much effort as LX speakers (usually subsidiary managers)

- Interaction between expatriates & HCNs
  - Mirrors the same changing dynamic, both expatriates and HCNs need to make an effort

- Global talent identification
  - Relational and communication skills are paramount

- Multilingual teams
  - Team leaders need to model, promote & reward linguistically inclusive behavior

IMPLICATIONS FOR IB RESEARCH AND PRACTICE (2)
IMPLICATIONS FOR ODI RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

- TO DATE ODI HAS MAINLY ADDRESSED VISIBLE/LEGALLY PROTECTED ASPECTS OF DIVERSITY (E.G. GENDER/ETHNICITY)
  - Considering the ubiquity of multilingual organizations, it is important for ODI scholars to pay greater attention to language diversity

- LANGUAGE (AND ACCENTED SPEECH) IS A UNIQUE CATEGORY OF DIVERSITY
  - It is neither visible nor obscurable
  - It cannot be hidden or removed, but it can be modified

- STUDYING LANGUAGE DIVERSITY COULD BRING INSIGHTS INTO THE FLUIDITY OF DIFFERENCES
  - The extent to which someone deviates from the norm depends on interlocutors’ background and their communication experiences with people from different linguistic backgrounds
  - Translanguage performance could lead to original insights for e.g. transgender performance
CONCLUSION

Monolingualism as the norm

Plurilingualism as the norm

Binary language differences

Non-NS  NS

Low proficiency  High proficiency

Non-NS  NS

‘Deficient’ needs to adjust to NS

‘Ideal speaker’

LINGUISTIC INCLUSION APPROACH

LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

from

Non-NS  LX users  L1 users

LXS  L1 users

Complex proficiency profiles (CEFR)

Fluid language difference

to

NS

LX and L1 users

Reciprocal effort and collective responsibility

Plurilingualism as the norm

from

Non-NS  NS

LX and L1 users

High proficiency

L1 users

Low proficiency

NS

Needs to adjust to NS

IDEAL SPEAKER

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