Language Use and Communication in an International Management Setting: The Power to Misrecognize

Abstract

Linguistic and cultural differences have often been conceived as the main obstacles when communicating in international business settings. While acknowledging that such differences are of great importance, this article goes one step further in investigating the role of intercultural communication in international management settings. Hence, it is our argument that more focus should be directed at group processes within the organization. Based on a short illustrative case of a Danish subsidiary in China, it is argued that the differences in language use and communication style can be strategically used in categorization to divide power between different groups. This is important for understanding the implications of intercultural communication in international settings and how to deal with it accordingly.

1. Introduction

It has recently been argued that with intensified internationalization of the business environment, interaction across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries is a daily issue for many organization members. In a knowledge-based economy, this means that the management of communication and language has become increasingly crucial for the acquisition of competitive advantage (Dhir 2005). Consequently, Dhir/Goke-Pariola (2002) argue that corporations need to acknowledge the fact that the essential language skills form the basis of organizational human resources, and that business communication ensures that the right information reaches the right people (Lagerström/Andersson 2003). This is even more important in an international context where interaction across national boundaries may prove to be crucial in the understanding of foreign markets (Hambrick et al. 1998). In addition, language not only communicates information, but also facilitates the creation of value through the exchange of ideas, making it a vital resource in all development activities (Buckley et al. 2005).

One place where language is an important managerial challenge is in international subsidiaries. Park and his associates (1996) argue that communication problems within subsidiaries located in countries not speaking the language of the headquarter, primarily stem from three different sources: an inequitable internal communication structure, different cultural backgrounds and ethnocentrism. However, the display of social order in interaction on the basis of semantics, styles, perception and knowledge in multinational corporations has not yet been properly recognized in international business studies (Dowling/Welch 2004; Janssens et al. 2004; Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999). Hence, Marschan et al. (1997) note that language has almost disappeared from the research agenda in the topic of international management. A reason for this may be the tendency to associate the concept of language in an international context with cross-cultural communication focusing solely on measurable parameters with regard to cultural distance, as can be seen in the works of Hofstede (1991) and others (e.g. Kim 2005). This extensive work on cross-cultural communication (e.g. Beamer/Varner 2001; Gudykunst 2004) has, to a certain extent, according to Welch et al. (2001), led researchers to neglect the studies of the dynamic role played by language in international settings and focus more on the apparently static cultural traits, such as Hofstede's

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(1991) or Hall's (1976) descriptions of national differences in norms, values and communication styles. However, as sociolinguists and intercultural experts have observed, much cross-cultural communication literature does not come to grips with what happens when people are actually communicating across the boundaries of social groups (Scollon/Scollon 1995).

Hence, this study attempts to investigate the role of language and communication in intercultural business encounters as could be registered in a Danish subsidiary in China. The study is important for several reasons. Firstly, as a relatively undeveloped research field with few empirical studies, the study will produce new empirical insights enhancing the understanding of the use and management of language as a social practice. Secondly, while extant research has focused mostly on language proficiency (e.g. Barner-Rasmussen/Björkman 2007), this study introduces a social element by including group processes such as social categorization, boundary crossing and social exchange. Understanding such group processes is important due to the relation between language and social identity. According to Giles and his associates (1977), individuals' language is used in positive or negative differentiations, thereby expressing social identity. Thirdly, the theories of Bourdieu, introducing power relations to the field, are rarely applied in international management and business communication studies. Last, but not least, the increasing trend of globalization makes the understanding of the use and management of languages and communication a growing challenge throughout the world. Therefore, it is the purpose of this article to contribute to the literature on the use of language as a social practice in a managerial context by exploring communication across boundaries of social groups.

The remainder of this paper will first describe communication and language use in a Chinese context; then outline an argument for perceiving language use in international management settings as embedded in intergroup power relations. This theoretical underpinning is succeeded by a section describing the applied methodology. Finally, a short illustrative case on Danish expatriates in China is displayed and subsequently discussed, and conclusions of the study are drawn.

2. Communication and language use in China

It is suggested that communication problems may develop in the interaction between individuals from high-context cultures (Asians) and individuals from low-context cultures (Westerners) (cf. Hall/Ames 1987). While low-context cultures use a more direct communication style, high-context cultures rely more on non-verbal communication. Bilbow (1997) argues that Chinese and Western individuals assign oppositional values to certain communication styles and relate these differences to contrasts between Confucian and Western philosophies. As an example, Chinese managers are said to be implicit and slower to reach their point when conversing (Bond 1993). In relation to this, Gao/Toomy (1998) argue that it is common practice to 'let things speak for themselves' in China. This can be observed in a number of distinct communication styles, such as listening-centeredness, politeness, a focus on insiders, and face saving communication strategies.

According to Dologite et al. (1998), language use in Chinese organizations is informal and closely related to the social context. This makes the creation of lasting relationships just as important as the conveyance of tangible business relevant information (Leung/Wong 2001).

Gao/Toomy (1998) argue that the position occupied by a Chinese individual in the hierarchical structure determines how and to which extent he or she speaks. Furthermore, Chinese subordinates express their opinions only when they are recognized. Such speaking practices may have a great effect on communication, even when the conversation is conducted in English.

However, differences in language use and communication styles are not the only elements affecting intercultural collaboration. Some scholars have argued that language is closely linked to social categorization and positioning between groups and individuals (e.g. Giles et al. 1977; Lakoff/Johnson 1980). By turning to the field of social anthropology and sociolinguistics, some insight into the social dynamics of intergroup encounters can be helpful in understanding the role of language in international management settings.

3. The social organization of language use and communication

The structure and the function of language have often been looked upon as separate entities to be investigated independently (Gumperz 1965). As Chomsky (1992: 59) argued, '*the computational system of language that determines the forms and relations of linguistic expressions may indeed be invariant; in the sense, there is only one human language...*'. Hence, Chomsky stated that the goal of linguistic description should be to construct a theory that would account for the infinite number of sentences of a natural language (e.g. Searle 1982). Even though he was trying to integrate the structures and the functions of language in a conceptual framework, Chomsky's cognitive approach was criticized by other linguists, but especially by social anthropologists for the conception that language should be studied as an autonomous system reproducing itself more or less independently of social and cultural structures of society (Lakoff 1987).

Hymes (1964) was one of the first to introduce thoughts on language to the field of social anthropology. According to him, to complete such a project, there should be a higher level of analysis in which linguistic forms were viewed also in terms of their social significance (Hymes 1996). Until then, anthropologically oriented linguists had been working on the assumption that language was mainly linked to mental representations (e.g. Sapir 1921; Whorf 1951). A growing body of literature, however, began to investigate the use of language as guided, more or less, by the same practices that also guide other forms of social activity (e.g. Halliday et al. 1964).

In investigating the social significance of language, Hymes (1996) argues that one should not only study what is within a speech community, but also what is between different speech communities. This is important because the boundaries between speech communities are also boundaries of communication. However, communication is not only the function of a certain objective degree of differences between two languages or some series of related languages. Rather, it is in the process of social organization of differences that language becomes an important factor in the categorization process. In other words, to understand the role of language use in communication, researchers may benefit from investigating the social boundary creation and maintenance taking place between different groups (cf. Barth 1971).

Language provides the opportunity for engaging in interaction and can be described as one of the most important vehicles of social integration (Mueller 1973). This way, jointly shared symbolic expressions articulated through language are the means of socialization and create a social bond between individuals and groups, since the roles and social relations available in the social group are transmitted and internalized through language (Mueller 1973). In categorization of other individuals, different group members may differ systematically in the way they convey meaning and attitude in speech and this can reinforce and even create negative stereotyping (Gumperz, 1982). This negative categorization has by some authors been argued to link the social use of language to power relations (e.g. Labov 1972).

To develop the link between language and power, one may take inspiration from the thinking of Bourdieu (1977b). Bourdieu outlines a theoretical framework in which he understands social structures (such as language, culture or communication styles) as embedded in the active and interacting individual. This way, social structure conditions the actions of individuals, but is also, over time, formed by those actions (Bourdieu, 1990). In other words, culture not only determines the actions of individuals, but is also created by those actions. This dynamic view provides room for changes in social structures as a result of negotiations and 'struggles' over resources and recognition between individuals and groups (cf. Oetzel 2002). As such, communication in managerial settings can be viewed as a power relation framed within the 'praxis' of the individual and/or group that to a certain extent reproduces the social structures, but always with the possibility of social change as the individual constantly renegotiates the 'rules of the game'.

Furthermore, Bourdieu points out that the social use of language should be seen in relation to this negotiation and hence the production of social differences (e.g. Bourdieu 2004). The speaker's competence not only refers to the capability to speak a legitimate language, but also to the ability to relate linguistic expression to a symbolic logic of distinction. To put it differently: On

the one hand, language skills are resources, in a metaphorical and non-metaphorical sense, that can be used in communication and, on the other hand, language skills can be applied by individuals or groups as a way to distinguish themselves in a particular setting. Hence, the use of language is closely linked to the positioning of groups in relation to each other (Bourdieu 1977a).

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence and misrecognition can be used to elaborate on the relation between language and power (Bourdieu 1977b). Symbolic violence can be described as the capacity to ensure that the arbitrariness of the social order is ignored making it 'natural'. As Bourdieu (1977: 140) put it: "*The continuous structure of the distributions reappears, now transfigured and misrecognizable, in the discontinuous structure of hierarchized life-styles and in the representations and recognitions that arise from misrecognition of their objective truth*". This is done to ensure the legitimacy of the dominant group. Through this process, dominating groups misrecognize the traits and competencies (symbolic capital) of other groups (Bourdieu 1990). Bourdieu (1977: 140-141) argues:

The relationship between distributions and representations [of symbolic struggles] is both the product and the stake of a permanent struggle between those who, because of the position they occupy within the distributions, have an interest in subverting them by modifying the classifications in which they are expressed and legitimated, and those who have an interest in perpetuating misrecognition, an alienated cognition that looks at the world through categories the world imposes, and apprehends the social world as a natural world.

In other words, the dominating groups make their superior position seem natural, ignoring the imposed link between specific social characteristics/classifications and specific social positions. Hence, both the dominant and the dominated groups may engage in processes of misrecognition that are, in essence, the denial of interests that drive the practices of a given field or a social system (Bourdieu 1977b). This way, specific competencies, skills, and qualifications can be sources of misrecognition and symbolic violence. As an example, working class language can be institutionalized as a legitimate and 'naturalized' barrier in education and working life and thereby disguising the effect of symbolic power and its production of misrecognition (Bourdieu et al. 1994).

In conclusion, the theories of Bourdieu provide a framework that includes the intentionality of language use in communicative actions (cf. Austin 1975; Searle 1974). Similarly, the idea that differences, cultural or other, are naturalized with a purpose is particularly useful in managerial settings and the individuals' communicative strategies. This provides us with a framework that combines intentional communicative actions with the naturalization of differences. Such a framework allows us to understand how power relations are reproduced and changed in the interaction between individuals.

4. Methodology

The data collection for this study was conducted in a Danish-owned subsidiary in China. The subsidiary has around 100 employees managed by five foreign expatriate managers and five Chinese managers working together in the production and sales departments, respectively. The General Manager is Danish. The other managers are Chinese (5), Danish (3), and Canadian (1) and hold equal positions. Apart from production, the subsidiary also sells furniture through its 60 franchise shops across China.

In order to study language use and communication in international subsidiary management, a case study approach has been selected. This seems appropriate to answer explorative questions in this less researched area (cf. Marschan et al. 1997; Yin 1991). Case study research can make use of several means of data collection (Yin 1993). In the present study, the main data collection tools were semi-structured interviews and, to some extent, participatory observation (cf. Bernard 1995).

The case study approach started out exploratory and open-ended. During the project, the research questions gradually became more focused as more knowledge about the context was gained. In the beginning, language usage and communication constituted only one of several possible research themes, but gradually it became apparent that language and communication was in one way or other related to all intercultural questions raised by the interviewees.

Participant observation was mainly used to explore themes to be asked about in interviews. However, during participant observation, researchers will also become a part of the life of the interviewees. This allows them to be both engaged participants and, at the same time, distanced observers (Tedlock 1991). The researchers are, thus, continuously engaged in the process of becoming group members, and are slowly acquiring more knowledge of the local community's world views. In this project, the researchers' assistant stayed in the organization for several weeks during which he also performed some practical tasks. The assistant is of Danish origin. Being situated physically in the subsidiary made it possible to observe and note most of the activities taking place.

Five interviews were conducted in Danish and five interviews were conducted in English. Furthermore, two Danish interviews were held with managers at the Danish headquarters that had returned from the Chinese subsidiary. The lack of language skills dictated the object of the study to be limited mainly to the management team, since most local employees spoke very limited English. The researchers were only able to interview in English or Danish. Interviewees spoke Mandarin, Danish, or English as their mother tongue. Due to the sensitive character of the collected information, the use of an interpreter was deemed inappropriate. With an interpreter, there was a risk that interviewees would question the discretion of their viewpoints (Hammersley/Atkinson 1997; Holloway/Jefferson 2000). All managers in the subsidiary were interviewed. All, both Western and Chinese managers, had worked in the organization between two and five years. They were all male. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The interviews, which lasted for approximately one hour, took place in the interviewees' offices. In the interviews, we relied on a semi-structured technique, loosely following an interview guide to ensure that core topics were addressed and linked coherently, while allowing respondents to lead the conversation (cf. Taylor/Bogdan 1984). The interview guide was also helpful in overcoming the biases that can arise in a situation where the interviewer works in a second language (cf. Marschan-Piekkari/Reis 2004).

The data analysis was done manually, coding the field notes and interview transcripts (Miles/Huberman 1994). During the analysis, the statements and observations were categorized and thematized in indexes with subcategories (Bernard 1995; Spradley 1980).

5. The social practice of intercultural communication and language use

The interviewees all agree that language difficulties and communication style pose significant challenges to management interaction. As one of the Danish managers describes it:

The diversity and complexity of the Chinese language leaves many risks of misunderstanding. The Chinese use a lot of words to make themselves understood by each other. So when you have heard a two minute long explanation, sometimes you get suspicious when it is interpreted by only five words (Danish Manager).

Another Dane conveys a similar view on the contextual nature of the Chinese language use.

In principle the words 'yes' and 'no' do not exist in the Chinese language. Instead different versions of confirmation and disconfirmation such as 'correct' and 'not' are used. This creates great problems when talking to Chinese employees and managers that speak some English. A 'yes' often means 'no' and the other way around (Danish Manager).

Furthermore, it is described how the high context communication styles make it necessary to be very specific in the definition of project work, always making sure that all elements are understood. However, even though confirmed, the manager should not take it for granted that the assi-

gnment is understood. According to the Danish managers, it often simply means that subordinates have paid attention.

Consequently, expatriate managers argue that one has to be very careful in formulating sentences when conversing. As it is put by a Danish manager:

The Danish way of speaking directly is very difficult to cope with for the Chinese. If something has to be rejected, it has to be done in a very nice and indirect way (Danish Manager).

An important issue is the Chinese understanding of hierarchy which, according to the Danish interviewees, challenges collaboration across different levels. As it is explained by a Danish manager:

Newcomers will experience that they do not get any response from subordinates. No questions are asked. And if the boss asks for opinions, he is not answered. Everybody just sits quietly staring at the table (Danish Manager).

As can be seen from the above description, the Danish managers experience that language difficulties and the high context communication style of the Chinese impede communication in the subsidiary. However, both expatriates and local employees agree that communication is vital for the survival of the subsidiary. As one Danish manager states: *"I could not do anything without the knowledge from Chinese managers – they are a lot more familiar with how, where and why things need to be done accordingly"*. Another Danish manager agrees that communication is highly necessary for future business and argues that without the acquisition of knowledge from interaction with the Chinese colleagues, working in China would be similar to polar scientists working in the Sahara desert. The need for local information stresses the importance of internal communication and interaction between the Danes and the Chinese.

Nonetheless, the Chinese managers do not think that the expatriates actually take the time to hear what they have to say. *"In the Chinese market the foreign manager is not familiar with many of the characteristics, so they should communicate more with us"*. Another Chinese manager expresses a similar opinion about interacting with the expatriates *"Knowledge sharing is like one big conflict here – we don't use each other's ideas"*.

The above quotes illustrate the Chinese managers' feeling of being in an unequal relationship even though the opposite is formally expressed. Such incidences can be described through observations of a meeting.

A Danish manager wanted to explain the need for improvements of the display in the franchise shops. He stated the importance of having shops as beautiful as the ones in Europe. When asked, the Chinese manager replied that this would be difficult due to the Chinese franchises' reluctance to spend too much money on design. Consequently, it would take time to live up to European standards. The Dane responded by stating firmly that in order to not lose their franchise agreement, they should be required to do better. This closed the discussion without any solution or any suggestions. The Chinese managers apparently did not openly want to challenge the reason behind the firm statement, though it was obvious to him and other Chinese managers, that the proposal was more or less impossible to carry out in the near future.

This is an example of an expatriate manager not listening to the advice of the Chinese peers. As it is argued:

Culture has a lot to say because we are used to having a two-way communication in Denmark. I don't believe that I will be able to understand the Chinese people completely. Their behavior, their way of thinking and their culture in general is so different from ours that you can forget about understanding them (Danish Manager).

Similarly, the General Manager of the subsidiary asserts that dialogue is not truly realistic due to the cultural differences and the subsequent relationship between Chinese and foreign managers.

The Chinese managers have a different interpretation of the reasons for communication breakdowns. As one puts it:

My opinion is not important to the foreign managers, because many times they don't believe me. I tell them my opinion two or three times, and the third time I will keep quiet (Chinese Manager).

Another Chinese manager conveys a similar observation.

Communication between the managers is very difficult. Perhaps it is because the foreign managers don't see us as equal when discussing different things (Chinese Manager).

Thus, according to the Chinese managers, the main reason for the lack of communication is not only cultural differences, but also an ethnocentric, and hierarchical attitude held by the expatriate and too little sensitivity to other ways of expressing opinions. As one Chinese manager argues: *"The foreign managers always have an idea when solving a problem and it is very hard to change that"*. A feeling of foreigners not listening can be related to a statement made by the Danish General Manager of the company: *"When ideas are brought forward, I will consider them. I normally have an idea of whether or not it is possible"*.

From the description of interaction in the subsidiary it becomes clear that even though the expatriate managers express that Chinese individuals have insufficient language skills and difficulties speaking up when they feel inferior, they do nothing to eliminate this feeling. As it is stated by the General Manager:

When you aren't Chinese, you will always have a problem understanding them, and the whole structure of the society and culture will not allow this relationship (Danish Manager).

Officially, all managers held the same status. Unofficially however, the expatriates, according to their Chinese colleagues, maintained a superior attitude. And without intention it seemed that language and communication differences became a 'natural' barrier that excluded the Chinese managers from taking part in the decision making. To put it differently, the Danes explained that differences in language use posed an insurmountable obstacle, and that nothing could be done to solve this problem. Consequently, it seemed that the expatriates felt they had to take on the trouble of managing the subsidiary with little inclusion of the local managers. Thereby, the Danes stabilized their opinion on the impossibility of altering the communication in the subsidiary due to cultural structures. The expatriates, in other words, ignored the potential for changing communication patterns through interaction. Instead, they chose to blame the cultural differences for any communication problems, resulting in the exclusion of the views of the local managers. Hence, the management practice of the expatriate managers can be interpreted as an act of symbolic violence. By ignoring the voice of the local managers, the expatriates misrecognized their own active role in installing differences in language use to induce influence and power.

6. Conclusions

When one considers that ethnography is a thick slice of life, this paper has only illustrated a tiny part. However, we have intended to present some initial empirical insight into the use of language and communication across the boundaries of social groups in an international setting.

By application of sociolinguistic and anthropological theories, we argue that the linguistic exchange taking place often depends on the structures of the social field, and that the communicative actions are used in positioning actors within the field. Thereby, the perception of speech communities based on distinguishable uses of language may become expressions of power relations. Language is thus linked to other social structures facilitating the social categorization of groups and individuals. In other words, language can be used in processes of both exclusion and inclusion of individuals, and differences in language use might form distinctions by which individuals and groups can be restrained from influence.

In Bourdieu's perspective, differences in language use may be misrecognized, by dominating actors, as a source of social categorization. Thereby, expatriate managers may unconsciously be excluding local managers due to their linguistic performance. This can result in an unequal power

distribution that over time will be perceived as natural. As can be seen in the case, this can have important implications for acquiring information vital to running an international business unit.

As theoretical implication of the study, we argue that strategies for communication and human resources management that do not take into account the informal social organization may be ill focused or seriously flawed. With this in mind, it is recommended that the dynamic role of language in the creation and maintenance of social structures should be integrated in the theories of international management and business communication. Such theories would provide a more nuanced picture of intercultural encounters (Bargiela-Chiappini/Nickerson 2003).

Due to the exploratory character of the study, the attempt to provide general practical guidelines may be somewhat premature. However, one can provide an initial sketch of some ideas on avoiding the described problems. First, the awareness of the implications of the informal social organization of communicative practices in international corporations may be the first step to deal with potentially negative effects. Secondly, corporations need to ask themselves whether international managers are able to communicate with local employees in a mutually acceptable way in a business environment, where international language skills and low context communication styles have great symbolic values. Do managers actually misrecognize their own background as basis for the evaluation of other ways of communicating? Are expatriate managers unknowingly reproducing their own authority by their communicative actions?

Finally, subsidiary managers could, to a larger extent, be held accountable for the management of communication. While this may not be sufficient by itself, we suggest that a communication policy, motivating expatriates to learn and use foreign languages in order to facilitate cross-cultural communication, could still improve intercultural collaboration. Such a policy could have a positive effect on the ongoing dialogue and relationship building between nationalities and thereby moderate the dominant position of the expatriate management team.

As a suggestion for further research, more studies are needed in order to place language use in international management settings more clearly in an organizational context, including variables such as informal interaction practices and power relations. As the empirical material of this article has demonstrated, the local organizational context shapes the perception and use of differences in language and communication styles. Future endeavors could relate to questions concerning the role of the organizational environment in developing effective communication management strategies in international corporations. Finally, rather than focusing only on general differences in national cultures, more intercultural business communication studies should engage in investigating the role of group dynamics in intercultural communication.

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