

Critical Perspectives on International Business

Special Issue on critical perspectives on language in international business

Guest Editors

Claudine Gaibrois, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland
 Philippe Lecomte, Toulouse Business School, France
 Mehdi Boussebaa, University of Glasgow, UK
 Martyna Śliwa, Durham University Business School, UK

Introduction to the Special Issue

Over the past two decades, the issue of (natural) language has attracted increasing critical attention in the field of international business (IB) and management studies more broadly (Tietze and Piekkari, 2020; Wilmot, 2017). While a managerialist-functionalist perspective dominates the field, a growing body of research has turned attention to questions of power and politics. For instance, it has been argued that the increasingly widespread practice of mandating a common (typically English) language inside multinational companies (MNCs), far from being a neutral process, “should be viewed as exercise of power” (Vaara et al., 2005, p. 596). The process typically results in native speakers benefitting from “unearned status gain” (Neeley and Dumas, 2016, p. 1) and obtaining undue control over the communication flow (Feely and Harzing, 2003; Harzing and Pudelko, 2013). In other words, a ‘common’ language in MNCs can empower some employees and disempower others (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Peltokorpi and Vaara, 2014). Similarly, research has shown how translation within the MNC can be understood as an inherently political act (Ciuk et al., 2019; Logemann and Piekkari, 2015).

Some research has also placed greater emphasis on individual agency in the context of the linguistic inequalities described above. This might include open resistance against the use of a certain language as well as more subtle forms of non-compliance such as adaptation (e.g., Gaibrois and Nentwich, 2020; Wilmot, 2017). Such work highlights power and politics in MNCs as a source of dynamism and change, stressing possibilities of empowerment, emancipation and giving voice to marginalized groups. As an example, scholars have recently stressed the power effects of hybrid language use, as it can provide possibilities to express voice and facilitate participation in interactions (Gaibrois, 2018; Janssens and Steyaert, 2014).

Additionally, a growing body of literature has provided critical reflections on the dominance of English in management research and education, including IB. This body of research has questioned the “hegemony of English in the production of management knowledge” (Karhunen et al., 2018, p. 985) and called for more dialogue and research on the subject (Boussebaa and Brown, 2017; Boussebaa and Tienari, 2021; Tietze and Dick, 2009).

This emerging body of power-sensitive research has been important. However, there is a range of under-studied issues on language dynamics from a critical IB perspective that require attention. The research highlighted above, and the papers presented below are just the start of what we think is a much-needed stream of critical research on language in IB. One issue to be further examined is how language policies inside MNCs and the related process of “Englishization” may be shaped by power relations rooted in the colonial past and present (Boussebaa et al., 2014; Vaara et al., 2005; see also Paunova, 2017; Śliwa, 2008). Another, related issue, concerns the linkages between the use of English as a global language and the global spread of neo-liberalism (e.g. Śliwa, 2010).

Additionally, in order to understand the effects of contemporary IB activity on society (Boussebaa, 2021; Dörrenbächer and Michailova, 2019), further research is required on how language policies and practices in MNCs relate to processes of participation and inclusion/exclusion (e.g. Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012). Research investigating how language intersects with other diversity dimensions such as migrant background, education or organizational function shows how language contributes to social and organizational differentiation (Johansson and Śliwa, 2016). Possible questions include the effects of using English as a ‘lingua franca’ on the participation of low-skilled employees in organizational life (Gaibrois, 2015) or the consequences of the foreign-language environment on migrants’ and refugees’ organizational status.

In this Special Issue, we have invited scholars from various disciplines and geographical locations to reflect further on the issue of language in IB from a critical perspective. Potential contributors were encouraged to challenge the earlier focus on managerial perspectives by highlighting issues of power, privilege and inequality. We selected four papers. Reflecting back on the overall body of submissions, we observe that there is still plenty of potential for critical studies investigating how language policies and practices in IB are mediated by power and politics. It is our hope that this Special Issue contributes to encouraging further research in this area. In light of recent events, possible topics might include language inequalities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Piekkari et al., 2021), refugees’ language-related challenges

in accessing the labour market (see Lønsmann, forthcoming), and the effects of the increasing digitalization of workplace activities on language-related power relations in MNCs.

The four papers we selected stand out by their focus on topics that have thus far received limited attention in language-sensitive IB. Jonna Ristolainen, Virpi Outila and Rebecca Piekkari, in their paper titled “Reversal of language hierarchy and the politics of translation in a multinational corporation”, examine the politics of interlingual translation in a Finnish MNC. Drawing on a postcolonial perspective, which is rarely used in language sensitive IB (for exceptions, see Boussebaa et al., 2014; Vaara et al., 2005), the authors situate translation within the Finnish MNC in the context of colonial relations between Finland and Russia. They show how Russian became the dominant language of translation despite English being the firm’s official common language, and explain that reversal of the corporate language hierarchy with reference to Russia’s historical role as a colonial power.

Kyoungmi Kim and Jo Angouri’s paper titled “‘It’s hard for them to even understand what we are saying’: Language and politics in the multinational workplace” illustrates how language becomes part of a mechanism of negotiating group membership and of perpetuating or challenging power asymmetries through social and ideological processes. The study investigates a Korean MNC, and thus contributes to the much-needed investigation of Non-Western contexts in language-sensitive IB. By drawing on the notion of language ideologies from sociolinguistics, the authors introduce a valuable concept for the analysis of power and language in IB. The study also has the potential to stimulate methodological innovation, because it draws on interviews from an ethnographic case study and analyses language use in situ, both methods that are rarely used in language-sensitive IB.

The effects of colonialism on language use are also addressed by Natalie Wilmot and Susanne Tietze in their paper titled “Englishization and the Politics of Translation”. The authors extend the emerging debate on “Englishization” in IB and management more broadly by considering the issue of translation. They provide a useful review of the relevant literature and find that despite growing interest in language in IB research, the issue of translation has received comparatively little attention. They also show that those articles which do address translation fall into one of five categories: epistemological/methodological, translator agency, discursive void/conceptual fuzziness between languages, and translation as social practice. The authors also usefully call for greater engagement between studies of language/translation in IB and postcolonial theory.

Finally, in their paper on international accreditation challenges in French business schools, titled “International accreditation experts as linguistic and cultural boundary-spanning

facilitators: A critical assessment of the effects on internal stakeholders”, Mary Vigier and Michael Bryant focus on higher education. The authors situate their study in France, which is useful given most relevant studies have focused on the UK (e.g., Śliwa and Johansson, 2014; although for an exception, see Boussebaa and Brown, 2017). Vigier and Bryant identify a set of linguistic and cultural challenges that French business schools encounter in their efforts to secure international accreditation. The authors draw attention to the substantial political and practical efforts that the schools have to invest into to learn and adapt to the HE practices and value systems of the cultural and linguistic context from which international accreditation principles derive. In this regard, the requirement to use the English language throughout the accreditation process adds another layer of complexity.

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