In the past few decades, it has become widely accepted that the lingua franca of international business is English; witness the way companies increasingly choose English as their official corporate language. Although this would seem to facilitate communication, this article argues that the choice of language(s) used is a delicate issue, highlighting the complexities of any split into native/non-native speakers, and thus requiring considerable people management skills. This article discusses research from the Helsinki School of Economics on language and communication in multinational corporations based in non-English speaking countries. It suggests a reconceptualization of English lingua franca as business English lingua franca (BELF), and argues that BELF is a mostly oral language through which power is wielded in multinationals, and perceptions of self and others created. Moreover, it is not a “cultureless” language, but rather creates new operational cultures. Language choice thus has implications for management, HR, and employee satisfaction.

Keywords: lingua franca; business communication; globalization; language; multinational corporations

Friedman (2006, p. 10) aptly divides globalization into three stages, which he characterizes as follows:

While the dynamic force in Globalization 1.0 was countries [italics added] globalizing and the dynamic force in Globalization 2.0 was companies [italics added] globalizing, the dynamic force in Globalization 3.0—the force that gives it its unique character—is the newfound power for individuals to collaborate and compete globally.
With globalization proceeding from Friedman’s stage 1.0 through stage 2.0 to stage 3.0 (where we are now), the dynamics of communication processes are undergoing inevitable change. Communication potential is driving dramatic changes in organizations and their environments. As Friedman (2006) points out, globalization is fuelled by technology. Yet technology alone could not have achieved globalization. What is needed is a sharing of language facility. Only language can enable individuals and companies (and countries) to communicate. To understand globalization, it is therefore crucial to examine developments in the language and communication through which it occurs.

It is this linguistic perspective that inspires research in my unit—the International Business Communication Unit in the Department of Languages and Communication, at the Helsinki School of Economics (for more information on my institution, see www.hse.fi). We see language and communication dynamics as the driving force in global business. We therefore examine language specifically as an enabler, but also increasingly as a troublemaker in communication and globalization. In all our work, we have an applied focus: We want to do research that can be used for the teaching of future global managers in a business school environment. We also want to help existing companies to globalize and to operate successfully. Our focus is on Finnish and Scandinavian companies, which—like companies in other non-English speaking countries—face formidable challenges as they attempt to operate globally in a language that is not their mother tongue.

Language and communication challenges, however, are not the sole concern of non-English speaking countries. When multinationals from English-speaking countries go local in different parts of the world, they are faced with the problem of how best to communicate in their new environments, both within and outside the company. In these situations, the question arises: Is English always the answer, or is there a place for local languages as well? Language issues concern everyone.

In this article, I argue that the choice of language(s) used, particularly in intracorporate communication, is a delicate and complex issue requiring more management attention than is frequently given. Language and language skills tend frequently to be viewed as a challenge for the individual. However, as employees’ language skills crucially affect interorganizational and intraorganizational communication, language is also a managerial issue not to be ignored. To increase awareness of language issues in companies, and encourage research in the area, this article discusses the research my colleagues and I have done in multinational companies based in Scandinavia. First, I will
explain the reconceptualization of English as a shared language—a lingua franca—which we felt was a necessary starting point. I will then briefly discuss our theoretical framework and methodology. Finally, I will summarize our main findings and conclusions, in the form of five sweeping statements.

FROM ENGLISH LINGUA FRANCA (ELF) TO BUSINESS ENGLISH LINGUA FRANCA (BELF)

From the global perspective, the position of English as the universal lingua franca—shared language—of today is beyond dispute (see, e.g., Cenoz & Jessner, 2000; Crystal, 1997; Dovring, 1997). The number of people who speak English as a foreign language (nonnative speakers, or NNSs) far outnumbers those who speak it as their mother tongue (native speakers, or NSs). Back in the '90s, Crystal (1997) estimated that 80% of speakers of English were NNSs. An updated estimate would be that the current figure is closer to 90%. The literature speaks of ELF communication (e.g., Knapp & Meierkord, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2001, 2004), which involves nonnative speakers of English. Arguably, more international business is actually done in English between NNSs than between NSs.

Scholars have tried valiantly to pinpoint the characteristics of ELF discourse. The focus in that work has been to identify core linguistic elements that have to conform with native speaker expectations to not cause intelligibility problems, and distinguish them from noncore elements, which are recognized (by native speakers) as anomalies, but which do not affect intelligibility. Based on speech collected from a wide range of NNSs, Jenkins (1998, 2000, 2002, 2004), for example, has defined a particular lingua franca core, to which she assigns such elements as maintenance of the contrast between long and short vowels, such as the /i/ and /iː/ sounds in the words live and leave. She also lists features that do not seem to cause misunderstanding in lingua franca communication (non-core). These include the mastery of the phonetic qualities of sounds or pitch direction to signal attitude or grammatical meaning. Along the same lines, Seidlhofer (2004) presents some preliminary findings in the lexicogrammatical area which, in authentic lingua franca communication, were found to be unproblematic, forming no obstacles to communicative success. Examples of these are dropping the third person present tense –s, and confusing the relative pronouns who and which. (See also Bartlett & Johnson, 1998.)
Although this research has proved useful in many ways, the manner in which ELF researchers’ thinking revolves around native speakers would seem too partial a view for globalized business. The concept of a common core is instinctively useful; yet questions like the following arise: Why should NNS ELF communicators shape their mutual communication around a fictitious NS (particularly in the absence of one)? Why could they not shape it around their own, shared, communicational needs?

Seidlhofer (2004) points out that that reshaping might be difficult. She suggests that there is a conceptual gap in our minds, resulting from the way language seems to be so closely tied with its native speakers and their cultural backgrounds that it is difficult to open up conceptual space for a “language” which is “nobody’s,” yet “everybody’s,” as ELF is claimed to be. She argues that NS norms tend to operate as a point of reference not only in scholarly thinking but also in ELF speakers’ minds. Bamgbose (1998) also points out that the “success” of NNS discourse tends to be judged not according to how well that discourse functions and “gets the job done,” but rather according to how well the speakers are able to emulate the language use of native speakers. Because they are mostly doomed to (relative) failure in this respect, NNSs are frequently seen to be a source of trouble. Their less than adequate language skills are usually deemed to cause misunderstandings (Bamgbose, 1998), and, at the very least, result in discourse that is “hard work” for the NS. What does not often come into the equation, however, is that communicating in a foreign language is more often than not extremely “hard work” for the NNS as well; understanding the NS is hard work—to say nothing of the hard work involved in the sheer production of English discourse. Besides, there is the communicational angle: Like the NNS, the NS may also have somewhat less than adequate communication skills, and thus may not be able to take situational factors fully into account in interactions. Neither party alone can therefore take the blame for possible shortcomings. There is serious space for communication teaching to address the problem.

Although the NS >> NNS dichotomy seems, in many respects, to be common sense, it is inherently dangerous if used as a basis for communication studies: It divides the world of communication into “us” and “them,” resulting in “linguistic ethnocentricity” comparable to Bennett’s (1986) well-known cultural ethnocentricity, where one particular way of “doing things”—in this case, the native speaker’s way of communicating—is taken to be preferable to others. Clearly, in view of global diversity—and the amount of business done by NNSs—ethnocentricity is not a feasible starting point for
examining global language issues. A reconceptualization of ELF is thus necessary.

Building on Seidlhofer (2001, 2004), some business discourse researchers have, indeed, departed from the ELF school of thought and started to discuss language in terms of “International English for Business Purposes,” or “International Business English (IBE)” (e.g., Bartlett & Johnson, 1998). The inclusion of the words international and business implies a shift in the way language is conceptualized. International takes English away from the sole realm of native speakers, and business gives it its domain of use, as well as indicating the discourse community whose terms of reference should be used in any judgment of “efficiency” or “success.” Building on the idea of IBE, and carrying on from where the ELF school of thought leaves us, our research team has christened this “language” BELF. (For a detailed discussion, see, e.g., Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005; Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, & Planken, 2007).

Although the NS >> NNS dichotomy seems, in many respects, to be common sense, it is inherently dangerous if used as a basis for communication studies.

BELF differs from ELF in that its domain is solely business, and its frame of reference is provided by the globalized business community. The B of BELF is thus the sociopragmatic backdrop against which language—and any lexical or syntactic anomalies in it—is to be interpreted. Looked at from this angle, we can refer to the global business community as the “culture” that has created BELF, and within which BELF evolves. As with all cultures, the global business culture is diverse and dynamic; it also has groups who see themselves as its “owners.” In the case of BELF, its owners are the “International Business Discourse Community,” who have certain shared values (e.g. that of doing profitable business), and use it for a shared purpose. The “rules” of BELF, and its operational guidelines, however, have yet to be defined. Though globalization may well have reached Stage 3.0, BELF is only at the beginning of its development.
A start in the definition of rules for BELF has already been made by scholars who have studied the way business discourse works and how NNSs use that discourse “to get jobs done.” This research has established the cooperative way in which BELF (like any other) discourse is built and meanings created (which is not to say that the interactants always agree—quite the contrary—but rather that even disagreements are jointly constructed). In this vein, Vuorela (2005) and Charles (1996; also Charles & Charles, 1999; Lampi, 1989) studied sales negotiations, viewing their English speaking negotiators simply as interactants/communicators, and language users in their own right, with no NS/NNS distinction, and came up with particular linguistic strategies used by international business negotiators. Firth (1996), in his study of telephone conversations between sellers and buyers, found what he labeled as the “let-it-pass” principle, which he claims contributes to cooperative and mutually supportive use of language. Poncini (2004) examined discourse in an Italian company’s meetings of its international distributors, and describes, for example, the collaborative construction of a corporate “we.” Nikko (2007) investigates construction of meaning in company internal business meetings with Finnish and Swedish participants, where the BELF speakers help each other through tricky bits in the discourse, occasionally resorting to code switching. Interestingly, the mostly European research on BELF quoted above has not discovered significant misunderstandings in spite of frequent syntactic and lexical anomalies. This ability of BELF speakers to understand each other must surely be partly attributable to their shared business background (in spite of great diversity), and shared purpose, with the help of which discoursal interpretations are made.

In contrast to the above researchers who emphasize sharedness, Meierkord (2002) emphasizes diversity. Speaking of ELF communication, but with applicability to BELF, she suggests that lingua franca conversation is a hybrid—a linguistic masala—where, in addition to the speaker’s competence in the language, other factors like the interactants’ cultural backgrounds are involved. Meierkord (2002) argues that what is frequently ignored is that the speakers creating the lingua franca do have a cultural background, and, in fact, a diversity of backgrounds—and this diversity is reflected in the language. She refers to Geertz (1973), whose work she sees underlying all later discussion of the relationship between language and culture.

The main differences between the ELF approach to communication and the BELF approach are summarized in Table 1.
As we can see from Table 1, the differences between the two schools of thought culminate in the view adopted toward language and communication. ELF researchers tend to be more language than communication oriented—seeing linguistic skills as the crucial factor in communication—whereas BELF researchers see communication skills as crucial. Both, however, seem to agree on the fact that, at the lexicogrammatical level, signs are interpreted on the basis of English words and English grammar, whereas interpretation conventions prevailing at the sociopragmatic level are more complex. It is this complexity and the diversity inherent in the addition of the B into ELF which make the reconceptualization we have undertaken particularly challenging, yet necessary for understanding the nature of global communication.

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<td>Note: ELF = English lingua franca; BELF = business English lingua franca; NS = native speaker; NNS = nonnative speaker.</td>
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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

The reconceptualization of English as a shared language, discussed above, illustrates the overall theoretical framework for our research: social constructivism (Geertz, 1973; Suchan & Dulek, 1998). In qualitative analysis of empirical data, we build on the principles of interactional sociolinguistics (see Gumperz, 1982; Tannen, 1993; for an application to professional discourse, see Yamada, 1992).

ELF researchers tend to be more language than communication oriented—seeing linguistic skills as the crucial factor in communication—whereas BELF researchers see communication skills as crucial.

In social constructivist theory, there are three points that, in particular, guide our research. Firstly, meaning is seen to arise from social processes to which individuals contribute. These processes are constructed through language. Analysis of language activities will contribute to an understanding of how organizational actors make and modify meanings, social identities, and roles (Allen, 2005).

Secondly, knowledge is created and shared through language use. As Allen (2005, p. 37) puts it, “We use language to produce and reproduce knowledge as we enact various roles within various contexts.” Knowledge sharing is the formal and informal exchanges of ongoing social interaction that mobilizes knowledge that is dispersed around the organization or its stakeholders (Doz, Santos, & Williamson, 2001; Kalla, 2006). Knowledge sharing will create social capital necessary for thriving concerns (see Kalla, 2005, 2006).

Thirdly, we subscribe to the critical assumption that taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world (and ourselves) should be challenged (see Burr, 1995). These taken-for-granted assumptions include the fact that cultural differences exist; also, that NNSs create a challenge for communication (discussed above).
As an application of social constructivism, interactional sociolinguistics acknowledges the interaction between cultures and language use. As Yamada (1992) points out, an overreaching premise of interactional sociolinguistics is that meaning is based on shared expectations and can only be understood in the context of interaction. In multicultural situations like global business, the various cultures of the interactants interact with, and influence, encounters which, in turn, influence the nature of discourse. Out of this complex, a dynamic interactive process is created.

Within the multidimensional theoretical framework created by social constructivism, we hope to produce a rich description of communication processes, with quantitative findings guiding qualitative research, and observations made through qualitative analysis helping us to understand findings from quantitative analysis.

DATA AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The bulk of our data comes from, or deals with, in-house communication in multinationals created through cross-border mergers and acquisitions. There are several reasons for our interest in mergers and acquisitions as a route to globalization. Firstly, corporate growth through mergers and acquisitions has a long tradition in the business communities of the U.S. and the U.K., which makes them an important target in globalization research (see, e.g., Cartwright, 1998). Secondly, as Cartwright (1998) points out, the past few decades have seen dramatic social, political, and economic changes in Europe which, in turn, have led to a substantial increase in the number of cross-border mergers, acquisitions, and other forms of strategic alliances. This trend has been particularly strong in Scandinavia. Thirdly, as Louhiala-Salminen (2002) points out, mergers and acquisitions have been studied extensively from the financial, strategic, economic, and organizational management point of view (see, e.g., Larsson & Risberg, 1998; Vaara, 1999, 2000; Gertsen & Söderberg, 1998), and there are even studies that give a fair amount of prominence to some cultural and communicative issues (see Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch, 1999a, 1999b; Holden, 2002; Welch, Welch, & Piekkari, 2005), yet few studies focus on the linguistic and communicative perspective. Finally, multinational companies (MNCs), by their very nature, involve employees and managers who speak different languages coming together to form a new entity, and having to find a shared
language—shared communication practices—to create this entity. Research from the communication perspective would thus seem crucial.

Most of our data are from four major multinationals. (For reasons of confidentiality, the names of these companies will remain undisclosed.) All have headquarters in Finland, that is, a nonnative English–speaking country, and comprise companies coming mostly from other nonnative English-speaking countries, yet having English as their official corporate language. These companies are thus in the increasingly common situation of having chosen to operate in English though English is a foreign language to virtually all concerned. It is this intriguing situation which sparked off our research back in 1999.

To ensure that our research methodology reflects the multidisciplinary field of business communication, we have adopted two different research strategies. Firstly, we have created a special multidisciplinary advisory board for each one of our research projects. To supplement the linguistic expertise in our core research team, our advisory boards bring in expertise from the fields of management communication, organizational communication, and international business management, as well as experiential knowledge of the particular business areas on which we focus. Moreover, we operate in close contact with companies that not only provide us with data but also function as a springboard for ideas, and provide us with a highly pragmatic, down-to-earth perspective on the everyday reality of corporate life.

Our second strategy is to use multimethod analysis. This involves using different data collection methods, and analyzing those data from different perspectives, with different methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative. Accordingly, we have carried out surveys that are analyzed quantitatively; the surveys are followed up with interviews, thus producing interview data which can be analyzed qualitatively; we also gather authentic communications from the companies we study—e-mail messages, videotaped meetings and presentations, corporate intranet Web sites, and other corporate communications messages, which are analyzed with the help of discourse analysis, genre analysis, and conversation analysis. These multiple data analyses allow us to look at a variety of communication issues from different perspectives, and thus gain insight into the multifaceted communication processes in our case companies.

In line with the focus of Friedman’s Globalization Stage 3.0, our research focuses on individual employees. We want to find out what individual employees perceive their everyday communication to be like, and what their attitudes are toward language issues. We are interested in the
changes that employees see as having occurred in communication patterns and language requirements as a result of, for example, a cross-border merger; we are also interested in personal reactions to the resulting need to increasingly use a foreign language in various aspects of work; finally, we are interested in employees’ views on cultural issues that result from increasingly international operations.

With the follow-up interviews, the surveys give us the subjective reality of employees caught in the midst of globalizing corporate operations. Thus, we get a glimpse of corporate reality. What we do not capture is the “official corporate view.” Neither can our database possibly be anywhere near large enough to allow any kind of generalizations about globalization and communication. What we get is an opportunity to understand some feelings and perceptions of changes occurring in one small part of global business. (For a critical discussion of the methodology in the surveys and interviews carried out, see Louhiala-Salminen, 2002.)

The views expressed in surveys and interviews are used as a stimulus for qualitative analysis of videotaped and audio-recorded communication events. Over the years, we have accumulated a database of close to 60 hours of spoken data—meetings, negotiations, and presentations (for details on meetings data, see Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; on negotiation data, see Charles, 1994, and Huttunen, 2005; for investor relations presentations, see Caspers, 2006)—in addition to having access to e-mail messages (for details, see Kankaanranta, 2005, 2006) and corporate intranet communications in companies that are in different stages of globalization. We use these data to give insight into what we, as researchers, see is actually happening in the companies—as contrasted with what employees perceive to be happening.

Modest as this database is, anyone who has been involved in trying to get recordings from companies will appreciate the enormity of the challenges presented by this kind of data collection. Research cooperation in the form of surveys and interviews is one thing; permission to record interactions is another. Questions of confidentiality loom larger than anywhere else, as also does individual trepidation, perhaps even fear of being personally exposed through recordings. In the world of spoken BELF research, the amount of our recorded data is actually substantial.

**FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS:**
**THE SUBTLE POWER OF LANGUAGE**

Detailed reports on our research findings have been published and appear in the references section of this article. Here, I want to discuss
selected findings and conclusions that would seem to have significance for research in our field, as well as areas that are in dire need of further investigation. The essence of our findings—and the conclusions we have reached—have here been brought together into five (sweeping) statements. Each will now be briefly discussed.

1. Informal, oral communication deserves to be considered of paramount importance in MNCs.

In spite of the technological advances of the past decade, the significance of oral, informal communication, such as face-to-face chats, in the everyday business of MNCs comes through clearly in our research. In two of our case companies, we asked about the percentage of time spent on various communication situations/media in in-house communications. The share of various oral communication situations (63%) exceeded that of written situations (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002). Face-to-face meetings topped the list (25%), with telephone interaction a close runner-up (more than 20%). Informal chat at the coffee machine (or similar) accounted for more than 10% of internal communication. Interestingly, informal chat was perceived to account for a greater percentage of employee communication than formal oral communication situations, such as company presentations, and video and teleconferencing. This finding would seem to have implications for BELF teaching and training: Although obviously NSs will have no trouble chatting, BELF speakers may well find it challenging.

Indeed, the challenges involved in oral interaction were highlighted in interviews. Respondents in one globally operating MNC emphasized the difficulties experienced in understanding each others’ Englishes in oral situations (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Marschan, 1996). Interestingly, several of the interviewees mentioned that problems were created by NS communication as well as by NNS; it seems that NSs’ sophisticated language could be difficult for NNSs to comprehend. In informal interviews, problems were also identified in the way decisions were understood in multicultural meetings, with miscomprehension resulting in misconstrued nonverbal performance (see Huttunen, 2005).

As cross-border mergers for many of our interviewees had meant changing over to a foreign language in many of the tasks that earlier had been carried out in the mother tongue, it was not unexpected that “foreign language use” was regarded as the main source of communication
problems. In one company it was pointed out, for example, that at the pre-BELF stage, when Swedish was used as the “language of management,” that is, a shared language, the Swedish employees were able to use their mother tongue, whereas many Finnish employees felt that Swedish was not their “best foreign language” (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002; see also Charles, 2002). Interestingly, these interviewees explained that learning banking terminology in another language was not a problem, but finding the right expressions in “ordinary small talk,” or acting assertively in negotiations, and being able to suddenly and effectively express opinions or convey nuances in meetings, was difficult. It was thus the discursive conventions of informal communication that seemed to be a challenge, rather than the language of formal communication as such.

Our findings on the significance of oral interaction are in line with, for example, Nickerson (2000) and Poncini (2004). There clearly seems to be a need for management to adopt a broad view of in-house communication. That view should not limit communication simply to the more or less formal communications occurring in, say, superior-subordinate contacts, or those carried out by the communications function. Instead, communication should be understood as “integrated communications” (Kalla, 2006), where communications refers to all interaction that takes place in a company—the informal communication around the coffee machine and the small talk in meetings, as well as in other face-to-face contacts. According to Kalla (2006), this kind of informal communication is essential for networking and creating bridging and bonding relationships between employees, which, in turn, contribute to knowledge sharing and the accumulation of social capital within the company. Clearly, MNCs, which have the challenging job of creating some sort of global unity and loyalty among a hugely diverse entity of employees, are a prime example of the need to focus on both formal and informal communication.

2. Language is a power-wielding instrument in organizations.

Ability to operate in the official corporate language, and/or the language of management/headquarters, gives individuals access to corporate-level information. Interviewees narrated how language skills were seen to empower employees. The following two cases are illustrative.
Our first story shows how those who, because of inadequate skill in the corporate language, do not have access to information distributed in the official language of the company, become dependent on those who do have that access. Charles and Marschan-Piekkari (2002) quote the case of a subsidiary whose representative told our interviewer that his unit did not need any training in the corporate language. It turned out later that this interviewee was the only one who could speak the language in that unit. Thus, any language training would have meant a sharing of the power that his language skills gave him, and eventually have threatened his position as gatekeeper. At the time of the interview, all information from headquarters was filtered through him, making everyone else dependent on him. He was clearly wielding power through language.

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Learning banking terminology in another language was not a problem, but finding the right expressions in “ordinary small talk,” or acting assertively in negotiations, and being able to suddenly and effectively express opinions or convey nuances in meetings, was difficult.

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Our second story is about subjective (dis)empowerment. It derives from a company formed as a result of a merger between Finnish and Swedish companies. Right after the merger, the official shared language (the language of management) was Swedish, that is, the mother tongue of some employees but not of all. Many Finnish-speaking staff felt their Swedish was more or less rusty, in need of updating and practice, dating as it did several decades back to the Swedish learned in high school. Against this backdrop, these Finnish-speaking interviewees felt they were suddenly stripped of power. They felt they were unable to even use the power and influence that their professional status and role in the company granted them. In meetings, they felt inferior to Swedish NSs; in particular, they pointed out how difficult it was to behave in a professional and influential style, operating—as they felt they were—in halting (although in many cases actually very fluent) Swedish. Interestingly, these same interviewees felt relieved when the
official company language was changed to English (BELF), which was a foreign language to both Finnish and Swedish speakers. The use of BELF was perceived to remove the NS $\succ$ NNS dichotomy, and thus to equalize language-based power relations. This brings us to my third point.

3. Language affects perceptions of oneself and others.

The above interviewees, struggling to assert themselves in Swedish, felt disempowered because of their lacking language skills. As one of them said, “It is extraordinarily difficult to be professional in ‘Me Tarzan—you Jane’ language” (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002, p. 77). The disempowerment was reflected in the way they perceived themselves as professionals and managers. In this situation, they used a variety of coping strategies. These included avoidance strategies, such as attempts to move sideways in the corporate hierarchy to areas where Swedish would have to be used less, but also attack strategies, such as enrolling on Swedish training courses, and actually upgrading their language skills. From the organizational point of view, therefore, language issues greatly impacted organizational hierarchy and other HR issues, and became an important consideration in promotion and relocation decisions.

Language is a very personal thing. If people, on a daily basis, face situations where they feel deprived of their ability to communicate and express themselves adequately, there is, as our interview data indicated, a sense of frustration, and a struggle to maintain dignity. This challenge becomes particularly acute if there is a general feeling among employees that the frame of reference in communication is the native speaker (as is the case in ELF). In organizational life, this frustration is bound to result in employee dissatisfaction with the jobs and the company; inevitably, low performance levels will follow. In a multilingual MNC environment, it is therefore particularly important for managers to be aware of the significance of language and communication skills for staff motivation and job satisfaction.

4. Language unites people and organizations—but also divides them.

We have seen above how perceptions of one’s ability to use language in professional communication can be a disruptive force if one thinks in terms of the NS $\succ$ NNS dichotomy. Kalla’s (2006) study, however, focuses on the uniting force of communication. She has studied the role of communication in bridging and bonding relationships created within a Finland-based multinational. Through quantitative analysis, she demonstrated that the easier
communication is made—and here, for global companies, technology comes into play—the more communication there is likely to be. She links communication frequency with strong, bonding relationships; knowledge sharing; and creation of social capital in corporations (Kalla 2005). Frequent and fluent communication—which assumes a shared language facility—thus serves to cement an organization together.

The above interviewees, struggling to assert themselves in Swedish, felt disempowered because of their lacking language skills.

Mäkelä, Kalla, and Piekkari (2006), on the other hand, look at language as both a uniting and a dividing feature at organizational level. They discovered a “clustering” phenomenon in MNCs. According to them, units in countries with close linguistic and cultural affinity tend to communicate, cooperate, and share knowledge with each other, but fail to do so with units whose linguistic and cultural characteristics would require greater linguistic and cultural effort. Their findings thus confirm what Marschan (1996) referred to as “shadow structure,” with corporate employees communicating with those with whom they can easily communicate (because of language and culture) rather than with those with whom they should, according to their professional and business interests, be communicating. By dividing individuals into “us” and “them”—those who “can” and those who “cannot”—language can be seen as having the same divisive impact at group level. This is obviously a challenge for multinationals, particularly in view of the fact that language effects—both positive and negative—are not always overt and obvious, and language as a potential factor in corporate success or failure is frequently overlooked. Thus, more research is needed on the role of language and communication in companies.

5. BELF is not a “cultureless” language.

Qualitative analysis of videotaped meetings in the data reveals that, building on a common lexicosemantic core of English, speakers of different mother tongues and cultures use the language according to different
sociopragmatic rules (Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). They thus bring into BELF situations their own cultural characteristics, and together create a “new” operational culture based on shared understanding of situational factors.

From video-recorded and audio-recorded data, we examined Swedish and Finnish BELF speakers conducting business meetings in English. We then compared our findings (a) to what Finnish and Swedish interviewees said about their own and their colleagues’ communication style, and (b) to what the literature says about the nature of Finnish/Swedish mother tongue discourse (e.g., Fant, 1990; Lehtonen, 1991; Öberg, 1995). We wanted to find out (a) whether interviewee perceptions of the nature of Finnish/Swedish communication would tally with findings from a close analysis of their discourse, and (b) whether characteristics that previous research had suggested were specifically NS Finnish/Swedish were transferred to, and could be detected in, the speakers’ BELF discourse.

One characteristic that we looked at was a characterization that came up again and again with our interviewees, that is, the “wordiness,” or “talkativeness,” of Swedish participants in meetings, and the “few-wordiness,” and “relative silence,” of the Finnish participants. Interestingly, word counts did not show any significant differences between the amount of speech produced by Swedish and Finnish speakers. Differences did, however, emerge when Swedish-Finnish BELF interaction was subjected to close discourse analysis. Swedish speakers tended to pay explicit attention to their interactants, ask their opinions, address them directly, and use metalanguage that referred to what previous speakers had said; they also tended to “think out loud.” This meant that a lot of the time the Swedes were talking and enhancing communication between the various partners, but were not actually saying much at all about the issue at hand. It may well be that this kind of discourse caused their behavior to be perceived as “wordy” and “talkative.” The contributions of the Finnish speakers, on the other hand, tended to be highly information oriented, with few questions asked; the Finnish speakers in the data tended to proceed in a linear manner without using metalanguage to refer to what had previously been said (for more details, see Louhiala-Salminen, 2002; Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005), and they said what they had to say in a well-argued but monologic style, without attending to the interactive requirements of other participants. Moreover, there was a difference in speech distribution between the Finns and the Swedes. The Finnish speakers tended to have periods of silence, followed by longish monologues,
whereas the Swedes’ contributions were shorter and more evenly dispersed throughout the meeting, thus with shorter periods of silence (Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006).

Discoursal differences like issue orientation versus interpersonal orientation, amount of metadiscourse used (see Halliday, 1973), and timing of speech could well explain the perceptions of Finns as “quiet” and Swedes as “talkative.” Moreover, because the Swedish colleagues tended to address the Finns directly, and ask them questions (which the Finns rarely did to the Swedes), the discourse gave the impression that Finnish speakers were often the underdogs—the less dominant, the less powerful ones—in the event. This conclusion was confirmed in interviews, where Finns said how difficult it was to be assertive and hold their own in BELF discussions (see Louhiala-Salminen, 2002).

What these findings revealed was that BELF speakers—like, of course, all speakers in any situation—bring into BELF interaction their own sociopragmatic assumptions and conversational expectations. The resulting discourse may well be “different” from what native English-speaker discourse might be (for example, Finnish small talk might well differ from NS English small talk expectations; see Charles, 1994), but, as our data showed, business got done and conversational cooperation was achieved (though disagreement over a variety of issues was not avoided). The point is, however, that, in an analysis of this BELF discourse, a comparison of the performance of these NNSs to NSs would be of little relevance to the business at hand, as no native speakers were present. Finnish and Swedish participants seemed to bring in their own discoursal and cultural expectations, and use them to create BELF communication that served them more or less efficiently. Far from being “cultureless,” that discourse comprised features of at least two cultures—Finnish and Swedish—out of which the speakers forged their very own, situation-specific, discursive culture (in accordance with Holden, 2002).

Clearly, we are here talking of highly complex issues, and we are not in a position to generalize. At the moment, however, we are not so much interested in making generalizations as in trying to understand BELF processes. Findings like the above would seem to help us to appreciate the challenges involved. Moreover, our empirical analyses seemed to confirm the need for a reconceptualization of ELF into BELF.

**FINAL WORDS**

It is widely agreed that MNCs need a corporate language—a language of the management—in which policies, bulletins, and information in general
are made available. On the basis of our research, we suggest that multinationals need to shape their language policies with the shrewdest possible appreciation of the significance that language has for individual and organizational performance. Companies need to see internal communication as an integrated issue, including both formal and informal communication. They need strategies for implementing their language policies—strategies that take into account the language challenges that individual employees face in globalized operations. They also need to be aware of the potential that judicious handling of language issues offers them.

At the moment, companies address “the language issue” in a variety of ways. Some (as Welch et al., 2005, point out) see it in simplistic terms as merely a mechanical translation issue made easier and less costly with the emergence of such IT tools as increasingly sophisticated (but still flawed) translation software. Clearly, these companies are ignoring the empowerment and unifying potential of language and communication, as well as the impact that informal communication has on staff motivation and perceptions of self-worth and professionalism.

Many companies, on the other hand, see the adoption of a designated company language (or languages in some cases) as a solution to the language question and associated internal communication issues (Reeves & Wright, 1996). Although this certainly alleviates some communication challenges at some level, a shared language, as we have seen, is no panacea. These companies, again, fail to see communication as a process integral to the whole organization, with important interpersonal communication occurring on an informal basis, often in social situations (Kalla, 2006; see also Nohria & Eccles, 1992).

Companies that have a realistic and insightful view of the role of language in their operations see it as being at the very core of international business. As Welch et al. (2005, p. 11), point out: “[Language] . . . is a sometimes awkward, sometimes impenetrable, sometimes an irritating reminder of what may be involved in crossing foreign cultures, and managing in a cross-cultural environment.” The key to handling this diversity, however, is not to attempt to model everyone’s language according to that of native speakers. As Reeves and Wright (1996) suggest, the task of learning NS-like language is daunting. Learners are bound to fall short of their target, and are thus doomed to the role of a less proficient speaker/communicator, who is seen to cause problems and communication failures in interaction. Moreover, for companies operating in the fast-paced global business of today, any NS-oriented language teaching approach causes insurmountable problems. Companies can seldom afford to rely solely on unrealistic,
long-term solutions like raising the language proficiency of their staff to near-NS levels.

To come back to the title of this article: Yes, language *does* matter in global operations, and yes, language matters are important for companies. Indeed, on the basis of our research, we suggest that, for businesses, heightening awareness of communicative and cultural diversity and working on ways to increase mutual understanding of the Englishes (or other shared languages) used globally—whether NS or NNS—is of vital importance. We therefore need research that helps us to better understand the complex process of how people relate to each other across language barriers. This research needs, we feel, the BELF approach, where language is seen to be doing a job—an important job. Whether native or nonnative, communicators need to learn (be taught!) to listen, make situational adjustments, and use sociopragmatic, situational potential to jointly create meanings and operational cultures.

It is in this vein that we, at the Helsinki School of Economics, will continue our research on the role and significance of a shared language (English) as we proceed in Globalization Stage 3.0. The Outstanding Researcher Award granted to me gives us fresh vigor and increasing motivation. On behalf of my whole team—most of whom have been quoted in this article—I want to thank the Association for Business Communication for doing me this great honor.

REFERENCES


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