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“English is the language of business”: An exploration of language ideologies in two European corporate contexts

Abstract: The increased linguistic and cultural diversity of international workplaces challenges different understandings of corporate language, corporate communication and even language ideologies. The understanding, attitudes and ideologies towards language and language policies of members in culturally and linguistically mixed teams are an important aspect of business communication studies that so far has received little attention. Through an analysis of two case studies of MNCs in Switzerland and Italy in the banking sector, based on semi-structured interviews with employees in those companies, this paper aims to explore ideologies of multilingualism and English that dominate in the workplace and those that underpin the official and unofficial corporate policies adopted. The dominant discourse is that “English is the language of business” and it remains a fixed and unquestioned corporate language. However, the importance of collaborative, flexible and multilingual practices at all levels of professional communication has been highlighted in the experiences reported by business professionals interviewed. The use of BELF and other languages does not necessarily function, as companies’ policies would require, following the monolingual language separation mode, but in a mixed, fluid and flexible mode. Finally, the promotion of a translingual use of BELF in corporate communication may allow flexibility and equality in dealing with the diversity of repertoires and access to resources for plurilingual employees.

Keywords: Language ideologies, multilingualism, Business English as a lingua franca, translanguaging, plurilingual repertoire, OLAT/OLON

1 Introduction

An increasing number of companies are opening branches around the world and operating in different countries and business realities. This often involves a growing mobile workforce and the development of international teams. The globalization of the economy, therefore, contributes to the development of more multilingual and multicultural workplaces and the issue of work communication has been given some attention in communication studies. However, the use of

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a corporate language or different *lingua francas*, more commonly English as a *lingua franca*, and other multilingual means of communication has only recently started to be considered an important aspect of business communication.

The common discourse is that English is reported to be the most useful language of the banking business, though the local language and the language of the company’s headquarter(s) also play an important role. Large-scale surveys confirm that, depending on the local or specific business context, other languages than English can serve as *linguae francae* (Angouri and Miglbauer 2013). In fact, in the two multinational companies (MNCs) explored in this paper, not only English but also French, German and Italian are used as local languages or unofficial media of communication in some international exchanges. With increased linguistic and cultural diversity of international workplaces people come into contact with and challenge different understanding of corporate language, corporate communication and even “language”. Their understanding, attitudes and ideologies towards language and language policies are an important aspect that so far has received little or no attention in business communication studies. However, as Nekvapil and Sherman (2013) point out in their study of multinationals in the Czech Republic, language ideologies have a “normative character” (p.90) and inevitably guide or underlie communicative practices in the workplace. Therefore their analysis is particularly important to help us to understand specific communicative practices of inclusion and exclusion in the workplace.

In this paper we explore two case studies of MNCs in Switzerland and Italy. Based on semi-structured interviews with employees in those companies, this contribution aims to explore ideologies towards multilingualism and English that dominate in the workplace and those that underpin the official and unofficial corporate policies adopted.

2 Language ideologies in MNCs

The main focus of this paper is language ideologies and their impact on MNCs policies, their employees and discursive practices. Silverstein describes language ideologies as “any sets of beliefs about languages articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (1979:193). Like other kinds of ideologies, language ideologies involve simplifications of reality that have specific consequences in everyday practices, and can lead to potentially discriminatory or stereotyped assumptions. In this paper we explore the ideologies and discourses around languages that have specific consequences for employees’ practices in MNCs. It is also important to note that

language ideologies are not only explicit, but they can be implied in implicit assumptions (Gal 1989) about the nature of language and its practices.

Languages cover various instrumental and phatic functions in business contexts – they can be used as the corporation medium of communication, or for the international coordination of production, as the employees' medium of communication and also for the local communication exchanges. In the international corporation, these functions need to be managed and the possibilities of using one or more languages have been explored in the literature (Piekkari, Welch, and Welch 2015). Traditionally companies would identify at least three main strategies for the management of company communication: a) the company uses the local language, b) the company uses another language c) the company adopts a *lingua franca* (Vandermeeren 1998). More recently, companies have started looking into possibilities of using more than one language for communication (and our case studies are a confirmation of that tendency), but mostly these policies respond to the OLAT (one language at a time), or even OLON (one language only), principles (Yanaprasart 2015a).

Related to the concept of the transparency of language(s) where *one language fits all* (Yanaprasart 2016a), languages are often considered as separate and fixed entities, which *should* be used one at a time. Even when, as with recent developments, companies do allow for more than one official language, they are not supposed to be used together or in mixed form. For instance, in a study of a trilingual Swiss public service company (Lüdi et al. 2009) the official policy adopts a “juxtaposing” language management, which is based on a fundamentally monolingual vision of communication. In the company's *Linguistic Guide* (3rd edition September 2008: 24), it is recommended that speakers of different languages have to choose a working language in meetings:

Our meetings will be more efficient and take less time if we observe the points following: [...] If participants are from several linguistic regions, we set to agree on one working language.

From a company language management perspective, these multiple languages are allowed but can be used only one at a time. However, in daily and professional communications between collaborators with different repertoires, more “mixed” strategies are employed, involving different forms of multilingual speaking, and these practices are normally not sanctioned by the company's policies. To handle linguistic dynamics in the workplace, employees exploit their respective multilingual repertoires to achieve communicative goals, be it under the form of code-switching or language mixing (Cogo 2009; Klimpfinger 2009; Lüdi 2007; Lüdi, Höchle, and Yanaprasart 2010, 2013), receptive multilingualism (Werlen 2007), or translanguaging practices in contexts of superdiversity (Cogo 2012).

Despite mixed and flexible language practices, business communication studies still advocate a common language as the solution to linguistic diversity

in the workplace. Lehmann and van den Bergh (2004) clearly mention that multicultural teams must choose a professional common language to communicate to each other. In their views, a common means of communication allows them to exploit at best their diverse skills. For some, the lack of a common language, first and foremost, prevents effective communication. Introducing a common language into the internal communication of multinational companies has been seen as a panacea for the problem of language differences for quite a long time. Appeals for a new, universal language, a special code (Peters and Waterman 1982) that would be unambiguous and have the facility to describe things as they truly are, have been put forward in the past. More recently, proposals have been less ideal and more towards the use of one existing language. Phene, Madhok and Liu (2005) support the idea of a shared language as a component of corporate identity that enables an MNC to transmit and share knowledge.

But there is a dark side to this choice. Welch and Welch (2008) argue that — even if the adoption of a common corporate language is beneficial for the flow of information — it often introduces new barriers and forms distortion. Members of staff risk being marginalized or isolated because of their weak competence in the company language, and they may feel discriminated or excluded if they are not comfortable with the language they must adopt. In other words, the policy of a single corporate language does not remove the language barrier in face-to-face verbal interaction, but recasts the language problem by pushing it further down the hierarchy, and creating new configurations of linguistic power. As language can be used as a tool in the creation and recreation of power (Gaibrois 2015; Yanaprasart and Gaibrois (eds.) 2017), the policy of uni/monolingualism does not guarantee the success of interpersonal interaction (Welch and Welch (2008), especially when the monolingual solutions constitute a conventional and simplistic style of thinking (cf. Martin 2007).

The ideologies of one language as more effective medium of communication, of language separation and fixity also underlie more recent discourses concerning English as a corporate language (cf. Cogo 2015). In international business contexts, especially MNCs, referring to English only as a corporate language has become a common practice, if not an official recognition of the company’s language policy. In its role of corporate language, “English” is now a requirement in globalized business and, even more, an essential aspect of business knowledge. However, clear definitions of what kind of “English” is meant to be a corporate language are very rarely provided. When no further specification is added, the usual interpretation is that the kind of English considered is a native variety, usually British or American, and a fixed entity without multilingual influences. This is not, though, what happens when English is used as a business language in international contexts.

3 Business English as a Lingua franca (BELF)

In practice, when English is used in the international arena it is often adapted and shaped to the local context and participants. In other words, it is not the English of native speakers, but Business English as a Lingua franca (BELF). Most studies in the professional area confirm the overall tendency for BELF users to focus on the content of the message and understanding of business ideas, rather than foregrounding accuracy in linguistic terms. In the words of one professional in Ehrenreich's study, "I must say I'm confronted with so many levels of correctness that I don't actually care whether something is correct or incorrect. As long as the meaning is not distorted" (Ehrenreich, 2010: 418). Kankaanranta and Planken (2010: 399) compare the use of BELF in professional contexts "to the ability to use a computer: you could not do your work without it in today's international workplace".

It is not uncommon for professionals to make reference to variation in linguistic proficiency among the people they come in contact with in the workplace, and often comments include easiness or difficulty of accents, and native speakers tend to be singled out as the most difficult interlocutors (cf. Rogerson-Revell 2008; Sweeney and Zhu 2010). This is not so surprising if we think that professionals operate with a range of L1 and L2 speakers of English who potentially display variation in their speech at all levels, lexico-grammar, phonology and pragmatics. What makes their communication work, therefore, is not so much adherence to "native speaker norms", but a flexibility to accommodate to the unexpected (Cogo 2009; Cogo and House 2017) and adapt their pragmatic and strategic competence to the various communicative challenges of the international workplace. Accommodation, relational talk and rapport-building are seen as essential aspects of communication in (B)ELF environments (Jenkins 2014; Mauranen 2012; Seidlhofer 2011).

Studies exploring business discourse, notably through the analysis of naturally-occurring data from BELF contexts, also demonstrated that BELF communication is intrinsically intercultural, and for that business professionals need to be able to deal not only with multiple backgrounds and identities, but also with different ways of operating or acting in multiple business cultures (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010; Yanaprasart 2018). On that basis, because of the cultural hybridity of these contexts, some scholars also focused their research on negotiation of meaning, the co-construction of understanding and the strategies used to solve non-understanding (Cogo and Dewey 2012; Pitzl 2005; Zhu 2015). This discourse focus highlighted the importance of collaborative practices at all levels of professional communication and provided important findings in BELF-based interactions.

The other aspect that the research in BELF has emphasized is the multilingual nature of BELF itself. Studies have shown that it is not only English resources that

shape BELF, but multilingual repertoires are normally brought up to play in communicative practices. Some studies emphasize that English is a “must” while a repertoire of resources is appreciated strategically (Ehrenreich 2009; Pullin Stark 2010), others explore the issue of language choice and the importance of other languages for work matters, not only for relationship building (Charles 2007; Chew 2005; Erling and Walton 2007; Evans 2013; Zhu 2014). In some of these studies, issues concerning English, in its potentially excluding or gatekeeping role, are also emphasized (Miglbauer 2017), something we will expand on below. The main point to make is that English is seen as “only English”, as separate from the other languages and in competition with them for a role in the business. BELF, however, is a multilingual medium, it is shaped by the multilingual repertoires of the speakers and co-constructed in the international workplace. In other words, BELF is a dynamic medium of communication with multilingual resources coming to play in and within English in the professional workplace (Cogo 2012, 2017; Hülmbauer 2013; Zhu 2014; Cogo 2017).

4 Context, methodology and data overview

In this paper we compare results from two case studies concerning two MNCs, which are part of the authors’ previous and on-going work, focusing on the dominant language ideologies. The study explores two very different multilingual settings, highlighting the complex interplay between contextual-organizational elements, observed practices and participants’ views regarding language use, with the aim of exploring the language ideologies prevalent in two different contexts and institutional environments. The specific questions include an investigation of the ideologies and philosophies that have an impact on those policies and attitudes of the employees dealing with language-related practices on a daily basis.

The first study, a Swiss National Foundation-funded research project (100015_147315, cf. Yanaprasart 2015b), focused on the way in which companies manage diversity at work on the one hand and tried to identify the advantages and drawbacks of linguistic diversity in the Swiss situation as a multilingual state on the other hand. The study aimed at understanding the development of local diversity management practices (local initiatives) and the way of managing several aspects of workplace diversity as described by the field workers. Its main focus was to uncover the language regimes and the relevance or not of linguistic diversity as a part of the organizational diversity management. As part of this study involving ten firms – be it multinational, national and regional, a banking Swiss multinational corporation, BANK A, is selected to contribute to the comparative analysis of this paper.

The second study is part of a project involving three different companies in three different countries (cf. Cogo 2012, 2015, 2016b), focused on the ways in which companies manage multilingualism and English or ELF in the workplace. The project aimed at understanding the policies and practices driving the regulations of language and uncovering the attitudes and ideologies which influenced those regulatory practices. While the project constitutes a multi-sited ethnography, the research presented in this paper concerns BANK B, the Italian branches of a multinational banking corporation, with headquarters in France and branches all over the world, including a financial hub in Italy which is the main location for the investigation of this paper.

Despite differences in the theoretical approach and specific research questions, both studies collected significant qualitative data on language use and policies in the banking MNCs, which could be fruitfully compared. Methodologically, in both projects we used a mixed-methods approach or triangulation of methods: analysis of texts documenting explicit language strategies, including different kinds of company documents (e.g. internal magazines, websites, job advertisements, intranet documentation, emails etc.), interviews with key players in the company HR department and interviews with employees, observations of the company's offices.

This paper is an exploratory comparison of language ideologies in two different MNCs. Although the site of investigation for BANK A is the Swiss headquarters, and for BANK B is the Italian branches of a French bank, the kind of work that the headquarters and the branches cover is in many ways similar and makes it comparable data-wise. The work these two banks do concerns most areas related to the financial business, such as accounting, sales, management of various operations (including projects, market and liquidity risk management), treasury, income, security and IT services.

5 Monolingual ideologies and multilingual practices

The focus of this paper is on language ideologies and discourses constructed by employees in two MNCs. The driving research questions, which guided the comparison of our data, concerned the role of multilingualism and English in the MNCs, and the attitudes and ideologies that underlie the multilingual and English practices in the workplace.

From the companies' top management point of view, adopting one common language is generally seen as a common-sense decision for communication in the MNCs. In both our studies, a monolingual language ideology is largely shared by

the investigated multinationals, and this becomes obvious in the discourses of the interviewed participants, such as “English is the official management language [...] of the company” or “The language of banking is English. English is the official language of BANK A” or “It’s impossible to think of working in our field without knowing at least English” and “English is the language of corporate banking” (BANK B).

However, while discourses about the effectiveness and usefulness of a common language are widespread and agreement is generally towards that language being English, actual official language policies seem to address the issue differently. When asked to clarify what English and if there is a specific variety of English that is the preferred language, there is still a lot of confusion. BANK A clearly specifies that “it is American English”. If this latter is recognized as “the official language of the company”, “here at BANK A, it’s not really clear what the corporate language is”, because people “have a lot of freedom to do things” in multiple languages. In the Swiss quadrilingual linguistic landscape the workplace is obviously multilingual. BANK A designates “American English” as the company’s official language and recognizes a duo “English-German” as the corporate working languages at the headquarters in Zurich, whereas French and Italian constitute its means of communication on the company’s websites and external communication with clients and stakeholders, as well as internally with colleagues in French or Italian speaking parts.

For BANK B the situation is a little different. The employees recognize English as the main corporate language, but the required variety seems unclear. They seem to gravitate towards British English, “because most of our business relations are with British offices”. English is not the only official language, it is accompanied by another corporate language, French, and so BANK B too seems to rely on a duo (English-French) of official languages. While most official aspects of the MNC are done in English there is quite a lot of the company’s management work that is done in French. This is justified by the interviewees referring to the company’s origins, when the company was locally serving a specific geographical region, and to French being the language used historically at the beginning of their banking business. But this is not the whole picture. Historical developments have played a very important role in the official language policy decisions, so that Dutch and Italian were added to the pool of official company’s languages when historical mergers took place.

Corporate language is the black box of business communication studies, something obscure and alien, something that does not need to be investigated. In fact the processes that happen inside the box are obscure and therefore the black box of English as a corporate language is objectified and seen as something that does not need explaining. This, as a consequence, implies that the concept

is reified and conceived as monolithic, as one entity (see Cogo 2016a). Various companies deal with this concept differently – sometimes the notion of corporate language is dealt with in official language policies, whereby language choice decisions are explicitly formulated and one or more specific languages are mentioned as corporate languages. Sometimes other companies adopt a laissez-faire mode and language choices are left to ad-hoc realizations. Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) describe these as “multilingual strategy” and “emergent strategy” respectively. In the cases of BANK A and BANK B the situation is even more complicated because monolingual ideologies are constantly facing and struggling with multilingual practices.

5.1 The case of BANK A

BANK A is a Swiss-based multinational bank, headquartered in Zurich. It operates in over 50 countries, employing more than forty-five thousands individuals from over 150 different nations. BANK A, on its website, describes itself as “A Financial Partner Who Speaks Your Language”, and who is familiar with specific requirements of clients’ sector – one who speaks your language. The Regional Head of Diversity and Inclusion, T.M.,¹ underlines the attractiveness of Swiss multilingualism as a big advantage for the companies based in this country. On the one hand, she points out that it is important that “we have to have employees who speak the language of our clients.”² BANK A offers a global website (.com) in five languages and in four languages for the Swiss local website (.ch) in the following order: EN, DE, FR, IT, SP. On the other hand, “the language of banking is English to serve people all around the world. English is the official language of BANK A”, points out T.M., because BANK A has become an international bank. Although, there is not an official recognition of the company’s language policy and none of our respondents was able to find either written documentation, or guidelines on language usage and practice clearly documented, “English is our corporate language” has been widely stated.

1 All names and initials used in both studies are pseudonyms or changed initials which have been altered for ethical reasons.

2 Data quoted in this paper was originally in Italian, German, French or English depending on the participants’ language choice for the interviews. Where Italian, German or French were used, we have translated the interview extracts into English. In this contribution, all interviews with <Bank A> were conducted in English. T.M. is a German citizen and J.K. came from England. R B. G. has Spanish as her mother tongue. All chose to use English, as it is their professional language, in the interview.

The idea of one international bank having one corporate language is emphasized. In the quote below, J.K., an English native speaker responsible for internal language training, stresses the role of English in doing that, especially the contact with native speakers.

The bank is doing quite well. We become one bank. We were divided divisions and now one bank, one international bank. A lot of people are becoming more into contact with English native speakers than before. (J.K.)

The bank chose to specify a national variety of English, “American English”. This choice may be explained by the partnership in the late 1970s between BANK A and a New-York based investment bank. For J.K., the two varieties of English, British and American, are not of importance.

We got once an email from the CEO, saying that English in the bank would be American English, and not British English. [...] In my mind, I didn’t think this is very important because sometimes Swiss people tend to get excited about the difference between British English and American English. The British and American don’t bother much. Everybody understands everybody more or less. (J.K.)

T.M. recognizes a big “linguistic” challenge in the perception that “English is not enough in Switzerland [...] you have to do multilingual reports. [...] English is not enough, cannot sell this product to customers here in Switzerland. It was sometimes a little bit challenging”. Because of the nature of their work, the multilingual core team of diversity and inclusion values the members’ linguistic resources, which are seen as five distinct languages: English, German, French, Italian and Dutch.

To address the linguistic challenge, translations are put forward as the solution with regard to external communication. Written information has to be transmitted in the local language, alongside English. “In Switzerland, we translate most of the official documents, our pages, our intranet in at least four languages. It’s always German, Italian, French, and English. This is how we operate”. This practice can be related to the corporate social responsibility in terms of equal opportunity, equal treatment, and equal employment policy. BANK A places considerable emphasis on the importance of ethical values and professional standards, and language equality seems to be equated with access to translation: “Employees’ correspondences or policies, compliance trainings, etc. documents that we use internally are translated”. In addition, the code of conduct exists in Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Portuguese and Spanish. T.M. explains that “the number of languages depends on the country”. This language policy seems to be influenced by the “traditional one nation-one language ideology” (Hüning, Vogl, and Moliner 2012: 34); the number

of languages to be translated directly corresponds to the number of national or local languages of the country's branch.

Translation services are generally offered to ensure the understanding of every participant. Whereas English and German dominate in the workplace at the headquarters, two other national languages, French and Italian, also take the role of local *lingua franca*, particularly in regional offices. In meetings and events, participants are invited to feel free to use the language of their choice. Forcing everybody to employ English is not the firms' way of doing: "if you don't understand, you can ask. If you want to contribute, you can contribute in your mother tongue. So you can use English, Italian or French. We don't have this approach of forcing everybody to talk English." T. M. makes clear that English is not an absolute linguistic competence to have, because "Sometimes it's more important that people speak Swiss German than English or speak French or speak Portuguese or Chinese or Japanese."

Even if BANK A does not use English as an overruling language and permits the use of local languages in order to ease communication, and even supports the parallel use of languages, the firm's language management is to put a strong strategic role for English so as to reinforce a monolingual corporate language policy. A minimum knowledge in English is increasingly required, as not all documents are expected to be translated into German and the other languages. Employees have been asked to be able to "understand and read English documents" (T.M.).

The trends towards promoting "one language only" policy is accompanied by a growing assumption that speaking English is all that is needed for the global professional of tomorrow. This is also reflected in the following comment of J.K.: "English seems to be far more important, the one they need to have. We used to have internal courses for French. Now we just have English internally". Whereas this teacher observes the decrease of the value of investing in other languages than English training among employees, to produce the level of language capabilities through language training takes considerable time. T.M. shares her dilemma: the use of English is still a big problem for a number of her colleagues, this regardless of the company's effort:

I have a lot of colleagues on my level who are not used to talk English in their work because they have Swiss customers and they only have Swiss people around them. And then they go to top talent training and suddenly everything is in English and they are not used to it. (T.M.)

And when the question of English appears, it is rarely clarified which kind of English it is referred to: "If you are speaking English, what English we are talking about?" According to T.M. speaking English has "a lot of colors". There is not one model of speaking English, but English is plural. This way of perceiving things may "help people who are not good in English to overcome this barrier".

Additionally, the unclearness about corporate language is not perceived as a negative point. On the contrary, freedom in language choice is equated with originality. The English official language does not exclude other multiple working languages.

Here at BANK A, it's not really clear what the corporate language is. Because we have a lot of freedom to do things in German, or Italian or Japanese or Portuguese or whatever, and I also like this. It makes it NOT EASY but I think it's good also for the people because it's part of their personality, part of their originality. They can also live this while they are all in business. (T.M.)

Employees in BANK A tend to emphasize that the “not necessary-perfectionism” is perceived as a challenge rather than a weakness. If one language does not work quite well, let's use another one in a pragmatic manner.

In the past, I used to think the Swiss were very fussy about their language. They hardly opened their mouth and must be 100% perfect. I have feeling that changed now. You get quite a lot of people who just have to and they just throw into it. (J.K.)

Despite the expectation to use only English, J.K. does not hesitate to step out of her linguistic comfort zone by choosing German, the local language and the mother tongue of the majority of her colleagues, as a sign of respect (“If I am with German speakers and I am the only English speaker. I feel bad if I speak English”), of solidarity (“If I feel that people are struggling to speak English, or if it is not so relaxing, so that I prefer speaking in German so they don't have to struggle”). And as J.K. explains, “Obviously, my German is far from perfect for various reasons. [...] What I speak is a terrible mixture between Swiss German and High German. [...] But it's fairly fluent”. This illustration interestingly reflects J.K.'s ideology of what “language use” means to her. In the eyes of this plurilingual language user, what prevails in multilingual business settings is a not a “perfect” language knowledge, but a “pragmatic” language use when attempting to find local solutions to practical problems. Switching to the language of the other is a practical way to cross linguistic borders and give equal access to all participants in interaction (Yanaprasart 2017).

Furthermore, it turns out to be that mixed language use or a multilingual *franca* approach is a common mode of professional communication in international business settings. Despite the fact that the genre of banking in itself is associated with English, translation is not always the most efficient way for dealing with business conversation, as a managing director and her assistant³ point out.

³ Sometimes I found some words in German for example really more adapted to what I was feeling more than in French and in a way it's true that you can use some words to say something better about your feeling and you can communicate better. (L.T.)

Exploiting, instead, the multilingual resources of all team's members by using all languages at the same time (ALAST) is quite natural.

Sometimes, it happened that we started in one language and finished in a different language because you don't find the right word right away. So it's a mixture. Or sometimes we have a presentation written in English but delivered in French or written in French and but delivered in English. For people, they feel more comfortable because first of all you mix the languages that you can express yourself, understand exactly what you meant with the richness of your vocabulary. Your potential of vocabulary is much bigger and richer. (R B. G.)

Instead of respecting at any price the monolingual ideology of "one language at a time", that risks impeding the effectiveness of group communication, these interviewees seem to agree on the point that making use of their multilingual resources allows them to accommodate much more to their interlocutors in this multilingual business setting. Besides, this communicative approach assumes that a *lingua franca* does not consist of one language. To optimize cross-language communication, BELF is used, which is a hybrid, mixed form of languaging, or translanguaging. Speakers mobilize their multilingual resources in complex and simultaneous ways, by moving away from any singular norm to perform a range of creative, dynamic and transgressive discursive practices.

What we have seen above is that the external environment affects the company's strategy and thus elements of its internationalization strategy. And for BANK A, there is no doubt about the central role of English as the global business language, especially in the banking world (economic challenge). However, in practice BELF is used not exclusively as English, but alongside and mixed with local languages (identity based issue). BANK A does, still, respect the linguistic diversity in accumulating the unilingual formats, by offering services and providing information in several languages, but separately, "one language at a time". In this monolingual ideology of multilingualism, each language has its own space, separated from that of the others. But for all that, multilingual language mixing, which is not sanctioned formally, actually appears to be a common oral practice in linguistically mixed teams. Polyglot employees mobilize their multilingual repertoire, passing from one language to another, and mixing languages. Indeed, while the firm makes choices about employing which language should be used in which function, individuals choose whether, when, how they want to use their language skills to access to the information provided by the company or to interact with their colleagues. If it is true that BANK A opts for the multilingual solution to manage language diversity in the workplace, this is operated in a way that fulfils the business expectations rather than with the conviction of equality of treatment and opportunity.

5.2 The case of BANK B

The official languages of BANK B are Dutch, English, French and Italian. However, this is not what the employees of the bank think the language policy is. The official policy of the MNC is not known to the participants who, until the researcher pointed that out, believed there was an “English only”, or at the most, an “English and French” language policy. In the branch of BANK B, Italian is normally chosen as the local working language, but French is used when communication involves representatives from the French offices, while English is the unofficial *lingua franca* in other international communication. In relation to other languages (in this case Italian for the Italian branch and French for the headquarters), the comments from the Italian case study show that linguistic resources are used in complex and inter-related ways. The participants say they are involved in a constellation of activities in different languages, which are interconnected – they may deal in Italian or French in a conference call and then write up the decision reached in that call in an English email. Other times, the spoken conference call can be mainly in English and then employees need to write up the minutes in Italian for the local colleagues or the internal newsletter.

For instance, P2f has an administrative role in the BANK B and, as part of her job, she receives calls from other colleagues outside the company or clients and uses English more often, French less often, with them “because they do not know Italian”. When she is asked how she feels about using English for work she comments in positive ways and making reference to establishing relationships with the people she interacts with.

It is interesting no? To have to confront yourself with other people because you create a minimum of relationship with them so if you talk again the following time you ask how they are and where they’ve been on holiday and so, it is interesting. (P2f)

The interviews and observations of working practices at BANK B show how English is associated with various and overlapping functions. Using English is not only connected with business specific communication, but also with doing small talk and relational work with colleagues and clients. There was no obvious distinction among languages that did identity/cultural work and languages that worked for transactional purposes, although all participants considered English as “*the language of business*”, and this was emphasized in many occasions.

Not everybody speaks French so we do the meeting in English. [...] in Italian? No generally Italian is not used for these meetings (P5m)

The importance of English above all other languages is reiterated in all interviews with the participants, the main point being that there is a hierarchical importance among the languages used in the bank, which is recognized and reiterated by the employees, such as P4m, who said that “even though we are in a French bank, the main language is still English” and P9m “if you want any chance of working here you must speak English, but French is certainly appreciated”. Corporate languages are not all on the same level, English and French are prioritized over the other two official languages, and this is also reinforced by the (mis-) understanding that “English and possibly French” are the only official languages of the company. The employees interviewed are also condescending to this situation, as they do not expect colleagues outside Italy to be able to communicate in Italian with them.

The French colleagues for instance know a little English and no Italian [...] I actually realized that knowing a language, at least one language, is essential in the workplace, especially in the bank sector. (P2f)

Knowledge of other languages is appreciated in the branch and in the headquarters, as confirmed by the employees and also by the linguistic training they receive, but English has priorities over the other languages and is used for gatekeeping functions. Employees have the option of taking English and French classes, which are run according to demand, but in practice their French classes need to be justified and the request for French tuition is not automatically met. The employees interviewed confirmed that they all took English classes at some point in their career and some of them took French classes too. However, while current employees are supported in their language learning and development, for new recruits, knowledge of English is assessed at recruitment stage, and therefore seen as gatekeeping function for entry to work in this field. In order to work in finance, all employees reported that English is “a pre-requisite”, with any new employee having to be interviewed in English.

English is “a *conditio sine qua non*” (.) [...] it would be impossible to manage these kinds of activities without speaking English. (P6f)

All new recruits need to demonstrate competence in English, whether from their education or their experience. The early-career interviewees talked about how the role of English was emphasized during the work selection process, “they said now we do the interview in English but it did not last long eh I studied in English and they understood stopped after a little time” (P18f), and another participant reported “they changed to English like that [...] they wanted to check I could speak English” (P19m). It is clear that in BANK B, English is cited as the most useful

language for the employees’ careers and candidates’ competence in English is repeatedly reported as an important aspect of recruitment, and therefore used as a gatekeeper to access to employment. French, however, is also mentioned in its position of gatekeeping. Only those who speak French get access to the French documents from the headquarters and the people who speak French seem to get to the company’s higher positions.

Even with the English requirements at interview stage, some employees are not necessarily able to use English for work, mainly because their position does not require English skills. Some of the people involved in the study said they were not proficient in English or that they did not use English very often for their job. These were the people who found themselves at the margin of the international community of practice or the ones who would provide support to the core employees in the team. They all confirmed that Italian was still the main language used in the branches and also the local language used in the retail business. When asked about the possible provision of translation services, BANK B employees confirmed that the MNC does not have any translation services or a specific department allocated to this, and a few employees said they would sometimes work on translating official documents. In BANK B, translation is done by volunteering members of staff who have other roles in the company, rather than by trained translators or people employed for that task. Translations of official documents from French/English into the local languages are clearly not a priority of the company.

The diminished role of translation is also connected to the role of diversity in the company and the diversity policy specifications. Similarly to BANK A, in BANK B there is a diversity policy that is clearly operating at the overall MNC level for all sites and branches. The policy concerns the idea of resisting “all forms of discrimination” and the emphasis is placed on gender, age, disability and ethnicity, but there is no mention of protecting or defending any kind of linguistic diversity.

What we have seen for BANK B is in many ways similar to BANK A. Here too, there is an understanding of English as the only appropriate language for transactional, more business-related purposes and communication, with the general discourse being that “English is better than other languages to deal with business it has short words and more precise, French is a lot of rhetorical long phrasing”. The concept of English is not questioned and variation, including multilingual phenomena, is accepted in practice but not in official situations. In terms of the diversity policy, BANK B does not refer to linguistic diversity in any policy matter, and, unlike BANK A, practices of translation are not contemplated, not regulated and do not seem to be at the core of the company communication.

Overall, it seems that, in this banking sector, English is still considered the most important linguistic resource and it is a monolingual approach to English that is valued, not an ELF understanding, whereby different linguistic resources are used in a *lingua franca* situation. Languages tend to be kept separate in theory, although in practice, employees' communication activities appear to be more flexible. This hierarchy of separate languages, with English at the top, is also accompanied by the use of English for gatekeeping purposes, though other languages (such as French, or local languages generally) can also be used for gatekeeping purposes at different levels or stages of employment and career, and for access to important aspects of the job.

6 Conclusions

In both studies covered in this paper, our participants concluded that English is essential in some ways or within some aspects of their jobs. The understanding that “knowing English is a must” is the discourse frequently occurring in the business, especially international, context, but English is not the only language used in professional communication, internally as well as externally, and the other languages used are not necessarily kept separate, as companies' policies would require. The experiences reported by business professionals interviewed have highlighted the importance of collaborative practices at all levels of professional communication.

Despite the flexible and multilingual practices of the international workplace, business communication studies still advocate the use of a single corporate language as the solution to internal and external communication. This is not only based on a number of language ideologies, that are, in effect, not represented in the actual work practices, but that can also create domination, discrimination, exclusion and separation in the workplace.

Both banks seem to have to juggle the position of English as the international banking language, the multilingual corporate languages and the flexible linguistic practices. They do so by constructing discourses of language equality and diversity that in effect hide ideologies of monolingualism, language hierarchy and separation. Firstly, our study has shown how both banks emphasize the dominant ideology of one corporate language being the most efficient way of running communication within an MNC. Secondly, “concessions” to language equality are made, but seem to remain rather superficial. In the case of BANK A, managing language diversity corresponds to the branding of the Swiss identity, precisely to the marketing of Swiss multilingualism as an asset for the company

under the label of Swiss quality (Yanaprasart 2016b), and in the case of BANK B it is about “ticking the boxes” of four separate languages (see Cogo, 2016a) in all official and internal semi-official communication. The tendency remains to refer to one corporate language – English.

Moreover, English tends to be perceived in opposition to multilingualism, it is either English or other languages that are used, in monolingual language separation mode. Despite the ideology of BELF being a monolingual entity, when English is used as a *lingua franca* it is always a multilingual mode of communication. Contrary to the still dominant overall discourses of OLAT/OLON – i.e. that communication can only be managed and be efficient if one language is spoken/used at a time – the mixed, fluid and translingual use of BELF can be observed in both banks.

Finally, while this has been a small comparative study of two rather different realities, our exploration has highlighted very interesting aspects concerning the language discourses and ideologies dominant in the banking sector of MNCs. And although more studies are needed to complement, confirm or challenge our findings, in these banks the dominant discourse is still that “English is the language of business” and it remains a fixed and unquestioned corporate language.

A small contribution can be made as a recommendation. If one corporate language strategy is chosen, and English is usually the most common chosen language, then it should be made clear that it is not a monolingual native variety, but a multilingual and more flexible medium of communication, i.e. BELF, that should be promoted in corporate communication. This would allow flexibility and equality in dealing with the diversity of repertoires and access to resources for the employees.

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