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ABSTRACT

The importance of language management in multinational companies has never been greater than today. Multinationals are becoming ever more conscious of the importance of global co-ordination as a source of competitive advantage, and language remains the ultimate barrier to aspirations of international harmonization. In this article, we will review the solutions open to multinational companies in terms of language management. Before doing so, however, we will discuss the aforementioned trend to globalisation, outline the dimensions of the language barrier and illustrate its consequences.

INTRODUCTION: THE TREND TO GLOBAL CO-ORDINATION

Evidence suggests that as many as three out of four multinational companies now manage networks of twenty or more overseas operations (John et al., 1997). The co-ordination burden of managing such geographically, culturally and linguistically diverse networks is daunting. Nevertheless, many multinational companies spurred on by the twin goals of the transnational model (local responsiveness allied to strong global direction) have accepted the challenge and have sought to strengthen their global co-ordination. They have done so in different ways employing a variety of management methods most notably Total Quality Management, Global Sourcing, Virtual Organizations, Co-Design, Human Resource Management, Concurrent Engineering, Corporate Culture, Extended Enterprise Management, Systems Integration and Centralized Treasury Management.

The performance benefits of these systems are indisputable. For example Global Sourcing allows companies to balance trade, hedge exchange rate risks and to buy materials at "world-best" prices. JIT has allowed companies to slash stock levels and minimize obsolescence. TQM has enabled companies to improve product and process quality enhancing company economics and customer satisfaction in tandem. And Concurrent Engineering and Co-Design have greatly shortened time-to-market spans and have improved product design by leveraging the know-how of suppliers and production engineers.

Attesting to the importance of these advantages a 1996 McKinsey Group study (Theuerkauf et al., 1996) of leading US consumer-product multinationals confirmed that successful companies were much more effective in integrating their international acquisitions, and much more accomplished in global co-ordination, than their less-successful contemporaries. Foremost issues leading to this competitive advantage included global management development systems and global electronic integration, sensitivity on the part of the parent company to the specific national circumstances and close networking between their global managers.

However, whilst it is easy to understand that co-ordination is a key source of competitive advantage, it is equally undeniable that such co-ordination makes global communication capability a pre-requisite for success. "*Physical distance makes effective communication necessary and cultural distance makes effective global communication essential*". (Spinks & Wells, 1997). As a palliative, companies have invested heavily in the tools of modern-day communication. Global intranets, video-conferencing, e-mail networks, global integration of IT systems and workflow technologies have all contributed to making information flows faster, easier and more secure. However, these tools just like their less technologically advanced predecessors, founder when language is a serious barrier. Perhaps one example taken from the authors' personal experience in the Fiat Group will illustrate the point.

The Palio was Fiat's first foray into the concept of the world car. As the car was designed principally in South America, Brazil and Argentina emerged as the source of most pressed components including those for the exhaust. However, for sound strategic reasons it was decided to produce the catalytic converter in South Africa. These converters were then shipped to Italy to be matched with the other components of the full exhaust system that were then shipped to Poland for assembly onto the vehicle. To exacerbate problems a small quota of the exhaust systems were then onward shipped from Poland to the smaller Russian plant. This global supply chain met its strategic objectives keeping costs low, balancing trade flows across countries and creating global centers of product expertise. But behind the scenes the communications problems were severe as logistics personnel along the supply chain struggled to work in a mix of Spanish, Portuguese, English, Italian, Polish and Russian. Fiat had made the communications tools available. All those involved had email, integrated stock systems, fax and desktop videoconferencing but in the absence of linguistically versatile logistics staff they failed to avert the predictable confusion, suspicion and friction, triggered by language problems.

This one example can be readily generalized to other areas of business activity. To Finance who co-ordinate cash flows, investments, bank loans and currency purchases across the globe. To Marketing who have to direct product, pricing and promotional strategies worldwide. To R&D who develop new products in collaboration with design centers, suppliers and production installations spread across numerous countries. And to IT tasked with the challenge of integrating the diverse systems of their global operations. They will all confront the question "how best to manage communications across the language barrier"?

THE DIMENSIONS OF THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

Before attempting to consider language management strategies, companies will have to evaluate the magnitude of the language barrier confronting them and in doing so they will need to examine it in three dimensions. The first dimension is the number of different languages the company has to manage (the Language Diversity). The second is the number of functions and the number of levels within those functions that are engaged in cross-lingual communication (the Language Penetration) and the third is the complexity and refinement of the language skills required (the Language Sophistication). These three dimensions are discussed below:

Language Diversity

The level of language diversity will obviously depend on the extent of the company's global network of subsidiaries, customers, suppliers and joint ventures, though even the most international of enterprises will embrace only a minute fraction of the world's 5,000 plus languages. Global giants such as Microsoft have strategies to manage around 80 different languages. However, this is likely to be an unrealistic target for most companies. More typically global enterprises will be able to manage their global networks provided they establish capabilities in the leading European languages, including some from Eastern Europe, in Japanese, Chinese, Arabic and in selected Asian languages notably Malay, Urdu, Hindi and Bengali. An Elucidate study identified the top dozen or so language priorities for European companies (Hagen, 1999). This number is suggested also by the Engco model (Graddol, 1997) which uses population, demographic and economic data to position languages on a scale according to Global Influence. Beyond the leading 15 or so languages on this scale none can really be claimed to have any significant global influence.

Language Penetration

The level of language penetration will depend on the number of functional areas within a MNC that have to operate across linguistic boundaries. There may have been a time when cross-lingual communications could have been channeled through a small and exclusive band of language specialists. However, as we've discussed in the previous section the new integrated systems of global co-ordination now touch almost ever function of the business and at multiple levels. Finance (Global Treasury), R&D (Co-design), Production Engineering (Concurrent Engineering), Logistics (Supply Chain Management), Sales (Global Account Management), Purchasing (Global Sourcing), Human Resources (Global Management Development) and MIS (Global Systems Integration) are all directly tasked with coordinating activities that span national and linguistic boundaries. And corporate level functions such as Legal and Public Relations require the same linguistic versatility to be able to support them.

Language Sophistication

Clearly the complexity, refinement and type of the language skills required will vary from post holder to post holder, within an organization. A receptionist will require essentially speaking-listening proficiency and might suffice with the limited skills necessary to recognize requests and to exchange pleasantries. A logistics clerk will need to have a greater foreign language capability including reading and writing, but will at least have the benefit of being able to operate with a limited vocabulary. An engineer working as part of an international design team represents a further progression in language sophistication. They will be required to evolve concepts and resolve design problems in both spoken and written form without language being a barrier. And at the pinnacle of the scale comes the international manager. He or she will need excellent language proficiency embracing the full range of rhetorical skills such as negotiation, persuasion, motivation and humor. At this level the capability level might well exceed that of a typical Masters graduate in modern languages.

Measuring the language barrier dimensions

The tools for measuring these three language barrier dimensions are provided by Linguistic Auditing. (Reeves & Wright, 1996) The methodology is designed to enable international companies to evaluate their foreign language requirements and to benchmark these against their capabilities thereby identifying areas of strength and weakness. It goes on to assess the company's language training and recruitment needs and evaluates the efficacy of these programs. Finally it provides the means to match the organization's foreign language capability against its strategic aspirations.

Unfortunately, research suggests that Linguistic Auditing has not been widely adopted (Randlesome & Myers, 1998) and that most companies have yet to develop language strategies (Hagen, 1999). Arguably the problem is the fact that a full audit is a costly and time-consuming process requiring extensive support from external language assessors. So to combat this criticism a simpler, less costly system called Language Check-up has been developed as a front-end to the Audit methodology (Reeves & Feely, 2001). Although lacking the rigor and reliability of the full Linguistic Audit, the check up offers some notable advantages. It is self-administered avoiding the cost of external language specialists, it generates results quickly and it embraces a wider range of language issues than the audit. Specifically it evaluates the status of Corporate Language standardization, the availability of computer systems, publications and web sites with multiple language interfaces, the capabilities and controls on external language resources and the usage of machine translation tools.

We strongly feel though that it is not only the cost that has deterred companies from auditing their language skills and developing language strategies. We also believe that companies underestimate the importance of language as a management issue. Accordingly the next section is dedicated to exploring the impact of the language barrier on international business.

THE IMPACT OF THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

The impact of the language barrier cannot be evaluated using simple measures such as dollars spent on interpreters or days lost in translating documents. Instead the true cost has to be seen in terms of the way it distorts and damages relationships. These in turn then impose pressures and constraints on the strategies pursued by the company and the organizations and systems they consequentially adopt. Founded in sociolinguistic theory, Feely & Harzing (2002) offer a more extensive discussion of these processes. In summary however, it is worth noting that the language barrier triggers a whole range of negative consequences. It breeds uncertainty and suspicion, accentuates group divides, undermines trust, and leads to polarization of perspectives, perceptions and cognitions. And of course that is just the start. With the all-pervading nature of communication, it is hard to imagine any aspect of management that emerges undamaged by the corrosive effects of uncertainty, mistrust, conflict, and cognitive divides. Below we have advanced ideas illustrating just a few of the more the most probable consequences.

Buyer / Seller Relationships. Companies facing the prospect of globalising will sense a greater cultural distance and will be aware of greater uncertainty about markets that don’t share their language and salespersons working in their second language will appear less able, less credible, less likeable and ultimately less persuasive. As a consequence, companies will in general have more success selling to countries that share their language. Buyers too when working in their second language will not be as confident and assertive and will lose some of their relationship power. As a result they will be less successful in gaining advantageous deals. Aware of this, buyers are likely to demand increasingly that negotiations are conducted in the language of the customer. Companies unable to work in the language of the customer will therefore, under-perform in export markets relative to their more linguistically able competitors. And this is not limited to the Sales Department. All areas that interact with the customer will be similarly affected.

Foreign Market Expansion. The process school of internationalization (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977) predicts that companies at the beginning of their global development will prefer to establish subsidiaries that are characterized by a low level of psychic distance to their home country. Language differences are a crucial element of psychic distance. In the absence of this possibility, parent companies will prefer to establish subsidiaries in countries where English, the dominant international language, is widely spoken. (Welch et al., 2001).

Joint Ventures. Whenever the host country and the parent country do not share the same language, the parent will inevitably feel an increased sense of uncertainty and will prefer an entry method where risk can be shared. Thus joint ventures will be likely where there is language difference. Joint ventures between partners where only one of the partners has an international language will end up working in that language. Subsequently, as a consequence of power through communication, the partner with that language might start to dominate the relationship, which will pose increasing pressure on the JV.

HQ-subsidiary Relationship. Wherever language is a barrier to the development of close personal relationships the level of suspicion, mistrust and conflict between a parent company and its international subsidiaries will be heightened. Such mistrust will cause the parent company to be more formal and less subjective in its evaluation of subsidiary performance, and may also hinder collaborative processes such as knowledge and technology transfer.

Staffing Policies. Companies will be more prone to employing expatriates in important positions at subsidiaries where the host country has a different language to the parent operation. As a consequence of the internationality of the English language, American and British companies and others that have English as the corporate language rely less heavily on expatriates than those companies that have other languages. (Harzing, 1999; Yoshihara, 1999).

We have not attempted to present an exhaustive list of the potential impact of the language barrier or to provide irrefutable evidence for our speculations. Future empirical work should be able to address this. Our aim was to illustrate that the impact of the language barrier can be wide-ranging and potentially serious to multinational enterprises, and that language should therefore be managed as a corporate asset. We will now turn to the main topic of this article: the options available to MNCs to manage language and to alleviate the problems it creates.

OPTIONS FOR MANAGING LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

Having examined the relationship problems and their consequences that might be caused by language issues and using the tools of Linguistic Auditing and Language Check-up to evaluate the dimensions of the language barrier confronting them, companies next need to turn their attention to how they should best manage language. There is a range of options from which MNCs can formulate their language strategy.

Lingua Franca

The simplest answer, though realistic only for English speaking companies, is to rely on ones native tongue. As recently as 1991 a survey of British exporting companies found that over a third used English exclusively in dealings with foreign customers (Metcalf, 1991). This attitude that “one language fits all” has also been carried through into the Internet age. A survey of the web sites of top American companies confirmed that over half made no provision for foreign language access (Frook, 2000), and another found that less than 10% of leading companies were able to respond adequately to emails other than in the company's language (WorldLingo, 2001). Widespread though it is however, reliance on a single language is a strategy that is fatally flawed. It makes no allowance for the growing trend in Linguistic Nationalism whereby buyers in Asia, South America and the Middle East in particular are asserting their right to "work in the language of the customer". It also fails to recognize the increasing vitality of languages such as Spanish, Arabic and Chinese that over time are likely to challenge the dominance of English as a lingua franca . In the IT arena it ignores the rapid globalisation of the Internet where the number of English-language e-commerce transactions, emails and web sites, is rapidly diminishing as a percentage of the total. Finally, the total reliance on a single language puts the English speaker at risk in negotiations. Contracts, rules and legislation are invariably written in the local language, and a company unable to operate in that language is vulnerable.

Functional Multilingualism

Another improvised approach to Language is to rely on what has been termed "Functional Multilingualism" (Hagen, 1999). Essentially what this means is to muddle through, relying on a mix of languages, pidgins and gestures to communicate by whatever means the parties have at their disposal. In a social context such a shared effort to make one another understand might be considered an aid to the bonding process with the frustration of communication being regularly punctuated by moments of absurdity and humor. However, as the basis for business negotiations it appears very hit-and-miss. And yet Hagen's recent study suggests that 16% of international business transactions are conducted in a "cocktail of languages." Functional Multilingualism shares the same defects as reliance on a lingua franca and increases the probability of cognitive divergence between the parties engaged in the communication.

External Language Resources

A more rational and obvious response to the language barrier is to employ external resources such as translators and interpreters, and certainly there are many excellent companies specialized in these fields. However, such a response is by no means an end to the language barrier. For a start these services can be very expensive, with a top Simultaneous Interpreter commanding daily rates as high as a partner in an international consulting company. Secondly, any good translator or interpreter will insist that to be fully effective they must understand the context of the subject matter. This is not always possible. In some cases it is prohibited by the complexity/specialization of the topic, sometimes by lack of preparation time but most often the obstacle is the reluctance of the parties to explain the wider context to an "outsider". Another problem is that unless there has been considerable pre-planning between the interpreter and his clients it is likely that there will be ambiguity and cultural overtones in the source messages the interpreter has to work with. They will of course endeavor to provide a hi-fidelity translation but in this circumstance the interpreter has to use initiative and guess work. This clearly injects a potential source of misunderstanding into the proceedings. Finally while a good interpreter will attempt to convey not only the meaning but also the spirit of any communication, there can be no doubt that there is a loss of rhetorical power when communications go through a third party. So in situations requiring negotiation, persuasion, humor etc. the use of an interpreter is a poor substitute for direct communication.

Training

The immediate and understandable reaction to any skills-shortage in a business is to consider personnel development and certainly the language training industry is well developed, offering programs at almost every level and in numerous languages. However, without doubting the value of language training no company should be deluded into believing this to be assured of success. Training in most companies is geared to the economic cycle. When times are good money is invested in training. When belts get tightened training is one of the first “luxuries” to be pared down. In a study conducted across four European countries (Hagen, 1999), nearly twice as many companies said they needed language training in coming years as had conducted training in past years. This disparity, between “good intentions” and “actual delivery”, underlines the problems of relying upon training for language skills. Unless the company is totally committed to sustaining the strategy even through bad times, it will fail.

One notable and committed leader in the field of language training has been the Volkswagen Group. They have developed a language strategy over many years and in many respects can be regarded as a model of how to manage language professionally. However, the Volkswagen approach underlines that language training has to be considered a strategic rather than a tactical solution. In their system to progress from “basics” to “communications competence” in a language requires the completion of 6 language stages each one demanding approximately 90 hours of classroom tuition, supported by many more hours of self-study, spread over a 6-9 month period. The completion of each stage is marked by a post-stage achievement test, which is a pre-requisite for continued training. So even this professionally managed program expects a minimum of three years of fairly intensive study to produce an accountant, engineer, buyer or salesperson capable of working effectively in a foreign language. Clearly companies intending to pursue this route need to do so with realistic expectations and with the intention of sustaining the program over many years. Except in terms of “brush-up” courses for people who were previously fluent in a foreign language, training cannot be considered a quick fix and hence other methods will have to be considered.

Corporate Languages

An alternative to a customized training program (in which different individuals are trained in different languages) is to adopt a single corporate language. All recruitment and personnel development could then be focussed upon achievement of required standards in that one chosen language. A number of major multinational companies have adopted this strategy including Siemens, Electrolux, Daimler-Chrysler and Olivetti. A Corporate Language can be considered to have a number of important benefits:

- Facilitation of formal reporting
- Ease of access to, and maintenance of, technical literature, policy and procedure documents and information systems.
- Facilitation of informal communications between operating units and within cross-national teams.
- Fostering a sense of belonging as an element in diffusing a corporate culture.
- And of course it does focus the management of language problems.

However, in no sense is a Corporate Language solution without problems:

- It is a long-term strategy. One study of a major Finnish company reported that decades years after the designation of English as the Corporate Language, the minutes of board meetings were still taken in Finnish (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999).
- It is sometimes effectively impossible to adopt a single language for all circumstances. Nestle for example faced by a polarized split of personnel designated both English and French as the company's official language. (Lester, 1994)
- A corporate language will often incur resistance if there is a large body of corporate personnel lacking competence in the chosen language. In Kone, the Finnish, elevator, company for example English was adopted as the corporate language despite the fact that almost two thirds of its employees were non- native speakers of the language. (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999)

And although a corporate language may well enhance intra-company communications it does nothing to ease the language barrier with external bodies such as customers, suppliers, international agencies and governments. So for these other solutions must be examined.

Language Nodes

In the absence of sufficient language capability and without the time or finances to adopt a training or corporate language approach, companies become heavily dependent upon their scarce linguistically skilled personnel. These key personnel become informal “language nodes” establishing themselves as the default communications channel between the company and the external world. Whilst it is understandable that companies leverage their scarce skills in this way, research has indicated that the approach has numerous drawbacks (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1997):

- It places an onerous burden on those acting as language nodes impairing their ability to perform their formal organizational duties.
- It introduces an increased risk of miscommunication, as the language node personnel might be inexpert in the field of work that is the subject of the communication.
- It invests in those individuals the power to act as communication gatekeepers. This inevitably brings with it the risk that this power will be used in counter-productive ways filtering, distorting or even blocking transmission, thereby impeding rather than facilitating the flow of information from the parent company.
- Finally within a parent subsidiary or Joint Venture relationship the Parallel Information Networks based on these nodes undermine the formal chain of reporting, weakening the positions of the senior managers who are being by-passed and hence creating potential for conflict.

So whilst it is important to leverage skills within an organization it is of paramount importance that language-skilled personnel do not themselves emerge as sources of organizational dysfunction.

Selective Recruitment

As noted in the case of Nestle, "*the easiest and cheapest way to approach the language problem is to hire people already possessing the required skills*" (Lester, 1994). However, this is clearly not a painless solution implying, as it does, the redeployment and perhaps redundancy of existing post-holders lacking those skills. Moreover, there is considerable evidence to show that the right level and mix of language skills is not always available in the marketplace (Hagen, 1999). So the recruitment approach to bridging the language barrier must be used very selectively, and is probably advantageous only in three distinct situations:

- To fill critical areas of language exposure
- To create a language node (see above)
- To develop expatriate managers.

Expatriate Management

Continuing that theme, one immediate solution to any multinational company facing a language barrier with its subsidiaries is to assign expatriates to work within each subsidiary to act as the "language node" linking back to corporate headquarters. Every major global company employs expatriates but research suggests that companies with parent operations domiciled in countries with minority languages will rely more heavily on them. As an example the two key components of the Japanese Model of Globalisation have been summarized as "*Management by Japanese and Management in the Japanese language*" (Yoshihara, 1999). His research of leading Japanese multinationals indicates that the vast majority of their subsidiaries (78%) are managed by Japanese Executives and more than half employ Japanese expatriates at departmental manager level. One clear explanation for this is the necessity of Japanese headquarters to continue working in the Japanese Language as evidenced by an analysis of telephone and fax traffic between the Japanese headquarters and their US subsidiaries. Nearly 90% of all telephone calls were either partly or wholly conducted in the Japanese language and 83% of the fax traffic was also drafted in Japanese. Clearly in Yoshihara's example the use of expatriates has eased the problem of the language barrier between the parent and subsidiary but in no sense can this be considered a satisfactory solution:

- It is an inherently costly solution. In many cases the base salary paid to the parent company manager will be considerably higher than a corresponding salary for a host country national, and that base salary can be more than doubled by the addition of assignment-related allowances. (Dwyer, 2000). Add to that the lump sum incentives paid at the start and end of each assignment and it is unsurprising that many companies are electing to cut back their usage of expatriate managers.
- It doesn't eliminate the language barrier, but merely shifts it down a level. Linguistically, the expatriate managers have to develop a twin personality. In Yoshihara's survey while more than 80% of headquarter contact is conducted in Japanese, 99% of host country management is conducted in the local language. This is a serious source not only of expatriate stress but also of internal conflict within the subsidiary where several researchers (Neal, 1998; Sargent & Matthews, 1998) have shown that language problems are often the principal barrier to team working.
- Finally but most importantly, this approach limits local managers to supporting roles in the company development, impeding knowledge transfer, blocking career opportunities and undermining the potential benefits from cultural diversity. Using a phrase made famous by Bartlett & Ghoshal (1986), companies like the Japanese multinationals relying heavily on expatriation, will be unable to "*tap their subsidiaries for global reach*".

These defects allied to the earlier problems discussed under Language Nodes suggests that expatriation is at best an interim solution capable of bridging the language gap only until a more complete solution is developed.

Inpatriation

An increasingly popular way of combating the language barrier is to inpatriate subsidiary personnel into the head office operation. As an example, the HQ of the Electronics Division of Fiat that until the late 1980's had been manned exclusively by Italians was by the mid 1990's truly multinational with French, Belgian, British, Spanish and Lebanese managers being introduced into first-level management positions. It is a popular strategy too amongst British companies with the HQ of Royal Dutch Shell employing a staggering 38 different nationalities. And even the Japanese who at one time exalted the cultural homogeneity of their management teams are now seeking to introduce national and cultural diversity into their top management teams.

The benefits of inpatriation strategies are clear. They inject cultural diversity into the HQ operations, they provide communications links to the operations and institutions of countries from which they came and they offer a cost-effective alternative to situations where expatriates are less likely to succeed. Developing these themes Harvey identified seven discrete advantages of integrating inpatriate managers into parent company management teams (Harvey, et al., 1999). One other advantage not listed by Harvey but certainly a consideration relative to expatriation is that of internal conflict. Think of the analogy of mixing water (the parent company) and sulfuric acid (the subsidiary). Inserting a drop of acid (the inpatriate) into the water has almost no effect as they readily become subsumed into the corporate culture. However, placing a drop of water (the expatriate) into the more volatile subsidiary produces a mix that can be explosive!

Despite its appeal, the inpatriation strategy is not without drawbacks. If the inpatriates are less than fluent in the parent company language, this could seriously impair their short –term effectiveness and will delay the realization of benefits to the company. Also the problems of repatriation are notably more severe than with expatriates because the individuals concerned have to be re-inserted into a much subsidiary organization that typically is much smaller than the HQ. And empirical research suggests that inpatriates require extensive and custom-designed support programs during the acculturation and socialization phases (Harvey & Miceli, 1999).

Machine Translation

All of the potential solutions to the language barrier discussed previously rely upon human means. However, computing does hold out the possibility of an alternative – Machine Translation (MT) and its sister technology Machine Interpretation (MI). Machine translation has been around for over 4 decades; for a fuller history refer to Hutchings (Hutchings, 1999). Machine Interpretation is more recent but is essentially a machine translation kernel with a speech-recognition front-end (in the source language) and a post-translation speech generation module (in the target language). All of these technologies are quite mature and extensively used. A thorough review of the state of the art is provided by Haynes (Haynes, 1998) who describes Machine Translation as the "*technology that can no longer be denied*". So is this the definitive answer to language management? Well at the moment the jury is out.

Reviewers of Machine Translation are fairly unanimous in recognizing an advantage in speed relative to human translation, though the scale of the advantage varies from 4 times to 50 times depending upon the reviewer. However, there is less of a consensus about the quality of translation possible. Supporters believe that MT is currently capable of "*working cost effec-*

tively for most translation needs where the objective is to extract information from the source text and communicate that information into a target text in a second language" (Haynes, 1998). And MI enthusiasts are equally optimistic. They believe that the new generation of intelligent, self-learning MI systems such as SATS will make real time, high fidelity automated interpretation a reality (Lehman-Wilzig, 2001). However, these views are not in the majority and for the moment more pessimistic opinions dominate. The attitude of professional translators concerning MT was described as *"somewhere between the skeptical and the scathing*" (Haynes, 1998) and even some developers describe the current state of Machine Translation with the words "the disappointing past and present" (Kay, 2001). In business terms therefore, the MT and MI technologies still appear more appropriate for development laboratories and for small-scale pilot projects, than for mainstream applications. However, for those attempting to move ahead Haynes (1998) provides a useful checklist of measures that will enhance the possibilities of success.

Controlled Language

The last approach used by multinational companies to bridge the language barrier is that of Controlled Language. A controlled language imposes limits on vocabulary and syntax rules so as to make the text produced more easily comprehended by the non-native speaker/reader and equally more amenable to machine translation. Caterpillar in 1970 was the first to launch such a system with CCE (Caterpillar Controlled English) that allowed a vocabulary of only 8,000 words including product terminology (compared to over half a million words in the full English vocabulary). General Motors then followed this lead launching their own system called CASL (Controlled Automotive Service Language). Clearly such systems have merit, as evidenced by Caterpillar who have successfully employed theirs for over 3 decades. However, as a solution to multinational communications the potential of a controlled language is clearly limited. The costs and timescale for implementation are prohibitive to all but the world's largest companies, a restricted vocabulary is advantageous only to those who share the same alphabet, and its usage is effectively limited to the written form where it is possible to filter and simplify language before transmission. More importantly still, the scope for communicating in a controlled language is clearly limited to conveying operational detail. To impose this constraint on business situations demanding persuasion, negotiation or motivation would clearly rob the participants of their powers of rhetoric.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that there are sound strategic reasons why multinational companies should seek to enhance their global co-ordination. The achievement of such an enhancement is by no means a simple task however, and will be made that much harder whenever language is a barrier to international communication. And given the demographic, social and business trends predicted for the future it is difficult to see how any company can contemplate going multinational without going multilingual at the same time.

Language interfaces in these businesses will trigger problems of miscommunication, uncertainty, mistrust and conflict and unless these problems are professionally managed, they will bring detrimental consequences for the business and its relationships. Linguistic fragmentation results in depressed economic performance for whole countries. It would be naïve to think that the same impact would not be felt by linguistically fragmented companies.

So the challenge facing these businesses is how to manage their language problems effectively. This article advances a range of different approaches that are employed in different contexts and concludes that each one has a tantalising mix of advantages and disadvantages, and that for sure no single solution can be considered a panacea. The secret therefore, would seem to be to understand the language barrier well and to mix and match the solutions into a blend that is right for the company context. But even understanding the problem is a challenge and companies with multinational relationships to manage are strongly urged to conduct language check-ups and linguistic audits.

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