

Language practices in the workplace

Ethnographic insights from two multilingual
companies in Sweden

Hanna Rönnlöf

Department of English

Bachelor Degree Project
English Linguistics

Spring 2014

Supervisor: Raffaella Negretti



Stockholms
universitet

Language practices in the workplace

Ethnographic insights from two multilingual companies in Sweden

Hanna Rönnlöf

Abstract

Today's globalised world calls for a multilingual workplace, with employees who can communicate effectively and efficiently with colleagues and clients around the world. Communication, both in the sense of actual language use and of language management, is an important but often forgotten part of productivity and performance in multinational corporations. This exploratory study aims to investigate how language is used and managed in two Swedish companies with English as at least one of the official languages. By using in-depth ethnographical interviews and a short analysis of the companies' language policies from the view of centrality, present study is focused on the employees' perceptions of the day-to-day language use and the company's language management. It can be concluded that English is the main language used for written communication while both Swedish and English are used in spoken interactions. Language is negotiated through a set of variables and is thus determined by the people involved in the interaction, the function of the interaction and the medium of communication. Although some strains and difficulties did emerge in the interviews, both informants are positive towards the use of English. It is hoped that this small study will contribute to a better understanding of language use and language management in multinational companies in Sweden.

Keywords

Multilingual workplaces, Language practices, Language choice, Ethnographic interviews, Language policy.

Contents

1. Introduction	5
1.2 Background.....	6
1.2 Research questions	8
2. Method	8
3. Material	10
3.1 Informant 1	11
3.2 Informant 2	11
3.3 Policies	12
4. Results	12
4.1 Language choices.....	12
4.1.1 Activities	14
4.1.2 Social relations	15
4.2 Advantages and disadvantages	17
4.3 Language policies.....	18
5. Discussion	19
6. Conclusion	22
References	24
Appendix	26

1. Introduction

In today's globalised world, the new work order (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996) and advanced technologies call for a multilingual workplace, with employees who can communicate effectively and efficiently with colleagues and clients all over the world (Angouri & Miglbauer, 2014; Gunnarsson, 2013; van den Born Peltokorpi, 2010). Communication within and between workplaces is thus becoming increasingly important and organisations and corporations are putting language policies in place, such as using corporate languages, to regulate and facilitate functional communication (van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010).

Communication, both in the sense of actual language use and of language management, is an important but often forgotten part of productivity and performance in multinational corporations (MNC) and small/medium enterprises (SME) (Angouri, 2013; Angouri & Miglbauer, 2014; Bjørge & Whittaker, 2011; Marschan, et al. 1997). As MNCs and SMEs acclimatise to the globalised and international demands, linguistic issues and difficulties often appear, such as thin communication or knowledge loss, language clustering and exclusions or power imbalances (Tange & Lauring, 2009; Lønsmann, 2014; Pullin, 2010). These issues can hinder effective communication and even risk company productivity (Marschan, et al. 1997, Millar & Jensen, 2009). Language practices and policies are therefore an essential part of communication as well as Human Resources and management (Charles, 2007; Marschan, et al. 1997; Thomas, 2008; van den born & Peltokorpi, 2010).

Sweden today can be said to be a multilingual country, and part of the globalised world. More and more companies and MNCs in Sweden are now using English as a corporate language in order to navigate through the maze of multilingual communication (Gunnarsson, 2013). The need for a deeper understanding of language use and language management is evident in Swedish businesses, both to understand and possibly improve the conditions of communication. This necessity for more and deeper knowledge of communication in multilingual Swedish business settings was the springboard for the present paper.

This exploratory study aims to investigate how language is used and managed in two Swedish companies with English as at least one of the official languages. By using in-depth ethnographical interviews following the approach of Tange and Lauring (2009) and Angouri (2013), and a short analysis of the companies' language policy from the view of centrality (van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010), present study is focused on the employees' perceptions of the day-to-day language use and how the company's language management might have influenced and been influenced by this. Centrality in language management is concerned with whether the policy is focused on parent language, local language or corporate language. The study has a bottom up approach, as it focuses on the employees' perceptions, rather than the management policies. It

aspires to understand the participants' thoughts and opinions of their own language use and their companies' language policy.

1.2 Background

Numerous studies have already established that English is the language of choice in multinational corporations and used widely across the globe. English is thus a chief part of the discourse when discussing multilingualism in white-collar workplaces (Angouri & Miglbauer, 2014; Ehrenreich, 2010). Although the use of English does not entail that other languages disappear or become redundant, parallel language use is often seen as potentially problematic in management studies (Ehrenreich, 2010). Parallel language use can be defined as two or more languages with near equal status, which can be used interchangeably (Ehrenreich, 2010). However, parallel language use is not only common, it also seems to be relatively well functioning. Kingsley's (2013) study shows that the language practices are strategic and flexible among the employees. Language is negotiated through various factors that help govern the choice of language. The linguistic competence and limitations of the people involved are a key factor in this negotiation (Kingsley, 2013). In her study, Angouri (2013) examines language policy and language use in regards to the employees multilingual realities. Her exploratory case study of three MNCs in Europe discusses the language policy and how it is viewed and used by the employees in their day-to-day work. The study indicates that the bottom-up language practices are highly influential compared to the top-down regulations of language use in the workplaces. It is also clear that the new work order, with a flat hierarchy makes for a more flexible language policy, which puts function before form.

Another significant aspect to language practices is the activity or the function of the interaction. Social goals, such as building rapport and team spirit also affect the choice of language. Language use in work settings is therefore not only concerned with transactional but also with relational communication (Kingsley, 2013; Pullin, 2010). Getting the job done is evidently fundamental, but social interactions such as small talk, have been said to be vital for productivity and performance in the workplace (Tange & Luring, 2009; Pullin, 2010). Pullin (2010) illustrates in her study that it does not only help in building rapport and solidarity, but furthermore, small talk can help mitigate cultural barriers and thus possible misunderstandings. It is also clear that local and shared native languages are particularly important in order to "fit in" and build team spirit (Angouri & Miglbauer, 2014).

In multilingual workplaces that use a corporate language or a lingua franca, a bridging language for speakers who do not share a mother tongue (usually English), linguistic barriers such as language clustering or thin communication often appears between the corporate and local languages (Kingsley, 2013; Tange & Luring, 2009). What often identifies language clusters is that people feel excluded from a group or interaction, but rarely or never part of one. Communication within smaller groups whom share a

minority language in the company can lead to information loss between these groups or clusters. This is defined as thin communication (Tange & Lauring, 2009). In their study, Tange and Lauring (2009) investigate the attitudes and implications of these phenomena in several Danish multilingual companies. The study focuses on the language ideologies of the workplaces, and concludes that the employees' linguistic and cultural ideologies create barriers for effective communication. This can lead to knowledge loss among and between different language groups, as employees prefer to discuss problems, solutions or briefings with people they share a native language with. Tange and Lauring (2009) further state that effective communication is not only dependent on a common language, but more so the employees' willingness and openness to use the common language in work-related as well as social interactions. Several other studies reveal similar findings (e.g. Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Pullin, 2010). Angouri & Miglbauer (2014) focus their research on the employees' perceptions of multilingualism and language use. As previous studies have shown, language is negotiated among the employees, and whilst English is most widely used, it is not the only language of interactions. Native languages are also used among those who share one, which is seen as positive among the participants. This is interesting since language clusters such as these often lead to knowledge loss and group separation according to Tange and Lauring (2009). Angouri & Miglbauer's (2014) study also discusses the employees' linguistic flexibility; they are willing and able to shift between languages and adapt to different situations. The two studies show that the reality of everyday communication is often both more complex and flexible than the official written language policy prescribes. In his study, Thomas (2008) states that:

“corporate language policy (presumably) affects either directly or indirectly everyone who works or will work in a corporation. Clearly, this impact is not limited to the domain of work conduct, but affects attitudes towards plurilingualism and intercultural communication throughout society.” (Thomas, 2010, 308)

He also argues that although English is a functioning and common corporate language, it is not adequate in all situations. Corporate language policies must therefore incorporate local languages to meet the requirements of functioning and effective communication. Van den Born and Peltokorpi (2010) discuss centrality in language policy in their paper. In accordance to previously mentioned study, they assert that language policies centres around one of three languages, parent language, local language or corporate language. Although the policies will lean towards one of the three, they are rarely clear-cut. Language policies can thus be ethnocentric (home country orientated, i.e., parent language), polycentric (host country orientated, i.e., local language), or geocentric (internationally orientated, i.e., corporate language) (Thomas, 2008; van den Born Peltokorpi, 2010).

Another Danish study (Lønsmann, 2014) discusses language ideologies in a MNC, and how it affects social interactions and power balances. This study is divided into the perspectives of two groups, “the international expert” with native-like English, but

very limited Danish proficiency, and “the blue collar worker”, native Danish with a low proficiency in English. Lønsmann argues that the language ideologies and language skills of the two groups collide and that members of each group are excluded from the other. This does seem logical and partially in line with Tange and Lauring’s (2009) study, but one must take into consideration that the realities of communication in a multinational corporation is usually a little more complex and nuanced than that. This complexity is made evident in the work of Angouri, (2013) and Angouri & Miglbauer, (2014).

1.2 Research questions

1. What are the language practices in the workplace, which languages are used and for what purposes?
2. What are the implications, if any, of the possible language policy in the day-to-day language use?

2. Method

The aim of present study is, as mentioned above, to investigate when and in what contexts different languages, especially English, are used and for what purposes. The study will also explore the companies’ language policy from the view of centrality (van den Born & Peltokorpi 2010).

The data was collected through ethnographical, in depth semi-structured interviews. Two informants from two different companies were interviewed about their day-to-day work and language use. The method was chosen as several studies of similar topics have been based solely or partly on ethnographic interviews (Angouri, 2013; Angouri & Miglbauer, 2014; Johansson, 2005; Lønsmann 2014; Millar & Jensen, 2009; Tange & Lauring, 2009; Pullin, 2010). The interviews were approximately one hour long and semi-structured so that the same questions were asked, but allowing plenty of room for follow-up questions and the interviews rather took the shape of a conversation, albeit somewhat asymmetrical. Eliciting techniques from Johnson & Weller (2002) were used in order to gain as reliable and comparable responses as possible. Using elicitation techniques can be very helpful in exploratory studies, especially if the researcher is not familiar with the environment in which s/he is doing the research (Johnson & Weller, 2002). For example the informants were asked to give “a grand tour”, describing a normal day at work, what they do and which languages they use in the different tasks and situations. “Free recall listing” was also used in the interviews, the informants listed situations or tasks where they would use English or Swedish, situations where linguistic problems might occur or different activities they participated in during a workday.

The interviews were not transcribed in their whole, instead detailed summaries of the interviews were written down and used together with the actual recordings for the analysis. Parts of the interviews were later transcribed and used as examples in the paper. Both interviews were conducted in Swedish, as it is the informants' mother tongue; summaries were written in English and transcriptions and citations were all translated by the author. The responses were coded into different categories and later themes that emerged from the interviews, using Miles & Huberman's (1994) method of qualitative data analysis, especially for the coding of data. This is a useful way of organising and analysing, allowing the data to "lead the way". The themes that emerged were for example different activities, social interactions and advantages/disadvantages of English as a corporate language. These themes will be discussed one by one in the results section.

The two interviewees hold different positions in their respective workplace, which will help give a fuller account of the language practices in a multinational company. The companies were chosen due to their differences in size, home country and policies. It is hoped that by investigating two rather different companies, the study, albeit small, will be able to compare and contrast to a higher degree and thus contribute to a better understanding of language use and language management in multinational companies in Sweden. Informant 1 is a project leader in a MNC, previously working with marketing and communication. Informant 2 is a business controller working in the finance department in a SME. Both have a focus on communication in their daily work, although from very different perspectives. The two employees have worked one and two years at their respective company, none of them in management positions.

It is important to note that the interviewer (author) may have, by her mere presence, influenced the responses. This needs to be taken into consideration when analysing the data. It is also important to note that what is presented in this study is not general facts or objective descriptions of the companies language practices; it is rather the informants' opinions and perceptions, what is called self-reported data, that are discussed and analysed in present study. For a full and objective description of the actual language practices in the workplaces, observations and recordings of authentic meetings and other situations would be needed. Unfortunately this was not possible for this research project.

As mentioned above, the study also intends to explore the two companies' language policies. The main focus on this part of the study is to investigate if there is an official written policy, what it states, and whether the companies' policies are ethnocentric polycentric or geocentric (van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010). This method is chosen to gain some background knowledge and thus a better understanding of the language practices in the workplaces. Centricity in language policy has to do with the focus on home country language, local, and corporate language. A policy can be ethnocentric, polycentric or geocentric, often however, the policy is not clear-cut. In simple terms,

van den Born & Peltokorpi (2009, 100) define an ethnocentric language policy as home country orientated, polycentric as host country orientated, and finally geocentric as internationally orientated. An ethnocentric company would thus be strongly interrelated with the home country, with many home country-expatriates employed in the subsidiaries, and with a relatively strict language policy. A polycentric company is instead focused on local language and customs, with limited control from the home country. Geocentric companies appear to focus more on expert knowledge than language proficiency and therefore employ personnel globally. This will undoubtedly create a need for a lingua franca (van den Born & Peltokorpi 2010).

The study can be said to be both emic and etic as it takes the view of the informants, describing their language practice in the workplace as well as exploring the language policy from an outside point of view. An emic perspective can be described as the insider's view; here, the research is describing the participant's experience and opinions of their reality. This is what the analysis of the language practices is based on. An etic perspective on the other hand, is viewed from an outsider's perspective. It is more deductive and centred on the theories and concepts of the field of research (Hornberger, 2013). The analysis of the language policy thus has an etic approach, as the data collected regarding the company and its language policy has been studied with the framework of centrality as its basis.

3. Material

This section will give a brief overview and background of the interviewees who have participated in the study and the companies in which they work. This background information will enable a better starting point for the analysis. Although the initial plan was to interview several people from the two companies, in order to get a full and extensive understanding of the language use in the two workplaces, the study has had to make do with one interview from each company. This will undoubtedly affect the scale and significance of the study. The researcher is therefore very cautious to generalise or make statements of the actual language use in the company. It is important to bear in mind that the study covers and discusses two people's perception of their day-to-day language use in their workplace.

The two companies have, as we will see, some similarities even though the differences are prominent. One is a large multinational corporation (MNC), while the other is a small/medium enterprise (SME). Company 1, the MNC, is foreign-owned with head office in Canada. Company 2, the SME, is a Swedish company with head office in Stockholm but with a British and German upper-management. Some basic information about the companies can be seen in table 1 below.

Table 1. Basic information regarding company 1 and 2.

Company	Size	Home country	Type of business	Official languages	Languages used by informant
Company 1	MNC	Canada	Technology	English and French	English and Swedish
Company 2	SME	Sweden	Design and manufacturing	English	English and Swedish

3.1 Informant 1

Informant 1 works in a large multinational corporation with English and French as official languages. It is a global Canadian-owned company with offices in 60 countries around the world. There are around 2700 employees in Sweden, spread over three offices around the country. Around 550 individuals are working in the office that is examined in this study. The company is divided into five regions; this office is part of “Region North” the four other regions are Asia, Region South (south Europe and middle east), America (US and south America) and Central Europe. Around 30 nationalities are represented in the office, making for a multilingual and multicultural workplace. Much of the staff has been relocated from other offices, both within Region North and from the other regions. It is common for the offices to borrow staff and experts from each other, and employees in certain positions will often travel or even move in their job. Informant 1 is a native speaker of Swedish, and is also highly proficient in both English and Spanish. S/he has been in the company for a little over a year, working with marketing and communication.

3.2 Informant 2

Informant 2 works in a medium/small company with offices in Stockholm, Hong Kong, Singapore, Seoul, Tokyo and Dallas. The company is Swedish, with a British CEO and English as the corporate language. The company has recently suffered from cut downs and has gone from 800 employees to 200. The German part of the company has been sold off. Ten individuals are now working fulltime in the Stockholm office. Three nationalities are represented in the office; Sweden, China and Korea. Everyone is however highly proficient in Swedish, according to informant 2. Although the Stockholm office is relatively small, it is nevertheless the company’s head office. Management, and sometimes employees from the other offices around the world are present in the Stockholm office approximately half of the time. The CEO for example, spends most of his time in either Stockholm or Hong Kong. Borrowing expert knowledge within the company is thus common in company 2 as well. Informant 2 works in the finance department, and has been with the company for a little over 2 years. S/he is a native speaker of Swedish and highly proficient in English.

3.3 Policies

It is important to once again stress the differentiation in the analysis of the language practices from the analysis of the policies. The analysis of the employees' language use conveys the informants' perceptions and viewpoints, thus taking an emic stance. The companies' language policy on the other hand, is analysed through the researcher's perspective, and is based on the framework of centrality (van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010). This analysis thus takes an etic perspective (Hornberger, 2013).

Company 1 does have a written language policy, which states that English (specifically Canadian English) and French are the official languages. The company also has a 16-page "English style guide" which is concerned with how to write rather than what language to use. Part one of the style guide brings up topics as "Keep it simple", "tone of voice" and "inclusive language". The paragraphs under "Keep it simple" stress that English is not the first language of most of the readers, and that the language should therefore be simple and to the point. The second part lists and discusses, in alphabetical order, "style specifics", such as abbreviations, acronyms, captions and titles, headlines and sub-headlines, and hyphens. A relatively high proficiency of English is necessary in informant 1's office. Informant 1 was required to take two tests in both English and Swedish prior to employment in company 1.

Company 2 does not seem to have a written language policy. Informant 2 states that s/he has no knowledge of one, although it might exist somewhere. There is no style guide and although it is common knowledge among all employees that English is the corporate language, there is no specification on whether it is American or British (or any other English variety) standards that should be adhered to. Company 2 likewise requires proficiency in English in their employees; however, informant 2 did not take a test or in any other way attest his level of proficiency prior to his employment.

4. Results

This section will describe the language practices in the informants' day-to day work and presents the themes and discussions that emerged from the interviews. The section is divided into three main themes, language choices, language policies, and advantages and disadvantages. The possible implications of these results will be discussed in section 5 below.

4.1 Language choices

The two informants use English as their principal language in writing. Although informant 2 mentions a few more instances where Swedish would be used, they both state that in writing, English is used at least 90 per cent of the time. This is to avoid additional work, in case an email, summary or document needs to be forwarded to a third party. In spoken language however, Swedish is used to a higher degree. Informant 1 explains that it depends on the project and who is involved. If the group is Swedish, they will speak Swedish but continue to write in English. If the group has

non-Swedish speakers, all communication will be in English. Informant 2 describes a similar approach; however, it is more customary that everyone involved speaks Swedish in Company 2, as the majority is fluent in the language. This means that Swedish is used more in company 2 than in company 1, especially in spoken interactions.

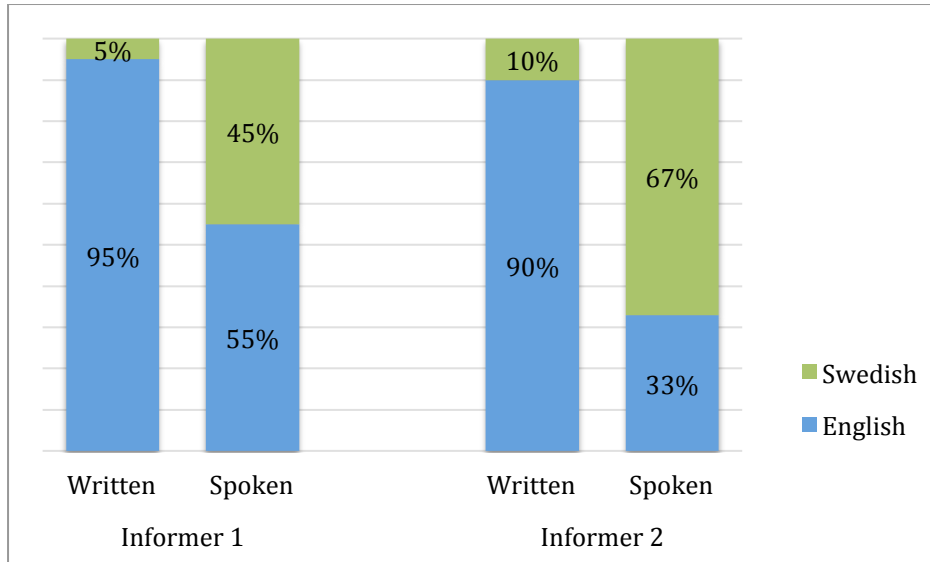


Fig. 1. The informants' language usage.

Another important factor that helps determine which language to use is whether the interaction is business-related or social. Informant 2 uses English mainly for business-related interactions, whereas Swedish is used for both work-related and social communication. Informant 1 uses the languages more interchangeably, in work-related as well as social situations.

The choice of language in a given situation is thus dependent on three variables; if the interaction is work-related or social, if the language is written or spoken, and who is involved in the interaction. Although all three variables have shown to be important for both informants' choice of language in a situation, they seem to prioritise them somewhat differently.



Fig. 2. Key variables for language choice.

4.1.1.1 Activities

Activities can be divided into two variables, which both contribute to the choice of language. They are concerned with whether the language is written or spoken and if the interaction is business-related or social. The first variable among the activities to be accounted for is written and spoken language. Written language includes genres as emails, reports, and written presentations as well as minutes and summaries from meetings. Written language is mostly, if not always business-related according to both informants, they also state that written language is nearly always done in English.

(1) “Everything that’s documented is in English. Even if everyone speaks Swedish, the minutes and emails are in English. Because an email might need to be forwarded to someone who doesn’t speak Swedish. That’s a ground rule.” Informant 1.

Spoken language is connected to both business-related and social interactions. It can therefore be said to function on three levels; meetings and conferences, which are highly work-related, telephone or face-to-face conversations, which usually include social performances even though the focus is on work-related issues, and small talk over lunch or coffee breaks, which is often a predominantly social situation, even if work-related topics are sometimes discussed. For informant 2, there is a clear connection between the type of interaction and choice of language. The more important a meeting is, the more likely it is that English is used. Consequentially, as the interactions decrease in importance and move towards small talk, the more likely it is that Swedish is used. Informant 1 does not describe the same pattern. The language choice in Company 1 thus seems to be more dependent on who is interacting with whom.

The informants mention different strategies used in written communication in English. Both describe a simple and direct language when writing in English. This

strategy is used as not everyone involved is on the same level of proficiency, and the informants therefore use as simple a language as possible, to avoid misunderstandings. Informant 2 says that s/he is more conscious and spends more time on the language when writing to upper management and native speakers.

(2) “If I send out an important email or report, which goes to management, I want it to look professional. It takes a little longer than writing in Swedish, but it doesn’t take that long to look up a couple of words or synonyms and double check the spelling. When you write a short email (.) just to ask a question, it doesn’t take any longer than writing in Swedish. But then you use the same lines over and over, “let me know if you need anything else” and “best regards”” Informant 2.

Informant 1 on the other hand claims to always write in a certain style, and does not seem to take power relations or social distance into consideration to the same extent.

(3) “I’m very straightforward in my emails, I don’t embellish. I’m always pleasant and polite, but I’m direct, that’s how I am. It works pretty well.” Informant 1.

Although only informant 2 mentions any such strategies when describing spoken language, one could assume that they both use different strategies when speaking English as well as writing, although unconsciously.

(4) “I might choose not to use the most advanced words I know when I talk to someone who isn’t as good at English. But it’s not much of a difference really. More slang and idioms when I speak to natives I guess.” Informant 2

The second variable concerning activities is social and work-related interactions. This was briefly mentioned above, as the two variables are strongly connected. Work-related interactions will be reviewed here, while social interactions will be accounted for in the following section. Work-related interactions can, as mentioned above, be both written and spoken, and are mostly performed in English by both informants. If meetings are held in Swedish, minutes and summaries are still written down in English. Informant 1 states that s/he usually uses English in work-related contexts, even in spoken mediums. Informant 2 however, who works in an office where the majority, if not all, is fluent in Swedish, says that Swedish is used for spoken work-related communication around two thirds of the time. Nevertheless, s/he also states that minutes and summaries are always written in English.

4.1.2 Social relations

In social interactions, the two informants describe rather different experiences and strategies. The language in social interactions is however strongly dependent on who is in the room. Both informants state that the choice of language is governed by the participants of the interaction. Swedish is used only when everyone taking part in the interaction is proficient in Swedish. This is of course more common in company 2,

where everyone working fulltime in the office is Swedish-speaking. In company 1, English is the shared language, as there is usually someone in the group who doesn't speak Swedish.

Informant 1 states that in Company 1, people are generally very good at continuing speaking English throughout the interaction. In his/her experience from other multilingual workplaces, it is often the case that a group conversation, over a lunch for example, starts off with English, but people soon begin to shift back to Swedish and other native languages, creating small group conversations instead. According to informant 1 this sometimes happens in Company 1, but rarely. Informant 2 describes the situation which informant 1 mentioned above as his/her own experience in Company 2. Swedish is, as previously mentioned, the main spoken language in Company 2. Even if meetings and business-related conversations are held in English when a non-Swedish speaker is involved, coffee breaks and social talk is more fluctuating. According to informant 2, they often start off with English, but people shift back to Swedish if they do not talk directly with the non-Swedish speaker. Small groups are often formed, with some speaking English and some speaking Swedish. Informant 2 also mentions that if English is spoken in social settings, the conversations are more business oriented, whereas small talk concerning subjects outside of work is usually confined to Swedish.

(5) "When you talk to English-speaking people outside of meetings (.) in the lunchroom for example, you still talk about work." Informant 2

Languages other than English and Swedish are relatively common in company 1, although used in smaller groups. Informant 1 often spends time with people from other offices, and sometimes has lunch with the Spanish-speaking group, to practice his/her Spanish. S/he has noticed some clustering in Company 1, based on native languages. However when someone who does not speak the language joins the conversation, people will shift to English. According to informant 1 there are some differences among different language groups. Swedish and Spanish speaking people, s/he mentions as an example, are more inclined to speak English for a longer time, such as over a lunch, and on a range of subjects. Other groups often shift back to their native language and only use English when they speak directly to a non-speaker of Russian for example, or focus on more business-related subjects when they do speak English. This is the same pattern that was described by informant 2; English in social contexts is still business-related.

(6) "My opinion is that it's a very open atmosphere here (.) but then, it's easy to be drawn to similarities, so you probably do spend more time with those who speak your own language. I like to mix with everybody, but I think that the ones who don't speak Swedish keep with their groups a bit more." Informant 1

(7) “the Russians were more shy, and maybe not as confident in their English, so they often changed back to speak Russian with each other, you had to drag the conversation back to English.” Informant 1

These clusters or groups do not appear to exist in Company 2 according to informant 2. Even when the company was at its biggest, informant 2 claims that the groups were usually based on positions, e.g. the design team and the sales department. Today everyone interacts with each other, as they are only ten individuals in the office. However, as we can see above, group divisions are made when non-speakers of Swedish are present in social interactions.

4.2 Advantages and disadvantages

The use of English is largely viewed positively by the informants, both to ensure functioning communication and as a cultural buffer. Multilingualism by and large is a valued asset in the companies, being able to communicate in the local language is advantageous and often necessary when it comes to external communication, but English is enough for internal communication.

(8) “What makes it good is that it creates an openness, and everyone is included. People mix with each other and a lot of the Swedish codes or norms are washed off.” Informant 1

Both informants are of the opinion that English as a corporate language works well in their respective company. The companies and employees are described as open, including and respectful. The informants’ perception is that everyone talks to everyone and that no one feels left out. Nevertheless some complications and strains are mentioned as the interviews go on, specifically in social situations.

(9) “Of course, when you start scratching the surface, on these nice lunches for example, there will be a degree of incomprehension. Some cultures are very strong, Swedes are quite adaptable, (.) not all cultures are. And to understand what is culture and what is personality is can be difficult sometimes.” Informant 1

(10) “Everyone understands English well, but there is one person who doesn’t like speaking English. She’s not that used to it, not comfortable with it. She’s quieter when we speak English in the lunchroom and stuff. There hasn’t been any problems and she can do the job, it’s just the social bit.” Informant 2

Although the level of proficiency is often relatively high, both informants mentioned situations when low proficiency of English caused some difficulties. Although these incidents were not portrayed as problematic, they are nevertheless telling and noteworthy.

(11) “I had a manager from Italy, his English wasn’t that good, but he made sure to get help from someone who could verbalize and package his messages, (.) so he could communicate what he wanted to say effectively.” Informant 1

(12) “One time the finance manager in Germany started talking with her colleagues after the meeting, but they hadn’t hung up the phone so we overheard her saying in German that she hadn’t understood a word we’d said. That meeting had been one and a half hour long. We had a good laugh after that.” Informant 2

4.3 Language policies

The two companies seem to have rather different approaches in their language policies. Although the language practices are relatively similar, the language management, i.e. how the language is controlled, is noticeably different. Company 1 has a clear, official and extensive language policy, which seems to be widely and actively utilized at the workplace. In Company 2 however, it is clear that English is the corporate language, but informant 2 is not aware of any documents stating when and how this should be implemented.

English and French are the official languages in Company 1, as the company is Canadian. French however, is rarely used in the day-to day work. Documents and information are nevertheless available in both languages, as well as in German and sometimes Spanish. Swedish is used in much of the communication in informant 1’s office, which shows that local languages are embraced and utilised. As much of the staff in the office comes from all over the world, it is also clear that expert knowledge is prioritised over language proficiency. As the company is customer-dependent and works globally, brochures, documents and other information are translated into the customers’ native language when needed.

(13) “Its dependent on the market we work in, in China we translate most things to Chinese, or you wouldn’t be able to have big clients there. All external communication is adapted to the receiver. In Brazil we translate to Portuguese.” Informant 1

Company 1 has a 16-page style guide, which addresses and describes the linguistic conventions in the company. Examples of these are that Canadian Standard English is to be used, the tone of voice i.e. degree of formality, and inclusive language e.g. using “we” and “our”, as well as gender neutral and non-discriminatory language. The style guide also has a long section called “style specifics”, which “*give an overview of a rule and examples... that will result in greater consistency, less confusion and encourage clarity and simplicity*”(Company 1’s style guide, 2010, 7). Examples of this section are abbreviations, acronyms, bullet points, dates and times, and hyphens.

Company 2 does not appear to have any such document, or rather; no such document is being used. Although it is common knowledge within the company that English is

the corporate language, and should be used in all official documents, informant 2 has never seen or read any policy documents stating exactly when and how English should be used. Neither is it clear which variety of English that should be used or what information should be translated into other languages. This was evidently more relevant when a substantial part of the company was situated in Germany, but nonetheless still important today. All of the fulltime employees in the office are fluent in Swedish, while top management are native or highly proficient in English with zero or low proficiency in Swedish. This implies that although parent language is used in the office, the corporate language is prioritised in company 2. It also shows that expert knowledge is prioritised over language proficiency in company 2 as well.

(14) “We might have one, [language policy] (.) from before, but that no one reads. I haven’t read it. Don’t think anyone looks at those files. But I know that English is the corporate language, and that all the documents and reports need to be in English.” Informant 2

Proficiency in English is a requirement in both companies. Nonetheless proficiency also seems to be firmly connected to position and field of work. The higher up in management, or the more communicative the job, the higher level of proficiency in English is necessitated. Both informants state that a certain level of proficiency is needed to work in their respective office, but that blue-collar employees would require a lower level. Informant 2 also mentions that mid and upper management usually have a higher level of proficiency, including several native-speakers of English.

(15) “I had to do both verbal and written tests in English and Swedish when I applied for the job. They were quite tough. All job applications need to be in English. So you can tell just by the CV. Even the interviews are often in English. (.) But then it depends on the job as well, not everyone needs that high proficiency in English.” Informant 1

(16) “You need English to work here. But I didn’t need to do a test or anything. But I had worked in international companies before, so I guess they trusted that my English was good enough.” Informant 2

5. Discussion

As we can see from the results, much of what the informants have described seems to align with the research issues that have been highlighted in multilingual workplaces. English is the main corporate language, used parallel with Swedish in both social and work-related situations. Both informants state that written language is predominately in English while spoken language is more flexible. The informants do not view parallel language use as problematic; both have different strategies to communicate effectively in English and seem to competently shift between the two languages depending on the situation. Language is negotiated through a set of variables or factors and is thus determined by the people involved in the interaction, the function of the interaction and the medium of communication. Although some strains and

difficulties did emerge in the interviews, both informants held to be positive towards the use of English.

The present study have shown that parallel use of languages is customary and functional, and that language is negotiated among the employees, which corresponds well with Kingsley's (2013) findings. The two companies do however seem to have rather different schemes to language use and choice of language. In company 2, which has a looser approach to language policy, there seems to be a relatively strong correlation between formality and language; English is used for formal and imperative business communication whereas Swedish is used for less formal meetings and small talk. Company 1 does not show the same pattern, which most probably has to do with the size and structure of the company. As the office in company 1 is 50 times the size of company 2, and have 30 nationalities represented, the language is more dependent on the people involved in the communication than the formality of the interaction. The informants both claim to use a simple and direct approach when writing in English, in order to avoid misunderstandings. However, high proficiency in English does seem to be highly valued and aspired to. It is also clear that these flexible bottom-up practices are more influential than top-down regulations of language use. Although the fundamental directions come from management, the details and deviations are negotiated among the staff. This coincides with the results of Angouri & Miglbauer's, (2014) research.

Social interactions seem to be rather more problematic than business-related communication. This is apparent in both companies, as both informants mention people or groups of people whom avoid speaking English in social settings. The reason for this is most probably twofold; the participants are proficient enough in business-English, but lack the vocabulary for small talk and longer conversations. Separately or connected to this is the possibility of low confidence in language proficiency and the fact that social interactions are the situations that can be avoided. The employees' willingness to use the corporate language is thus evidently important, and language management can therefore not be concerned only with the language itself, but also the employees' beliefs and feelings regarding the language (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Pullin, 2010; Tange & Lauring, 2009). That the employees form groups depending on preferred language in social settings seems to be common in company 2, but less common in company 1. The informants view the situation in respective companies as positive, as "no one gets left out". It is clear that both informants feel that their respective office is open and welcoming, although the strategies for inclusion are contrasting. It is rather interesting that both informants claim that there are no problems in communication in their respective workplace, while at the same time bringing up issues such as language clustering and low language proficiency.

Communication is portrayed as well functioning and effective within both companies, nevertheless difficulties and potential problems are visible in the results. Informant 1

describes some language clusters in company 1, which seem to reduce communication. This is however mainly concerned with social interactions, and does not, according to informant 1, cause work-related problems. Informant 2 also describes what could be language clusters, although it is pointed out that Swedish in small talk is usually related to subjects outside of work. It is nevertheless important to note that a substantial amount of work-related information is communicated through small talk (Tange & Luring, 2009), and although meetings and other formal communication works well, these language clusters can still cause knowledge loss and thin communication within the office. An interesting observation is that both informants brought up situations concerned with linguistic difficulties regarding managers. These situations were however presented as funny stories or examples of success, and not as problematic. The fact they were mentioned at all suggest that there might be a lower tolerance for linguistic difficulties among managers than for employees. It appears to be expected that managers have high language proficiency, and that possible miscommunication is more severe when it involves a manager. However, as these examples are told as funny stores or success tales rather than problematic situations, it also exemplifies how flexible and forbearing the informants are in their communication.

The companies' language practices are relatively similar; however, the policies appear to be distinctively different. Company 1's most common language is English, the parent language, along with Swedish, the local language. Much of the staff is taken in from across the world, and English thus become a corporate language as well as parent language. It is however clear that English is viewed and used as parent language, since Canadian English is prescribed and there are directions to how to write correctly in English. In company 2, English is used as a corporate language, it is focused on function rather than form and although it is the native language of the CEO and others in top management, it is not the parent language. Swedish is the parent language and used widely in the office for spoken but not written communication. It can therefore be claimed that company 1 has an ethnocentric language policy, focusing on parent language and standardisation, although merged with a polycentric approach to local language. Company 2 on the other hand, is geocentric, using a corporate language for communication, which is not regulated from the top and is therefore focused on function more than form. The language policy is also influenced by an ethnocentric view of parent language.

Whereas it can be argued that power structures are always present, concerning language in the same vein as class, gender, nationality or any other classification, the informants do not seem to identify any obvious power structures concerning language in any of the two workplaces. While they do concede that native speakers of English have the upper hand linguistically, the informants do not perceive that this automatically gives native speakers of English any advantages or power in the company on the whole. As this study has solely focused on white-collar employees, the collisions between the "international expert" and "blue collar worker" discussed in

Lønsmann's (2014) study is not particularly relevant here. Even when moderating the thesis to reflect on high proficiency versus low proficiency, it appears to be inapplicable in present study. There does not seem to be any power struggles or collisions between groups within the offices. On the contrary, as informant 1 stated, with such a multicultural environment, the company has "washed away" the Swedish culture, and there is a sense of respect and solidarity among the staff.

6. Conclusion

In summary, it can be concluded that English is the main language used for written communication while both Swedish and English are used in spoken interactions. The choice of language is very much depending on the function of the interaction and the people involved, and the language is thus negotiated among the staff in all interactions. Parallel language use is therefore customary in both companies and is viewed positively by both informants. Nevertheless some issues have come to light in the study. Low confidence or a lower proficiency in English among some employees can hinder small talk and social relations. This could have effects on the companies' performance and productivity. Language clusters seem to exist in both companies, although not seen as a problem by the informants, this too can cause thin communication and knowledge loss.

The companies' language policies, although very differing, both appear to focus more on written language than spoken. Both informants are well aware that written communication is to be in English, spoken interactions on the other hand, are negotiated in every situation. This can cause some difficulties, in social settings especially. The style guide available in company 1 is a good and easy tool to encourage a simple and functioning language. It is characteristic of an ethnocentric policy, which focuses on parent language, to standardise the language use. Company 2's non-existence of a clear policy gives the employees more flexibility and might create a higher tolerance for linguistic discrepancies. However, a lack of guidelines also puts more liability on the employees. This is common for a geocentric language policy, which puts function before form, and thus has a more open and unregulated organisation.

The aim of this study was to explore how and when English was used in the workplace, and how the language policy might affect the communication in the company. It is hoped that this small study will contribute to a better understanding of language use and language management in multinational companies in Sweden. This study has shown how language is negotiated among the employees, and when parallel language use can cause difficulties for effective communication. This knowledge is valuable for HR as well as management in order to encourage and facilitate successful communication. It is also an important start for developing or improving a company's language policy.

Further studies in multilingual workplaces in Sweden are however called for. It would first of all be interesting to examine what level of proficiency is essentially needed in the workplaces, in order to meet work-related as well as social demands. It would also be useful to connect interviews with observations of the workplace, to obtain an objective assessment of the language use and thus gain a deeper understanding of the language practices in the workplace. Furthermore, a deeper analysis of the language policies and how these are used and implemented by management to ensure functional communication would be both valuable and interesting.

References

- Angouri, j. (2013). The multilingual reality of the multinational workplace: language policy and language use, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 34(6), 564–581.
- Angouri, J. & Miglbauer, M. (2014). ‘And then we summarise in English for the others’: The lived experience of the multilingual workplace. *Multilingua*, 33(1–2), 147–172.
- Bjørge, A-K & Whittaker, S. (2011). Language management within Norwegian organizations with a multicultural workforce. *FOCUS working paper*: SNF/NHH.
- Charles, M. (2007). Language matters in global communication. *Journal of Business Communication*, 44(3), 260-282
- Charles, M. & Marschan-Piekkari, R. (2002). Language training for enhanced horizontal communication – a challenge for MNCs. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 65(2), 9–29.
- Ehrenreich, S. (2010). English as a business lingua franca in a German multinational corporation – Meeting the Challenge. *Journal of Business Communication*, 47(4), 408–431.
- Gee, J., Hull, G. & Lankshear, C. (1996). *The new work order: behind the language of the new capitalism*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
- Gunnarsson, B. (2013). Multilingualism in the workplace. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 33, 162–189.
- Hornberger, N. H. (2013). Negotiating methodological rich points in the ethnography of language policy. *International Journal Of The Sociology Of Language*, (219), 101-122.
- Johansson, C. (2005). 'Man har svårt att uttrycka nyanser' : när engelskan är koncernspråk. *Språk på tvärs: rapport från ASLA's höstsymposium*. Södertörn, 11-12 November 2004.
- Johnson, J. C. & Weller, S. C. (2002). Elicitation Techniques for Interviewing. In Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A., *Handbook of interview research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 185–204.
- Kingsley, L. (2013). Language choice in multilingual encounters in transnational workplaces. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 34(6), 533–548.
- Lønsmann, D. (2014). Linguistic diversity in the international workplace: Language ideologies and processes of exclusion. *Multilingua*, 33(1–2), 89–116.
- Marschan, R., Welch, D., & Welch, L. (1997). Language: The forgotten factor in multinational management. *European Management Journal*, 15, 591–598.
- Miles, M. & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: an expanded sourcebook*. 2. ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Millar, S. & Jensen, A. (2009). Language Choice and Management in Danish Multinational Companies: The Role of Common Sense. *Sociolinguistica*, 23, 86–103.
- Pullin, P. (2010). Small Talk, Rapport, and International Communicative Competence: Lessons to Learn from BELF. *Journal of Business Communication*, 47(4), 455–476.

- Tange, H. & Luring, J. (2009). Language management and social interaction within the multilingual workplace. *Journal of Communication Management*, 13(3), 218–232.
- Thomas, C. (2008). Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice: Language Policy in Multilingual Organisations. *Language Awareness*, 17(4), 307–325.
- van den Born, F. & Peltokorpi, V. (2010). Language Policies and Communication in Multinational Companies: Alignment With Strategic Orientation and Human Resource Management Practices. *Journal of Business Communication*, 47(2), 97–118.

Appendix

Questions for interviews:

These are the original questions, prepared ahead of the interviews. The questions were then used as notes to remember what to discuss with the interviewees. It is important to remember that the interviews were semi-structured, so follow-up questions and discussions of interesting themes that emerged were a large part of both interviews.

- Du kan väl börja med att berätta lite om arbetsplatsen, det här är anonymt, så inte vad företaget heter el vad ni gör, men hur stort det är, var ni har kontor, vilka språk som används, om det är många nationaliteter eller språk på det här kontoret, hur många det är som jobbar på kontoret mm.
- Kan du beskriva en vanlig dag på jobbet för dig? Vad gör du? Vad har du för olika arbetsuppgifter?
- Skulle du kunna lista eller rada upp alla de saker som du gör under en vanlig arbetsdag och säga när du använder vilket språk, t.ex. skriver e-mails, eller på kafferasten, möten?
- I procent, hur mycket tror du att du använder du de olika språken? I vilka sammanhang används de?
- Vilka är det som du umgås mest med på arbetsplatsen? som man småpratar med och är lite mer social med. Inga namn, men det alla som du springer på, är det de som du sitter närmast, de med samma modersmål, de med liknande uppgifter, samma chefsnivå.
- Tycker du att kontoret i helhet är uppdelat i grupper, umgås man i grupper, och är det iså fall beroende på språk, arbetsuppgifter eller kanske kontorets geografi?
- I vilka situationer byter du språk? Är det t.ex. så att du använder svenska/engelska förutom när du måste använda ett annat språk, finns det tydliga regler om vilka språk som ska användas när, eller är det något som hela tiden förändras, att man använder alla språk och byter naturligt?
- Vem är det som byter språk, och i vilka situationer, vem är det som egentligen bestämmer vilket språk som ska användas?
- Hur tycker du att det fungerar med engelska på arbetsplatsen?
- Kan du komma på något som är positivt med att använda engelska som ni gör här?
- Uppstår det några problem el frustrationer på grund av språken, missförstånd, svårare att kommunicera, tar längre tid t.ex.?

- Kan du komma på några exempel när språket kan ställa till med problem, stora som små?
- Känner du till er språkpolicy, vad säger den?
- Arbetar ni faktiskt så som policyn uppmanar till?
- Vet du om språkpolicyn används, av er, eller av HR och chefer, är det ngt som nämnts?
- Har ni någon språkträning på arbetsplatsen, eller hade de språkkrav när ni ansökte om jobbet t.ex.?

Stockholms universitet
106 91 Stockholm
Telefon: 08-16 20 00
www.su.se



**Stockholms
universitet**