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Management of Multilingualism in Multinational Companies of German Origin in the Czech Republic

1. Introduction

Due to the great economic and societal changes beginning in 1989, large companies in international business in the Czech Republic are mainly foreign-owned. In many cases, the foreign owners send managers and specialists, so-called expatriates, from the parent company, to 'build up' the new factories and subsidiaries. Communication strategies between expatriates and local employees have been the topic of some studies on multicultural and language issues in such multinational companies (e.g. Nekvapil 1997; Nekula 2005). Some further studies (e.g. Nekula *et al.* 2005; Nekvapil/Sherman 2009) have concentrated more on the issue of multilingualism in these settings. Corporate communication involves, on the one hand, activities oriented toward a greater public including (potential) customers, and on the other hand, activities which are part of work processes and take place exclusively on the company site. This study reports only on the internal part of corporate communication. It utilizes Language Management Theory (Jernudd/Neustupný 1987; Neustupný/Nekvapil 2003; Nekvapil/Sherman 2009b) to explain some processes of multilingualism in multinational companies in the Czech Republic. Visits were made to several companies, plants of large German business groups with headquarters in Germany, during 2007 and 2008. All of the companies were large enterprises (with at least 500 employees) in the engine construction industry, which has certain consequences for the organization of the workplace. Data collection combined written material with interviews and all kinds of observation. The analysis will first show some common features of these companies and then concentrate on a case study of how multilingualism is managed in the internal communication of one specific multinational company of German origin in the Czech Republic.

2. The workplace and its linguistic diversity

The premises of the relevant companies[1] consist of manufacturing halls (factory) on the one hand and offices where activities such as sales, purchasing and administration are conducted on the other hand. As regards linguistic interaction, it is obvious that the bulk of the communication is done in the offices, whereas the factory is to a great extent a non-communicative space due to the fact that the jobs there mainly involve manual labor, and circumstances like noise and distance between people obstruct language interaction. Some conference rooms inside the manufacturing halls are important exceptions to this. These spaces are used to discuss the manufacturing processes.

Expatriates are sent as delegates from the parent company for a period of time ranging from several months to five years as specialists in certain economic or technical matters. Except for a few people of other nationalities, expatriates in the given companies are German citizens. Even in cases when they receive preparation in advance, they tend not to have the time and the pre-conditions to learn Czech at a communicative level. For the supervision of the working processes, a few German expatriates operate in the factory. They also take part in the above-mentioned discussions of the manufacturing processes. Most of the expatriates work in leading positions in the offices of the company, often with the support of a secretary or assistant, who, among other things, compensates for the expatriate's lack of language skills.

1 For reasons of anonymity, neither the names nor the precise locations of the companies are mentioned.

People with a local labor contract include employees on all hierarchical levels of the company. It is typical for the most highly qualified employees not to stay very long in the respective companies, hence a significant fluctuation of workers is characteristic. This holds true especially for companies in the Prague area, where the labor market offers many alternative sources of employment for highly skilled people. Manufacturing employees mainly come from different parts of the Czech Republic and from the Slovak Republic, each with its first language. Czech and Slovak are very closely related Slavonic languages with an underlying continuum of spoken varieties. Slovaks have used a variety of Czech for literary purposes for a long time in history and the use of Slovak for these purposes established itself in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. In the 20th century, a common state (Czechoslovakia), which existed for the time of three generations and eventually split in 1992/93, supported the understanding of both standard varieties (Czech and Slovak) in almost all public and private domains in both parts of the country. Nowadays many people from either country are still used to make themselves understood in their own language when communicating with members of the other ethnolinguistic group (that is, Slovaks use Slovak in communicating with Czechs and Czechs use Czech in communicating with Slovaks). However, a growing number of people lacks nowadays the intensive contact with both languages to communicate fluently in this way. Czech-Slovak receptive bilingualism also hardly works with those few foreigners in the Czech Republic who have learned Czech as a foreign language.

In addition to the first languages of the people in the companies under research (that is German, Czech and Slovak),[2] English is used in companies to a certain extent. As the language of business and as a lingua franca, English has no alternative in external (global) communication; in internal communication English is used as an alternative to German in the communication between expatriates and local employees.

Companies with a similar multilingual situation adopt certain strategies for managing their multilingualism. The present study has

2 Further first languages of very small minority groups are not included here.

found that they apply the following tools in order to meet their language requirements.

- they have linguistic recruitment conditions – requiring the knowledge of German or English for many of the local employees;
- they offer
  - a significant amount of language courses or other help for the acquisition of one or more foreign languages (including Czech courses for expatriates);
  - a salary bonus for language proficiency;
  - translating and interpreting services – in the companies studied there are even some in-house translators;
- companies try to establish a climate of mutual understanding, for example by establishing so-called communication rules.

Through these measures, companies raise the language skills of their staff but also the motivation for learning (e.g. by means of the salary bonus). We may argue that companies raise, at the same time, the awareness of their employees of the languages in the company, thus actually supporting multilingualism.

3. Inequalities in language use

Expatriates are delegates from a parent company and therefore work on a different basis than local workers. This leads to differences in almost all of these tools for handling language diversity: local workers are expected to know foreign languages (German and/or English), but expats are not expected to know the local language, but rather, to merely display the readiness to learn it; expatriates are not tested on their improvement in language courses. These are examples of inequality, which will be discussed below.

Communication in foreign languages (without interpretation) is also unequal, as language skills are often at different levels. Lingua franca communication is therefore often seen as a solution to which

anyone may easily adapt, with no participants having any particular disadvantage. In the case of Germans in the Czech Republic this would mean speaking English. Previous studies (e.g. Nekvapil/Sherman 2009a) have shown that this kind of lingua franca communication is not always as equal as it was intended to be by the persons who introduced it. There is evidence for inequality in both directions: globally experienced expatriates outperforming Czech colleagues, who learned English as their third foreign language quite late in life; and, on the other hand, older German managers with a less proficient command of English than their younger Czech staff.

A final inequality is the fact that companies have established their own communication rules. One of the companies has formulated so-called guidelines for internal communication which involve instructions like "We do not tolerate off-topic or personal attacks", "We have the courage to ask in cases when we do not understand", "Our aims are clearly formulated"[3] etc. Rules like this are written in German and Czech and put up in places such as meeting rooms, and presuppose that all participants adopt the same norms and therefore experience equal treatment. Rules are predominantly formulated in an inclusive way, using formulations with the pronoun *we* rather than imperatives. They avoid mentioning differences in belonging to a national, language or status group, which suggests that their main aim is to establish a climate of mutual understanding. In addition to official rules there is also a hidden agenda, norms which are not written but which have emerged from the reactions of people; for example, a German employee stated that it was not possible to learn Czech, due to the short time of his/her stay.[4] In addition Czech employees may have become accustomed to the practice of not speaking Czech to expatriates. Their behaviour may be analyzed as conforming to a 'contact situation norm' which implies that Czech is not the language of contact between Germans and Czechs.

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3 All translations are by the author from a bilingual original (German and Czech).

4 This is not, however, meant to imply that there are no German employees with proficiency in Czech – in all of the companies under study, counter-examples were observed.

4. Language Management Theory (LMT)

The problems of linguistic understanding in the companies under study can be analyzed using Language Management Theory (Jernudd/ Neustupný 1987; Neustupný/Nekvapil 2003; Nekvapil/Sherman 2009b), as a theoretical basis. This theory concentrates on language problems not only on the macro-level of the entire society, but also on problems in ongoing or arising communication, at the micro-level of concrete interaction. LMT explains the possible relationships between those levels (Nekvapil/Nekula 2006a; Nekvapil/ Sherman 2009b). One of the characteristics of LMT is that the management of linguistic features is embedded in communication management and socio-economic management. Neustupný and Nekvapil (2003) following Hymes (1974) specify eight types of strategies which are subject to language management. They use the term 'variety strategies' to address communication management, which is the main interest of this study of a multilingual workplace: "variation strategies govern the use of language varieties and variables – what languages are spoken and what problems affect these languages and their individual rules" (Neustupný/Nekvapil 2003: 187).

LMT presumes that participants have certain norms or 'expectations' when they use language. The management is described as a process beginning with *noting* a deviation from a norm. The noted deviation may then be evaluated. The negative *evaluation* of norm deviations (i.e. a language problem) may result in the *design of an adjustment* and the subsequent *realization or implementation* of this design. Not every process of language management arrives at an implemented adjustment design, but if it does, new facts are produced, which may evoke new deviations from expectations, thus evoking new language management (see Figure 1).

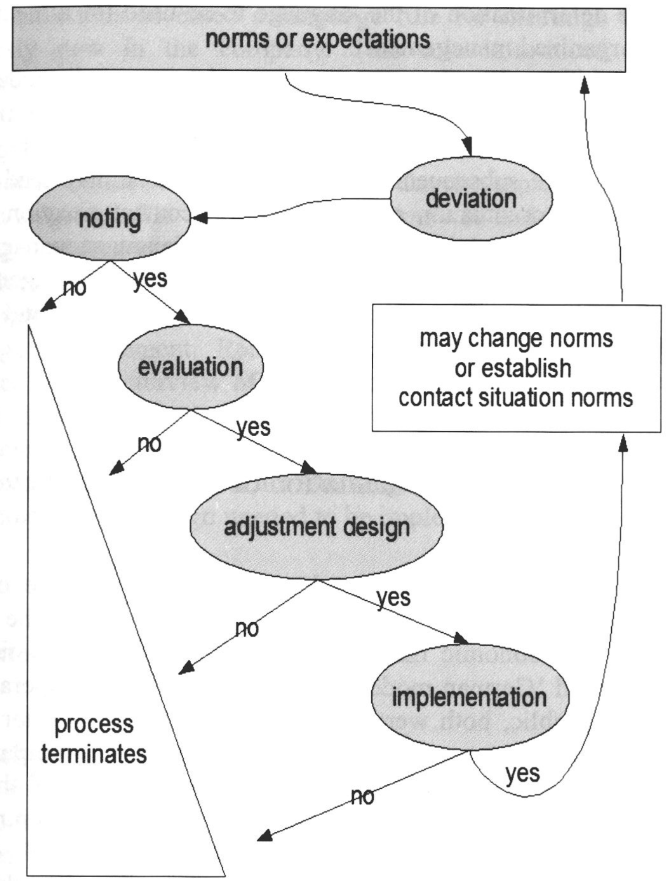

Figure 1. The language management process.

When this process occurs at the level of the individual utterance, e.g. self-correction, it is called 'simple management'. It may be studied by means of conversation analysis, which offers description models like repair sequences (Schegloff/Sacks/Jefferson 1977). When language management transcends the utterance level, occurs repeatedly in a number of situations and becomes the subject of discussion, reflection, and even of ideological considerations or acts of policy or 'strategy', such as the determination of the language to be used for a meeting, it is called 'organized management'.

In multilingual settings the question of norms and expectations becomes particularly relevant, because in addition to clear-cut norms and expectations of usual communication, the reoccurence of certain deviations and the subsequent language management may lead to the building of contact situation norms. However, contact situation norms may also serve as the starting point or the result of language management.

In multinational companies, organized language management is present in language rules, in communication conventions and in the language policy of the company.

5. Declaration and implementation of language policy

One of the researched companies has two chief executive officers (CEOs), one responsible for technical matters and the other responsible for economic matters, a type of task-sharing which has also been called 'German model'. When the plant began operating in the Czech Republic, both were German. A few months prior to the data collection in the company, one of the CEOs left the company and was replaced by a Czech CEO, Mr. Dvořák.[5] At one of the first meetings with the employees of the company Mr. Dvořák commented on a future language agreement for meetings. Several of the employees interviewed mentioned this meeting, agreeing that Mr. Dvořák stated

- that meetings should be held in the native language of the majority of the participants;
- that the minority then had to rely on the translation of an interpreter.

5 In order to maintain anonymity, the names have been changed.

Mr. Dvořák thus invented a language rule for meetings which was obviously new in the company. This rule introduced something resembling the right of the majority to its language in meetings. Most likely this was meant to strengthen the Czech language and to eliminate situations in meetings where a small minority of German expatriates would force a majority of Czech employees to speak a foreign language. Mr. Dvořák's declaration was undoubtedly part of a language management process as this includes discussions and reflections on language management. A meeting of the managers with the employees of the company was used for such reflections on language management. Reflections on language management also appeared in the interview of employees with the researcher, who was treated as 'expert' from Charles University. In terms of the language management-process, Mr. Dvořák's declaration is part of an *adjustment design*. In order for the language management process to be completed, this design needed to be implemented.

6. A meeting in three languages

Research in the company further involved participant observation in a technical meeting in Mr. Dvořák's company. There were twelve participants, but none of the in-house interpreters was present. Czech, German and Slovak were used. Sometimes there was some background conversation between two or three persons in addition to the main interaction of the meeting. Some of this talk in the background was interpreting. The participants in the meeting were all sitting around two tables, with the exception of one young Czech man, who stood near a board at the front of the room. During the meeting he announced the names of the individual construction items and prompted the other participants to comment on them. Occasionally he would write something on the board. I will call him the moderator although he did not really moderate the interventions except for starting and eventually closing the items of the discussion. He spoke only in Czech, although there were two German expatriates in the room, who spoke only German, and one material requirements planner (MRP), who was Slovak and spoke both Slovak and German. The other participants were Czechs, who either only spoke Czech or switched between German and Czech or did not speak at all.

Transcript 1 contains about 3.5 minutes of the project meeting. This extract starts in line 01 with Č0, the moderator, speaking in Czech. The language changes in line 13 to German, then again to Czech (line 34), but the German discussion goes on, beginning in line 37 and lasting until line 52. Then a Czech question (lines 53 to 55) is answered in Slovak (lines 56 to 67) and the reaction in line 68 is again in Czech. We can thus see six instances of code-switching in this short example. German is the language spoken the most. Lines 53 until 68 show an example of typical Czech-Slovak receptive bilingualism: a Czech question is followed by a Slovak answer and again a Czech reaction.

01 Č0: černý dveře, (.) jsou dodaný 02 do padesát trojky, (...) takže ty 03 nejsou jako k= (.) nevedeme jako 04 kritický;	01 Č0: black doors, (.) are delivered up 02 to number fifty three, (...) so they are 03 not like c= (.) we don't list them as 04 critical;
05 Č1: není to v ideálním stavu ale,	05 Č1: it's not in the ideal state but,
06 Č0: není no. (..) já bych ukážeme 07 si (to určitě) ještě. 08 (laminátový) poklopy,	06 Č0: it's not. (..) I would we will have 07 a look (at it definitely) later. 08 (laminated) hoods,
09 Č2: hm	09 Č2: hm
10 Č0: ty jsou dodaný do	10 Č0: they are delivered up to
{38 seconds left out}	{38 seconds left out}
11 Č0: izolační panely Miloši, samý 12 (šest sedmičky),	11 Č0: isolation panels, Miloš, just 12 (six sevens),
13 D1: wieso fehlen Dachklappen?	13 *D1: why are roof lights missing?*
14 S?: (Dachhauben)	14 *S?: (roof hoods)*

15 D1: äh: Dachhauben? (.) von 16 Quantos, sind das (die da)?	15 *D1: eh: roof hoods? (.) from* 16 *Quantos, are they (those)?*
17 S: bis zum siebenundvierziger 18 fehlt ( ) (..) siebenundvierziger 19 sind die (wo) ( ) gehabt hat, und 20 da hat schon die (Legierung) und 21 zwar eh hat [( )] 22 D1: [habt ihr] die nicht 23 rausgeschickt? nach meinen 24 Informationen (hat die)=	17 *S: up to number forty-seven are* 18 *missing ( ) (..) number forty-seven* 19 *are those (where) ( ) has had, and* 20 *there already the (alloy) and in fact* 21 *eh has [( )]* 22 *D1: [didn't you] send it out?* 23 *according to my* 24 *information (has the)=*
25 S: (nein (.) kommende Woche)	25 *S: (no (.) next week)*
26 (...)	26 *(...)*
27 D2: und die Gummis werden dann 28 hier geklebt	27 *D2: and the rubbers will get* 28 *glued here*
29 ?: na? die werden=	29 *?: yeah? they will=*
30 S: ja und die Gummis werden hier 31 geklebt (wir haben) ( ) (die 32 Gummis) ( )	30 *S: yes and the rubbers will get* 31 *glued here (we have) ( ) (the* 32 *rubbers) ( )*
33 (...)	33 (...)
34 Č0: Miloši můžem dostat 35 informaci (i i) i k těm izolacím? 36 (.)	34 *Č0: Miloš may we get information* 35 *(also also) about the isolations?* 36 (.)
37 D1: (.) auch alle weiteren 38 Gummis werden hier geklebt. (..) 39 (für die weiteren Dachklappen)	37 *D1: (.) and all the other* 38 *rubbers will be glued here as well.* 39 *(..) (for the other roof hoods)*
40 Č1: wo, bei uns?	40 *Č1: where, here?*
41 D1: ja oder?	41 *D1: yes or?*
42 S?: [nein] 43 D1: [ist] das abgesprochen.	42 *S?: [no]* 43 *D1: [is] it arranged.*
44 D1: [(nur für) das eine Problem.]	44 *D1: [(just for) this single problem.]*

45 S: [( ) nein nein ( )]	45 *S: [( ) no no ( )]*
46 abgesprochen ist, dass	46 *it's arranged that*
{1:08 minutes left out}	*{1:08 minutes left out}*
47 D1: also achtundvierzig und	47 *D1: okay number forty-eight and*
48 neunundvierzig wird noch hier	48 *forty-nine will still get*
49 geklebt.	49 *glued here.*
50 S: ja. [( )] Optionen [( )]	50 *S: yes. [( )] options [( )]*
51 Č1?: [( )] [( )]	51 *Č1?: [( )] [( )]*
52 D1: [gut]	52 *D1: [okay]*
53 Č0: Miloši jak to vypadá s těma	53 Č0: Miloš how does it look then like
54 izolacema teda, (..) izolační	54 with those isolations (..) isolation
55 panely	55 panels
56 S: no (.) ffffhhh ( ) (..) tam je	56 S: well (.) ffffhhh ( ) (..) there is
57 (nejaké to) evidovaná ta: ( )	57 (some) listed this: ( ) delivery, (..)
58 dodávka, (..) ja len dúfam teda že	58 I just hope then that it'll
59 príde lebo, (.) za prvé nemám ešte	59 come otherwise, (.) first I don't have
60 ten Lieferschein (zoznam) ( )	60 this *Lieferschein* (index) yet ( ) don't
61 vôbec neviem či ta príde, (.) i ( )	61 know at all if it'll come, (.) and ( )
62 sedmička už teraz (úplne totálne)	62 seven is already (completely totally)
63 a, (.) dúfam že tam vôbec bude	63 and, (.) I hope it'll be there at all
64 ako ja ti neviem povedať presne.	64 see I can't tell you exactly. I know
65 ja viem že má prísť ( ) dodávka.	65 the delivery should come. (.) (quite
66 (.) (celkom isto). ale (čo) prídu	66 certainly). but (what) is coming
67 nemá= nevie nikto. (3s)	67 nobody has nobody knows. (3s)
68 Č0: to tam můžeme napsat.	68 Č0: we can write it down there.

Transcript 1: Excerpt of a transcript from a meeting. In the English translation I marked text which is originally in German by italics and text which is originally in Slovak by underlined letters. Unmarked text is in original Czech.

This project meeting had the purpose of assessing the progress of a large construction project. The participants are the employees responsible for the assembling of the different components, for the logistics of well-timed delivery, storage, etc. The ordinary course of the meeting is, that the moderator (marked in the transcript as Č0), calls the name of a certain component. Everybody including himself

may then contribute or ask questions on this component. Č0 may also prompt particular participants to provide information. If there is no discussion the moderator may quickly continue to the next component. Transcript 1 shows such a course in lines 01 (*černý dveře* [black doors]) to 08 (*laminátový poklopy* [laminated hoods]). In line 11 the Č0 calls for information on *izolační panely* [isolation panels] prompting Miloš, the Slovak MRP (marked as S). Before anyone answers, a German participant (marked as D1) interrupts and asks for a completely different component, which leads to a longer discussion, during which the moderator tries again to come back to the item of isolation panels (line 34-35). The answer is not forthcoming until Č0 asks a third time (line 53-55), and it is provided in Slovak. In general, the course of the meeting is quite chaotic, everyone seems nervous, participants speak in a curt way with no polite phrases, always sticking to the point, with some speakers interrupting each other or speaking at the same time. Repair sequences like in lines 13-15 – in terms of conversation analysis – occur in the most dispreferred way: as other-initiated other-repair.

Although there is no common language in the meeting and there is no official interpretation available, it can be observed that all participants are able to act in accordance with their needs. The company's translator, who was not present at this specific meeting, but who usually interprets at similar events, said in an interview that her presence leads to the containment of code-switching by the bilingual participants, and thus the role of the interpreter is not only that of helping people understand each other, but in general, of controlling the language behavior of the participants. It is generally accepted that multilingual talk includes a variety of phenomena such as code-switching within sentences/propositions or between turns, borrowings and mixed codes, just to mention a few, and that these phenomena tend to occur together (Auer 1988, 1998; Myers-Scotton 1993; Lüdi 1998). In transcript 1, we see a lot of code-switching between turns coinciding with change of speakers, but there is considerably little code-mixing within turns of single speakers. The only exception within this extract is the Slovak MRK, who uses the German word *Lieferschein* when speaking Slovak in line 60. This is a case of 'transfer' in Auer's (1988) sense. It appears that the speaker corrects himself immediately by using a Slovak word to replace the German one,[6] which would mean that even in this case, as in the whole meeting, the speakers are oriented toward not mixing the codes. What is more, some of the participants know the two technical terminological systems of their respective project very well and pay attention to whether the terminology is used correctly, as in lines 13-15, where a German L1-speaker is corrected by a speaker of German as a foreign language (probably the Slovak MRP) in German wording.

Without extending the analysis into too many details, I would like to return now to the question of language management: Do we have any evidence that Mr. Dvořák's language policy declaration is put into practice here?

His new language rule was that a meeting should be held in the language of the majority of the participants and that the minority should then rely on interpreting. According to this rule, this meeting should have been held in Czech. What we can see in transcript 1 is that there is more German than Czech spoken. The analysis of the whole meeting shows that the three languages: Czech, German and Slovak, are used at a ratio of 44% - 46% - 10% respectively. The ratio of the first two languages is astonishingly well-balanced, and neither language dominates. Thus it would be difficult to claim that a language rule favoring Czech is being applied in this meeting, although there are reasons to assert that the new language policy is being implemented in a certain way.

One reason is the fact that there are no in-house interpreters present to support the German minority. The interpreting is therefore not done systematically, but rather, merely through simultaneous whispering among the colleagues. The German expatriates then contribute to the talk in their language – but also without consistent translation. This would explain why there is so much German in the discussion, which should be, according to the language rule of Mr. Dvořák, held in Czech.

Another key to the understanding of the process of the meeting is the role of the moderator. It is his job to announce the components, to state known information and to ask for further information. In doing

6 Due to the quality of the recording, it is also possible to doubt this interpretation.

so, he gives the meeting its structure, and this structure is entirely in Czech. Inside this Czech structure, there are possibilities for discussion or for the supply of information in German or Slovak. Like the other Czech participants, the moderator knows German, but he does not switch to it as most of his Czech colleagues do. The reason for this may be his structure-building function. This role makes him particularly conscious of the officially declared language policy and thus refrain from code-switching.

In terms of LMT, what we are witnessing in this short extract of a meeting, shown in Transcript 1, is how the stage of implementation of organized language management may result in quite a complicated course of multilingual talk with no systematic interpreting and with the official language being used to a lesser degree.

7. Contact situation norm and ideology

We may now ask what kind of deviation from what norm or expectation may have activated the language management in the case analysed above. We have shown that in contact situations, where a certain act of language management is often repeated, a contact situation norm may be established. In Mr. Dvořák's company, as in many of the other German-owned companies in the Czech Republic under study, a contact situation norm seems to have emerged, i.e. that no Czech may be spoken with expatriates. This is an instance of language inequality. The task of managers is to propose – and also to change – norms. When Mr. Dvořák took his office as new CEO, he may have had an expectation of some kind of equality in communication, but at the same time, he encountered the everyday contact situation norm in the company. He may have experienced the contact situation norm as a deviation from his personal norm of equality and this may have been the starting point of his own language management.

From the perspective of researchers in the area of multilingualism, we may claim that equality in communication of people with different first languages is very difficult to achieve. But the ideal of equality may still function very well as an ideology which influences the process of organized language management, which is probably the case with Mr. Dvořák's declaration. According to Neustupný and Nekvapil (2003) the intervention of ideology is one of the characteristics of organized language management.

8. Conclusions

LMT differentiates between management arising from problems on the linguistic, communicative and socioeconomic levels. The case discussed here, that of a language rule for meetings, deals mainly with problems on the level of communication – the question of what language should be used. The subject of management is thus a variety strategy, which in this case consists in the management of multilingualism. As we have seen, the management of multilingualism takes the form of organized language management, which takes place in different situations ranging from declarations at a high hierarchical level in the company to the interaction of the participants themselves in a meeting.

The multilingual workplace is a site for contact situations. Participants may get used to certain patterns of language management in contact situations and may establish contact situation norms. Participants may learn to act and communicate in accordance with their needs although the multilingual setting hinders a clear information flow.

Multinational companies in the Czech Republic use different strategies to cope with the multilingualism of their employees. With respect to the different first languages, inequalities are unavoidable, but issues of equality may serve as an ideology which influences the stakeholders in the language management process, especially when evaluating deviations from norms.

The declaration of a certain language policy, as well as its implementation, are stages of a language management process. The implementation of a language policy in direct interaction may produce a range of transitional and provisional means of communication, which, at a first glance, may seem to contradict the language policy. Rules for which languages are to be used in meetings may result in a multilingual course of talk with the 'main' language used to a lesser degree. Even in a multilingual meeting, participants may orient themselves towards a disjunction of different languages in refraining from code-switching and in proper use of two terminological systems.

In general, it appears that some measures of language policy in a multinational company raise the awareness of multilingualism among the employees. The interaction of such employees with different mother tongues may then bear some features of that language policy, even if it is not fully implemented.

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Transcription symbols

R: Č0: D1: S:	Abbreviations for different participants
?	rising intonation
,	slightly rising intonation
;	slightly declining intonation
.	declining intonation
u: n:	lengthened sounds
(.) (..) (...) (3s)	short, medium, longer pause, pause in seconds

( )	unintelligible passage
(šest sedmičky)	passage with unclear interpretation
[nein] [ist]	simultaneously uttered turns

{comments by the transcriber}

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