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NEW AGENCIES IN LANGUAGE PLANNING

CORPORATIONS AND FIRMS AS LANGUAGE MANAGERS

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States and communities alike now organize much of their interaction around the flow of goods. Even the arts world seems to be organized as merchandising, and the contents of museums are evaluated by their commercial resale value to thieves. Space exploration offers not expansion of knowledge, but utility as commercial enterprise. Forgive me for engaging in coffee-room philosophizing. But my message for students of language is, I hope, politically crisp: that commerce ("business") supports, and organizes both in thought and in substance, academic work and university education. Therefore it makes sense for students of language to make lan-guage use in business a topic of study. Students of language can do better by paying explicit attention to business interests, thereby enhanc-ing our own interests.

But is this new? To answer, I will have to limit my scope a bit. My interest is specifically agencies in language planning. What do I mean by that? First I want to switch terms on you. Rather than language plan-ning I will use LANGUAGE MANAGEMENT.

Language planning is one type of language management linked with public interest and therefore with government agency. In the late 1960's, that made good sense be-cause it reflected the then dominant discourse of optimistic opportunity for development in the third and fourth worlds and acceptance of government and international agency authority and right of inter-vention. Neither dominates dis-course today; but there is of course still language planning as a public political process and government agency implementation. But this is not my topic. Other types of lan-guage management should become objects of study: there is much sys-tematic language management that is privately organized both by and for business firms.

There are few among us who pay attention to such language manage-

ment, and in neighboring fields, even the best of genre analysis and possibly the bulk of discourse analysis deal with academic and professional texts and class room or story-telling interaction, respectively. Certainly here in Hong Kong I find it extremely difficult to direct university students' interests away from educational settings; and I applaud those who grapple with language use in "conventional" professional settings (accounting, journalism, advertising, and so on). In that sense I am advocating something that is new.

As a matter of communicated thought, early papers on language planning did point to language management by and for business, and as an activity, it has always been there. Concretely, and with reference to language management agency, examples abound in the field of terminology of how industrial enterprises initiated standardization of vocabulary at firm, branch, national and international levels and outside of the academe in the last century, yet linking to the academe in various ways. For example, the Swedish firm ASEA had its own in-house term management office, which in the late 1940's spurred the present Swedish Centre for Technical Terminology.

Obviously, the range of language problems that corporations now come up against has also broadened immensely because of the internationalization of society. The multi-national corporation seeks ever-broader and ever-deeper markets and, apace, control of its business environment, which implies management of language use.

The book by Hoft (1995) is certainly an eye-opener in regard to management of language communication in the context of the international business firm's expansion. The book deals with support for the international flow of products, and

very much from her particular perspective of "inter-facing" in a computational products environment. Hoft's book is quite different in scope from, for example, Finlay (1973), with a foreword by Sir Frank Roberts of Unilever, Dunlop and Lloyd's of London, and Simpkin & Jones (1976), which twenty years ago were quite unique in paying attention to linguistics services in and for industry.

The business spirit of our times begs the question for students of language management: what kinds of activities in business qualify as organized language management? We need a typology of business language management activities (and therefore of agencies). I will not attempt one here, but I will offer some tidbits to whet your appetite, I hope.

Lands-End, the "direct merchant" US mail-order firm, which also advertises to Hong Kong customers, includes in its ordering catalogue a "Dictionary LandsEnd" between English and several other languages, among them Chinese and Arabic. Who put this together? Was it a one-off outside consultancy job? Or in-house? Has it been evaluated, and if so by whom?

Ajay Singh and Arjuna Ranawana in *Asia Week* (September 6, 1996, page 57) quoted Sanjay Parthasarathy, who is Microsoft's new regional director for South Asia as saying "Most Indians have to first learn English to use a computer" and continued "the use of computers could go up tenfold if programs were made in local languages." He is quite right. His goal is the equivalent for computation (or, rather, for Microsoft) of the UNESCO declaration in favour of mother-tongue education. This is not an insignificant intervention in the language affairs of a nation. How are these programs produced in "local languages", and in which

ones? Such production has been going on for some time already in European countries. What are the organizational forms that accomplish software adaptation, by what principles, with what linguistic know-how, what normative points of view, with what consequences on community languages? Program nativization is made so much the more interesting by the fact that the inner workings of the programs need adjusting, too, not just the outwards language display or the language of manuals.

I read in a recent issue of *TNC-aktuellt* that in early 1996 Project POINTER (Proposals for an Operational Infrastructure for Terminology in Europe) had recommended forming a European Association for Terminology (EAFT). This association came into being in October 1996 at an international conference on *Language and Business Life* held at a business school in Denmark. What corporate interests are represented?

The same issue of *TNC-aktuellt* reviews a CD produced by Ericsson Language Services AB in Stockholm (Eriterm 96), which is a dictionary in a Windows environment of tele-communications vocabulary, suited for "those who work with text production or translation" (page 10). What else does Ericsson Language Services AB do? How is it affiliated with LM Ericsson? If not, does it compete with LM Ericsson's in-house management of terms and in-house text production? And how is *that* organized? Besides term and text management and translation, what is LM Ericsson's language policy? What body within the corporation authorizes it? How is it implemented and monitored? What are its personnel recruitment and assignment policies? What language training does the company offer and support?

I return to order. I will attempt to

characterize language management as a process of language use because I need a model to help me gather and order information about language management in business, so that, among other things, I can motivate the typology. I need first to introduce a model for simple management of discourse, because I shall build on it an image of systematic, organized language management. I will exemplify discourse management with reference to work by a couple of students in the MA in Language Studies course at the HK Baptist University.

Ms Jenny Chow studied spoken discourse management in a small textile quality consulting firm (1996). Her point of departure was the paradox that Hong Kong does so well in the expanding service sector and yet "big business" complains about supposedly falling standards of English and about the youth's insufficiencies with regard to English proficiency. She discovered *how* people work together in this small firm to support each other's language use as *they speak*, how knowledge of the substantive quality control routines and of purposes and structures of interactive routines mediate between inadequacies of English vocabulary and grammar on the one hand and getting the message across on the other, by offering a shared platform on which the participants in the acts of speaking jointly and smoothly enable each other to continue making their contributions. The significant skills that all parties acquire in adjusting their own and especially others' inadequacies of language expression should count as an intangible but vital capital asset in the management of this firm. This asset is a discourse management asset, in this firm not formally organized, although with consequences for organization of work routines and individual assignments. The equivalent accumulation of experience of inadequacies

and adjustments to be implemented the production of written texts supported the maintenance and use of files of document templates and of recurring expressions, to be accessed when needed. Such files are also highly motivated by the almost instant retrieval of recurring format and language, with significant productivity gains.

Cremer and Willes (1994:158), although not attending to the process of writing as much as to features of written business communications, come to a very similar conclusion: "the internalized knowledge of the discourse which develops on the job and is extended with experience is an economic resource which enables senior merchandisers in the international textile trading companies in Asian economies to function." I particularly enjoy this article because in one passage they demonstrate how business could suffer when a foreign (a "native" English user outside Hong Kong) business partner impatiently insists on standard language. The authors quote the Hong Kong partner: "she attributed the impatience to the sender's inexperience, he has since become much more tolerant. These days, she added, be knows his way around the textile and garment trade and be has no more trouble understanding than anyone else." (1994:157) The "native" user now happily and successfully communicates in "non-native" English!

Ms Cheung Ching Yi (1996) established that work memoranda take their final textual shape in a manner different from that taught at commercial schools. She shows in her case study that not only are standardized layouts stored and accessed at the work place that she studied, but that grammatical, stylistic *and image* considerations (of self and of others) are managed in considerable and deliberate detail, in their contexts of previous correspondence, and client and supervisory relation-

ships. Writers edit and edit again according to these considerations and report to the investigator-author in follow-up interviews about the principles of evaluation and adjustment that they emulate to accomplish the final text.

The model that has been implicit in reporting on these two dissertations is this: a feature of language production is noted, perhaps then evaluated, perhaps generating an inadequacy which could be adjusted, and if so, perhaps implemented (reissued, in speech, or replaced, in writing). If the final outcome is an act of editing, the most likely sequence that the author-writer took through the model was to have noted a deviation from norm in the originally produced text, to have evaluated the deviation as inadequate, therefore to have sought an adjustment in the form of an alternative expression which was then written in place of the original formulation. The model generalizes (Neustupný 1983).

This model needs of course to accommodate the interplay between participants in acts of speaking and writing. My students showed how a supervisor may enter at the point of noting, or later at the point of evaluating, or later at the point of adjustment; or exit at an earlier stage, e.g., before implementation. It can be a group process, it can be helped along by turning to reference materials (the very purpose of reference materials, in fact) and by previous texts, and so on. Ms Chow showed how spoken interaction internally to the textile quality services firm allowed co-workers to note, evaluate, and adjust for and with the speaker *without prejudice* to the speaker's standing in the firm and the group. In other words, the universal rule of preference for self-correction may well apply in this firm (as undoubtedly in many other firms) but in a social system of minimal personal

distance between participants in these speech events that for all practical purposes neutralizes this rule so as to allow routine correction by others, and certainly solicited such correction. Mixing metaphors, there is minimal cost incurred by self due to others' noting (etc.). Ms Cheung caused writers in the firm to reveal detailed and apparently individually systematic principles of text management that emphasize linguistic correctness (by their particular evaluations, of particular valued features of language expression) and maintenance of relationships in the work place and without, in a con text of freedom of formulation tempered by templates and prior texts.

The step from discourse management to organized management is small. The language management agency works to prevent language inadequacies by prescription (e.g., by releasing lists of standard terms, by pre-formatting documents of various kinds, and so on), by help with evaluation and adjustment of a noted feature of language when someone calls in to enquire, with training, and in other ways. Language teaching is organized language management (Neustupný 1978:244).

I mentioned the fact that some multinational corporations have language policies. In the multinational corporation it can be predicted that language policy will sooner or later come to be discussed in the evolution of the global reach of the corporation. There is an interesting interplay here between localization and central control of the corporation's activities.

I have referred to in-house term management; and directly or by implication to a range of other language management activities by agencies that serve business. Manuals, assembly instructions, servicing procedures; contracts, financial documents; PR documents, advertising, sales promotions; information

systems and information retrieval; all these aspects of running a business require specialized language one way or other. How is this language managed? To what extent are systematic principles of evaluation and adjustment in language management developed and applied by specialized groups of employees? After all, what is a law firm if not to a very large extent a language management service operating between texts in an exceptionally demanding manner of precise linguistic cross reference? Or the advertising agency as the law firm's creative counterpart?

I invite your suggestions. And I invite colleagues and students to join me in the study of language management agencies in the world of work.

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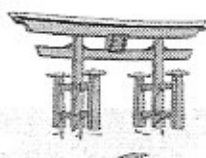
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