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Language Management × 3: A Theory, a Sub-Concept, and a Business Strategy Tool

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The term 'language management' has become a widely used expression in the sociolinguistic literature. Originally introduced by Jernudd and Neustupný in 1987, as a novel continuation of the language planning tradition stemming from the 1960/70s, language management along these lines has developed into the Language Management Theory (LMT). A second definition of language management, diverting from LMT, can be found in the work of Spolsky, who treats language management as a theoretical component of the wider concept of language policy. Furthermore, over the past 15 years a number of scholars, particularly from the international management discipline, appear to have taken an interest in language as a variable in business and corporate management. It is also common to refer to this research field as language management. This conceptual article offers a theoretically based comparison of the three definitions of language management, before discussing five main focus points, which may be used to highlight their analytical differences.

INTRODUCTION

There is a long-standing tradition of research within the area of language planning and regulation of languages, including language behaviour and practices. Language policy and planning (LPP) has been recognized as an independent academic topic for about half a century now. It was initially brought into the sociolinguistic debate in connection with the break-up of European colonial empires following World War II, and the corresponding need of newly autonomous former colonies to deal with the linguistic diversity in their countries (Nekvapil 2006; Baldauf 2012; Jernudd and Nekvapil 2012). In the latter half of this period, for approximately 25 years, the focus and the way in which language has been analysed and examined have shifted slightly, and the study of certain language phenomena is no longer synonymous with examining large-scale government-induced activities within the context of the nation state. New objects of interest have emerged from the traditional language planning framework, one of them being a research field emphasizing the importance of discourse processes in the management of language practices, operating under the heading of 'language management', the Language Management Theory (LMT).

When Cooper in 1989 discussed the, at the time, new concept 'language management', initially introduced by Jernudd and Neustupný (1987), he commented that it was too soon to say whether the term would catch on (Cooper 1989: 29). Today, 25 years later, the question is not whether the term is in use or not, but rather by whom, and in what way. Considering the growing number of publications dealing with the management of language practices in various contexts, there seems to be some degree of disharmony between the original concept and how this term is defined and applied by scholars other than the founders of LMT. This article will give an introduction to LMT, that is, language management as a theory, as well as two other language management approaches, namely, language management as a sub-concept, found in the work of Spolsky (2004, 2009), and language management as a business strategy tool, which is an instrumental understanding of the management and regulation of language in multilingual business organizations, primarily discussed by international management scholars.

The second half of this article will compare the three different language management approaches in an attempt to identify and call attention to their analytical differences. This discussion will be based on five main foci which have been recognized as central aspects in which the language management models and frameworks differ from one another. These key points have been categorized as, first, the type of language management examined, secondly, the goals of which the language management activities are aiming at, thirdly, the issue of the language management agency, fourthly, the target group of the language management, and fifthly and finally, the context surrounding the language management activities, which refers to the environment in which the language management initiatives are being implemented.

THREE CONCEPTS—ONE TERM

Language management as a theory

The origin of the term 'language management' can be traced back to the two sociolinguists Jernudd and Neustupný, and their (1987) paper 'Language planning: for whom?'. Since its initial formation as a separate academic field, issues related to regulation of language and linguistic behaviour were commonly referred to as 'language planning', defined by Cooper (1989: 45) as the deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes. According to Jernudd and Neustupný (1987), the new term language management, was coined to leave the term 'language planning' open to refer to the type of language-related problems developed in the 1970s. This would mark a theoretical distance to what at the time was a novel shift in research interests in which language problems to a larger extent were seen as embedded in their societal context. 'Linguistics is slowly moving towards a better understanding not merely of how people use language but also how they interact with it.

Let us call this system of interaction *language management*' (Jernudd and Neustupný 1987: 71).

Also more recent work from the same group of researchers, for example, Nekvapil (2006) and Nekvapil and Sherman (2009a) argue that the term language planning should be reserved for the earlier sociolinguistic theories and activities. According to Nekvapil (2006: 1–2), the initial language planning theory was characterized by rational problem-solving and societal resource planning, usually carried out by technical experts at the nation state level. A shift in focus around 1960/70s directed more attention to language practices as part of social behaviour, which ultimately broadened the scope of the linguistic and societal problems at hand. The foundation for this language management model or framework stems from the conventional language planning tradition, but LMT contains certain alterations in scope and content, entailing a broad range of linguistic, communicative and sociocultural/economic problems, and LMT must therefore be interpreted as a more comprehensive model than its forerunner (Jernudd and Nekvapil 2012).

According to LMT, language management is examined as a corrective discourse-based process, which involves the discrimination between two processes which characterize language use. These are, first, the production and reception of discourse, that is, the generation of utterances, and secondly, the activities aimed at the production and reception of discourse, that is, the management of these utterances (Nekvapil 2006; Nekvapil and Nekula 2006). The management process begins when a deviation from an established norm is noted, and may continue with an evaluation of that particular deviation, planning of adjustment, labelled 'adjustment design', and finally, the implementation of adjustment (Nekvapil and Sherman 2009a). It is specifically in the second part of this language management process, where the management of utterances takes place, that the language corrective actions are carried out in practice. Central to LMT is the division between simple language management, performed at the micro level, and the organized language management, performed at the macro level. Where simple language management occurs at the level of the individual utterance, for example, through self-correction, organized language management transcends this utterance level in the sense that the management acts become transsituational, often through the involvement of complex social networks, such as governmental institutions (Nekvapil and Sherman 2009b; Sherman *et al.* 2012). At the same time, LMT also emphasizes the connection and relationship between the two types, as illustrated in Figure 1 (based on Nekvapil 2006; Nekvapil and Nekula 2006), especially in the initial language management stage, where the speech deviation is first noted. The utterances will naturally be generated during individual discourse, while the management of the language problems will be transferred to the corrective stage, which occurs at different levels. While simple language management is relatively straightforward, organized language management is a more multifaceted process, which requires some degree of organizational undertaking set in system.

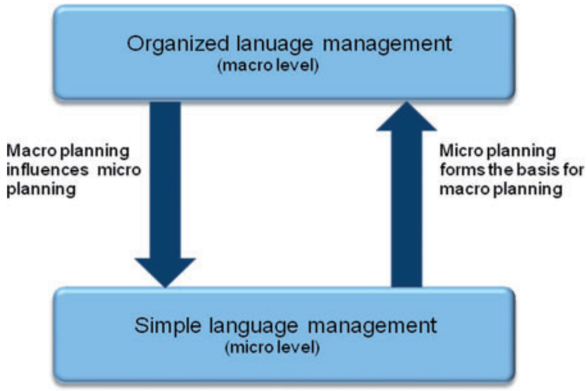

Figure 1: The division between simple and organized language management; the second phase of LMT where management/correction of utterances takes place

The founders of LMT advocate the wide applicability of the theory by presenting it as a model which aims to explain a number of factors related to people's language behaviour. In addition to addressing the management processes within and outside the actual discourse, LMT also seeks to explain the motivation behind language practices, how people organize in order to manage language and the consequences thereof, the role of the disciplines concerned with language, and finally, the manners in which humans organize their behaviour towards language (Jernudd 2009).

Language management as a sub-concept

Perhaps the most prominent scholar published in English on language policy and planning, Spolsky (2004, 2008, 2009, 2012) has defined language management in contrast to LMT as developed by Jernudd and Neustupný and their followers. This has generated criticism from certain scholars (Jernudd 2010; Sloboda 2010). Spolsky states that language management should be understood as a theoretical component of the wider concept of language policy. According to this model, language policy consists of three interrelated but independent components: first, language practices, defined as people's observable linguistic behaviours and choices, secondly, language beliefs, the values or statuses assigned to languages, also called ideologies, and, finally, language management, which Spolsky defines as the explicit and observable efforts by a person or a group that either has or claims authority over the participants in a domain to modify their language practices or beliefs (Spolsky 2009: 4, illustrated in Figure 2). The management process can be applied at all levels, whether it is an individual linguistic micro-unit, a collection of units, or a specified macro-variety, such as a language or a dialect.

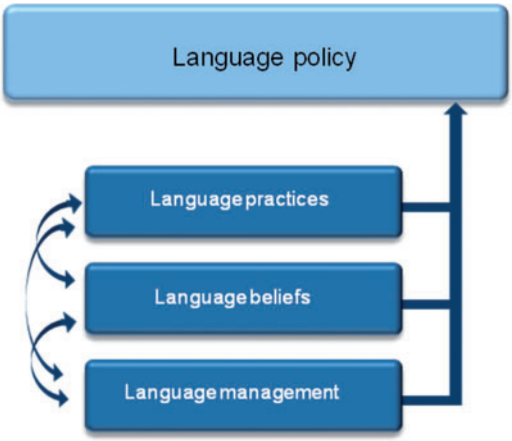

Figure 2: Language policy is the overarching concept, consisting of three interrelated but independent components

Spolsky (2004) describes how language management should be interpreted as a manipulation of the language situation of a community. This definition requires the presence of a 'language manager', a person or a group of persons, including institutions or organizations, holding a very central position in the language management execution process. It is specifically the intervention carried out by the language manager, by formulating and publishing an explicit language plan or policy which constitutes language management in Spolsky's model.

Spolsky has been criticized by Nekvapil (2006) for not dealing with the simple discourse-based management, which is a central component of LMT described above. One of the main features of LMT is precisely the basic distinction between the simple and the organized language management. According to Nekvapil (2006) and Jernudd (2010), Spolsky's definition of language management is no more than a continuation of the sociolinguistic LPP programme of the 1960/70s. The way Spolsky addresses societal language problems is juxtaposed to be synonymous with how scholars operating within the 'original' LPP tradition used to discuss social language problems and the corresponding efforts to correct them. Consequently, as stated by Nekvapil (2006: 14), Spolsky's understanding of language management as a concept demonstrates how a term may become part of a discourse in which the original authors no longer matter.

One of the starting points for the three-component model—language practices, beliefs, and management—is the work by Fishman (1972) on sociolinguistic domains. The notion of a domain is defined in terms of its institutional contexts and corresponding language behaviour among its language users. Domains can be understood as a conceptualization of the most prominent patterns of interaction which occur in multilingual settings and situations, in other words, a model meant to explain the language practices of a population that rely on two or more languages for internal communication purposes, that is intragroup multilingualism (Fishman 1972: 437). Spolsky uses the domain perspective as a basis for analysing language practices in various sociolinguistic areas, for instance, within the family, in schools, in the army, and so on. Specifically, Spolsky describes a model whose explanatory power is based on an assessment of the relationship between the choice of language use on the one side, and more or less established institutional characteristics and spheres of activities on the other. Within this framework, language management in the domain of the workplace is described as management decisions intended to modify the practices and beliefs among the workforce, solving what appear to be communication problems (Spolsky 2009: 53). This understanding of language management approaches the essence of the corporate language management literature, which focuses on the language regulation of multilingual business organizations, but there are, at the same time, important theoretical differences between these different 'language management paradigms', which will be discussed later.

Language management as business strategy tool

Over the past 15 years, researchers within various academic disciplines appear to have taken a new interest in language as a variable in business studies. The pioneering work of international management researchers, especially Marschan-Piekkari *et al.* (1999a,b), Welch *et al.* (2001, 2005), and Feely and Harzing (2003, 2008) and Harzing *et al.* (2011), have advocated the importance of language in multinational management, and demonstrated how language may potentially influence the running of a multilingual organization. Marschan-Piekkari *et al.* have presented an extensive body of work dealing with linguistic standardization, in particular, the costs and benefits of adopting a common corporate language. Feely and Harzing and Harzing *et al.* have also published a number of articles from a cross-cultural management perspective, identifying various components of the language barrier, and reviewing different language management strategies, especially with regard to HQ-subsidiary relationships.

This understanding of language management stands out as an instrumental hands-on approach to language-related questions, close to the arena in which the policy formulation takes place. Corporate language management describes a course of action where language regulation is designed and implemented on the basis of a strategic evaluation of the subjective language needs of the organization. The language strategy, or language policy, which has turned into a relatively common format of the rules governing the firm's linguistic regime (Pool 1991), is developed with the purpose of achieving some kind of organizational goals and/or benefits. The decisive factor behind language regulation may well be non-linguistic targets, in the sense that economic considerations or ideas about increased operational effectiveness based on streamlined communication patterns motivate the development of a certain type of language strategy. One of the most explicit characteristics of this language management approach is the strategic use of language from the managerial point of view, that is, to deliberately control the linguistic-communicative arena of a firm or business unit based on the assumption that it will affect the overall productivity and performance (Marschan *et al*. 1997). The management aspect of this setting refers to the initiatives taken by the management team, or someone in a type of managerial position, at the organizational level. Put differently, the language-specific initiatives are regulated top-down, while being influenced by the communicative needs experienced at the employee level, as illustrated in Figure 3. This understanding of language management has much in common with the wider field of strategic management, and it is therefore not surprising that the main contributors to this particular research field are management scholars.

Language management according to this definition differs from LMT and the language policy/three-component model in several ways. Overall it is a much more instrumental approach which emphasizes the strategic role of language by referring to various solutions—language strategy or language management tools—which may be implemented in order to facilitate efficient corporate communication. To a lesser degree, it relates to the control of individual language practices. On the contrary, the very starting point of this conceptual realm is the company, and the language needs of the organization as a unit

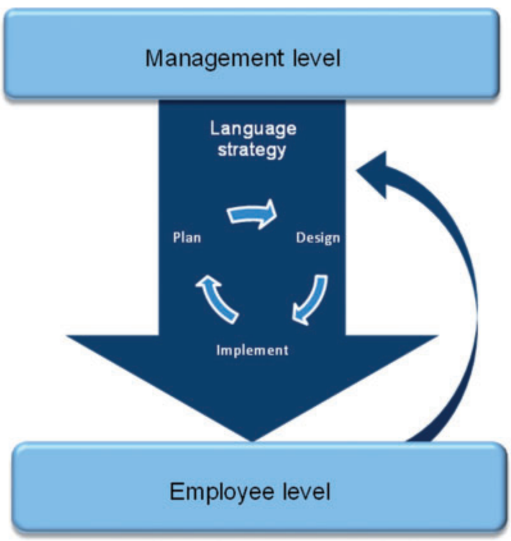

Figure 3: Language management refers to the regulation of the linguistic-communicative area, from management level to employee level

of its own. Individual discourse is of less importance, although the communication practices and language use of the workforce naturally affects the strategy formulation. Furthermore, while the other two language management concepts are based on theoretical contributions from, for the most part, sociolinguistic scholars, corporate language management can, to a large extent, be described as a research field without any underlying theoretical foundation in the language camp. Since both the research and the terminology are comparable across the fields, an impelling question presents itself: how can that be? The next section will try to shed some light on the current theoretical limbo in which corporate language management researchers have to manoeuvre, and as part of this, also draw attention to why ambiguous use of terminology may result in not just linguistic challenges but also severe conceptual shortcomings.

CONCEPTS AND CONCEPTUALIZATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPLANATORY FOCUS IN LANGUAGE MANAGEMENT CULTIVATION

What this article has demonstrated so far is an obvious terminological disagreement within the sociolinguistic and international management literature; there is neither consensus nor consistency in the way the term language management is used among scholars today. This linguistic confusion appears to have developed over the past two decades, as new research interests and fields have emerged. At this point it is fair to question what this conceptual ambiguity really implies—after all, it can be argued that it is not the name of a field that shapes its content. If there are conflicting definitions and explanations of some somewhat related terms, does this actually have any theoretical and practical implications? The answer is yes, and there are five main reasons for this, which will be elaborated on next.

The type of language management

One of the very first things one should consider when reviewing the divergent literature on language management is the type of management the different models or frameworks describe. Central to this evaluation, is the question of what is being corrected or regulated, and at what level. From the previous section it is clear that the three perceptions of language management refer to different sorts of management phenomena, specifically with regard to the degree of detail with which the language management is concerned. This becomes particularly evident in a comparison between the discourse-based LMT, where the individual generation of utterances is the point of departure for further analysis, and the type of language regulation which takes place in large multinational corporations, where language initiatives are implemented against the background of a strategic evaluation of some kind of organizational need. Although corporate language policies and strategies may be more or less explicit in outlining the preferred language use of their employees, this type of language management will typically be characterized by more high-level language decisions than, for example, grammar, punctuation, and spelling, which are highly relevant in both LMT and Spolsky's language management model. In the view of international management researchers, language management in business organizations will typically deal with issues such as the adoption of a common corporate language, the official communication style of the company, and so on (Feely and Harzing 2003; Harzing *et al.* 2011).

Certain scholars operating within the LMT framework, for example, Nekvapil and Nekula (2006), Nekvapil and Sherman (2009b), and Sherman *et al.* (2012), share the business angle with international management scholars in the sense that these studies aim to investigate issues of language and communication in multinational corporations. In these cases, there is undoubtedly some overlap between these two approaches in terms of focus. However, the type of language management described within these two frameworks is completely different in nature. Organized language management within LMT, which may be confused with the corporate language management approach described in this article, occurs, according to Nekvapil and Sherman (2009b: 193) 'because there exist problems in individual interactions, and its point is to help remove the problems'. LMT takes a discourse-based perspective, where both simple and organized language management are intended to solve language problems as they appear in individual discourse. In contrast, the type of language management which international management scholars are concerned with will first and foremost seek to satisfy the language needs of the firm or control in-house language competencies as a kind of human resource management. The 'management' in corporate language management refers to the management of language-related issues in the company in question, not the management of language use as it appears in a corporate setting, which is what LMT researchers are concerned with.

The goals of language management

In order to understand the literature correctly, it is crucial to identify the intended effect of the different types of language mandates, which can be expressed as the goals of language management. Within the 'classical' sociolinguistic LPP tradition, Nahir's (1984) discussion of anticipated goals of language planning activities has frequently been cited. Here, Nahir emphasizes the need to distinguish between the language planning process on the one side, and the language planning goals on the other. While the language planning process represents the implementation aspect of language planning, the language planning goals represent the intentions of the authority in charge, which ultimately should result in the deployment of initiatives. A comprehensive classification of goals can be found in Nahir (1984), and Kaplan and Baldauf (1997, building on Nahir), which provides an overview of 11 major categories of language planning goals—almost all of these are what Hornberger (2006) describes as 'cultivation planning' of either the status type, for example, language revival, language maintenance, and so on, or the corpus type, for example, lexical modernization, stylistic simplification, and so on (for a discussion of the division between status and corpus planning, see Kloss 1969; Cooper 1989). In Nahir's (1984) taxonomy, only one category, language standardization, can be applied to the type of language planning which typically occurs in the business world, and this only if one chooses to interpret it within the status planning framework. In that case, language standardization may refer to language planning activities that impose one language as the standard (Hornberger 2006: 31), which is also the desired outcome for companies that decide to implement a (single) common corporate language. The remaining 10 categories cannot be employed to explain any goal or purpose of corporate language management.

This backdrop from the traditional sociolinguistic literature on language planning goals may enlighten the language management discussion by calling attention to the fact that language management in business organizations clearly stands out as an approach whose principal focus lies on non-linguistic goals in contrast to the other two models. It is a common saying in the corporate world that 'the business of business is business', in other words, firms are set up to generate profits, and will survive only if they do this successfully. All aspects of a corporation's activities will ultimately be determined by the need to operate in an efficient manner, and consequently, the goal of language management in business organizations will, more or less directly, be to facilitate administrative and operational effectiveness as a precondition for organizational productivity (Grin *et al.* 2010: 13–15). However, it is important to emphasize that traditional language planning is not conducted solely for the purpose of attaining pure linguistic goals. On the contrary, the language question to be addressed must never be seen in isolation from the societal context (e.g. Karam 1974). This also holds true for Spolsky's three-component model of language policy and LMT, although the non-linguistic goals will typically be less explicit than in the case of corporate language management, where these kinds of goals must be considered the starting point of the language management initiative in itself.

The issue of agency

Another factor which is of importance when coming to grips with the different language management approaches is the question of the authority in charge. As already mentioned, Spolsky refers to the language management agency as the language manager, as a person or a group of people claiming control over the language management execution process. The language manager takes up a central position in Spolsky's model, to the extent that Spolsky argues that it can be called language management only if it is possible to identify the manager (2009: 6). Baldauf (1982, 2006) also emphasizes the role of agency (in his terminology, the 'language planners'), by stating that the agency may play a potentially important part in a language planning situation. This understanding of agency is in a way a natural extension of the very definition of traditional language policy and planning, as it, according to Cooper (1989: 45), refers to deliberate efforts to influence the linguistic behaviour of others—in other words, a conventional top-down model centred on the activities carried out by a group of authoritative decision-makers. Jernudd (1993) criticizes the classic language planning models for being too focused on agency, thereby failing to provide a convincing link with the discourse of the specific language problem in need of adjustment. In the words of Jernudd (1993: 139–140): 'What is missing in models of language planning that are axiomatically centered on the decision-making agency is an explicit way to relate discourse to language problems [. . .]. The link is accomplished by the management model [. . .]'. As previously described, LMT emphasizes the relationship between simple and organized language management, and predicts that language planning yields the most efficient outcome if the language management agency, operating at the macro level, provides solutions to language inadequacies experienced at the micro level (Jernudd 1993: 136–137). Unlike the other two approaches, LMT also presupposes the existence of individual agency, as it occurs at the micro level, where individual social actors manage their own linguistic behaviour (Sherman *et al.* 2012: 290).

Within the corporate language management framework, the language planner/language manager will typically be a business manager or communication department in charge of the linguistic-communicative area of the company. There may therefore be a large conceptual leap from the corporate type of language management agency to the type of language management agency which typically is in charge of large-scale national language planning efforts. This again must be seen in relationship to the other two issues described so far, that is, the different types of language management and the goals of language management.

The target group

Once the language management agency has been identified, an equally important step is to identify the target group of the language management mandate. This is done by examining whose language practices the language management activities are directed towards. The reason that this may be important is that the target group may have more or less well-established and explicitly formulated language rights based on their privileges either as individuals or as part of a defined social order, which, for example, could be the case for a language minority. Language rights, such as linguistic human rights (discussed by e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas *et al.* 1995) will involve restrictions on the type of language regulation the language management agency is able to implement, as the activities will have to comply with the granted entitlements. However, the existence of such language rights often depends on who the target group is, in the sense that some target groups are more likely to be given these types of rights than others.

The matter of language rights is perhaps most prevalent in settings which are built on or obtains its legitimacy from a democratic foundation, the most obvious example being the modern nation state. The type of language regulation that is carried out by national language management agencies will have to consider the universal right of citizens to receive and transmit information in a language they are able to understand. Citizens may in a sense be characterized as 'clients', given that the state should, on a normative basis, accommodate their language needs and guarantee their communicative rights, for example, the right to participate in political debates. A small state like Denmark, for example, with a national language spoken by approximately 5 million people (Thompson and Phillips 2013), cannot simply decide to implement English as a new official language in an attempt to increase foreign trade and international relations. In the workplace, however, the situation is reversed; employees cannot be seen as clients of their employer, rather, they are the ones who have to deliver the goods in terms of language responsibility, by satisfying the language requirements associated with their job function. They do not enjoy the same language rights as employees as they do as citizens, in the sense that companies may take the liberty to discriminate employees on the basis of their language skills, for example, by imposing a common corporate language like English, even in countries where English is a foreign language. Returning to the example of Denmark, an estimate made by the Confederation of Danish Industry in 2007 suggests that 25% of all Danish companies have implemented English as their corporate language (Pedersen and Holm 2007). The characteristics of the target group may therefore be of relevance when comparing the various language management frameworks, also in ways that have not been touched upon here (see e.g. Williams 2012 for a discussion of key influences which shape the political context of language policies as it applies to territorially defined language groups). In essence, the point that is being made is that there is a big difference between what corporate decision-makers and, for example, a national language academy is able to initiate out of consideration to the different language users which their policies are aimed at.

The context of language management

Language behaviour and practices never occur in isolation. Consequently, the context of language management activities must always be taken into account. Any model which seeks to explain the processes where language is corrected, managed, or regulated must consider and address the surrounding environment in which the respective initiative is being implemented, and the characteristics of this contextual framework. The three language management concepts described in this article approach the matter of context in very different ways, and in more or less explicit manners. As a discourse-based model, LMT is not restricted to any specific context, but may be applied in most situations where language is in use, that is, where utterances are generated.

Context may, in this case, be interpreted as a relatively encompassing concept, referring to anything that goes on outside of the discourse while affecting the correction of individual language use either at the simple or organized language management level. At the other end of the scale is the corporate language management tradition, which is built on and attuned to the very topic it examines, namely, language regulation in business organizations. Context will in this case refer to a much narrower spectrum of surrounding factors, as it will more or less correspond to the research field in itself. However, the macro context, that is, the external world beyond the scope of the company in which the language management takes place, may also affect the way language needs are perceived within the organization.

Spolsky's language management model, as part of the overarching language policy concept, is also explicit about its use of context. In fact, the issue of context is from the outset incorporated in Spolsky's theory, as it is based on Fishman's (1972) conceptualization of language domains. This is why Baldauf (2012: 237) labels Spolsky's approach to LPP as 'the domain approach' in his overview of the development and state of language planning research, leaving the term language management to the LMT approach. Nevertheless, one of the domains for Spolsky's analysis of language management practices is the workplace, which may bear resemblance to the type of language management analysis that takes place in firms and corporations. However, there are important differences between Spolsky's model and the corporate language management approach. While the latter relates specifically to business organizations and corporations, as described above, Spolsky's model treats companies as just another domain, which exists side by side with a wide range of other domains, such as the nation state, the army, schools, and so on. A potentially problematic feature of this model is that by building on the theoretical foundation in this way, it inevitably claims universal applicability by its very definition. Domains can be characterized as a realm-based understanding of the world, and in lieu of Spolsky's conceptualization, the theory thereby present itself as an explanation of the entire sociolinguistic universe. A model which aims to explain generic language management activities runs the risk of developing into nothing but a shallow framework with only limited explanatory power. Compared with the corporate language management literature, this theory fails to consider the complexity of language in international business, as it neglects the strategic importance of language regulation for the productivity of the firm. When examining language management in a corporate setting, key variables such as costs, expenditure, and profits should also be taken into consideration, otherwise important characteristics of the business context will be neglected. In any corporation, these factors may be the most important ones in order to explain the specific language regulation of the firm in question, if, for example, the adoption of an English-only policy is based on the assumption that it will lead to more efficient communication between linguistically heterogeneous employees. The way in which context is integrated in the different language management models is therefore an essential aspect of their applicability to real-life phenomena.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented and discussed three different types of language management. On the basis of a review of the existing literature, there are strong reasons for claiming that they are indeed different; their understanding and conceptualization of the ways in which language is managed, indicate that these research traditions do not focus on the same phenomena, and even when they do, their approaches differ substantially. It is, therefore, argued that the term language management may refer to:

1. a theory: the LMT initially proposed by Jernudd and Neustupný (1987);
2. a sub-concept: as part of the wider conception of language policy, found in the work of Spolsky (2004, 2009);
3. a business strategy tool: an instrumental process where language is seen as a variable in business and corporate management—a new and emerging research field mainly developed by international management scholars, for example, Marschan-Piekkari *et al.* (1999a,b) and Feely and Harzing (2003, 2008).

The fact that scholars within different research traditions focus on different aspects of language and the management of language is not surprising in itself. After all, owing to different research agendas, sociolinguists are likely to take another type of interest in language than international management researchers. However, this article demonstrates that three independent definitions of language management have evolved over time. As these different schools of thought only partially overlap, scholars working within each of them may suffer from 'tunnel vision', and run the risk of neglecting the work that is done outside their own field. There could be potential benefits in adopting a more cross-disciplinary view of language management, both for those interested in discourse-based language management and business researchers who aim to investigate the strategic use of language in multinational management, given that the research disciplines emphasize different angles of language use.

Still, researchers who wish to consult the theoretical literature and use it as a basis for empirical research should be aware that there are major conceptual differences between the three language management frameworks in certain areas. Ambiguity and confusion in the terminology may result in a potentially problematic application of the theories if the differences that have been presented in this article are ignored or not sufficiently taken into account. The three language management approaches must, in other words, be taken for what they are and what they intend to explain. Drawing attention to the divergent analytical perspectives on which the language management literature is based may contribute to creating a greater understanding of what the three language management frameworks are able to offer for examining real-world language issues, for example, in the corporate context—and this awareness may be the first step in promoting greater collaboration across research disciplines.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

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