

Chapter 13

Language use in multinational companies in Europe: A theoretical and methodological reframing

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1 Introduction

Europe's economy is changing, and with it the nature of enterprises, jobs, skills, and most of all, strategies for solving problems. The industrial age has long since passed, and the direction of the current shift is toward that of the knowledge-based economy. This economy is defined as "one that encourages its organisations and people to acquire, create, disseminate and use (codified and tacit) knowledge more effectively for greater economic and social development" (Dahlman and Andersson 2000: 32). On the job market of the knowledge-based economy, there is an emphasis on dynamism as opposed to specific skills, processes as opposed to products, and knowledge is understood as something which is continually developed.

This article explores one sector of this new type of economy, that is, the functioning of multinational companies. It is the nature of multinationals that they involve a range of people speaking different languages. This is a further step in the expansion of the study of the knowledge-based economy, moving from areas such as information and communication technology to include knowledge of various languages. Languages, particularly those used as a lingua franca, such as English, interact with state labor markets and create diglossic relationships between various international, national and regional languages. Labor markets no longer operate merely on a national level, but rather, due to globalization and the continual development of the free-market system, there are international corporations which are based at least in part on the mobility of people, hence they draw upon the European Single Labor Market, which, in theory, allows citizens of the EU to work in other EU-countries without the necessity of

labor permits. We will use multinationals as an example of how language functions specifically in this economy, what role it can potentially play, particularly in conjunction with cultural and socioeconomic issues.

We begin by reviewing two major studies on this very topic, ELAN and “Talking Sense”. We then suggest three ways in which findings from these studies can be theoretically and methodologically reframed. In consideration of the constantly expanding and changing nature of the knowledge-based economy in Europe, we use data collected in multinationals from two EU new member states, the Czech Republic and Hungary, as the empirical basis for the reframing.

2 Point of departure: ELAN and “Talking Sense”

Given the connections between the knowledge-based economy, the expanding European and global markets, and the subsequent increasing need for foreign language knowledge, we will begin by briefly reviewing two studies conducted by the British National Centre for Languages (the former on behalf of the European Commission), to take a further look into the language issues in companies in Europe.

The ELAN study (CILT 2007), focusing mainly on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) which engage in export, sought to map out the language issues that these enterprises encounter. The main questions were those of how exporting SMEs throughout Europe (nearly 2000 SMEs in a total of 29 countries) invested in language training, how much money could be potentially lost due to insufficient language knowledge, whether they felt they encountered intercultural difficulties, and what “language management” strategies they had implemented. Findings were verified through interviews with “national influencers”, i.e. figures such as “entrepreneurs, academics working in the business or language training disciplines, political and civil servants working in the business support field and representatives of business organisations such as the Chambers of Commerce” (CILT 2007: 38).

The study also looked for common denominators with large companies, and found that they reinforced many of the findings from the SME study, for example, that both types of companies recruit staff with specific language skills, and often the languages in demand were languages other than English. Large companies differed from SMEs in that they used English more exclusively as an intermediary language and they often even officially declared it as the corporate language (CILT 2007: 7).

Finally, the ELAN study examined the relationship between “language management” strategies, e.g. having a language strategy, appointing native speakers, recruiting staff with language skills and using translators/interpreters, and export success of the companies. If all four of these strategies were implemented, the export sales proportion was calculated at 44.5% higher than when they were not (CILT 2007: 7).

A second CILT study, the “Talking Sense” study, begins from the point of departure of UK companies and their belief that the English language was sufficient for their business needs and the fact that this belief was disproven by another study (The Nuffield Foundation 2000), and the subsequent formation of a UK government strategy for language learning (DfES 2002). The study methods consisted of “two parallel and inter-related exercises, one telephone survey of major multinational companies involving approximately 50 respondents in each of the UK, France and Germany, and one series of interviews with senior personnel in six UK-based companies identified as examples of best practice.” (“Talking Sense” executive summary, page 1). On the basis of these methods, the study determined that, in comparison with Germany and France, UK companies, though they had what the study called “language capacity”, lacked in what the study referred to as language responsiveness, awareness and management. In other words, UK companies presumed that much of their trading would be done in English and were more oriented toward short-term goals than their French and German counterparts were, and their strategies reflected this.

The results of such large-scale studies provide a certain background for the investigation of language use in the business world. We intend to undertake such investigation in the following sections of this paper. First and foremost, however, we must point out that our topical scope is slightly different: ELAN’s focus is (primarily) on SMEs and our focus on large multinational companies, and “Talking Sense’s” focus is on the United Kingdom vs. two large “continental” countries, Germany and France. However, both of these studies point strongly to another, more universal element of the knowledge-based economy: what is generally understood in both studies as “language strategy” and its ultimate success or failure in an economic sense.

3 A new framework

The various ways in which the concept of “strategy” is used and exemplified in both studies clarify the need for a theoretical and methodological

reframing in order to explore the language in economic contexts in a more qualitative, linguistic and ethnographic manner. The large-scale data from these studies must be somehow integrated with data from the everyday operation of company branches. It is necessary to look at corporate and national policies vs. local and ad hoc situated policies. Thus, using the example of multinational companies in Central Europe, in this article, through the analysis of recorded interactions, interviews, participant observation, written documents from the companies, and statistical data from other sources, the reframing addresses the following:

- 1) The regional nature of some of the companies' practices, as opposed to the European or national levels which form the basis for the ELAN and "Talking Sense" studies.
- 2) The complex nature of the relationships between speakers of various languages as concerns power, history, and the economic value of individual language knowledge.
- 3) The practices and processes of dealing with language problems in multinationals.

This reframing, and its third aspect in particular, invites the use of Language Management Theory or LMT (Jernudd and Neustupny 1987; Neustupný and Nekvapil 2003; Nekvapil and Sherman 2009c; see also Dovalil, this volume and Vasiljev and Nekvapil, this volume), as a theoretical basis. LMT, which we offer as an alternative to the concepts of "language management" discussed in the ELAN study, views behavior toward language as a process complementary to the generation of language, a process beginning with the noting and evaluation of a deviation from a norm *at any level of language generation*. 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. When this process occurs at the level of the individual utterance, e.g. self-correction, it is called simple management. When it transcends the utterance level, occurs repeatedly in a number of situations, thus becoming 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 meetings, it is called organized management.

In the next sections, we will show how the management of language in multinational companies considers and reflects several relevant phenomena, beginning with the nature of the data collected.

4 Data

The research involved interviews, recordings, participant observation and document analysis in four multinational companies with branches in the Czech Republic or Hungary (see also Nekvapil et al. 2009). The history of the companies varies: while some companies were directly founded by foreign companies, others are the result of foreign company purchases or privatization of local companies. Still others have changed owners, from one foreign company to another, larger one. The larger research project also investigated further companies, e.g. companies from Asia, and locally-owned companies which are oriented toward foreign markets further east (Russia, Ukraine) or are supported by foreign capital. We also draw upon data from earlier research on similar topics (e.g. Nekvapil 1997a, 1997b; Nekula, Nekvapil, and Šichová 2005a, 2005b; Nekvapil and Nekula 2006; 2009a, 2009b; Nekula, Marx, and Šichová 2009).

A total of 34 interviews were conducted in the companies by a multi-ethnic team, consisting of native speakers of Czech, Hungarian, German and English. A brief description of the companies follows:

Company A manufactures car components. It is a branch of a German company with other branches and clients all over the world. The branch of Company A which is the subject of our research is located in Eastern Moravia (Czech Republic), and production here began in 1996. As of June 2007, the branch had 2182 employees, most of whom were Czech, but who were also Slovak, Polish, and of other origin. All “expatriates” or “delegates” (German and Austrian nationals sent by the parent company to the subsidiary) working in the branch (10 persons) occupy top management positions. Originally, the corporate language of this branch was German, but as a consequence of the merging with another German-based company operating more world-wide, English has been officially introduced.

Company B manufactures rail transportation products and is a part of large international concern with headquarters in Germany. The branch in question is located on the outskirts of Prague. The company began operations in the Czech Republic in 2002, when it took over and restructured the production of a Czech company. There is no officially declared corporate language, but both German and Czech are claimed by the employees to have this role. The company employs over 1000 people. Technical experts and managers are sent from the parent company in Germany, and there were approximately 20 such individuals working there at the time of the research.

Company C manufactures rubber products and the branch under study is located in southeastern Hungary. It was formerly a German company with headquarters in Hamburg. In 2004 it was bought by another German multinational company with English as its corporate language. There were no expatriate employees in the company, but rather, the local employees were responsible for communication with the parent company and with other companies throughout Europe.

Company D is an electricity company with a branch in southeastern Hungary. It was founded in 1951, and remained in Hungarian state ownership until 1995 when it was privatized and bought by a French company. Since then both French and Hungarian experts have executed the management tasks at various levels in the company. There has thus far been no declaration officially about an official corporate language, though both English (by the HR department) and Hungarian (by the local employees) have been mentioned as candidates for this classification.

Finally, statistical data were collected to provide a picture of the local context in which the multinationals are situated. They will be discussed in the next section.

5 Languages and regions

The ELAN and “Talking Sense” studies focus on the European, national and global levels, with a special emphasis on export. However, the practices of some multinationals still manage to have a distinctly regional character. We will discuss this character below.

One important aspect of multinational companies throughout Europe is that companies decide to establish subsidiaries in particular places for various reasons, many of which may have to do with language and cultural considerations, not only in regard to the selected country (for example, the Czech Republic or Hungary), but also to the selected region (e.g. a capital city, or a region with a dense population of national minorities, or a border region). Local companies, local educational institutions (secondary schools, universities, language schools) and authorities may play a considerable role in this. Local conditions influence the professional skills and knowledge of languages of the local employees of the subsidiary. At the same time, language skills of the local employees influence their positions in the company and on the regional job market in general. In this vein, it is important to consider the “regional innovation systems” in operation (Williams 2006; Braczyk, Heidenreich, and Cooke 1998; Cooke, Heidenreich, and Braczyk 2004). According to this concept, localized or regionally-based

sources of knowledge and learning sustain innovative capabilities in the new economy, because tacit knowledge is more easily and inexpensively transferred within a regional or local level. Social capital may also be conditioned by regional culture – regions can display a distinct system of innovation differing from both the state norm and the systems of other regions. For example, in Company A above, the German parent company decided to establish a plant in the particular region of the Czech Republic due to the high level of skilled workers being educated there, as the following quote indicates:

(1)

It wasn't an accident, first, of course, the production was transferred, that means there were projects here that were transferred from the high cost areas of ((German city)), ((German city)) here to ((Czech city)) for startup programs like finding out what our cost situation was, well, they found out of course that from the point of view of production it was very advantageous for them and it wasn't such a problem to move it. And so this thought arose – okay, where exactly is this ((Czech city))? Aha, it's near ((Czech city)), near the airport, near the universities, near ((Czech city)) where they can test things ... and so on and so on and all of a sudden they realized that there was enormous potential there in terms of education, in terms of the accessibility of the machines and facilities. (Czech developer, Company A – translated from Czech)¹

There are two important types of statistical information that help to paint a better picture of the conditions for regional innovation systems. These are: the foreign direct investment (FDI) in the given countries, and the extent to which different foreign languages are taught in these countries. As concerns the FDI in the Czech Republic, overall, there are almost 4,000 foreign-owned companies operating in the country (see CNB 2007). Of the total foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Czech Republic, amounting to 79.8 billion USD as of December 2006, the largest share comes from the Netherlands (27 per cent), followed by Germany (21 per cent), Austria (11.3 per cent), Luxemburg (6.1 per cent), France (5.9 per cent), Spain (4.8 per cent), United States (4.3 per cent), Switzerland (3.8 per cent) and Belgium (3.1 per cent). Other countries contribute a combined total of 12.8 per cent.

In Hungary, there were 20,000–25,000 “enterprises with foreign equity participation” at the end of 2005 (MNB 2007: 11). The cumulative total

¹ All quotes have been translated from the original language into English, with the original language version in the appendix.

FDI for Hungary was 66.4 billion EUR as of 2007 (ITD Hungary²). The country with the greatest volume of FDI transactions in 2005 (47%) was the United Kingdom. Germany followed with 19.9%, followed by Austria with 12.2%, Sweden with 4.7%, Finland with 4.5%, the USA with 3.1%, Switzerland and Italy with 3% each, the Netherlands with 2.9% and France with 2.6% (MNB 2007: 36). There is also significant participation from Asian countries such as Japan and Hong Kong. In terms of stock investments, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and France are considered to be the most significant investors in Hungary (MNB 2007: 17): Germany for its investments in the most sectors of the country, Austria for its geographical proximity and historical traditions, the Netherlands and France for the growing nature of their investments.

The numbers listed above cannot be taken as absolute and, in fact, often require further explanation. One example of this is that foreign investors from the USA and Japan invest in the Czech Republic through third countries (which partly explains the very high share coming from the Netherlands). Another is that the high percentage of FDI from the UK in Hungary in 2005 is attributed primarily to the privatization of Budapest airport. This is one element the two countries have in common: both have been undergoing the process of privatization since 1989, and foreign capital is often involved in this.

Nevertheless, FDI is a good starting point for selecting the types of multinationals worth researching. However, with respect to the topic of our study, these types should be established not only on the basis of the volume of FDI in the Czech Republic and Hungary, but also by the position of the parent company language in the education system of these countries (with a clear distinction for example, between the position of Japanese and French therein). The position of English in a multinational (with a clear distinction for example, between the position of English in an American firm and in a German firm) could be another criterion. We will now look briefly at the position of various foreign languages in each country.

Knowledge of foreign languages represents an important condition for the successful functioning of regional innovation systems in general and of multinationals in particular. Central Europe is a region in which historical and political conditions, especially those of the 20th century, are significantly reflected in the languages taught and used. For example, let us comment on one of the few citations from the ELAN study that touch

2 ITD Hungary ZRT. = Hungarian Investment and Trade Development Agency. Foreign Direct Investment.

upon this issue slightly: “The backlash against Russian which was noticeable in the former Soviet Bloc countries at the end of the last century is not in evidence and Russian is extensively used in Eastern Europe as a lingua franca (along with German and Polish).” (CILT 2007: 5)

To elaborate on this further: in many former Soviet bloc countries (including the two which are the focus of our study), Russian had been a mandatory subject in all schools since the regime of state socialism was established (although, as interviewees in both countries pointed out, and as is popularly claimed, this does not mean there was a significantly high competence in it). However, German had been commonly taught during that period as well (and is the language of an acknowledged national minority in both countries), and the number of pupils learning English and French was also considerable. Following the political changes of 1989, Russian ceased to be a compulsory subject in the Czech and Hungarian education systems. The following tables will provide a more detailed picture of the changes that occurred thereafter.

5.1 Czech Republic

Table 1. Pupils learning foreign languages at primary schools between 2000/01 and 2005/06

	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
English	435,918	456,265	477,071	492,727	497,391	503,215
German	300,563	274,522	246,787	218,033	187,285	166,808
French	7,971	8,287	7,277	7,082	9,056	7,250
Russian	1,046	1,683	1,953	2,896	3,952	5,657
Spanish	553	610	685	725	1,036	1,235
Italian	22	19	46	43	49	44
Latin	–	–	–	–	–	–
Classical Greek	–	–	–	–	–	–
Other European languages	–	–	34	205	194	29
Other languages	737	201	296	113	46	48

Source: The Yearbook of the Development of the Educational System – Education in the Czech Republic in 2000/01–2005/06, Tab. B6.2.1

Table 2. Students learning foreign languages at secondary schools between 2000/01 and 2005/06

	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
English	334,672	345,752	360,043	376,294	388,747	399,351
German	319,423	313,791	310,253	308,210	298,563	287,799
French	29,062	29,908	31,826	33,758	38,966	40,370
Russian	7,556	7,813	8,918	10,820	12,472	14,329
Spanish	7,592	8,093	9,888	11,367	12,723	14,904
Italian	1,320	1,534	1,576	1,456	1,570	1,358
Latin	15,917	15,598	15,037	15,327	13,508	12,570
Classical Greek	124	111	141	112	113	112
Other European languages	105	156	57	121	116	112
Other languages	170	172	189	178	290	304

Source: The Yearbook of the Development of the Educational System – Education in the Czech Republic in 2000/01–2005/06, Tab. B6.2.3

In the Czech Republic, the principle of free choice of a foreign language was declared following the political changes. However, most students (98 per cent in 1997–98) chose only German or English. Being the current ‘neighboring’ language and historically a language spoken in the Czech lands for many centuries, German was initially the choice of more pupils at the beginning of the 1990s. During the 1997–1998 school year, however, English surpassed German in total number of learners, and the gap between them continues to grow (Nekvapil 2007).

Currently, the choice between English and German is largely region-dependent. The percentage of pupils learning German increases in the areas bordering on Germany and Austria. This choice also correlates with professional ambitions: German tends to be offered to and/or chosen by those who prefer more practically-oriented professions, and English tends to be offered to and/or chosen by students pursuing academic secondary (and university) education.

The management of foreign language selection in the Czech Republic also takes an organized form at the level of governmental intervention. In 2006, the Czech Ministry of Education implemented the National Plan for the Teaching of Foreign Languages, which stipulates the mandatory

teaching of two foreign languages, with the obligation that one of these two has to be English. One potential result of this management act is that the gap between English and German will continue to widen.

5.2 Hungary

Table 3. Pupils learning foreign languages at primary schools between 2001/02 and 2006/07

	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
English	336,642	357,108	362,193	373,172	372,670	369,211
German	275,652	267,868	250,056	237,448	218,575	201,008
French	5,575	4,004	3,709	3,519	3,309	3,201
Russian	3,538	2,687	2,054	1,450	1,317	1,081
Other languages	4,323	4,363	5,307	3,779	4,438	2,694

Source: Statistical Yearbook of Education 2006/2007

http://www.okm.gov.hu/letolt/statisztika/okt_evkonyv_2006_2007_070824.pdf

Table 4. Students learning foreign languages at secondary schools between 2001/02 and 2006/07

	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
English	308,075	329,916	344,490	354,741	356,361	361,517
German	267,051	276,368	278,371	273,652	268,214	261,095
French	30,142	29,075	28,495	28,336	28,917	28,926
Russian	5,032	3,640	3,737	3,332	3,385	3,003
Other languages	38,000	37,101	35,039	33,538	35,564	37,242

Source: Statistical Yearbook of Education 2006/2007

http://www.okm.gov.hu/letolt/statisztika/okt_evkonyv_2006_2007_070824.pdf

In Hungary, the teaching of English has gradually increased as well following the political changes, and in all types of schools. The school systems in Hungary and the Czech Republic are slightly different, but some important parallels can be drawn. The first of these is the significant increase in English, which varied in percentage depending on the type of school. Both English and German were widely taught even in 1989, and as can

be observed from the tables – both have continued to increase. The second parallel is that after 1989, Russian is taught to a very low degree and even less than French. Interesting about these numbers is that the decrease in the teaching of Russian has continued in Hungary, whereas in the Czech Republic there is again a rising amount of Russian taught in all kind of schools. One explanation for this could be that Hungarian is not a Slavic language and there is no ease of communication or learning between the two languages. As can be observed from the tables, both English and German were widely taught even in 1989, and both continued to increase after that. The number of students learning English in tertiary institutions in Hungary had doubled by 2007, and the number of pupils learning it in primary schools had increased by more than tenfold.

Trends from the previous era, however, remain highly visible and relevant in a large part of the adult employable population in both countries. One case in point is that in multinational companies operating in them, we find a large number of older “white collar” employees over 40 years old who did not start learning English until later in life, and thus find themselves with limited capacity to realize their own interests both on the job market and in negotiations with senior management in multinationals. This issue was pointed out in particular by local managers working in Company A and Company D. There are also many cases of employees who, after being initially required to learn and use German, were made to learn English (Company A, Company C).

Given the distribution of multinational companies in the Czech Republic and Hungary and the languages taught in the schools, there are a number of points to be considered. One is that a reasonable percentage of foreign investment comes from German-speaking countries. In both countries, the number of pupils learning German is gradually dropping, which raises the question of whether there is an expectation developing that it will eventually no longer be necessary to speak German with German native speakers. Also, there is a significant percentage of FDI that comes from countries whose inhabitants are typically very proficient in English (particularly the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland) or where English may be expected as the medium of conversation due to the great distance between the languages and cultures (such as Japan). Given the growing rate of English teaching in the both countries, it is probably presumed that most of the English the pupils learn will not be used with native speakers, but rather, will serve as a *lingua franca*.

As the data on FDI in the Czech Republic and Hungary demonstrates, geographical proximity is still relevant as concerns the investment of

foreign capital, and German-speaking countries remain the major investors. In continuation of the question posed above, it is also relevant to ask whether the German companies expect the local employees to speak German, or whether they prefer to conduct all business in English, and how such decisions will be explained by those making them. We will address these questions in the following sections.

6 Power and historical relationships between languages

Examining the sociology of language in a single company unit, or, in fact, in a group of such units involves the question of “who is expected to speak which language to whom, when, where and why” which was implicated in the previous section. This leads us back to another observation from the ELAN and “Talking Sense” studies: in essence, these studies are apolitical, ahistorical, and lack the issues of power and ideology. The studies generally present “foreign languages” as representations of some sort of autonomous societal values without placing them in other contexts. This is accompanied by the assumption that all states in the European Union are “economically equal”. Why, then, are some languages taught, learned, and used in business more frequently and comprehensively than others (a fact which both studies confirm)? This question can be answered, in part, using the example of the Central European region. This region includes, at present, the border between EU old- (Germany, Austria) and new-member states (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland). All of these countries have national languages which, in turn, are official languages of the European Union, as well as a number of officially declared minority languages. In addition, languages of migrants living in these countries are widely spoken in the respective communities. Finally, there are the languages which currently and historically have been taught as foreign languages in the various countries. The nature of relationships between speakers of these languages is complex as concerns power, history, and the resulting economic value of individual language knowledge.

At any level (e.g. national, local, community) and in any domain (e.g. school, family, workplace), there are established, yet constantly adapting practices for language use, for communication, and for semiotics, among others. Multinational companies, and in particular their regional branches or plants, are a typical example of this, constituting “communities of practice” (Wenger 1998; Barton and Tusting 2005). Having common goals, the employees work together over an extended period to share ideas, find

solutions, and build innovations. In this framework, there is a distinct difference between “codified” and “tacit” knowledge, or, roughly, the type of knowledge contained in manuals, books and instructive courses, measurable through some sort of testing, and the type of knowledge which is not elaborated in any organized form, but rather, is acquired through experience in specific situations.

These two types of knowledge may, on the one hand, be connected to competence in various languages and how it is acquired at the various stages of a career, i.e. in multinationals with branches in new member states there is the local language (in this case Czech or Hungarian), the language of the company headquarters (in this case German or French) and the international language of business, English. For example, the state of the organization of “codified” foreign language knowledge in the Czech Republic and Hungary was discussed above. Company language policy may include the supplementing of this codified knowledge through the teaching of languages to employees, the example of this being the teaching of English to older employees in former Soviet bloc countries. Yet it may also be possible for these same employees to function in their positions without possessing codified knowledge of a given language, but rather, while possessing tacit knowledge regarding how to manage situations where a foreign language may be required. For example, machine operators in Company A, when asked by a researcher about the fact that there was software in German on a computer in their manufacturing space, stated that it was not the case that they would “know” or “use” German, but rather, that they had learned over time and with the use of manuals “where to click”, without actually mastering the language outside the given situation.

At the same time, knowledge of the various languages can function in the transfer of information and knowledge between colleagues, or conversely, can prevent such transfer. Also of interest is how and to what extent issues of power influence the building of communities of practice of varying complexity. Multinationals in Central Europe thus involve a varying distribution of local languages, parent company languages, and English as the potential conflict of four particular functions, first described in detail in Nekvapil and Sherman (2009a) as concerned language use in one particular German company in the Czech Republic: language for communication vs. language as a symbol, language for communication vs. language for social purposes, language for communication vs. language for emotion, and language for communication vs. language for privacy (in regard to this final relation, see also Vaara et al. 2005). It is the first pair of these functions –

language for communication vs. language as a symbol, which we will now expand upon below.

One important distinction is that between the language of a parent company, which symbolizes economic power, and the language of most of the employees in the subsidiary, particularly when the two languages belong to an older EU state and an EU new member state. To add to this, contact between languages in Central Europe is marked by hundreds of years of history, not free from conflicts, involving multiple nations. Languages such as Czech, Hungarian, German, French or Russian symbolize national identity, and their use in multinational companies is no exception to this.

At the time the research was conducted, several trends could be observed:

1) Companies which were originally nationally-based had gone global, and subsequently established English as the official corporate language, because it had become necessary to communicate with company branches all around the world – for example, an originally German company may have plants in the Czech Republic, Brazil, the United States, France, the Philippines, India, etc. One side effect of this is that the subsequent actual use of English weakens the symbolic positions of national languages in the company, particularly the position of German. Situations are thus created in which nobody is speaking his or her native language, and, theoretically, neither side has an advantage. The use of English as opposed to German by Czechs or Hungarians reflects neutrality in power relations: the local group is “freeing” itself from the German language (“and the Germans” as a Czech top manager put it). This is, however, largely a discursive issue, as the establishment of English as a corporate language still does not create a level playing field. It is easier for some local employees to “free” themselves from German than it is for others, and the knowledge of English on both sides may not be the same. For example, as observed earlier in this chapter, the teaching of English in the former Soviet Bloc countries is currently in what we might call a “catching up” phase, as the previous section of this article has demonstrated. Older employees may be at a disadvantage when learning and using English (as discussed in Nekvapil and Nekula 2006). In addition, some older German employees may have weaker English language skills and still prefer German.

2) Despite the trend observed in the point above, in the case of German companies in the new member states in particular, to a certain degree, it is still observable at the management level that the local employees are expected to speak the language of the parent company (Engelhardt 2008a, 2008b, 2009) as a possible alternative to English, with the rationale being

that the company values a national identity highly as well, or rather, that the language of the country where the daughter company is located (e.g. Czech or Hungarian) should not be used in certain domains, as the following quote (taken from Engelhardt 2009a) demonstrates.

(2)

Above all it must be stated that we are a German company. That means that we have a German parent company, and insofar that you have to come to terms with the fact that we also have to provide information to the German mother company in some form – then in whichever language, but certainly not in Czech. (German manager, Company B)

The German manager from Company B (speaking to a German interviewer here) indicates that language use in the company (in particular in communication with the parent company) must occur in a language that the German employees know (typically German or English). Czech is considered inappropriate for such communication. Unfortunately, this reinforces the older historical relationships between Czech and German, as discussed in the next point.

3) Regardless of the language of the company ownership, it is observable that other issues are still relevant as concerns language choice. The Czech Republic, for example, has in the past been dominated by Germany to the west and the Soviet Union (with Russian as its major official language) to the east, and recently, Czech companies such as Company A have expanded into Russia, establishing branches or plants there or providing technical expertise. Though the Czech companies find themselves in a greater position of power in these situations, this does not, however, mean that the Russian colleagues have acquired Czech – historical relationships still remain, and the issue of small and large languages is still relevant. The result is that Russian, regardless its symbolic value, is still used with older Czech employees, and with younger ones, English is used or interpreters are employed. Discursively, some younger Czech experts interviewed in Company A dismissed the idea that Russian could be used in the communication between the Czechs and Russians, despite the fact that it is a Slavic language and theoretically could be easy to learn, or that situations of semi-communication (either Czech-Russian or English-Russian) could be employed, as the following excerpt indicates.

(3)

I think they [the Russians] didn't understand English at all. Czech, when we spoke Czech, they picked up some little bits but it was very very weak ... Russians seem to me like they're going to stick to Russian and those among

them who have studied at universities they have a high level of English. So the interpreter who was there [at the branch of the Czech company in Russia], her English was perfect, I have to say, and she had only studied it at school. So her level was high and she made up for it. (Czech manager, Company A)

4) The “clash of language functions” remains an issue relevant principally to the top management levels and areas such as logistics and development. Even if an official corporate language is declared or if there are delegates from the parent company present, not all local employees receive training in the language(s) of the parent company or even in the official corporate language. For example, in Company A, out of over 1000 employees, only 100 were attending English classes financed by the company and only 40 were learning German in this way. As concerns blue-collar workers in the company, more research needs to be conducted regarding their understanding of the functions of different languages, because the symbolic function of language and the ability to overcome it are very much connected to issues of power and position in the company.

As these points demonstrate, regardless of the transformation in hierarchical relationships between companies, subsidiaries, plants, and other units, there is no extensive movement toward the use of smaller languages (Czech, Hungarian) in intercultural communication, and the use of larger languages such as English or German are limited to the top management levels. These observed functions of languages in the multinational companies demonstrate that there are various acts of language management occurring regularly within the everyday operations of the company, such that the employees are able to consciously point to them, and have developed strategies for dealing with various language issues. This will be discussed in the next section.

7 Practices and processes

The ELAN and “Talking Sense” studies mention certain forms of what they refer to as “language management”, such as recruiting native speakers with language skills, website adaptation, the use of translators and interpreters and offering language training (ELAN executive summary 2). However, they do not offer specific examples of the ways in which these “management” tools are used, and the situations in which they are required. In this section, we will discuss how both local employees and expatriates deal with language, communication and sociocultural problems occurring

in specific situations, and primarily, how they try to prevent them. We will begin with the following observation about British companies.

UK companies spend heavily on recruiting internationally, paying premiums for employees with language skills, and using external interpreters and translators. From this it is clear that UK companies do place a value on language skills. However, rather than building language capacity in the company, preferred practice among those major UK multinationals surveyed for this exercise seems to be to wait until a language gap emerges and then take corrective action to plug it. (Feely and Winslow 2006: 13)

In the same section of this report, it is pointed out that German companies employ more long-term strategies. Also, in comparing the degree of “language responsiveness” of French, German and UK companies (page 15), the UK companies had the lowest degree, followed by the French, and then the Germans. On the basis of this, we can predict that the less commonly spoken a language is in the world, the higher “language responsiveness” its country’s companies will have, and that this will apply further to the Czech Republic and Hungary. In other words, the parent company (based e.g. in Germany) would have a lower “language responsiveness” than the daughter company based, for example, in the Czech Republic. In this vein, we have elaborated the LMT model described above to include the potential for analysis of this “language responsiveness”. We call this elaboration “pre- and post-interaction management.”

Pre-interaction management (first introduced and discussed in detail in Nekvapil and Sherman 2009b) is the language management process (noting of a deviation from a norm, evaluation, adjustment design, implementation) done in anticipation of a future interaction, or more precisely, in anticipation of potential problems in a future interaction. This can include looking up words and phrases in a dictionary or textbook, consulting language concerns with a language expert (e.g. a teacher hired by the company), or, even “avoidance strategies” such as preferring written communication to oral communication, bringing along an interpreter, or avoiding the interaction altogether.

Pre-interaction management can be targeted, i.e. oriented toward a specific future action, or generalized, i.e. oriented toward a multitude of similar interactions. In an analogous manner, we define post-interaction management as the language management process (noting of a deviation from a norm, evaluation, adjustment design, implementation) which takes place after the given interaction. Post-interaction management consequently

also takes place before future interactions. The difference between the two types of management lies in the fact that while pre-interaction management is oriented to an upcoming specific interaction or generally, to a particular set of upcoming interactions, post-interaction management is oriented to what has happened in the previous interaction without the speaker's immediate considerations of future interactions. It is post-interaction management which appears to correspond directly to the "Talking Sense" category of "language responsiveness".

In the data from the multinationals located in the Czech Republic and Hungary, two main types of pre-interaction management have been observed. These are individual language management and corporate language management. The strategies for individual pre-interaction management mentioned in the interviews included avoidance strategies, e.g. the preference of e-mail to face-to-face or telephone contact, the anticipated use of foreigner talk, and what we have termed "inserting native language pauses into meetings", discussed in the excerpt below:

(4)

So as I said, the Czechs among themselves then talk of course in Czech. So it may sometimes happen that we discuss a problem, then they first talk, and I also don't know what they're saying and when they agree, those three among themselves, one of them comes to me and asks me then in German, and then I know aha, they have discussed a problem there and don't know how to go on. And then I give them of course the help, also in German. And then maybe they discuss my answer again in Czech, and then they finally solve it, and then there's a way out that makes sense. (German manager, Company B, taken from Engelhardt 2009)

For telephone conversations, strategies observed include avoidance – using e-mail instead of calling (Company A), the use of a telephone expert – establishing beforehand the person who should call abroad or the person who should be asked for on the other side (Company D). In written communication, there are two observed strategies, so-called "language for unspecified addressee", or the use of either German or English (as opposed to Czech) for the preparation of documents such as software instructions or e-mail for an unspecified addressee (Company A, Company B), and the use of language class for the preparation of actual work materials (Company C, Company D).

Corporate pre-interaction management can include the outward presentation of names on a company website (including the elimination of diacritic symbols from Czech names) or the advertisement of positions with

requirements of certain foreign language knowledge. For example, in Company A, it was common to place job advertisements which listed “English required, German an advantage”, and for positions in the area of logistics (which involves direct dealing with clients), German and other languages (e.g. French) were required (for details see Nekvapil and Sherman 2009b).

8 Concluding remarks

In this article, we have gradually presented an approach to the study of multinational companies which reframes that of large-scale and highly influential studies such as ELAN and “Talking Sense”. First, using data from the Czech Republic and Hungary, we have deemed it relevant to examine the origin of the capital invested in a country and its relationship to the teaching of foreign languages in that country. In this way, we have emphasized that it is not enough to survey companies only in the context of their national affiliation, as the large-scale studies do, but that company subsidiaries and branches must be seen as a part of the local, regional context in which they find themselves.

Second, we have responded to the ELAN and “Talking Sense” focus on the degree to which companies were promoting the knowledge of different languages by their staff. We have emphasized that language knowledge is a complex phenomenon which cannot be separated from the historical and current political situations of the countries in question and the multi-faceted relationships between individual countries. Effective communication within multinationals does not merely concern finding a common communicative code to be used in all company domains. Rather, the situation is complicated by the fact that languages can symbolize national identity, power relationships and are used to fulfill particular communicative tasks. Our research in the multinationals operating in Central Europe has demonstrated that the varying distribution of languages can be described as the potential conflict between different functions. Profit-oriented multinationals are interested in finding the most effective medium of communication, suitable for most participants involved in the economic process. We have observed that though this function is often assumed by English, it would be errant to view the adoption of English as a corporate language as a universal solution. It is evident that the relationship between individual communication situations and official language policy is influenced by the changing economic and social climate in central Europe, and this also determines the functions of the individual languages used.

Finally, we have described the concepts of pre- and post-interaction management and presented several examples of strategies used in the collaboration of the local employees and expatriates in multinationals in Central Europe. In doing so, we have reframed the concept of “language management” used in the large-scale studies. The findings here lend themselves to several considerations for organized language management, both by the companies themselves and by higher organs on both the national and European-wide level. The companies may more closely examine the strategies their employees use to deal with language problems in order to constantly seek new communicative innovations which can be codified as (written) company policy. We have observed that what the “Talking Sense” study refers to as “language responsiveness” is indeed present in multinationals located in the Czech Republic and Hungary, and that it may take the form of pre- and post-interaction management. The further elaboration of processes through which these situations and policies operate is an appropriate subject for future research.

Appendix

(1)

“Náhoda to nebyla, první se samozřejmě transferovala výroba, to znamená, byly tady projekty, které se přesunuly z haj kost, to znamená z vysokonákladové oblasti ((name of German city)) ((name of German city)) sem do ((name of Czech city)) pro výběhové programy jako zjištění jak na tom vlastně nákladově jsme, no zjistilo se samozřejmě z hlediska produkce, že to je nákladově pro ně výhodné a nebyl to takový problém to přesunout. A zrodila se ta myšlenka, dobře kde přesně ten ((name of Czech city)) vlastně je? Aha, poblíž ((name of Czech city)) poblíž letiště, poblíž univerzit, poblíž ((name of Czech city)), kde můžou testovat ... a tak dále a tak dále a naráz se zjistilo, že tam je obrovský potenciál ve smyslu vzdělanosti, ve smyslu dostupnosti všech strojů a zařízení.”

(2)

“Also zunächst muss man mal sagen wir sind ein Deutsches Unternehmen. Das heißt wir haben eine deutsche Mutter, und insofern muss man sich damit abfinden, dass wir in irgendeiner Form auch immer der deutsche Mutter berichten müssen. In welcher Sprache auch immer, aber auf keinen Fall in Tschechisch.”

(3)

“Myslím si, že ((Rusové)) nerozuměli vůbec jako anglicky. Česky, když sme se bavili česky, to sme taky zkoušeli, tak něco málo pochytily, ale

velice slabě ... Oni jsou rusové mně připadá, že jsou spíš takový opravdu že oni si budou držet tu ruštinu a ti co už potom mají vystudované ty vysoké školy, tak zase mají vysokou úroveň i té angličtiny. Takže ta překladatelka co tam byla, tak perfektní měla angličtinu, to musím říct, a studovala jenom na škole. Takže ta úroveň byla vysoká v jejím případě a ta nám to suplovala.”

(4)

“Also wie gesagt, die Tschechen unter sich unterhalten sich natürlich dann Tschechisch. Also es passiert schon mal dass wir ‘n Problem erörtern, dann unterhalten sich die erst einmal, und ich weiß auch nicht was die reden, und wenn sie sich dann alle drei unter sich einig sind, dann kommt einer zu mir und fragt mich dann auf Deutsch, und dann weiß ich aha, die habn da ein Problem diskutiert und kommen nicht weiter. Und dann geb ich denen natürlich die Hilfestellung, auch auf Deutsch. Und dann kann’s sein dass sie meine Antwort nochmal auf Tschechisch diskutieren, und dann aber auch lösen, und dann geht’s sinnvoll weiter.”

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