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(Business) English – The *Lingua Franca* of the New EU Economic Environment

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Abstract

This paper deals with language and its impact upon the business environment, with special focus on the way in which English is emerging as an interlanguage of a United Europe. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that the knowledge of English, the common dialect of the EU and of any other European language, is crucial to business. Moreover, people doing business in Europe and elsewhere in the world should learn foreign languages or improve their linguistic competences in their attempt to conquer new markets and to establish new partnerships. If nowadays speaking a foreign language is quite enough and thus very common, in the near future good linguistic competence will be defined as knowledge of two or more foreign languages.

Keywords: business English, lingua franca, economic environment, development, communication.

1. Introduction

Language has always been a means of communication, a vehicle of human interaction of any kind. In business, especially within the context of globalization, communication is vital and language is its main component. Multinational companies are bound to get involved in cross-cultural negotiations and interaction with their partners. People should make an effort to adapt, to

learn foreign languages even if they already speak English, the lingua franca of our times. The EU enlargement does not only bring economic and juridic changes within the business environment but it also influences the way people do business, the way people relate to each other. On the other hand, business is people working in order to attain a common goal, one that could not be achieved through individual effort. Business is about buying and selling goods and services, about research and development, about innovation, about leadership and power, about interaction, about cultures, about people working together. The vehicle for all these activities is language, the language of business; the language spoken within a particular context, a context usually termed as the business environment. However, language is not the only bond between people, the only bridge filling the gap between cultures but it is certainly the most important one. That is why linguists speak about business English, business Romanian, business German, etc., i.e. in order to emphasize the importance of the context when using a specific language.

Thus, learning a foreign language is crucial for those working in the business environment. It may be part of their job, it may be viewed as an investment, an asset that brings them a certain status within their companies or just evidence of their awareness.

2. Language as a mediation/negotiation tool

Language has always been a bridge between cultures and that is a fact. However, what people seem to forget sometimes is the fact that one of the most important drives towards communication has always been trade, exchange of goods and services, as an expression of people's needs. Therefore the concept of “foreign language for business” is nothing new. First, it was the language of interpreters, those ancient go-betweens, mediators, negotiators providing people doing business or building political alliances with a linguistic and cultural bridge. The rule that governed their activity was *awareness*. Translators and interpreters, bilingual people providing communication services, those living in ancient Greece or in modern Europe, are not mere technicians, but creators, performing the functions of what Greeks used to call a *demiourgos*¹, one who should anticipate the value, the accuracy and the impact of his work. Going beyond and enlarging this perspective, Roger T. Bell states: “all those who communicate are translators”² because they face the same problem: they receive (written and oral) signals which contain messages encoded in a communicational system that, by definition, is different from their own. Any transfer of this kind is translation, or bilingual communication.

¹*Demiourgos* means creator, craftsman. *Demiourgos* must be identified with the intelligent, efficient cause postulated by Platon. This *demiourgos* is not at all omnipotent and cannot avoid the effects of “necessity” (*ananke*). The Gnostics’ ethical dualism finds its expression in their theory that *demiourgos* creates the world without knowing the *eides* (*eidos* means “what is seen”, “constitutive nature”, “type”, “shape”, “idea”).

² Bell, R. T., *Teoria și practica traducerii*, transl. by Cătălina Gazi, Polirom, Bucharest, 2000, p. 30.

Then, what is the difference between a bilingual person and one who uses a single language to communicate? It is a fact that they are involved in communication in the same way, but their behaviour is in deep contrast with regard to the encoding process. For the former, the encoding process is in fact a recoding in another language and it refers to a message that is identical to the received message, the receivers differing in this case from the initial emitter. The person using a single language performs just a simple encoding and delivers a message to people of the same class, namely to those speaking his/her language.

Generally speaking, a bilingual person, and in the business environment in particular, is one who mediates, one who bridges two cultures, two societies, and why not two economic “miniworlds“. This person becomes a negotiator, one that decodes the message coming from the source culture, then recodes it and transmits it to the target culture. The bilingual communicator stands on a so-called “no man's land”, a place where communication originates; in order to ensure communication this person has to be acquainted with both codes.

Therefore, language is one of the most important communication tools, and of course not the only one, used by the business community worldwide. Communication needs are however best met when using a language that everybody understands, a language that everybody is able to use, one that is accepted by all parties to a business, negotiation, etc. This language has to fit well within the business environment and has to be suited for business communication; some people say that the only language in the world that can perform this function is English, but scholars usually emphasize the fact that not the language itself is important but the way in which it meets the requirements of business relationships.

3 – Business English – The *Lingua Franca* of the EU Economic Environment

There are 6 billion people in the world, those living in highly developed countries possess more than 80% world's total wealth. Poor countries struggle to reduce this gap and developed countries successfully manage to preserve their superiority. Some would argue that this war is fought only on economic grounds but this is not actually the case. The first step to be taken towards economic development is to gain certain skills that make workers, companies, countries able to cope with the requirements of an ever-changing economic environment. These skills include, but are not restricted to: foreign language proficiency and other communication skills; statistical analysis proficiency; a basic understanding of economic development issues; and a basic understanding of environmental issues. Compulsory education in small countries, and not necessarily in developing countries, cannot be completed unless students are able to prove their linguistic competence in at least one foreign language. This is not the case with bigger *and* developed countries, for example the United States of America, where it is possible to complete

secondary and postsecondary education without any foreign language study. This is just an example and there are other examples of smaller *but* developed nations that encourage the study of foreign languages.

Then what is business English and how does it interact with the economic environment? First of all, we should try to define the concept of "business English" or "English for business" and to explain the way in which it differs from general English. There is only one English language with several varieties, its grammar is the same and so, for the most part, is the vocabulary. Business English is just the English language spoken within a certain specific context; within this context, i.e. the economic environment, the criterion of success is effectiveness.

Evan Frenco explains how English for business is nothing else but a blend of what people call *everyday English*, *specific lexis* and *specific context*. Everyday English is what people use in common communication situations (telephone language, E-mail, meetings, etc.). The specific lexis is the vocabulary accountants or engineers use to discuss issues related to accounting or engineering. Those issues and situations are what we usually call the specific context.

“So, business English is an umbrella term for a mixture of general everyday English, general business English, and ESP. It is not limited to words or phrases that only appear in some special business world. [...] there are some other things that make business English distinctive. Firstly, business people do a variety of things with language: they socialize, predict, analyse, negotiate, buy, write, persuade, compromise, telephone, compete, market, sell, produce, interview, train, travel, plan, investigate, deal, advertise, explain ... the list is endless. These are done in a specific *business context*, and for business *aims*. [...] business English is used together with *business communication skills*.”³

This English is not the English spoken by native speakers, nor it could ever be. Language can be only used and analysed within a specific context. Let us also remember what the Romanian scholar Bogdan Petriceicu Hajdeu, said in his work “Cuvente den batrani”: “Words are like money. The more they circulate the better they are.” Business English is the *lingua franca* of the business world and general English is the *lingua franca* of the European Union.

The fact that English, and especially this variety of English, i.e. business English, is the main language used within the economic environment of the EU is not debatable. It is also a paradox, as EU encourages diversity in its unity.

“Despite the EU’s support for a policy of multilingualism, in practice the tendency towards an ever-increasing use of English at the expense of all other languages continues and, since the last EU enlargement on 1 May 2004, is accelerating. On returning to Brussels last September

³ Frenco, E. *How to Teach Business English*, series editor: Jeremy Harmer, Pearson Education Limited, Longman, 2005, p7.

after an absence of four years, I witness this development daily in the Council's Working Groups. From a kind of French-English condominium we have moved to almost total English dominance, as if English had already become the European language. This micro-level practice in Brussels is obviously reflected at macro-level throughout the EU. It is clear that a common language has many positive aspects and may appear a necessity in an EU which has 21 official working languages.”⁴

Professor O'Riain's testimonial above is straightforward enough. English is dominant, and this dominance is not only restricted to communication between and within EU institutions, but it has spread all throughout Europe. The effects of this dominance are overwhelming: people use English everywhere, at their workplace, in politics, some even at home in order to improve their linguistic competence, in showbiz, etc. As Professor O'Riain states, the dominance of English has several economic effects that people should bear in mind when talking about concepts such as multilingualism, diversity and unity.

4 – Economic Effects of Using English as a *Lingua franca*

The document titled the “Grin Report 2005” estimated an amount of €17-18 billion/year is won by the UK economy due to the status of the English language in the world. Grin states that the linguistic hegemony of English is dangerous, unjust, and worrying due to its economic, cultural and geo-political implications. The conclusion of the Grin report is that the EU has three choices: the dominance of English, multilingualism or Esperanto, of which Esperanto seems to be the most advantageous. On the short term, however, Esperanto is quite an unrealistic alternative as its implementation would require a long-term and concerted effort of all EU member states. The Grin reports goes on with further estimates, stating that the “Esperanto” would lead to net savings, for France, of close to €5.4 billion p.a. and, for all of Europe, of about €25 billion annually. In other words, the François Grin, who is professor at the University of Geneva and a specialist in the economics of language, suggests that each of the non-English-speaking citizens of the EU, including those from the poorest new Member States, are subsidising the British economy.

However, it does not mention, and this is understandable due to the fact that it was published in 2005, the amounts that these poorer countries such as Romania or Bulgaria would have to spend for the implementation of Esperanto.⁵

⁴ O'Riain, S., Conserving Linguistic Diversity in Europe/Improved Language Learning, paper presented at Goodenough Conference, London, 17 February 2006, p. 1 (www.cramlap.org/FileStore/Filetoupload,61168,en.doc, April 11, 2007, 15:03).

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

We should also add some facts and figures that would surprise the francophone community in Europe. The French journalist Pierre Assouline provides some figures that highlight the impact of English dominance upon the publishing industry in France. He says that in 2006, 41.4% of novels published in France were translated from a foreign language [...] English is, naturally, in first place with 2,503 titles but the extent of English domination is surprising: 75.5% of the total! In the runners-up spot are German and Spanish with 134 titles (4%), followed by Italian (108 titles or 3.3%). Russian (which is in decline) and the languages of the East are neck and neck (with 44 titles translated in the year), then come the Scandinavian languages and Japanese. The only notable breakthrough is the Chinese novel, with 37 titles translated.⁶ Let us not forget that we are speaking about France and contemporary French culture! Even if these books were published in French, only those French people who possess good English skills have something to gain out of it: translators of English. In other words, France seems to invest in English culture and in people learning English, rather than in its own cultural values.

Thus, English, even if it is not the most advantageous choice of all, it is still the most ready to hand of all because around 50% of European citizens seem to speak it. According to the 2001 special Eurobarometer survey 54 “Europeans and Languages” 93% of parents say it is important that their children learn other European languages; 72% of Europeans believe that knowing foreign languages is/ would be useful for them; 71% consider that everyone in the European Union should be able to speak one European language in addition to their mother tongue; 53% of Europeans say that they can speak at least one European language in addition to their mother tongue; and 26% say that they can speak two European foreign languages.

Thus, people are aware of the fact that knowledge of foreign languages is important, that languages have an economic impact, and that English is *volens nolens* the lingua franca of Europe and that English for business is also the language of business. The use of English on the job decreases costs, makes it easier for people to interact and therefore enhances communication which supports business relationships.

5 – Can English be Dethroned?

English and economic globalization are walking together towards the future of Europe. People would rather use English for business communication rather than any other language. The reasons are many: most enterprise software products are written in English, most multinational companies use English to enhance communication with their partners, and in order to optimize the use of resources, training sessions are conducted in English, negotiations, meetings, etc. use

⁶ Assouline, P., L’anglais règne en librairie, Le Monde personal blog, March 17 2007, <<http://passouline.blog.lemonde.fr/2007/03/17/langlais-regne-en-librairie>>

English as their vehicle. Therefore, what is really happening is not a *linguicide*, i.e. an intentional annihilation of all the other local languages, but the dominance of English is “simply a means of reaching a wider audience.”⁷

Roland J.-L. Breton, geolinguist and emeritus professor at the University of Paris VIII is sure that minor languages will eventually die out as it is rather difficult to fight the silent enemy: English. “Language murder or “linguicide”, whether it is carried out intentionally or not, is one of the basic tools of ethnocide, of the deculturation of peoples which has always been perpetrated by colonization and is still the semi-official aim of governments which do not recognize the rights of their native ethnic minorities. As local languages are increasingly excluded from education systems, “linguicide” is speeding up. The language issue in the 21st century raises two questions. How can widely-used or national languages resist the encroachment of English? And how can minority languages in danger of extinction be saved and gain access to development.”⁸

The answer to this question remains open. No one can predict when the language extinction process is going to end and what are the languages that will eventually survive the English dominance, if any. Other questions arise: What can we do to prevent this? and Should we do anything or not? Answering these questions and those above raised by Breton is a very difficult job. Nevertheless, we should also be aware of the fact that using English does not imply extinction of other languages but the lingua franca's main function is to grant access to culture, business and human interaction.

6 – Conclusions

- (Business) English is the lingua franca of the European Union and of the world. People prefer English for conduction negotiations, for meetings, workshops etc. Using English thus cuts costs and optimizes the use of resources.
- Linguistic competence in an enlarged Europe means knowledge of English and at least another European language besides one's mother tongue.
- The dominance of English has several economic effects that people should bear in mind when talking about concepts such as multilingualism, diversity and unity in the European Union.
- The English dominance is an ongoing process that currently cannot and should not be stopped. Its short term influence upon the economic environment is positive, but in the long run it could cause extinction of minor languages in Europe.

⁷ Breton, R.J.-L., *Can English be dethroned?*, in the UNESCO Courier, online issue: April 2000, <http://www.unesco.org/courier/2000_04/uk/doss11.htm#top>

⁸ *Ibidem*.

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