



8th international GEM&L conference

Toulouse Business School

Toulouse, 26-28 March 2014

Call for Papers

Language and company performance

When Saussure laid the foundation of modern linguistics in the 1910's, he made a sharp distinction between *langue* and *parole* (language and speech) that shaped much of the thinking of linguists throughout the following decades. Until recently, the concept of language as speech acts (Austin, 1962) was largely ignored by international business (IB) scholars (Marschan et al., 1997), and although we can no longer say that it is the “forgotten factor” in IB research, one could argue that language as a social act is still largely a “black box” that scholars have yet to fully explore.

With the intensification of connections between people of different cultures and backgrounds, the rather mechanical view of language focusing on the transmission and reception of messages has given way to a fuller understanding of the complexity of communication. Scholars recognize today that *langue* and *parole* are part of the same reality, sharing common concerns such as the impact of the situational context on the meaning of a message and the importance of style and tone in the choice of words. The “linguistic turn” which began in the 1990's in the social sciences reflected the growing interest in the crucial role of language in structuring social behavior and identities. In recent years conference streams such as EGOS 2010 and 2013 and special issues of journals such as the Journal of World Business, 2011, have contributed to the awareness of the influence of language and languages on the performance of international companies. In this call for papers, “performance” refers to the progress of individuals, teams, or companies in meeting their financial and non-financial objectives (Venkatraman & Ramanujam, 1986). Research on language and company performance therefore explores the way language may help or hinder companies in their pursuit of strategic goals.

There is considerable interest today in the symbolic power of language in multilingual contexts, and in particular, in the role of language as a marker of individual or group identity or as a factor of exclusion or instrument of power. The investigation of subjective and personal, as well as objective and impersonal, factors shows how language use can hinder or enhance cooperation between co-workers (Mantere & Vaara, 2008) and create “circuits of power” (Vaara *et al.*, 2005), affecting the performance of the company as a whole. The way language is used in interpersonal exchanges can erode or help build trust, can cause stress or induce workplace comfort and can thus be a determining factor in creating a negative or productive atmosphere. Also, with international project teams working virtually through electronic networks, different modes and channels of communication have increased the risks of language-induced interpersonal tensions.

How are language practices managed in a multilingual group? Although, with globalization, dominant vehicular languages - particularly English - are becoming increasingly widespread (Tietze, 2004), other languages continue to be used in the daily activities of organizations. The social tensions generated by the mixing of people from different cultures who speak different languages have been documented in a growing body of research (see for example the concept of linguascapes described by Steyeart, Ostendorp & Gaibrois (2011) and Gaibrois’ work (2013) on discursive repertoires). Scholars are asking whether English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) is actually the panacea that managers imagine, mindful that free will (Crozier & Friedberg, 1997) will always influence the choice of the common language of communication.

The impact of the heterogeneity of employees’ language skills on the performance of multicultural teams offers a promising field of study, as does the role of bilingual / bicultural agents whose linguistic and cultural talents can be a double-edged sword for the company. For example, how can companies ensure that these potential bridging and linking agents facilitate the process of collective sense-making rather than abuse their power to shape the dialogue in self-serving ways? In addition, parallel to the language in which they carry out their specific professional tasks, expatriate employees require a knowledge of the local language in order to be comfortable when in the presence of their co-workers some of whom may not be proficient in the vehicular language but are skilled in their professional tasks: how can these two categories best be prepared to work together in order to contribute satisfactorily to the performance of the company?

One may ask what latitude employees have in shaping the language policy of their company, if any. Although the corporate language is often regarded as an unquestioned fact of life (Louhiala-Salminen, 2013), we know that it is not a neutral factor in the process of knowledge sharing and transfer. How is a corporate language shaped, as in the case of « airbusian », a form of simplified English which has emerged within a « *transnational space* » (Appadurai, 1996) at Airbus? To what extent might it be possible for a « multilingua franca » between the lingua franca and a form of multilingualism to develop, constituting a corporate language (Janssens & Steyeart, 2010)? Can we heed the call of researchers to move beyond a static vision of language use and consider approaches such as *translanguaging* (Janssens & Steyeart, 2010) and *dynamic language boundaries* (Saulière, 2013)?

We see then that all activities in the international workplace are affected by language-related issues and by the diverse functions of language that come into play in organizational life. Both in the boardroom and on the level of operational teams, informed choices need to be made about language. What language or languages are to be used, for what purpose and by whom? What should be the role of ELF in international business? How does the use of ELF influence perceptions and attitudes (Rogerson-Revell, 2007)? What are the risks and possible perverse effects of these choices? What competences are necessary for what positions, and how are these competencies and skills to be measured and rewarded? What communication channels should be preferred for what purposes? What online tools, services or training methods are to be used? How is the omnipresent question of translation to be dealt with? What are the possible consequences of these choices on the operational, cultural and political level?

All these questions point to the importance of language as a potential strategic asset in the international company of today and the need for cooperation between linguists and IB researchers to explore the link between language and performance.

1. Language, career management and performance

- Are language competencies taken into account in career management?

- What criteria are used to assess the performance of expatriate managers and the additional language/s they use at work?
- Is there a link between a company's culture, the history of its origin and development, its language/s and performance?
- What is the contribution of written language to company performance?
- Are there good examples of 'best practices' in terms of language policies that contribute to company performance?
- To what extent can language be a career booster?
- Does language training improve managers' performance?

2. Translation, interpreting and related technologies

- What does translating in a company mean?
- What are the different types of translation (text, intention, content)?
- What technologies are used for translation?
- In interpreting, are there specific practices to enhance performance?
- Are controlled languages a warranty of performance?
- Who translates what and why? (official and 'hidden' translation)
- What are the limits of translation?
- Has localization an impact in performance?

3. Sociolinguistics applied to companies and organizations

- How do language tensions in a company affect performance?
- How does multilingualism or monolingualism contribute to the performance of organisations? Is this measurable?
- What language-related aspects of internal or external communication have an impact on performance?
- Can an accent harm or enhance the performance of an individual?
- What is the interplay between accent and social representation?
- What are the dynamics of language boundaries in organizations?

4. Other relevant themes

We welcome proposals on (but not limited to) any of the themes and questions mentioned above. Theoretical or empirical papers will be considered, and we encourage contributions with applicative value for companies.

We look forward to receiving your proposals.

Best regards,

The scientific committee

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Authors' guidelines:

- First page with author's identity, affiliation and addresses.
- Text of the proposal: in .doc(x), anonymous, justified, 2,5cm margins throughout.
- Abstract and 6-7 key-words (1500 characters including spaces). Title: Times New Roman, bold, size 16. Text: Times New Roman, size 12. References: see model above.

Proposals of maximum 40000 characters including spaces in French or in English in Word format to be sent **by January the 10th 2014** to scientifique@geml.eu

- Notice of acceptance / modification : **by February the 20th 2014**
- Final paper: **by March the 10th 2014 for the forthcoming procedures.**

For any information concerning the conference, please contact: scientifique@geml.eu

Schedule:

Proposed paper: **by January the 10th 2014**
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Registration the 8th GEM&L International Conference as from February the 1st 2014