



**LANGUAGE USE IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS:  
Seminar in honour of Anne Kari Bjørge  
1–2 September 2022**



**BOOK OF ABSTRACTS**

## ***Language in international management***

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This presentation consists of a literature review based on 10 years of colloquia and publications of the GEM&L (International Research Group on Language and Management) on the role played by language in international management.

The aim is to take stock of the knowledge produced on the subject, to identify the main research areas favoured by researchers in language-sensitive IB research, to highlight the links between this research stream and related disciplines and to show the possible interdisciplinary convergences as well as the obstacles to this convergence (IB + linguistics, IB + org studies, psychology, etc.).

The presentation will also focus on methodological aspects of language-sensitive IB research and will discuss recent initiatives to reconceptualise the concept of language in order to formulate the theoretical framework of a Language General Competence (LG-C) that goes beyond the notion of linguistic competence and communication across borders to define language as a strategic asset for organisations.

The database consists of 269 working papers, spread over 25 tracks presented during 10 years in the GEM&L international conferences, 3 books published in 2020 and 2022 or to be published in 2023 and 3 special issues published by EJIM, IJCCM and CPOIB.

Our methodology is home-made. The small size of the database does not require the use of sophisticated lexical analysis tools. We started from the tracks represented at the colloquia. For some tracks that are too general, we have identified sub-categories highlighting either different approaches, levels of analysis or methodologies. This has allowed us to establish the link between distinct notions such as language and power or language and identity, multilingualism and interculturality, etc. Our findings highlight the thematic choice made by scholars, the main trends and the orphans, underlining under-studied aspects and blind spots.

In conclusion, this presentation attempts to outline the future perspectives of the discipline which has been able to distinguish itself from cross-cultural studies without denying the consubstantial link between language and culture.

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## ***Relationship between BELF and corporate language over the years***

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Inspired by the novel *English as a Lingua Franca* (ELF) approach in linguistics, Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) developed the notion of *BELF* (*English as a Business Lingua Franca*) during a research project on the internal communication of recently merged Finnish-Swedish companies. It highlighted the role of English in global business as a professional tool getting the job done, while empowering internationally operating business practitioners and emancipating them from the role as failed native speakers. In the Finnish-Swedish corporate context, BELF was seen as a 'neutral' corporate language as it was neither party's mother tongue. Business was primary, while linguistic correctness of English was secondary.

Since 2005, the notion of BELF has functioned as a springboard for empirical studies (for an overview, see Ehrenreich, 2016) within business, professional and corporate communication (e.g., Birlik & Kaur, 2020; Bjørge, 2010, 2012, 2016; Cogo, 2016; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Räisänen, 2018, 2020; Takino, 2020) and recently also within international management (e.g., Karhunen et al., 2018; Nurmi & Koroma, 2020; Piekkari et al., 2014). It has also affected teaching and learning practices in various business schools (e.g., Komori-Glatz, 2018; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011; Ly, 2016; Pullin, 2015; Vettorel, 2019).

Interestingly, most of the studies addressing BELF as a corporate language, including Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005), do not define 'corporate language'. In international management research (e.g., Fredriksson et al., 2006; Piekkari et al., 2005; Sanden, 2020), the notion of 'corporate language' has been particularly popular but has often been taken as given. It is only recently that interdisciplinary scholar teams have made efforts to unpack the notion (Kankaanranta et al., 2018) and to investigate its manifestations in authentic data (Räisänen & Kankaanranta, 2020).

In my talk, I will discuss the relationship between BELF and corporate language over the years.

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### ***Overt prestige and ‘covert’ practices: An analysis of linguistic choices and language practices in an international company based in Sweden***

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In this ethnographically-informed study, I report on the linguistic choices and everyday linguistic practices of five employees working in a large international company based in the geographical context of Sweden. Employing shadowing observations (McDonald, 2005) and subsequent semi-structured interviews to complement the observations (Blommaert and Dong 2010), I investigate the interplay of English with other first languages present in the employees’ linguistic repertoire, seeking the answers to two specific research questions: i) which language(s) do the employees use for different functions in their everyday linguistic practices?; ii) what are some of the factors determining these employees’ linguistic choices and practices? Also included in the study are the employees’ reflections on the company’s overt linguistic practices. While there is valuable research on corporate language choices and the consequences of these linguistic choices (e.g. Bjørge & Whittaker, 2019; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010), there is room for additional research reporting on actual linguistic practices in large international organizations where there is often a rich pool of languages.

The preliminary findings of the present study point to multilingual practices by these employees. The shadowing observations show that, for macro functions, English is maintained as the default language of this company, and the employees’ linguistic choices are very much determined by the general praxis in place. Unsurprising as this may be, the observations also show use of other languages in the individuals’ linguistic repertoire although for more informal, micro functions. Also worth noting is the reluctance noticed by these individuals to use only English as the *only* default language for all the macro functions in the company. The findings from the subsequent semi-structured interviews seem to provide support for this reluctance. The individuals express a preference for a parallel language use of English and Swedish in the company, rather than using only English for all macro functions. Among the points brought up in relation are overt prestige-related issues such as the company image, and the mismatch between a company image and the employees’ actual linguistic practices. The employees express clearly a frustration regarding the target use of English

expected by the company, failing to mirror their use of “international” English where English is used as a business lingua franca (BELF).

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### ***If not English as a lingua franca, then what?***

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Adopting English as a common corporate language has become widespread practice also in non-native English-speaking countries, and the corporate sector is frequently mentioned as one area in which English-medium communication is most prevalent. This is also very much the case in Norway, although the official language policy of the country attributes significant importance to the principle of parallellingualism, where English and Norwegian ideally should be used side by side. With reference to this language policy, the present study examines the language used in 492 annual reports and financial statements of the largest companies in Norway measured by revenue. Annual reports produced in two or more languages were analyzed according to qualitative content analysis by classifying language choice as categories of parallellingual strategies. The results show that 36.2 % of the companies issued their annual reports in Norwegian only; 18.9% issued their annual reports in English only; while 44.9% issued their annual reports in at least one foreign language in addition to Norwegian. The combination of Norwegian and English was the most common parallellingual choice in the latter group, as 41.5 % of the companies in the study presented their annual reports in parallel language versions in Norwegian and English. The companies that issued parallellingual annual reports demonstrated two different approaches to language use in their publications, which can be referred to as, firstly, ‘separate language versions’, i.e. where the company issued two or more monolingual language versions of their annual report, and, secondly, ‘integrated language versions’, i.e. where the company issued one report with text written in both Norwegian and English in the same publication. The findings show that parallellingualism can be a viable alternative to monolingual communication, such as English as a lingua franca, which involves the risk of excluding groups with specific language requirements.

### ***Lessons from BELF for teaching leadership communication***

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In a world characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), leadership is a “dynamic and complex phenomenon” frequently characterised as shared, participative, adaptive and creative (Ruesga Rath et al. 2021: 201ff) as well as relationship-oriented (Bird 2018). Recent research has highlighted the role of communication in leadership in general (Ruben & Gigliotti 2019) and parallels with cross-cultural management in particular (Ruesga Rath et al. 2021). To date, though, there seems to be little consideration of the role of BELF (English as a business lingua franca) in leadership communication despite the fact that leading multicultural teams is a core element of leadership in a VUCA world.

This presentation first proposes a conceptual shift regarding teaching strategies for effective BELF communication. It suggests that these not only provide students with key skills for managing intercultural teams at a linguistic level but also as a proxy for learning key 21<sup>st</sup>-century leadership skills such as flexibility, adaptability, collaborative working and relationship-building. To finish, it explores practical methods based on findings from previous research to teach strategies for effective BELF communication in leadership and/or communication classes.

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### ***Expressing disagreement in English as a lingua franca – how does a business context differ from everyday interaction?***

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Bjørge (2012) investigated how business students who used English as a lingua franca (ELF) expressed disagreement in simulated negotiations. She compared the results to advice given to business students in textbooks and found that the students' formulations had little correspondence with textbook advice. Instead, the business students most often disagreed by using the expressions "but" (turn-initially; "yes/yeah but"; and but + counterargument), "no", "I don't think", and (but-initiated) questions. The majority of the disagreement turns in her corpus were mitigated in one way or the other, most commonly by delay, added support, or a combination of these, or by modulation/indirectness devices.

This paper examines how expressing disagreement among ELF-using business students compares to ELF-using married couples' (Pietikäinen, 2017) expressions of disagreement in domestic conflicts. The paper analyses conflict interactions drawn from 24 h 15 min of naturally occurring conversations audio recorded by seven couples in four countries. My hypothesis was that disagreement in domestic conflicts is expressed using largely similar machinery as in the simulated business negotiations. Particularly, the disagreement preface "yeah but" (Pomerantz, 1975) was expected to dominate in couples' conflicts, too.

Preliminary findings indicate, however, that of the 85 disagreement turns identified in the domestic data, only 31 (36.5%) used some type of a "but"-formulation. Of these, 18 used the preface "yeah but". A total of 20 turns (23.5%) consisted of "no" or some other type of a polar disagreement token. Interestingly, most of the disagreements (44.7%) did, however, not employ any of the common expressions identified by Bjørge (2012). Of these, approximately half involved an unmitigated counterargument. Earlier research on ELF couples' conflict talk identifies the use of silence as a means to express extreme disagreement (Pietikäinen, 2018), but in the current data focusing on disagreement turns only, only three occasions of avoidance by silence were detected.

The paper discusses the observed similarities and differences using a conversation analytic approach. It concludes with a discussion on the contextual similarities and differences of the two ELF domains and their effect on the interactional practices speakers use to express disagreement.

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### ***Openings and closings in workplace emails: How do people navigate without clear standards and clearly prescribed formulae?***

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Within pragmatics, the last decade has seen many studies of openings and closings in email correspondence between teachers and students, of which Bjørge (2007) was one of the first. However, the earliest studies on email communication examined emails written between workers in a professional setting. This study focuses

on openings and closings in professional email correspondence. Languages vary in linguistic manifestations of formal politeness, but what particularly marks professional email communication is the flexibility of the genre compared to traditional, formal business letters. This poses the question of how individual email writers navigate without clear standards and clearly prescribed formulae. This study focuses on the individual email writer and, specifically, opening salutations and closing valedictions in 927 Norwegian workplace emails, followed by metapragmatic interviews with their senders. In an egalitarian society with few explicit linguistic manifestations of formal politeness, individual choices of formulations provide a rich source of data. Linguistic content analysis reveals a significant degree of consistency in each person's individual use, which indicates that people make their own rules when there are no commonly held norms. The interviewees are aware of which openings and closings they prefer, but often not why. Further data analysis reveals that hierarchical social distance is not a motivational factor, but the intentions to be either personally close or professionally distant are. Both are regarded as viable options in formal workplace emails by their users. However, the informants' perception of which linguistic items represent these motivations depends on individual preferences rather than established or institutionalised practices. The latter is not a uniquely Norwegian problem but concerns email correspondents in general because of the flexibility innate to the email genre.

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### ***How meaning and language structure play a role in cross-cultural communication***

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As we know, language influences the way we behave, how we perceive things, how we think. How much of our culture is inherent in the language itself, its vocabulary, its structure, its idiom?

Both structure and vocabulary reveal something about the culture, as we have to use the words and structures that are available in the particular language we are using.

In this article, I will look at the way the meaning of words differs in different cultures, and how we can find out what the semantic networks of a word can be in different languages. Users of a foreign language will develop an associative system and a semantic network of their own, different from native speakers, and influenced by their own native language. A lack of overlap in the semantic fields between two or more groups will lead to misunderstandings. In business communication, these communication failures can be very costly and destructive.

I will also look at the way the structure of a language makes us give more or less information to our interlocutor, how a language obliges us to think in a certain way, and the impact it has on intercultural communication.

### ***Language Management in a Multinational Workforce: The Knowledge Worker Perspective revisited. Can standpoint theory offer new insights?***

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The aim of this presentation is to reexamine data from the article *Language Management in a Multinational Workforce: The Knowledge Worker Perspective* through the lens of standpoint theory. This theory was developed by feminist epistemologists in the 80's but has in more recent years been applied to the study of other groups perceived as marginalized. The main tenet of this theory is that neutral objective knowledge does not exist and that any knowledge that can be gained about the world is shaped by the knower's standpoint. Although the theory is questionable when it comes to the natural sciences, it has proved highly useful for the study of social relations, in particular power relations.

Standpoint theory posits that individuals in underrepresented or marginalized groups who have developed an awareness of the factors that maintain their subordinate position are considered to be epistemically privileged, i.e. have the capacity to identify anomalies that are likely to go unnoticed by other groups. (cf. Crasnow, 2008). At the same time marginalized groups tend to experience epistemic injustice: their specific knowledge is not considered important by the majority group (cf. Frick, 2003). Another key concept developed within the standpoint framework is that of ruling relations: the objectification and standardization of individual or local practices. These ruling relations are implicit and difficult to perceive, but are uncovered by identifying

practices that occur across individuals or groups for reasons that are not immediately apparent (Smith, 1997).

International knowledge workers have a high social and economic status and may not come across as a typically marginalized group. My claim is, however, that international workers in the setting described in the above-mentioned article are to a certain extent marginalized at their workplace due to the organization's choice of language policy. In my view their specific situation lends itself to a standpoint theoretical analysis. The concepts of epistemic privilege, epistemic injustice and ruling relations may shed new light on some of the experiences described by the informants in the interview data.

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### ***Linguistic glass-ceiling? Highly skilled migrants' sensemaking of local language proficiency in professional settings in Norway***

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In Norway, over 40% of highly skilled migrants (HSMs) are overqualified for their position, according to a recent report published by Statistics Norway (Statistics Norway, 2022). Norwegian employers claim they lack qualified candidates, but at the same time, they are reluctant to hire HSMs because they do not trust their qualifications and claim they lack proficiency in the local language (Risberg & Romani, 2022).

While the population's English level is high in Nordic countries, previous studies have shown that proficiency in the local language is still highly relevant in professional contexts (Bjørge & Whittaker 2015, Lønsmann 2014). In this perspective, Bjørge and Whittaker (2015) examined a Norwegian organisation that had adopted the local language as its corporate language and the implications for international knowledge workers. The study indicated that not having a good command of Norwegian limited international workers' career prospects and constituted a "linguistic glass ceiling" (Bjørge & Whittaker, 2015: 152).

This presentation draws on Bjørge and Whittaker's work and investigates how HSMs make sense of local language requirements for career advancement in Norway. It also discusses whether the statement "the issue was clearly perceived as a language issue only, and it was stressed that everyone -irrespective of national background- had the same career prospects" (Bjørge & Whittaker 2015:150) holds true in another organisational context.

The data is based on 20 interviews of highly skilled migrants working in different organisations in the Bergen region in Norway. While describing and reflecting on their journey and their professional advancement, proficiency in Norwegian became a key topic. The data is analysed using sensemaking, a concept in organisation theory introduced by Weick (1995) that provides insights into how individuals interpret situations and events.

The study shows that proficiency in the local language is problematised in different ways and depends on the informant's duration of stay in Norway, professional position, and mother tongue. The study presents the findings and how language proficiency relates to integration, career advancement and power struggles.

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