Chapter 8
Multilingualism in International Business

Libi Shen
University of Phoenix, USA

ABSTRACT

Language situations vary in different nations. In some countries, a variety of languages are spoken; in others, a single language is used. People who have the linguistic competence to speak several languages are multilingual. What role does multilingualism play in multinational corporations? Is multilingualism a problem or a solution for international business? Does English as a lingua franca play a role in international business? How business leaders react to multilingualism or Englishization? Opinions are divided. Multilingualism has been the focus of interest in recent decades due to globalization, tourism, technology advancement, international trade, and so forth. Language barriers and linguistic diversity surfaced which may impact corporate communications in international business. Specific language policies might be needed for corporate communications. The aims of this chapter are to explore the roles of multilingualism and Englishization in international business, and to seek approaches for better corporate communications. Associated issues and problems as well as solutions and recommendations will be explored and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Psycholinguistics is the study of language processing and mental representations in perception, comprehension, acquisition, storage, and production of language. Over the decades, many psycholinguists have devoted efforts to understand how various aspects of linguistic processing work together and how language is done in
Multilingualism in International Business

listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Thus, language processing was illustrated by a psycholinguistics model to include phonological processing, lexical access, syntactic parsing, representation pruning, and conscious interpretation (O’Grady, Dobrovolsky, & Aronoff, 1997). Since psycholinguistics involves the study of the relationships between linguistic behavior and language processing, it can be applied to many fields of language study. In examining languages in social contexts, multilingualism surfaced as one of the interesting fields for exploration.

Multilingualism is “the use of three or more languages by an individual or by a group of speakers such as the inhabitants of a particular region or a nation” (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1998, p. 299). For example, Leo Apotheker (former German CEO at SAP and Hewlett Packard) can speak German, Dutch, French, English and Hebrew; Paul Bulcke (CEO of Nestle) can speak Dutch, French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, German; and Tidjane Thiam (Chief Executive of Credit Suisse) can speak French, German and English (Shoshan, 2015). According to Forbes news, though inconclusive, people who can speak more than one language have more job opportunities, can do better work, can work more efficiently, and are better multitaskers (Money Builder, 2012). Three benefits of being multilingual (i.e., more business opportunities, better customer service, and understanding different cultures leading to international business) were proposed for international business careers by New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT, 2017).

The importance of multilingualism has been exemplified by many researchers. For instance, Gunnarsson (2013) described that,

In today’s economy, it is not only managers and elite staff who need to be linguistically flexible. Factory floor workers come in contact with different languages during the workday. They have to be prepared to interact with group leaders and fellow workers with a different linguistic background than they have themselves. (p.162)

The staff who are multilingual has a direct impact on its success with winning international work (The Guardian, 2014). Levy (2015) identified three reasons people need to have a multilingual international marketing strategy: (a) over 50% of Google search results are sent to people outside of the U.S.; (b) customers respond more favorably to content in their own native languages; (c) it avoids misunderstanding of the messages. “It cannot be denied that a multilingual approach could increase a company’s chances of findings new markets” and “a multilingual company has a competitive advantage when selling its products and services” (Pierini, 2016, p.50).

On the contrary, “the UK economy is already losing around £50bn a year in lost contracts because of lack of language skills in the workplace, says Baroness Coussins” (The Guardian, 2014, para. 1), and the languages most in demand in Wolfestone are
Discursive Construction of News Values in the Headline: A Case Study of BBC News Reports on Zimbabwe Crisis
www.igi-global.com/article/discursive-construction-of-news-values-in-the-headline/222824?camid=4v1a