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Communication in Global Corporations

Successful Project Management via Email

Warschauer Studien zur Germanistik
und zur Angewandten Linguistik

Herausgegeben von Sambor Grucza
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EDITION

Introduction

Gaining maximum profit has always been the aim of every form of business activity. Nowadays, in this time of dynamic civilised development and specialist division of labour in tandem with the growing market competitiveness, this aim is still topical. It is the methods of making profit that have changed over the centuries. In the second half of the 20th century, more and more companies started using the services of external individuals or external companies having their registered offices in other countries (outsourcing) in order to reduce labour costs. Products are made and services delivered globally by specialists from various countries working together (e.g. in teams) on a daily basis (wikinomics¹). Changes in business structures result from globalisation and widespread access to new technologies (Internet, multimedia, email, communicator, social media, etc.). New tools allow specialists based in different countries to take on common tasks. More and more companies are using new technologies, which as a consequence improves their competitiveness globally and grows their profits.

It turns out that in addition to new technologies, communication tools and lower labour costs in other countries also enable companies to reduce costs. Besides, these are new organisations in terms of work and the soft skills, especially linguistic/communicative competences, developed by the employees that practice them. In other words, it is becoming common practice nowadays for work to be conducted in the form of projects by specialists working in (global) teams, i.e. (global) project management is becoming an increasingly important field of study (see e.g. Levin, 2008: 1), and more attention should be paid to specialist communication that is closely related to project management. Specialist discourse is conducted in English by specialists representing various linguistic and cultural properties, even though English is not their *lingua materna* but the so-called ‘third language’ or *lingua franca*, also called ‘Business English as a *lingua franca*’ (BELF for short, see Section 2.4.1.).

1 Wikinomics as a form of collaboration based on the following principles: openness, partnership, sharing, and global activity, see the definition by Tapscott and Williams:

To succeed, it will not be sufficient to simply intensify existing management strategies. Leaders must think differently about how to compete and be profitable, and embrace a new art and science of collaboration we call **wikinomics**. This is more than open source, social networking, so-called crowdsourcing, smart mobs, crowd wisdom, or other ideas that touch upon the subject. Rather, we are talking about deep changes in the structure and modus operandi of the corporation and our economy, based on new competitive principles such as openness, peering, sharing, and acting globally. (Tapscott/Williams, 2006: 3, own highlighting)

Therefore, today's communication by project management specialists should be looked at from a new perspective (see Kisielnicki, 2011: 179). In brief, when analysing contemporary specialist discourse in intercultural settings, one should take into consideration new technologies, business structure, and globalisation (see Louhiala-Salminen, 2009: 308 ff). Nevertheless, it is human beings who influence the process of communication to the greatest degree (Schein, 1988: 12; Charles, 2009a: 458). Therefore, all analysis should start with human beings (anthropocentrism).

This book is an attempt to bring the reader closer to understanding the issues of communication conducted in BELF by specialists working in international teams within the field of project management. The research project, the results of which are presented in this book, was carried out on the basis of authentic data received from a global company, which has an office in Poland. In the course of the discussion presented in this volume, I will try to follow the recommendations by Candlin and Hall (2007: xii) concerning the fact that in applied linguistics practice and theory are intertwined:

... in Applied Linguistics there can be no good professional practice that isn't based on good research, and there can be no good research that isn't informed by good practice. (Candlin/Hall, 2007: xii)

I would like to mention that this book is a result of a multilateral research project carried out over 2009–2012 entitled 'Specialist Communication of Global Corporations' managed by Professor Sambor Grucza (University of Warsaw, Poland) and Professor Stephan Habscheid (University of Siegen, Germany). I am most grateful to both Prof. Grucza and Prof. Habscheid, who commented on the manuscript and always found time for the consultations and discussions that made me think of, and reorganise, various ideas presented in this volume.

Frameworks

Project management is not a new discipline; projects were conducted within ancient civilisations. For instance, the building of the Great Wall of China in ancient China and the construction of the pyramids in ancient Egypt. It should be emphasised that these complex and monumental works were developed without the aid of the Internet or advanced tools. The organisation of these enterprises and the coordination of the workers' tasks were certainly complicated. Nowadays, project management is a separate discipline, and it develops in a remarkably dynamic way, which can be observed through the continuously growing number of students graduating from project

management departments at universities, and participants at workshops and seminars devoted to project management. There are numerous examples of projects carried out across various fields of human activity, e.g. manufacturing cars, planes; building a new housing estate, a stadium; organising a conference, a sports event; doing a translation, etc. Also in academic settings more and more (research) projects are conducted (Stalewska/Bednarek, 2012: online; Stalewska/Krzyżanowski, 2012), and training programmes are developed, by various institutions, for researchers interested in working on such projects. In almost every field of human activity it has been observed that project management does not merely consist of applying the best tools or employing high-profile specialists. In fact, it turns out that these factors do not guarantee project success. Projects are carried out by teams of people (specialists) communicating with one another, and some of them fail due to certain communicative problems or ineffective communication within the team. Communicative difficulties occur even within teams whose members speak one national language. The more international the team, the more (communicative) problems they face.

Therefore, the division of competences into professional (occupational) and linguistic (communicative) as adopted in tertiary didactics, is artificial, as it does not fulfil the needs of the labour market, and is even dangerous (see Forner/Habscheid, 2006: 7 ff). In practice, this means that experts in project management have a relatively low level of communicative competences, especially as far as their knowledge of foreign languages is concerned, whereas linguists have not generated enough expert knowledge in project management. However, almost all occupations and types of professional activity consist of interpersonal interaction. In other words, they imply communication with the help of a language:

In an economy characterised by agriculture, primary extraction and production, it does not really matter what the language background of workers is and which other languages they may or may not speak. However, in an economy where business activities centre on knowledge, information and services, language and communication become a part of people's job, something they may be remunerated for. The term 'language work' describes jobs where a substantial aspect of the work consists of language related tasks. (Piller, 2009: 323)

Project management is an example of professional activity, in which tasks are language-related (see Section 3.1.2.), and can be called 'language work' as Piller suggests (*ibid.*). Therefore, the optimal solution would be to develop professional and communicative skills in parallel at university level, i.e. to take an interdisciplinary approach to educating future employees (e.g. of global project teams). This is why more and more scientists mention the need to

introduce an interdisciplinary approach to research on specialist discourse (see e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini, 2009: 12; Charles, 2009a: 460 ff).

This book also represents the new trend (subdiscipline) in linguistics, which may be called ‘linguistics of specialist languages and specialist communication’, according to which representatives of various disciplines should collaborate. Scholars representing this new trend do their research on the communicative properties of a given group of specialists, for example members of global project teams. The aim of researchers representing linguistics of specialist languages and specialist communication is the professionalisation of this new subdiscipline. According to Brünner (1999: 114), the professionalisation of a given discipline, i.e. its transition from a discipline dealing with purely theoretical issues to an applied discipline, has taken place, if:

1. the discipline has been ‘institutionalised’ at universities, i.e. it has been included in the formal division of universities into smaller institutes/departments (there are professors dealing with this discipline, and degree courses have been established and are on offer), and research methods have been developed within this discipline;
2. its representatives do not only deal with theoretical issues, but they also attempt solving certain social issues;
3. there are professions, which people may be prepared in by taking on training at the tertiary level of education (gaining professional knowledge), and institutions that control the process of the preparation of potential and current employees, and the results of that process, as well as the way in which these professions are conducted (the final stage of professionalisation of the given discipline) (*ibid.*).

It should be stressed that the process of professionalisation of linguistics of specialist languages and specialist communication is not yet complete, and has only been institutionalised in certain universities throughout the world so far. The Institute of Professional Languages at the University of Siegen (Germany) may serve here as an example (in 2006, the Institute celebrated its 20th anniversary, see a collection of papers published on this occasion in Forner/Habscheid, 2006). The researchers of linguistics of specialist languages and specialist communication currently use methods developed by related disciplines, and the communities of practice are intensively formed and developed. I believe that this volume contributes to the development of the new discipline.

Aim(s) of the Book

The aim of this book is to make an attempt to characterise the communication in global companies, in particular discourse conducted in international project teams, and to define the communicative properties of members of global project teams. In other words, in this volume I research communication within project teams of transnational corporations from a linguistic point of view, i.e. I analyse linguistic and cultural aspects of specialist intercultural and interlingual communication conducted by members of global project teams. I undertake the analysis on the basis of email communication conducted by the members of a particular project team formed in a real global corporation. Unfortunately, the findings presented in this book had to be limited to a particular line of business and one company. However, it should be understood that gaining access to authentic records of communication in a transnational company is not an easy task (see Section 4.1.). Even though the results presented in this book may not have a direct application within all companies, I trust that they remain important for every global company (see also Kalle, 2006: 20–21) and for didactic purposes.

Before I reach the primary goal of this volume, I will first try to answer the following fundamental research questions, which may be referred to as the secondary aims:

- (1) What does communication consist of?
- (2) What (obligatory) communicative tasks do project team members perform?
- (3) What technical solutions do they apply in order to carry out communicative tasks?
- (4) What (specialist) languages are used when conducting projects in an intercultural and interlingual environment?
- (5) What properties are essential for members of global project teams in order to conduct projects in international settings?
- (6) How can communication in global project teams be improved and what advantages can better communication bring to global corporations?

To start with, I would like to emphasise that I conduct microanalysis of specialist discourse (Zorn/Simpson, 2009: 33 ff), which means that in this volume I present findings regarding linguistic and cultural aspects of communication conducted by a small number of people ('focus group', see Gerritsen/Nickerson, 2009: 188). In addition, I conduct linguistic analysis on the basis of real texts composed by these people (specialists), to be more precise, on the basis of specialist emails (the so-called 'text-foregrounded research'), which can be referred to as typical in the given line of business (the so-called 'consensus-oriented research'). This research may also be called 'theory-

emergent’ as it aims at putting into order the theoretical aspects of the analysed discourse, as well as ‘practice-oriented’ due to the fact that its goal is also to draw applicative conclusions.

At the same time I would like to stress that in this book I do not answer the question of how to avoid communicative problems in global project teams, and I do not present the principles of ‘appropriate’ communication. I believe that every communicative situation should be treated individually, and communicative problems are inevitable in intercultural and interlingual settings (see Blum-Kulka, 1997: 60). I adopt the view that all specialists who work together, regardless of their nationality, aim to communicate with one another successfully. However, they may perceive this goal in a different way, and hence try to achieve it by applying differing means (see Duszak, 1998: 261). Therefore, it is important that participants of global project teams are aware of all communicative tasks that they perform and not only of those which may potentially cause problems. In other words, my aim is to make present and future employees conducting international projects aware of the meaning of their everyday communicative tasks so that they can anticipate the consequences of their own activities and potential difficult situations, and hence react to them in a proper, i.e. context-dependent, way.

This means that the linguistic analysis of communication in global project teams undertaken for the purposes of this volume undoubtedly has great practical value. Moreover, this book fills a cognitive gap in the field of project management, but first and foremost it is an ambitious attempt to contribute to the development of the field of linguistics of specialist languages and specialist communication. Therefore, from a cognitive point of view, the subject of this volume appears to be timely and necessary.

An Overview of the Book’s Contents

This book is theory-based and practice-driven, consisting of three parts. The first (theoretical) part contains Chapters 1, 2 and 3. The second (empirical) part includes Chapters 4 and 5. The final chapter (Chapter 6) is the last part of the book and presents the concluding remarks. The book finishes with a bibliography of around 300 entries (Chapter 7). The structure of the book is depicted *en bloc* in Figure 1:

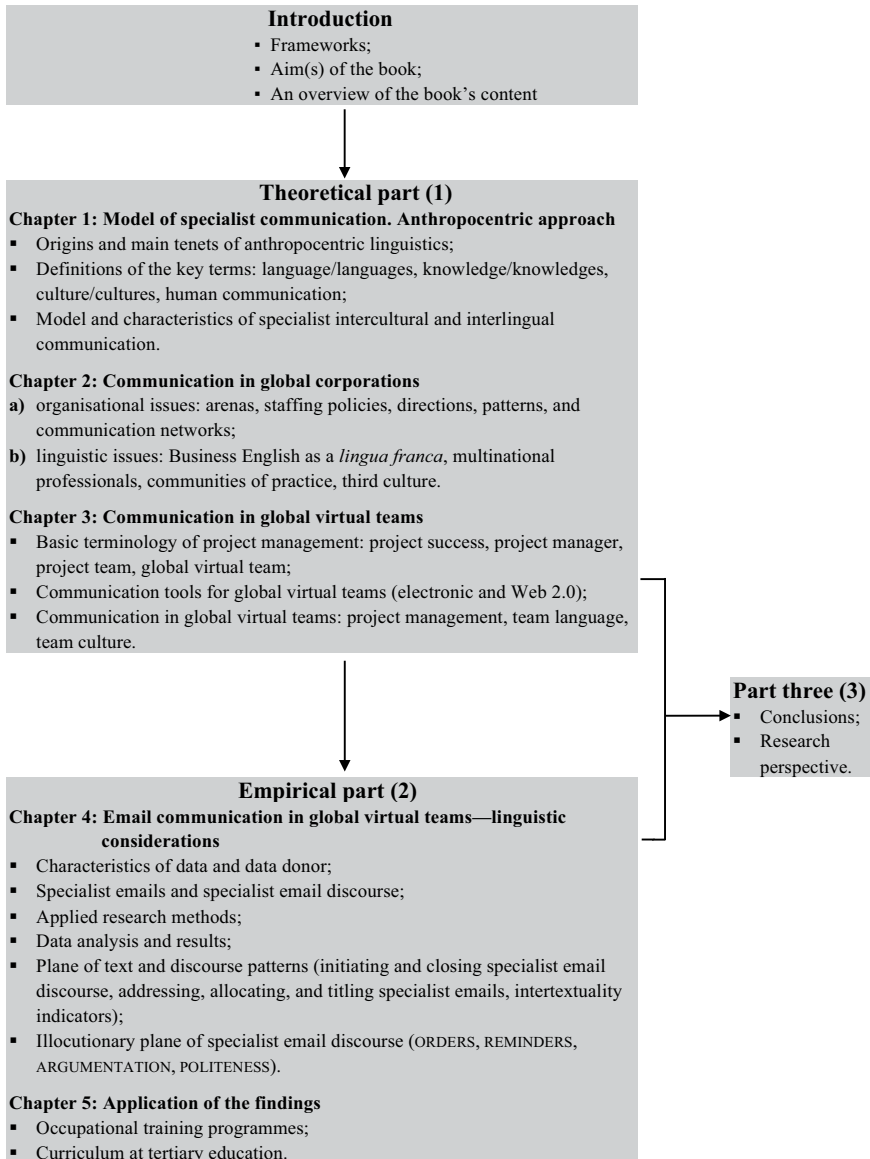


Figure 1: Overview of chapter contents

The structural logic of the book is as follows: in Chapter 1 I begin by describing aspects of human communication according to the tenets of anthropocentric

linguistics developed by Professor Franciszek Grucza. By adopting this innovative approach to *human language* and *knowledge*, I attempt to explain the reasons for the fallacious conceptions of human communication ignoring the role of human beings, according to which ‘human communication’ is a process of ‘sending/transmitting information’. I redefine the terms related to human communication, i.e. ‘language’, ‘knowledge’, ‘text’, ‘discourse’, ‘culture’ following the concept developed by F. Grucza. I then go on to explicate the meaning of ‘specialist communication’ on the basis of the considerations presented by S. Grucza. I focus on definitions of the central terms relevant to the discussion in further chapters, i.e. ‘specialist’, ‘specialist language’, ‘specialist knowledge’, ‘specialist text’, ‘specialist discourse’, and ‘specialist culture’. I end Chapter 1 by discussing the linguistic aspects of specialist communication in international environments. I focus on explicating the meaning of the words ‘intercultural’ and ‘interlingual’.

In Chapter 2 I present theoretical models of corporate communication, especially internal communication within global companies. I refer to the staffing policies that influence the manner of communication and language choice for the purposes of internal communication in transnational companies. I list and describe the directions and patterns of communication. I complement the discussion with those linguistic and cultural considerations of anthropocentric linguistics presented in Chapter 1. Moreover, from a linguistic point of view I present the characteristics of communities of practice built in today’s global corporations. In order to do this, I take into account discussion conducted by researchers on project management.

In Chapter 3 I narrow the discussion to project management and communication in global (virtual) project teams. Again, I start by defining the basic terms such as ‘project’, ‘project life cycle’, ‘project management’, ‘project success’, ‘project manager’, ‘project team’. Taking into account the anthropocentric approach to specialist communication, I discuss in detail the communicative properties of project managers and members of project teams. Next I outline aspects of communication conducted by participants of global project teams. I present the tools necessary for members of transnational project teams to communicate regardless of the countries or time zones in which they are located, and I discuss aspects of team language and team culture in professional international environments taking into consideration the tenets of anthropocentric linguistics.

Chapter 4 is devoted to empirical issues. In this chapter I sketch out basic features of the data donor, and I describe the data used for linguistic analysis, which comprises specialist emails exchanged by a particular global project team. Furthermore, I outline the applied research methods: qualitative method,