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12 Researching flexible language management in international workforces: The potential of critical realist ontology

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ABSTRACT

Employees often face multilingualism and organisational language policies when engaging in global work. Working in an organisation, which crosses linguistic borders through geographic dispersion and/or employing multilingual workforces, could entail encountering various forms of organisational language management. However, when multiple linguistic contexts are involved, multinational organisations may balance pressures for global standardisation and local adaptation through flexible language management. Here, flexible language management denotes organisational approaches to language, which, either officially or unofficially, apply a common language/s, but does not stipulate in which domains and forms employees should use it/them. While such policies may allow balancing conflicting pressures through the coexistence of common and local languages, their ambiguity has several implications. Leaving the organisational language and its qualities undefined leaves room for varying interpretations and expectations for language use, in turn influencing work collaboration and the careers of employees in an international workforce. By consolidating theoretical insights through a thematic literature review of language-sensitive business and management research, supplemented by sociolinguistic perspectives, this chapter provides a conceptual outline of flexible organisational language management. Furthermore, the chapter proposes critical realism as a suitable layered ontology for researching various facets of the phenomenon. Due to the multidimensional nature of language management as a social phenomenon, and flexible language management in particular, critical realist research strategies are here argued to provide the required contextual adaptation to study practices, norms, and ideology.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, language-sensitive research in business and management, as well as advances in other disciplines, such as sociolinguistics, have demonstrated that organisations can have a crucial impact on the functioning of their workforce through language management and language policies (Luo & Shenkar, 2006; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a; Sanden & Lønsmann, 2006). Particularly in the context of international workforces, expatriation and global work, multilingualism becomes a key contextual characteristic which employees must navigate (Tenzer & Schuster, 2017). In order to manage multilingualism and create a common ground for streamlined communication, organisations have created policy areas which specifically designate a language or languages for internal communication (Piekkari et al., 2005). However, as language is such an inherent part of human action and managing language use through guidelines has been proven difficult (Fredriksson et al., 2006), empirical studies have documented the existence of various forms of language management which either informally or semi-formally demarcate guidelines for acceptable language use (Sanden & Kankaanranta, 2018) – here coined as ‘flexible language management’. Given the frequency of such language management solutions, international employees may often find themselves facing unpredictable linguistic conditions and having to navigate a challenging terrain (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017). In order to shed light on this phenomenon and provide the foundation for future language-sensitive management and business research, this chapter conceptually maps flexible language management and its implications for an international multilingual workforce. By adopting this conceptualisation, future research may analyse a broader set of organisational practices which would normally fall outside the scope of traditional language management, such as language policy. Furthermore, in order to propose suitable empirical strategies for researching this phenomenon, the chapter also outlines the main characteristics of critical realist ontology and how it facilitates multi-method language-sensitive research.

FLEXIBLE LANGUAGE MANAGEMENT CONCEPTUALISED

In order to outline the conceptual need for ‘flexible language management’, this chapter builds on a thematic literature review of language-sensitive international business and management publications. Furthermore, publications from sociolinguistics are considered as a theoretical supplement. As the body of literature considered here is in many respects fragmented (Tenzer et al., 2017; Vulchanov, 2020), the gathering of literature has been cumulative, where database searches have been complemented with manual and thematic literature search techniques, such as reference tracking. With a body of literature distributed across several disciplines and sub-streams, a thematic literature review produces broad theoretical insight for conceptual development, rather than a systematic approach within one single domain.

Before conceptually outlining the term ‘flexible language management’, a brief introduction to ‘language management’ is also necessary. Based on management and sociolinguistic language planning literature, Sanden (2015a) offers a three-level conceptual discussion of corporate language policy, a main component of language management. Policy is here defined as “a type of plan, a statement of intent, or more formalised rules and/or regulations within a certain topical area” (2015a, p. 1100), placing an emphasis on the codified and intentional properties of policy. Sanden distinguishes language measures from policy, as “the hands-on activities the management of a firm implements in order to address the language needs of the corporation" (2015b, p. 33). Further conceptualisations of language policy concentrate on inter-unit relationships in an organisational hierarchy, where languages may be deemed as functional in a multilingual landscape of headquarters and subsidiaries, using a mix of parent country languages and local languages (Luo & Shenkar, 2006; Thomas, 2008).

By viewing multilingualism as a potential barrier, where the interface of different languages without a common lingua franca leads to misunderstandings and slowdowns in efficiency, many organisations have attempted to ensure the use of a single language. Often, in large parts of the world, this single lingua franca has been English, due to the language's widespread role as a foreign language on a global basis (Crystal, 2003), and its key role in international business (Tietze & Dick, 2009). It is necessary to differentiate between internal and external communication, as organisations may approach these two areas differently with regards to language management (Simonsen, 2009). On the one hand, the organisation may wish to influence language choices in internal communication if there is a desire to streamline communication and limit interlingual translation. On the other hand, organisations communicate with external stakeholders, such as competitors, partners, vendors, customers, political institutions, or the media. Here, the organisation may choose to influence the ways they are perceived externally, by adjusting their language use to the environment and audience. Many international organisations with sites and offices in multiple countries will thus face a diverse set of local adaptation requirements. However, English here may also become a frequent alternative, due to its associations with international mindedness and global connotations (Lønsmann, 2015). Thus, displayed external English use may be a part of organisational branding.

Scholars have also outlined the interrelation between language management and other organisational domains. Luo and Shenkar (2006) propose to consider the multinational company's (MNC) strategy, structure, internationalisation, subunit form, subunit strategic role and expatriate deployment when theorising which combinations of language/s will figure in an MNC. Although focusing on headquarter-subsidiary relationships and, to some extent, conscious language designs, their theoretical proposals for institutional factor influence on language strategy remain relevant when analysing organisational language policy emergence. Scholars have also indicated the relevance of the alignment between language policy and the MNC' overall communication policy (Simonsen, 2009) and human resources (HR) policy (Van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010). Thus, theoretically, there is a multitude of elements of MNC activity which are interrelated with language management. However, due to the challenges associated with fully coordinating and interconnecting these areas in day-to-day activities, many of the theoretical recommendations from language-sensitive scholars above are difficult to trace in practice.

Language choice, and the selection between different languages for organisational communication are not the only components of language management. There are several other policy areas and practices which organisations can use to influence the linguistic composition of their workforce. Particularly within human resource management, recruitment and employee training have been highlighted as key tools which organisations apply to influence language use in the organisation (Peltokorpi, 2017). Through language-sensitive recruitment, organisations may include language requirements when hiring and thus make sure that new employees are able to use the language/s which are designated for organisational communication. Furthermore, organisations may offer language training to existing employees in order to upskill the workforce in a language where proficiency does not match the organisational expectations and/or requirements. However, it is important to note that this form of language management does not guarantee language use to occur in a certain language or format, as even if a workforce has the necessary skills to operate in a certain language, language use is still an inherently individual choice which is governed by the social setting (Tietze et al., 2014).

However, extant terminology for the degree of language management formalisation is a potential source of conceptual conflation. Sanden and Lønsmann (2018) define non-formal language policies as the *de facto* organisational use of a given language, as opposed to *de jure* use supported by a document. In legal terms, de jure commonly refers to laws stipulating regulations and possibly, sanctions. Thus, there is further room for nuance, as the distinction between formal and non-formal, or official and unofficial language management, does not necessarily distinguish between the organisational procedures and practices which may make up language management. Therefore, 'flexible' language management is here proposed as a concept which may aid the theorisation of the link between observable linguistic phenomena and challenges in international workplaces and organisational practices aimed at employee language use.

Flexible language management, as coined in this chapter, refers to an organisational approach to language, which either intentionally or unintentionally provides a framework which leaves language use in a multilingual workplace governed by interpretations of practice and norms. This has already been discussed as *non-formalised* or *informal* language policy in the literature, where there is a common organisational language, but it is not backed by policy (Sanden & Lønsmann, 2018). However, there are other forms of language management, where the corporate language is not informal, but its codification and format leaves language use unmanaged. Therefore, this chapter proposes *flexible* language management, as this can encompass cases of formalised language management, which still is undefined enough to respond to conflicting internal and external institutional pressures. Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta's (2012) study describes an emergent informal language policy. This is a key component of flexible language management, as it juxtaposes an incremental, and in some respects automated, emergence of a corporate language to an abrupt top-down introduction. The emergent nature of language policy will naturally depend on the perspective at hand, as organisational mergers unite entities from different settings and different historical trajectories. Thus, one type of language management may have developed in an emergent fashion for one organisational entity but be introduced abruptly for another in a merger situation (Kroon et al., 2015).

A further component of flexible language management is the existence of a language policy which declares an official organisational language but does not specify what this role actually entails. Thus, emphasis lies on the declaration of the status of a certain organisational language, rather than whether this status is known throughout the workforce and what it means for everyday language use (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Lønsmann, 2017). If an international and multilingual organisation operates in several contexts, each with its set of pressures for language use, leaving the official organisational language status undefined allows the organisation to respond to conflicting linguistic pressures, while still maintaining a formal official language.

Therefore, another trait of flexible language management is its adaptability to various contexts. Besides leaving the official language status undefined, organisations may apply a combination of multiple languages, where national languages are used within given geographic contexts, and a common language is used for communication crossing borders and internal organisational boundaries (Luo & Shenkar, 2006). The separation between internal and external communication is crucial here, as an organisation may opt for standardised internal single language use, while showing responsiveness and adaptability to local linguistic contexts where other languages are prominent.

The implications of flexible language management are manifold. First, the advantages in this approach are discussed, after which the challenges and more unpredictable potential consequences are considered. Firstly, a crucial facet of flexible language management is its ability to navigate a complex, and at times, tense, political international organisational environments. Given the personal nature of language use, policy or management directed towards how people should communicate risks entering uncharted and even emotional territory (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Bordia & Bordia, 2015). Language use as an identity marker or facet of belonging to a certain demographic group is challenging to manage legally on a national level (Baldauf et al., 2010), let alone in a diverse organisational meso-scale. Various forms of language management, such as policy dictating organisational language use, has been found to meet resistance and even to foster or exacerbate divisions within the workforce (Hinds et al., 2014). When favouring one or a group of languages over other languages which exist in an organisational landscape, an imbalance forms between employees whose language is selected and those who have to function in second languages which they are not proficient in (Neeley & Dumas, 2016). Flexible language management, in the shape of not declaring single languages official, may be applied in such circumstances to avoid stirring up antagonism between different groups of employees and different organisational units based in different linguistic contexts.

Secondly, flexible language management may apply a pragmatic approach by regarding a multilingual organisational environment as an inherently natural part of international operations, where regulation or limitation of this characteristic through policy is not desired (Piekkari & Tietze, 2011). Thus, the focus lies on utilising multilingualism as a resource rather than a barrier (Gaibrois, 2018). This means that responsiveness to the organisation's anchoring in each national and regional context is prioritised. For instance, rather than over-emphasising English skills in recruitment, a potential new recruit's interaction with the local language environment, as well task performance abilities could be prioritised (Tenzer & Schuster, 2017). Furthermore, language training packages, as part of flexible language management, could be contextually, and even individually adapted, so that the organisation can provide language courses to employees based on the individual pattern of interaction with the various groups of the organisation (Tietze et al., 2014).

The conceptual properties of flexible language management match linguistic phenomena documented by prior research. Firstly, language policy left open to individual interpretation means that language use in internal communication will be highly susceptible to language ideologies (Kroskrity, 2004; Woolard & Shieffelin, 1994). Studies in sociolinguistics and language-sensitive management and organisational research have outlined language ideology as beliefs about the commonsensical and naturalised role of language in the world (Lønsmann, 2015; Lønsmann & Mortensen, 2018). Thus, when organisations host diverse bodies of employees located in different countries and regions, different expectations about language use norms in the organisation may conflict with each other. It is necessary to point out that a more rigid form of language management without flexibility does not exclude the existence of language ideologies, as they are an inherent part of social life and individual and group beliefs about acceptable and legitimate behaviour. However, as these ideologies are rarely acknowledged or brought to the fore, when expectations for organisational language use are unclear, language ideologies may play a significant, but hidden, role in shaping employee expectations towards each other's practices and competences. Thus, an undefined official language status leaves room for various interpretations of the accepted domains and practices where an official organisational language is expected to figure.

Secondly, international employees may encounter hidden language-induced glass ceilings for career advancements (Logemann & Piekkari, 2015). In some cases of flexible language management, in this case policy, English is declared as an official language, but other languages, such as those spoken in the country of the headquarters, may still function as a key medium of communication in top management (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999b). Thus, other languages than the official common language may be a necessary prerequisite for career advancement, as studies have found that strategic information is not always translated so that it is equally accessible to all employees across the organisation. Networking with individuals in influential organisational positions may thus be limited for those who cannot do this in an important, but unofficial organisational language. International employees joining the organisation will not know such important prerequisites in cases of flexible language management, where there is a disparity between official and actual organisational language use.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS: CRITICAL REALISM AS A FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCHING FLEXIBLE LANGUAGE MANAGEMENT IN ORGANISATIONS

The multifaceted nature of language as an organisational phenomenon requires a broad methodological toolkit (Tietze, 2020). Language management, when defined as organisational action directed towards regulating language use, is a practice aiming to regulate a phenomenon which can occupy different modes of reality. The employment of 'flexible language management' as a concept implies that, empirically, scholars come into contact with phenomena, such as practices, norms and ideologies. Thus, by adopting a layered ontological stance, scholars may theorise the interrelation between findings on different modes of reality. Ontologically, critical realism offers a layered view of reality and a dual and interrelated conceptualisation of the agency-structure interplay (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014; Fleetwood, 2005). Within the critical realist epistemology, the use of various methods is appreciated for the comprehensive and in-depth assessment of a social phenomenon (Hurrell, 2014). Here, rather than pitting methods against each other and or dismissing them based on perceived shortcomings, focus lies on their strengths in accessing the different layers of reality through the empirical.

A brief outline of critical realist ontology is necessary in order to position the various discussed methods. Although a lengthier discussion is warranted (see e.g. Ackroyd, 2010; Fleetwood, 2005), the central principles which critical realist scholars usually adhere to can be summarised as follows. The world is layered in three layers, where the empirical can be sensed and experienced, while the actual are events and processes – sometimes not experienced. Finally, the real lies at the core of reality and consists of the generative mechanisms and structures which cause and maintain the actual and the empirical. Although crude, this brief presentation indicates that a social phenomenon under scrutiny may appear differently, depending on which layer of the social world it is studied and theorised.

Case studies are among the most popular approaches in critical realism, and have been fronted by some business, management and organisational scholars (Welch et al., 2011). The primary strength of the critical realist case study is its appreciation of context (Welch & Piekkari, 2017), a critical factor when studying language-related phenomena. Language in itself is a historical product of context, which means that the study of organisational practices directed towards its management must also consider various layers of context, such as national, regional, organisational or even group-level idiosyncratic circumstances.

The case study approach allows scholars to apply a toolkit of various methods. Interviews are one of the popular methods in qualitative management research. Given the individual level of language-related phenomena, research of flexible language management topics could be enriched with data revealing individual interpretations of language management and use through in-depth interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Here, the researcher, as an outsider, may provoke the individual, or group, justification of the internally taken for granted status of given languages within the organisation. However, it is important that the scholar is aware of what kind of data concerning language interviews give access to. Relying solely on interviews data risks pulling language use out of its natural occurring context, as the obtained accounts are filtered through interviewee perceptions (Smith & Elger, 2014). This means that the accounts describing language use do not necessarily correspond to actual language use, not necessarily due to intentional misleading, but simply the difficulty of giving an objective assessment of something as inherently personal and natural as habits in speech and writing. However, if such accounts are treated as individual-level perspectives, they are potent sources for studying the employee perceptions and attitudes to language management. In the critical realist paradigm, an interview is regarded as a conversation infused with the positions and agenda of both participants. Such a conversation on the empirical level, after corroborated with other interviews, may function as surface-level indicators and patterns of events on the actual level, and structures and mechanisms on the real (Hammersley & Atkinkson, 1995; Smith & Elger, 2014). As an example, when studying employee attitudes to the organisational role of English, or language policy, interviewee opinions and assumptions concerning language use norms in the organisation may be analysed as indicators of underlying language ideologies. The critical realist perspective also facilitates the treatment of expert interviews to be indicative of actual organisational practices and processes. Therefore, interviews with HR or communication professionals are suitable to uncover portions of flexible language management which cannot be accessed through codified organisational documents.

However, accounts of such processes would benefit from being contextualised with the aid of parallel case study techniques, such as ethnography (Rees & Gatenby, 2014) and documents studies (Mutch, 2014). A main strength of case studies is the opportunity to triangulate between various qualitative methods, not necessarily for the sake of full correspondence, but also for obtaining differing perspectives. For instance, the study of language policy documents may provide access to the codified portion of language management but speaking to employees about their knowledge or opinions of language policy, or observing their actual language practice habits, allows the researcher to theorise beyond the empirical level. Particularly given the frequent disparity between language management and practices (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Steyaert et al., 2011), these multiple data points are crucial in uncovering contrasts in the relationship between language management and its organisational environment. Furthermore, in flexible language management, where the data points for official organisational approaches to language may be limited, complementing perspectives which do not rely on documents or employee accounts will allow the researcher to investigate alternative indicators of causal mechanisms.

Besides facilitating the combination of various qualitative methods, the critical realist stance is a fruitful meeting ground for qualitative and quantitative strategies (Brown & Roberts, 2014; Hurrell, 2014; Zachariadis et al., 2013), both as mixed-methods research, but also as complementing studies in different empirical sites shedding light on the same social phenomenon. Given the possibility that the causes and effects of language management may materialise as different empirical events on different modes of reality, complementing qualitative strategies with quantitative studies on larger samples may help uncover and confirm patterns which can be observed on the micro-level in various case study methods, such as interviews or ethnography. On the one hand, studying the foundations of an organisational culture towards language requires a flexible, abductive and in-depth qualitative approach, which is sensitive to themes brought up in micro-level interaction. On the other hand, the effects of a language policy could be traced in widespread employee impressions of the importance of language proficiency, measured through questionnaires.

While several critical realist scholars have applied quantitative methods, there is a wide spectrum of interpretations within this paradigm regarding which role statistical analyses can and should play in uncovering mechanisms and structures. Some perspectives dismiss quantitative studies for detaching a phenomenon from its context through an artificially closed space with predefined parameters studied with questionnaire designs insensitive to intricate and idiosyncratic characteristics of the field (e.g. Sayer, 2000). In the case of language-sensitive research, this view would posit that questionnaire designs, no matter how theoretically informed and validated, would put a straitjacket on individual responses, which are only subjective perspectives on language use norms. Furthermore, critical realist scholars have expressed concerns with the predictive aim of analysis techniques, such as regression analysis. On the other hand, critical realist perspectives encouraging complementing quantitative and qualitative strategies argue that finding a correlational relationship between variables may be an empirical and actual indication of mechanisms on the real layer of reality (Hurrell, 2014). It is however crucial that scholars show an epistemological consideration of what phenomena the variable constructs give empirical insight to and the potential disparity between empirical level indicators and *real* structures.

The role of quantitative methods in the critical realist approach depends on the complementarity between qualitative and quantitative strategies. Thus, the critical realist approach is also a suitable strategy for studying flexible language management, where the effects may be studied on the individual micro-level, or more aggregated, collective organisational levels. For instance, when examining the organisational role of a certain language in a context with flexible language management, detailed data producing thick description are necessary for theorising the individual-level sense-making and reception of language management (Bordia & Bordia, 2015; Lønsmann, 2017). In-depth semi-structured interviews may uncover individual-level discursive strategies for legitimating a certain form of organisational language management, for example through critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2005; Vaara et al., 2006). This is relevant in cases where the language policy is unknown among the workforce, but certain organisational language/s are upheld by practice- and ideology-based reasoning. Thus, interviews will allow the organisational members to display and explain their ideas about the natural role of language in the organisation. In parallel, through ethnographic fieldwork, the researcher may observe language practices in natural interaction and compare linguistic behaviour with the interviewee accounts (Rees & Gatenby, 2014). Here, however, it is important to account for the role of translation in multilingual fieldwork, where the interviewer and organisational members do not share a native language and may thus use expressions in a second common language differently (Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004; Welch & Piekkari, 2006).

While the data described above may yield theorisations of the foundations of organisational languages and flexible language management, there are potential factors which interviewees will not describe, or display in organisational behaviour under observation. When examining the implications of flexible language management, scholars may perform analyses of the statistical relationship and moderation between various constructs measuring employee perceptions concerning language use. Thus, the attitudes to and implications of language management outlined in interviews or observations may also materialise in hierarchical regression analyses as correlations between perceptions of various personal attributes, such as performance or professional competence.

CONCLUSION

Through a thematic literature review of language-sensitive international business and management research (Karhunen et al., 2018; Tenzer et al., 2017), and supplemented by sociolinguistic insight, this chapter outlines flexible language management as a pertinent phenomenon. The conceptualisation explains forms of language management which would fall outside the scope of codified and official language policies in current organisational linguistic landscapes. Furthermore, the methodological discussion of the critical realist philosophy of science facilitates future methodological choices and the theorisation of flexible language management on different layers of reality. This conceptual advancement contributes to the study of forms of language management which do not fall within the categorical confines of clear language policy or active attempts to influence language use in organisations. Thus, by outlining the conceptual properties, I have set out to aid scholars in anticipating which domains of organisational practices may be examined when empirically assessing the broad spectre of organisational language management. The transdisciplinary development in language-sensitive business and management research (e.g., Angouri & Piekkari, 2018; Piekkari & Westney, 2017) is crucial to actualise this agenda. The cross-fertilisation of neighbouring streams of research, such as organisation studies and business and management, but also more distant fields, such as sociolinguistics, bring relevant, but previously separated disciplinary perspectives together.

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