

BUSINESS ENGLISH: A LINGUA FRANCA?

The use of English as a shared language in the world of international business is not without its complications

by Marinel Gerritsen and Catherine Nickerson

In the course of the past decade, communication between speakers of different languages has increased exponentially in the business world. More and more business organisations are now characterised by a multi-cultural, multi-lingual workforce, and numerous organisations now communicate with stakeholders in different countries. In such situations in international business communication, whenever person A with first language A, speaks to person B with first language B, then there are four options available in terms of the language that they will opt for.

1. Both speakers use language A.
2. Both speakers use language B.
3. Person A uses his or her first language A, and Person B uses his or her first language B.
4. Person A and Person B opt for a lingua franca, a third language, language C, that both parties are able to speak and understand well enough to communicate.

The choice made depends on many different factors. The foreign language proficiency of the interactants plays an important role, as does the business relationship between them. For instance, if one of the interactants is in the role of a seller then he or she is less likely to use their own language and will opt either for the potential buyer's first language or for a lingua franca. Although research suggests that organisations are more likely to complete a sales transaction successfully by following a strategy of accommodation (examples 1 and 2) rather than using a lingua franca (example 4), the latter remains the norm in most international business communication. French, German,

Spanish and Scandinavian have all been used as 'lingua francas', but English now plays an increasingly dominant role in business transactions around the globe and its role as an international business lingua franca is beyond dispute.

Non-native English is used in two different situations. It is used in situations between two speakers, neither of whom speak English as a first language. In this case English is used as a lingua franca, which in business settings has been referred to as 'Business English as a Lingua Franca' or BELF. English is also used in situations where one of the speakers is a first language speaker of English and the other an 'English as a Foreign Language' (EFL) speaker. In this case English is used as an international business language and has been referred to as 'International Business English' (IBE). Recent research has reported that as much of 80 per cent of business communication in English takes place in non-native English. These encounters may lead to communication breakdowns due to the differing linguistic and cultural background of the participants.

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BREAKDOWNS IN IBE AND BELF SITUATIONS In this section we briefly outline causes of communication breakdowns in IBE and BELF situations. These can be attributed to one or more of three different causes, which can occur singly or in combination: lack of comprehensibility, cultural differences and stereotyped associations:

I. LACK OF COMPREHENSIBILITY Comprehensibility means that the message is understood by the receiver of the message in the way the sender intended. A complicated set of factors contribute to this. A major category of miscommunication caused by comprehensibility problems is those that occur at a lexical and grammatical level.

1.) IBE: An EFL speaker fails to understand a Native Speaker of English (NSE). A recent study showed, for example, that highly educated German women described the meaning

of “contemporary Italian jeweller’s” as “seductive Italian jewels” or “cooperative Italian jewellers”, and “the new fragrance for women” as “the new feeling for women” or “the new refresher for women”.

2.) IBE: An NSE fails to understand an EFL speaker. For example, the difference in the past tense in English and the past tense in many other European languages may cause a great deal of miscommunication if the EFL speaker uses a direct translation from their own language into English, e.g. the English construction “have worked”, for instance, may sound finite for an EFL speaker, whereas its meaning is an on-going situation for an NSE speaker.

3.) BELF: An EFL speaker fails to understand another EFL speaker. In the worst accident ever in aviation history, the crash between two Boeing 747 Jumbo Jets in Tenerife in 1977, there was a communication breakdown in a BELF situation. The Dutch captain said in English “We are now at takeoff”, a phrase that was interpreted by the Spanish controller as “We are now at the takeoff position” whereas the Dutch captain meant “We are now actually taking off”. The English sentence the captain uttered was an unusual phrase in English aviation terminology and was due to interference from Dutch.

II. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES A breakdown in communication can also be the result of cultural differences. Most speakers communicate from the perspective of their



own cultural background, regardless of whether they are communicating in a language other than their own. The following provides examples of both spoken and written language where this occurs:

- 1.) *IBE: An EFL speaker incorrectly interprets an NSE, e.g. the use of indirect language by British NSEs, which can be difficult to interpret for speakers from more direct cultures. An indirect utterance such as “You might like to look at the report again” is typical of a British NSE and is intended as an order or instruction for the hearer. For an EFL speaker from a more direct culture, such as a German-English speaker, this may be interpreted as a suggestion which leaves the hearer with a choice.*
- 2.) *IBE: An NSE incorrectly interprets an EFL speaker. Recent research has looked at the communication breakdowns that are due to differences in communicative conventions between customer service representatives in the Philippines and their US customers. The non-linear organisation of the Asian spoken discourse causes the NSE customer to feel that the representative “is either incompetent or ‘beating around the bush’”. In addition, confrontation and conflict are avoided in the Philippines, and the representatives become silent as a result of the customer losing their temper, causing more miscommunication and conflict in the process.*
- 3.) *BELF: An EFL speaker incorrectly interprets an EFL speaker with a different native language. In BELF email correspondence, for instance, people from cultures with a high power distance such as France use more formal salutations and closes (“Dear Madam”, “Yours respectfully”) than people from low power distance cultures such as Denmark (“Hi”, “Cheers”). The high power distance cultures experience the informal expressions used by the low power distance cultures as impolite and too personal and the latter experience the high power distance cultures as too standoffish.*

III. STEREOTYPED ASSOCIATIONS This type of communication breakdown is caused by the way in which words are spoken, i.e. the accent used. This is because people may have particular stereotyped associations with certain accents which they then transfer to any speaker with that same accent in terms of their judgement of their societal status, profession, IQ etc. In a study in the US which looked at the relationship between salesperson accents and consumer purchase intentions, the respondents had higher purchase intentions when the salesperson had a US NSE accent than when he or she had a Spanish-English accent. The following examples illustrate this further:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Business English as a lingua franca

- ➔ The use of English as the international language of business is fraught with the potential for misunderstanding
- ➔ Speakers are often stereotyped based on their accent and their use of English
- ➔ Regardless of the shared language used, speakers communicate from a context of their own cultural background
- ➔ However, research suggests that business people work harder to establish rapport because of these differences

i) The English produced by an EFL speaker reflects the speaker's first language, and this may often have a negative influence on what is associated with that speaker. British NSEs, for instance, perceive speakers of German English and Asian English as less prestigious and less socially attractive than speakers of French English, but they rate all these varieties of English less positively than they do British NSE. Even a very slight accent can make a difference. In the

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onset of a telephone sales talk for a Dutch asset management business, for instance, NSE speakers attributed a much lower status to speakers of Dutch-English with a slight accent than they did to other NSE speakers.

ii) BELF. Despite the fact that interactions between EFL speakers with different first languages are a common feature of business organisations in the twenty-first century, very little is known about the attitude EFL speakers have towards the accents used by EFL speakers with different first languages.

RAPPORT MANAGEMENT The examples given above are only three out of an almost unlimited set of possible factors that can influence the success or failure of an IBE or BELF interaction. Helen Spencer-Oatey, from Warwick University in the UK, has suggested that intercultural communication involves a set of five different factors, all of which play a role in managing rapport between the interlocutors. These are:

- a) *Action, which refers to the communicative event and whether this event is acceptable within a given culture or not, e.g. Can I ask the CEO to do something for me?*
- b) *Content, e.g. Can I talk about my health during a business lunch, as is the case in Japan but not in Germany; Do I start with social talk (as in India) or get straight down to business (as in the US)?*
- c) *Participation, which involves the organisation of the talk itself, such as how to take turns in a conversation (no overlap in Japan, but parallel talk tolerated in Italy)*
- d) *Style, which means the tone and formality used between peers in a business interaction, e.g. the relatively informal style used in the US compared to the more formal style used in Germany*
- e) *Non-verbal interaction, which include the gestures that are understood and the amount of eye contact made etc.*

Far from being the minefield of potential misunderstanding and communication breakdown that this might suggest, Professor Spencer-Oatey claims that business people in fact actively participate in rapport management and try to make sense of the interaction in order to facilitate doing business. Likewise, not all communication breakdowns are of equal seriousness, and in many cases the cause of the breakdown will be clear to the speakers. For instance, although a British NSE will perhaps smile at the utterance “I thank you from the bottom of my heart and also from my wife’s bottom” it is very unlikely that this utterance will derail the entire communication process. In other cases, however, if the underlying cause is unclear, then this may adversely affect the relationship between the interactants, through no fault of their own. Again, as we have suggested above, even highly experienced intercultural interactants may be caught off guard by a “hidden” difference between two cultures, particularly in situations where an EFL speaker may otherwise have near native proficiency in English.

CONCLUSION The burgeoning of cross-border business interactions and the increase in the diverse nature of the workforce in multi-national corporations, as well as in local business environments, suggests that it is becoming increasingly important to gain an insight into the potential communication breakdowns in BELF and IBE encounters and in their underlying causes. |



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