Language in the work place: Outline of an analytical framework

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The role of economic factors in sociolinguistic change

In Europe the transformation of methods of production and trade has exerted considerable influence on the history of languages. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in economies confined within state frontiers, the language used in the work place was a deciding factor in establishing the role and the status of national languages and in marginalising other languages. Thus in Great Britain, the industrialisation of Wales in the nineteenth century influenced the history of the Welsh language at least as much as the annexation of the country by the English Crown in the sixteenth century. Even if many types of jobs were unaffected by industrialisation and contributed to the survival of the traditional pattern of language use, and even if the organisation of work in the bigger companies (Taylorism) reduced the need for language, forbidding it in assembly-line work as it was considered useless and anti-productive, it became necessary to speak the national language. Professional promotion depended on it and so therefore did social advancement.

Language in the work place: the internationalisation of production and trade

The use of languages in the workplace was profoundly changed during the last quarter of the 20th century, for two series of reasons that are strongly interlinked. The first is the evolution of production methods and the nature of the goods produced. Computerisation, automation and the importance of services to the economy have all transformed the nature of work, making language a work instrument at all levels in companies. Companies now encourage and develop use of language. Language in the workplace has also changed because of the internationalisation of production, trade, companies and the labour market.

Factors in language use

Communication constraints which result from the internationalisation of a company are often put forward to explain multilingual practices. Thus a multinational company must manage internal communication in a vertical manner (between head office and subsidiaries) and in a lateral manner (between subsidiaries), as well as its external communication.

But these communication constraints alone cannot explain multilingualism in the workplace. Thus all multinationals do not accord the same role to the language of their country of origin. Another element that could be called the "strength of a language" (Ammon, 1991) can be identified as a factor in the treatment of this language, defined by demographic, geographic, political, economic, cultural and educational parameters.

Other factors can also be identified: for example the role of languages in relation to power, in the exercise of power, in hierarchical relationships; the use of a language's image to convey the image of the company. Companies assimilate linguistic ideologies that permeate society; they contribute to their formation and their promotion. According to globalisation theorists, the very fact of thinking globally and acting locally implies a global language and a multicultural approach. They insist on such an approach, but it takes many different forms.

Types of language use

These factors underpin the various practices and strategies which can be observed in companies and which may or may not be deliberately planned. The use of English as a common language is widespread but varies considerably. Some companies give it an official status (language of the company). In many, it is one of the several languages that are used. The native languages of companies are also used in different ways, and their use often corresponds to power relationships.

The treatment of the languages of countries where a company locates is the field where the least information is available. It seems likely that the link between languages in the public sphere and common languages will vary according to the "strength" of the languages present, and that in a number of cases some languages will be treated as minority languages.

But a language is also a resource that companies use. Thus Alsace is the favoured location for German and Swiss companies, where the knowledge of German is based on local Germanic dialects. It is also interesting to note that German and Swiss companies are using workers from the border region of Alsace, not only because of their well known qualities, but increasingly because they are bilingual, or more exactly they master the standard forms of French and German.

One can hypothesise that these practices have repercussions outside the professional context. It is possible that they influence the representations of languages, the relationship with national language, the social status of the multilingual individual. They also certainly influence the representations of the role of English. It is therefore tempting to establish a link between the current representations of this language in society and those of national languages some years ago, in noting that the positive connotations that applied to these national languages are now applied to English. However this is a hypothesis that must be tested by empirical research, as is the case with other issues concerning language in the workplace that are still not clearly understood.

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