**Language Choice as a Potential Source of Intercultural Discord in English-Mandarin Business Encounters**

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**Abstract:** Until recently Anglophone business research into the issues surrounding the costs of and barriers to internationalisation has focused on cultural barriers and their potential for conflict and misunderstanding. Most of this research assumes that, as English is the international language of business, language itself is not an issue and that communication problems are situated in underlying cultural assumptions. This paper surveys recent research on issues relating to the use of a *lingua franca*, normally English, in intercultural business dealings, and in communication and conflict management, and relates it to a pilot study of five Chinese business people who use English in their daily business transactions. The results confirm that the choice of language itself has considerable potential for causing conflict, and raises interlinked issues of face, harmony, hierarchy, directness and power. Furthermore, the Chinese preference for conflict avoidance and indirectness means that many of these conflicts may be hidden from the English speaking interlocutors. This has implications for monolingual English speaking businesses in their future dealings with Chinese counterparts. It also contributes to identifying potential underlying sources of conflict in these interactions.

**Keywords:** Language management, conflict management, intercultural communication, English as a lingua franca.

In spite of the recent global economic crisis, China remains a key destination for European and Western business generally. The Business Confidence Survey (2012) published by the European Chamber of Commerce showed revenues from China had increased by more than 50% since 2009, that new investments in China were being planned by 63% of respondents and that three quarters regarded China as a top three destination globally, and one which was increasing in importance. Much of the traditional academic literature looking at helping companies trade successfully with China has focused on issues such as cultural distance (Dong and Liu, 2010; Hofstede, 1991; Shenkar, 2012). More recently, research on multinational companies (MNCs) and foreign direct investment has also looked at issues of language management and how this impacts on investment decisions, fosters or impedes business efficiency and has the potential to create significant conflict. Linked to both of these approaches are the issues of differing styles of communication and conflict management.

 Most of the current literature on language use focuses on multinationals headquartered in non-English speaking countries and approaches the issues from the perspective of non-native speakers of English. This paper aims to investigate the role of language use, specifically English spoken by native speakers, in Sino-Western business dealings by bringing together insights from the existing literature on language management and communication and conflict management and applying them to the analysis of interviews conducted with Chinese business people engaged in dealings with English speaking Western counterparts. The findings challenge the assumptions that Business English is a neutral code, the use of which negates problems of international communication.

**Language choice and management**

 As has been noted, where language management and language choices are discussed, it is often from the perspective of non-native speakers of English, focussing on the issues surrounding language choice for global companies not headquartered in Anglophone countries and their subsidiaries worldwide (Andersen and Rasmussen, 2004; Frederiksson et al, 2006; Marschan et al, 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al, 1999). These studies have noted that language choice is about more than finding a simple, neutral conduit for communication, be it English or a local lingua franca. Research on language usage in multinational companies has identified a range of issues which also have implications for the native speaker. In particular, these include problematic issues of power and control in MNCs (López-Duarte and Vidal-Suárez, 2010; Marschan et al, 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al, 1999; Vaara et al, 2005;), the equally complex relationship between language and identity (Harzing and Feely, 2008; Lauring, 2008) and linked to these, the impact of differing communication styles on communication success (Hall, 1976; Griffith, 2002; Li Wei et al, 2001). These are discussed in more detail below.

 In the Anglophone literature language choice *per se* and language management are not much discussed. The current dominance of English as the language of business is evidenced by Harzing and Pudelko’s (2013) comprehensive survey of language use in companies across the globe, which establishes that: ‘All companies that use a language other than the HQ language as a corporate language use English.’ (Harzing and Pudelko, 2013, p.93). The assumption, therefore, is that for native English speakers the language issue is no longer as acute, since they have access to the global language of business communication. It is probably because of this dominance, as Luo and Shenkar (2006) point out, that language use has tended to be taken for granted in the Anglophone literature and the focus has been on intercultural communication. An article which specifically sets out to develop a model for successful intercultural communication relegates language to a sentence (Griffith, 2002) while another on team working in international companies notes in passing that: ‘All Chinese staff were sensitive to the language skills of their senior expatriate managers’ (Goodall and Roberts, 2003, p.153) but beyond noting the fact does not pursue the issue further.

 Anglophone approaches to communication across cultures have been heavily influenced by Hofstede’s work on cultural distance and cross-cultural communication, which tends to subsume language as a minor element of cultural distance. The cultural framework which was first developed by Hofstede (1980) was further systematised by Kogut and Singh (1988) and also lends itself to quantitative analysis and it is this paradigm which has informed later Anglophone writing. West and Graham’s (2004) work on language distance belongs to this tradition: it focuses on language but simply as an indicator of cultural difference. Luo and Shenkar identify these issues in their 2006 work which was among the first in the Anglophone world to identify the lack of discussion of language in the literature surrounding key MNC decisions. Taking a theoretical, macro approach they discuss the ways in which language may play a role ‘beyond facilitating effective communications’ (Luo and Shenkar, 2006, p.323) and in so doing touch obliquely on some of the issues raised by the non-Anglophone researchers. They demonstrate that since information is disseminated by means of language, language policies are central to a MNC’s control, strategy and performance. Although their analysis is limited by the fact that they regard language simply as a dependent variable which can be controlled by management, in their discussion of control, they nonetheless show that ‘Language choice and usage affect information circulation, presentation and interpretation’ (Luo and Shenkar, 2006, p.323). All of these are closely linked to issues of control and strategy, and both are linked to the enactment of power. Here, they contend, ‘The use of appropriate languages at the subunit level helps an MNC establish legitimacy in ... the various local environments in which it operates’ (Luo and Shenkar , 2006, p.323). Conversely, ‘Using a language that members of a given constituency do not master, or one that limits their ability to converse, lowers their information access and hence power within the organisation’ (Luo and Shenkar , 2006, p.323).

 This suggests the issue of language choice and its relation to power is a key factor in recognising the impact of language choices made by managers and companies. It is also discussed, from a non-Anglophone management perspective, by López-Duarte and Vidal-Suárez (2010) with respect to the foreign direct investment strategies of Spanish companies. In their evaluation of the factors influencing company choices in entry mode behaviour López-Duarte and Vidal-Suárez discuss what they call ‘language diversity’ (2010, p.578), pointing out that language differences may not only inhibit communication, but also ‘emerge as a critical point of conflict’ (2010, p.578).They note that the choice of a language must be negotiated and that the ‘functional language then becomes a control mechanism’ (López-Duarte and Vidal-Suárez, 2010, p.576) with the speakers of the functional language coming to dominate sources of information and decision-making.

 Both Luo and Shenkar and López-Duarte and Vidal-Suárez point to the importance of language as source of power, but discuss it at a macro level. Other authors explore the topic at a micro level and discuss its implications for individuals, showing how language skills can distort individual power relationships and normal chains of management in companies (Marschan et al, 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al, 1999). Vaara et al’s (2005) exploration of the linkage between language choice and power uses the concepts of Bourdieu and tools of sociology, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis in its discussion of the implications of the choice of Swedish as a corporate language in a merger between a Finnish and a Swedish bank. This study points to the very severe personal consequences for individuals which are embodied in the language choice of a company. It suggests that: ‘a selection of a particular language will inadvertently create superiority-inferiority relationships between the people belonging or not belonging to the group that shares the language and the culture symbolized by it.’ (Vaara et al, 2005, p.602). In this case the Finns felt excluded by the choice of Swedish. This feeling was heightened by the fact that few Swedes learn Finnish. When some did, it was pointed out that this had great symbolic importance for both parties (Vaara et al, 2005, p.614).

 Vaara et al also touch on the effect of language choice on issues of professional identity construction. The Finns’ relatively weaker language skills in Swedish also meant that they felt disadvantaged in terms of promotion and control of information. Some research suggests that professional skills can compensate for lack of language ability (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). However Vaara et al dispute this in this asymmetrical situation, maintaining that professional skills require highly developed communicative skills. When Swedish was imposed as the language of the merged company one of the Finnish respondents reported: ‘it was a terrible shock ... It was really horrible. It felt like ... half of our professional competence had been taken away when we had to use a language that was not our own native tongue. You felt like an idiot’ (Vaara et al, 2005, p.609). In a similar vein, Harzing and Feely (2008) highlight the problems caused for those weaker in the company language by the loss of rhetorical skills: ‘the use of humour, symbolism, sensitivity, negotiation, persuasion and motivation requires a very high level of fluency. These are skills that are more important in managerial positions than in operational positions’ (p.53). This, they argue, can lead to misunderstanding, uncertainty and anxiety. The affective impact of such disempowerment is put very vividly in some of the few papers which explore English speakers’ reactions to being linguistically disempowered (Park et al, 1996; Lauring, 2008). Park et al’s study of expatriate managers in Korea demonstrates that the Americans’ lack of skills in Korean leads to a ‘sense of peripherality’, which in turn results in ‘frustration and alienation [which] leads to feelings of autistic hostility’ (Park et al, 1996, p.94)

 Alongside the empowering or disempowering function of language choice, identity construction is also the focus of both Harzing and Feely’s (2008) article on MNCs, and Lauring’s (2008) study of Danish expatriate managers in a Danish company in England. Both of these use social identity theory to explore how language impacts on professional identity and status. Lauring’s study aims to establish ‘the role of language as an object of identification when national groups collide in an international business context’ (p.344). His findings are similar to those of Vaara et al. The English speakers feel excluded and believe that they are disadvantaged by not speaking Danish. Communication styles also play a part here, with the Dane’s more direct style coming into conflict with more indirect (British) English usage and contributing to the polarisation of the two groups. Harzing and Feely (2008) also explore feelings of exclusion as a result of the lack of language skills.

 In the situation described by Vaara et al the issue was resolved by the imposition of English, putting both parties at an equal disadvantage. This solution is also suggested by Frederiksson et al (2006). However, when the headquarters language or the language of business partners is English other issues may emerge. The element of negotiation discussed by López-Duarte and Vidal-Suárez (2010) is likely to be missing, since English has now become the default for international business. Further to this, Harzing and Pudelko (2013, p.94) note that: ‘It is clear that language as a source of power is more acutely felt by non-native English speakers when interacting with native English speakers.’ By implication, therefore, native speakers of English have an element of power and control of which they may only be subliminally aware. Studies have also pointed to mono-lingual English speakers’ relatively lesser empathy with and understanding of the issues involved in speaking a language which is not one’s mother tongue and consequent communication problems (Maclean, 2006; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010).

**Communication and conflict management styles**

 The conflicts described above, largely in the context of European business interactions, may be exacerbated by a further factor: differences in communication and conflict management styles between Chinese and Western businessmen. Lauring’s (2008) work has already demonstrated how differing communication styles can lead to conflict between the culturally relatively close Danes and English. The scope for miscommunication and conflict between more culturally distant partners has generally been assumed to be even greater. In order to understand and manage conflict it is necessary to understand both how it might be caused and how your partner might deal with it. The western literature on cultural and communicative difference tends to focus on polarities: whereas Western, Anglo preferences are presented as relatively more attuned to directness and a goal focus, it characterises Chinese communication as being indirect and relationship focused (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1991: for an overview see Dong and Liu, 2010). Chinese studies of Chinese cultural preferences in communication and conflict management do focus on the importance of harmony in Chinese cultural norms (Chen and Starosta, 1997; Chen, 2002; Hazen and Shi, 2009; Tjosvold et al, 2010; Leung at al, 2011). Research has indeed shown that attitudes to harmony and face were the dominant factors in Chinese conflict management and that ‘cultural values lead to a desire to preserve harmony by avoiding conflict and refraining from engaging in argument especially when it involves disagreement’ (Hazen and Shi, 2009, p.75). However, a more nuanced understanding of Chinese attitudes to harmony and conflict management is emerging from more recent work conducted in Hong Kong and China which evidences not the either/or polarities of relationship/goal orientation or harmony/conflict preferences presented in western literature, but a more complicated mode of operation showing elements of both characteristics. Many studies show how Chinese managers can use conflict positively in the service of harmony (Tjosvold et al, 2010; Leung et al, 2011, Fang and Faure, 2011). Chen (2002), Leung et al (2011) and Fang and Faure (2011) espouse a dualist view of the Chinese approach to conflict. Leung et al (2011) characterise the two complementary motives for maintaining harmony as ‘disintegration avoidance’ and ‘harmony enhancement’, which he defines as follows: ‘Disintegration avoidance is a passive approach, concerned with the maintenance of a relationship by minimizing actions and events that may disrupt it. In contrast, harmony enhancement is an active approach concerned with actions and events that will promote the quality of a relationship’ (2011, p.796). In a study in which Australia represented western values and norms, Leung et al showed that the Chinese did indeed score more highly on avoidance than the Australians in their preferred conflict management styles. However, they also established, ‘unexpectedly’, that ‘disintegration avoidance was related positively to dominance for both groups’ but particularly so for the Chinese respondents (2011, p.811). They speculate that such behaviour may have its roots in the greater degree of competition in Chinese society since the economy was opened up, and characterises it as a form of ‘passive aggression’ used to protect self-interest. Their findings also problematize the findings of Western conflict theories, which, they suggest, traditionally associate avoidance with a low concern for one’s own outcome. Leung at al’s findings suggest that within Chinese culture, avoidance may instead be a tactic for preserving one’s interests and may be associated with underlying dominant behaviour.

 Finally, a growing body of work has also challenged the assumption that native English speakers have an inbuilt advantage in international communication, citing, for example their mono-lingualism as a potential factor limiting their empathy with speakers of other languages (Maclean, 2006), and the fact that international business English is now evolving into a code in which native speakers no longer have the defining influence (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2010, Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010). Taken together, all of these factors suggest that the use of English by native speakers in international business may not be entirely unproblematic.

**The study**

 Within the context of these research findings this exploratory study looks at the impact of the imposition of the use of English on international business and finance in China and explores the impact of language difference on interactions between native speakers and non-native speakers of English in a business context, focussing on the reactions of the Mandarin speakers.

 This pilot study consists of a series of semi structured interviews with five Chinese managers who have dealings with native English speakers on a regular basis. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, transcribed and translated by a bi-lingual English and Mandarin speaker. One, A, is a government officer within a Municipal Bureau of Trade and Economic Co-operation. B is the General Manager of an investment and management company headquartered in Los Angeles. C is the Deputy Director of the China branch of a Japanese corporate investment bank. D is the manager of a state owned investment and management corporation. Finally E is the head of the investment and management department of and investment and management consultancy company with its headquarters in America. All of the interviewees conduct business across the world. Company A had contacts ‘in all countries except Africa’. Company C has dealings with thirty countries including the USA and the UK, where its largest European office is based. Company D deals with European and American markets, while company E works with the New York Stock Exchange and NASDAQ.

 Asked about their language use, the results varied. The three Chinese concerns, A, C and D indicated that the main language of business with foreign contacts was English. Of the six employees in the section controlled by the manager in company A, four had degrees from English-speaking countries: two from the UK and one each from the USA and Australia. Company C, although Japanese owned, emphasised the need for good English as a pre-requisite for a career in this business. The manager indicated that even training sessions for employees in Beijing are held in English. Company D uses English in its dealings with both European and American markets: ‘When we communicate with people from this company, our employees per se know English, so we do not have big communication problems.’ However the manager then qualified this general statement, suggesting the use of English is not as all pervasive as it might seem: ‘For our managers, we are usually expert in some aspects of investment business, but may not be good at English. However, this does not affect our international communication, because we have excellent employees who are very good at English, and who are responsible for intercultural communication and handling the issues faced by both sides.’

 Interestingly, the two managers from American owned companies said that most of their colleagues were bilingual. Company A asserted: ‘In some specific circumstances we do talk in English, but Chinese is used more often than English on most occasions.’ The manager later explained that the company recruitment policy was to employ bilingual American-born Chinese in order to facilitate communication. This was also the case in Company E, where Chinese was also spoken with American managers. However, even that was not without problems: ‘Because they are living in America, their Chinese speaking skills are not as good as their English. When they talk, they do it slowly. If we speak Chinese faster they can’t understand.’

 The respondents were asked about the implication of using a particular language. Their comments reflected the findings from the earlier research, identifying the use of Chinese by foreign counterparts as a means of showing respect for their partners. All the companies showed appreciation of foreign companies’ attempts to communicate in Chinese. Company B noted: ‘They are actively learning Chinese in order to communicate with us. Although Chinese is very complicated, we can feel that they are learning with sincerity.’ When asked if these efforts were of practical use, he replied: No, not really. It just makes us feel better.’ He goes on to describe how the international managers were learning and singing Chinese songs at the annual meetings and comments that this will lead to ‘mutual recognition and effective communication.’ Communication here is therefore conceptualised as more than simply speaking the words, but as showing the right attitude to your interlocutors. Whatever the practicalities of speaking Chinese, the willingness of foreign investors to engage with Chinese language and culture is clearly important in terms of face and engaging positively with the hosts. This is echoed by the manager from Company D, who commented that learning the language, even relatively ineffectively, is a means of accessing Chinese culture: ‘As a result it is relatively easier for them to integrate into our culture and interact with us.’ The manager from company A noted that: ‘At national level, foreign investors and foreign government officials are actively seeking opportunities to communicate with China in Chinese.’ These comments illustrate Leung et al’s findings on the importance of harmony enhancement for Chinese managers. They suggest that: ‘achieving genuine harmony requires effortful, engaged behaviour that involved positive actions such as rapport building and affiliation.’ (Leung et al, 2011, p.797). However the wish to have one’s language and culture acknowledged is not confined to China, as is illustrated in Vaara et al’s findings on the significance Finnish employees’ attached to Swedish managers learning Finnish.

 This respondent also appeared to corroborate Leung et al’s assertion that disintegration avoidance, in this case his own willingness to use English, can also be associated with dominant behaviour. He later comments: ‘In big cities like Shanghai and Beijing ... our Chinese side no longer provides interpreters for them.’ This raises the question of whether the drive to learn Chinese is voluntary and arises from business partners’ empathy, or is in fact being driven by growing Chinese confidence and assertiveness.

 Asked about the need to speak English, all accepted that speaking English is a fact of life in international business. This is reflected in Company C’s comments: English is the world language ... so we must have some team members who have excellent English language skills.’ In this company English is used for all routine communication: ‘We use English for our email exchanges, business communication and contracts.’ The rider to this comment: ‘It is difficult for us to change this phenomenon’ suggests that this state of affairs may not be entirely satisfactory and adds weight to the comments above on the relationship between conflict avoidance and dominant behaviour. However, as well as being demanding, speaking English is also a source of status and professional pride for these non-native speakers. As the manager from company A noted:

If you speak English in Japan you will be respected, since Japan pays particular attention to learning English. If an individual from a non-English speaking country speaks English, then Japanese people would assume that this individual received a good education or is to be respected.

Speaking good English is also a key to an international career. Company C noted that: ‘Even if we recruit our staff locally, one key recruiting criterion is that the applicants must be fluent in English.’ In China, Company B recruits on the basis that: Other things being equal, priority is given to those whose English is relatively better.’ Two companies, B and C, note that language proficiency also affects promotion. Company C noted: ‘If you are not good at English ... it is less likely you will get promoted.’

 Conversely, however, poor communication skills may lead to a range of problems. The manager from Company A suggests that general work related communication or discussion of day to day necessities can be relatively problem free but that when conversation turns to specific issues, ‘we may have different understandings.’ He attributes these to cultural factors which are implicit in the communication: ‘We Chinese are deeply rooted in our culture, which informs us how to behave in a specific situation. Equally they have their own cultural beliefs and norms.’ The manager from company C reports that communication is not always clear, in spite of language proficiency, and that managers from English speaking countries often accuse Chinese speakers of ambiguity – ‘actually, there are many examples like this.’ As a result of this danger, both companies B and E report that in spite of the acceptance of the need for foreign languages, and especially English, for complete security, most business people prefer to use their own language, supported by an interpreter where necessary:

There is a big principle for us to follow whenever we have meetings: we must use our mother tongue to give a talk. As far as I know, this principle is used in almost all the Chinese companies doing business in Wall Street and at the London Stock Exchange... This principle makes it possible for a presenter to express his meaning with clarity (Company B).

This problem is most acute, ironically, in company E, where the American managers were largely American-born Chinese, recruited for their communication skills: ‘For example when we speak dialect, our colleagues from America do not understand, even if they speak some Chinese.’ He reports that this can lead to serious issues for the Chinese staff: ‘Such a thing often happens that our American bilingual managers do not understand what we are saying and ask us to repeat what we have just said. The more we repeat, the more nervous we become, the less clear our explanations are.’ Further probing elicited the extent of the problem:

Actually in the past few years, our company has already paid a high price for speaking English at work. At the very beginning, our company stressed that all of the people within the companies need to communicate in English. However, our Chinese speakers do not really understand what our English speakers say. As a result, misunderstanding and confusion often occur, to the extent that they caused delay in our business operations and some of our investments even lost money. Sometimes our Chinese speakers did not follow what was said and even did something different. Gradually, our American top management team have given up the idea of using English as the only working language and use Chinese as an additional language.

The personal as well as the business costs of this miscommunication are clear. As already discussed, English skills are interpreted by many Chinese business people as a marker of status and international capabilities. For the representative of Company C, face can be gained by using English well: ‘speaking excellent English in our bank is directly related to the issue of ‘face’. For us, excellent English speakers usually hold very high positions in the bank. We speak English sometimes just for the sake of ‘face’. Sometimes we even deliberately speak English just for this.’

 Conversely, therefore, communication failure can lead to serious loss of face. The manager from company E discussed this in his interview and specifically linked the issues of face, power and language use in his interview:

The Americans are after all our bosses and our superiors. We are inferiors and so we have no choice but to obey to what our bosses say. Because we are in this kind of superior and inferior relationship, it is inescapable that sometimes conflicts occur. For example, if the Americans do not understand us, they may ask us to repeat. But sometimes, our Chinese staff feel that we are working very hard and express everything clearly, or alternatively sometimes, we are not in a good mood and don’t want to talk too much. This phenomenon is very common. Consequently, this has caused many problems in communication that our Chinese staff feel that we have no face at all. Especially our American management team members sometimes ask us to clarify one specific issue for several times, we feel that we have lost our face completely. This experience is very, very bad.

The impact of a manager’s language skills on his professional confidence and self perception was also alluded to by the interviewee from company C:

The disadvantage is that if our English is not good enough, this will lead to many problems like self-doubt or communication break-down etc. I remember once one of my middle-level Chinese managers got promoted. In his first only ten-minute presentation, he asked us about ten times ‘do you understand what I mean?’ which made us all laugh. One of our senior managers even jokily said: ‘I don’t think what you said is THAT hard to understand.’ So he doubted himself a lot.

It appears therefore that the use of English, although accepted as a fact of life, nonetheless caused a number of problems for the Chinese managers. When asked about the impact of cultural difference, on the other hand, which has traditionally been the focus of the Anglophone literature, there was far less concern. Asked about the evidence in the literature which suggests that Chinese communication styles are more indirect whereas western businesses tend to be more direct and task focused, the interviewee from company A stated that since joining the World Trade Organization, Chinese business has become far more attuned to other cultural norms:

This difference did exist over a decade ago, but it is not a case now. Since China joined the World Trade organization 10 years ago, we have drawn many lessons from what we underwent. Now we strictly abide by regulations and international practice and the way we use language is also changing. This was confirmed by the respondent from company B, who related an anecdote about his own cultural learning:

From day one I experienced a lot of cultural differences in communication. For example, when writing an email, we Chinese start with a very indirect beginning by saying something like ‘I have finished what you have asked me to do, your comments please’. This is not acceptable according to American way of writing. My American CEO always told me to be direct and topic-focused. Now, my email is very simple and direct.

**Discussion**

 In spite of these accommodations to international, or American, business norms the potential for conflict and instances of actual, if hidden, conflict between native English speakers and English-speaking Mandarin speakers is clear. While accepting the need to speak English, and indeed embracing it as a symbol of their internationalism, all the respondents also spoke of their need to speak Mandarin at key events, of a need for the willingness of both parties to expose themselves to the difficulties of speaking in a second language and of a need for a reciprocal understanding of cultural norms and practices. An underlying thread in the interviews was the sense that if such reciprocal behaviour is not forthcoming, it will be imposed by a unilateral refusal to speak English. In their 2013 study of the language practices of MNCs across the globe Harzing and Pudelko comment

In subsidiaries of Asian companies, Asian languages are spoken more frequently both between locals and expatriates and between local and HQ managers. This can be interpreted as an indication of a relative high degree of ethnocentrism in Asian MNCs. (2013, p.95).

Later they establish that of those Asian companies which have adopted a corporate language, 70% of them chose the language of their HQ, and repeat: ‘In our view, this can be interpreted as a further strong indicator of a high degree of linguistic ethnocentrism of Asian MNCs’ (Harzing and Pudelko, 2013, p.95). The same comments are not applied to Anglophone companies, although it established that 91.4% of interactions in the Anglophone companies they surveyed were conducted in English (p. 92). Given the current shift in global power balances, one wonders how long such linguistic power imbalances will continue unchallenged.

 In spite of the very small scale of this current study, some implications for Anglophone managers interacting with Chinese partners are already clear. While the Mandarin speaking partners may speak English, and may well perceive this skill as a source of professional and personal pride, particularly perhaps in interactions with non-native speakers such as the Japanese, this does not absolve English speaking managers from the need to reciprocate by learning some Chinese and engaging in their hosts’ cultural practices. In addition, insisting on the use of English potentially exposes the Mandarin-speaking partner to loss of face from which the English speaker is immune. Furthermore, an assumption that our partner will engage with you in a second language while you speak your mother tongue has power implications which may not be immediately apparent, particularly in the context of English/Mandarin interactions, but which may distort the relationship and cause hidden resentment which may emerge in other ways. Finally, the consensus on Chinese communication styles in the traditional Anglophone literature, which still dominates business practice, may be overly simplistic at best, or at worst downright misleading. The emphasis on the importance of maintaining harmony in professional partnerships may conceal what Leung at al call ‘passive aggressive’ behaviour designed to further Chinese partners’ priorities (2011, p.811), part of which may include covert tactics to promote the use of Mandarin. English speaking managers dealing with Chinese partners may do well to consider that in this context, language use itself can be seen the message, as well as the medium of communication.

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