

# Corporate Language Policies – What Are They

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**Abstract**—This paper offers a review of literature dealing with language policies in general and corporate language policies in particular. Based on a discussion of various definitions of these concepts within two research traditions, i.e. sociolinguistics and international management, a three-level definition of corporate language policies is presented, emphasising that a corporate language policy is a context-specific policy about language use. The three-level definition is based on the argument that in order to acquire a complete understanding of what corporate language policies involve, one needs to consider three progressive questions; 1) what is a policy? 2) what is a language policy?, and ultimately, 3) what is a corporate language policy?

**Index Terms**—Corporate language policies, communication management, organisational communication, international business.

## I. INTRODUCTION

One challenge many companies face in an increasingly international market place is the question of how to communicate through a multitude of languages. Some companies choose to address the issue through corporate language policies, for example by adopting a common corporate language for the entire organisation. To give an example; in Denmark, a small and relatively homogenous northern European country where the national language Danish is spoken by approximately five million people, the Confederation of Danish Industry estimates that as many as 25 % of all Danish companies have chosen to implement English lingua franca policies. These companies have, in other words, chosen to run their business in English in a country where English is not an official language [1].

Clearly, corporate language policies have a very practical side to them, especially for those employees who will have to perform their work in a different language than that of their mother tongue. But what do researchers really know about this phenomenon? Based on what previous studies have shown, is it possible to provide any recommendations to corporate policy makers who are the ones developing these language policies?

These are some of the questions this review paper – which is a review of previous theoretical contributions on language policies, with a particular focus on corporate language policies – will seek to answer. The purpose of this paper is first of all to investigate how language policies, and corporate language policies in particular, are defined in the literature. After presenting a summary of definitions found in the sociolinguistic literature and the business and management

literature, I will advocate my own conceptualisation of the term “corporate language policies”, presented as a three-level definition.

## II. DEFINING CORPORATE LANGUAGE POLICIES

### A. The History behind Language Policies

Corporate language policies are by definition an interdisciplinary phenomenon. We are dealing with the regulation of language use in a corporate context, i.e. what we are interested in is in fact a sociolinguistic event which takes place within an arena typically dominated by business and management scholars. A complete and accurate understanding of corporate language policies requires insight and knowledge of these two disciplines in general, in order to comprehend what this multifaceted concept really entails, as it is located in the intersection between two very different scholarly traditions.

The study of language in business and management research has gained an increasing amount of attention in recent years, but must still be considered a relatively new area of interest in this field. The work of the international management researchers Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, and Welch [2], Welch, Welch and Piekkari [3], and Feely and Harzing [4] in the late 1990s and early 2000s are often referred to as pioneering studies in the management discipline. Over the past 25 years language has become an increasingly important variable in international management as MNCs are becoming more reciprocal and multilateral in their global exchanges [5]. Over the same period of time, it is worth pointing out that the number of truly multinational or transnational corporations has grown substantially. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that in 1982 transnational corporations employed approximately a little under 20 million persons worldwide. In 2008, the number had risen to approximately 77 million, which represents almost a fourfold increase [6].

Some scholars (e.g. Brannen & Doz [7], 2012; Dhir, 2005 [8]) also argue in favour of a shift towards a more knowledge-based economy, where language and communication to a greater extent are seen as commodities by being the vehicles of information exchange. Information-driven organisations sell knowledge as their product, Dhir [9] argues. Consequently, there will be low costs associated with increasing sales volumes, but the language of communication may turn out to become an important cost factor in a global, linguistically diverse market. These two general tendencies combined, i.e. increased globalisation and more focus on knowledge-based products, in addition to other societal changes such as worker mobility, use of expatriation/inpatriation, etc., mean that a large

number of companies are faced with having a linguistically heterogeneous workforce. These employees must find a way to communicate and collaborate despite their language differences, and management scholars have recently taken a greater interest in how this can be facilitated in the most effective way [10].

However, language planning and policy (LPP) within the sociolinguistic tradition has been recognised as an independent topic for about 50 years now. It was initially brought into the sociolinguistic debate in connection with the decline of the colonial system and the corresponding need to develop national language policies for newly independent post-colonial states [11]. Many of the early language planning studies were motivated by the break-up of former European colonies following WWII and the handling of linguistic diversity within these new nations. In the course of time, scholars realise that the language-related problems faced by developing countries were far from peculiar to these regions, but rather widely applicable also in other multilingual countries [12]. Today, scholars working within the sociolinguistic LLP framework are concerned with language questions in a wide variety of domains, including e.g. nation states, schools, international organisations, and also business entities.

### *B. Definitions and Concept Clarifications*

A number of linguistics and management scholars have tried to define and conceptualise language policies in general and in later years corporate language policies in particular. A simple definition of language policy can be found in the purpose it is intended to serve; a language policy is a plan, i.e. laws, regulations, rules and pronouncements or statements of intent about language use [13]. Reality, however, is never that easy. One of the most frequently cited scholars within the sociolinguistic research stream, Spolsky [14], argues that language policy as a generic concept consists of three interrelated components of language use, namely language practices, language beliefs and language management decisions. Firstly, within a multilingual community or domain, the language practices of the community members will refer to the habitual patterns associated with their linguistic repertoire, i.e. what languages they tend to speak in what situations. Secondly, language beliefs are seen as the values or statuses assigned to the different languages, also called ideologies, i.e. are one or more languages seen as more prestigious than the other/s? Thirdly, the final component called language management is meant to conceptualise explicit and observable efforts made by someone or some group that either has or claims authority to control the language use of others in the community [15].

Spolsky advocates this complex language policy model by stating that when studying language policies, we are usually trying to understand how non-linguistic variables interact with linguistic variables [15]. Consequently, it is necessary to recognise the surrounding factors which may affect the design and implementation of language policies, irrespective of what kind of language domain we are investigating. The various domains may operate under very different language policies, as a domain is distinguished by its participants, location and topic of conversation [16].

Spolsky is not the only one who emphasises the need to acknowledge the environment in which language policies are designed and implemented. Cooper [17], drawing on Karam [18], observes that language planning initiatives usually are carried out in order to attain non-linguistic goals. In almost all cases the language issue will be directly related to the political, economic, scientific, social, cultural, and/or religious situation of the community. Ricento [19] is in agreement with this when he writes that debates concerning language policy always are about more than the language in question. Consequently, sociolinguists may benefit from insights from theories developed outside the sociolinguistic universe, e.g. political, economic or social theories, to help explain what is at stake, why this is of importance, and what effects the language policy might have on other societal debates.

Wright [20] appears to think along the same lines when she states that successful language policy initiatives in the past always have been developed in accordance with other social phenomena. In the nation state, for example, changes in the political landscape will inevitably have linguistic consequences, Wright observes, by referring to that the national system historically has had an immense effect on language related issues. The “one nation – one language” ideology which classical language planning models were influenced by serve as a good example of this [21].

At this point it can be useful to make a distinction between the two interrelated terms “language policy” and “language planning”, which are frequently used as a coherent concept in the sociolinguistic literature, i.e. “language policy and planning”. Kaplan and Baldauf [22] observe that a language policy represents the laws, regulations, rules, practices, or body of ideas intended to achieve a planned language change in a society, group, or system. In short measures, a language policy basically means determining which language should be used in which domains [23]. This description lies close to Spolsky’s [24] statement that a language policy is all about choice. The term language planning on the other hand is seen by Kaplan and Baldauf as the implementation of the language policy across the domains of language use which the policy is addressing. The language planning initiative is directed by, or leads to, the formulation of a language policy, developed by the government or another authoritative body. It is worth pointing out that the term language planning usually refers to language management activities undertaken by the government or taking place in a specific community, which is also the case in Kaplan and Baldauf’s model. Whereas language policy and planning in the sociolinguistic literature refer to interconnected aspects of language regulation, the term language planning is virtually non-existent in the management literature.

Yet, over the last two decades the notion of language policies as a generic concept has gained scholarly attention also in the management camp. Whereas a language policy in the sociolinguistic literature can refer to the language policy or planning activities in virtually any domain (Spolsky [25] for example investigates language management practices in everything from schools to the health sector), the scope of a corporate language policy is by definition much narrower. These types of language policies are developed for business

entities, usually by business managers or communication professionals in the company the policy is intended for. Simonsen [26] draws a distinction between three levels of secondly, the national level, where one would place the language policies of nation states; and third and finally, the organisational level, which also includes corporate language policies as well as the policies developed by other non-profit organisations.

Management scholars Kangasharju, Piekkari and Säänti [27] define language policies in fairly broad terms when stating that the concept may refer to both everyday language practices and more abstract principles related to language use. Within the corporate context, the authors use the concept to refer to general guidelines and practical procedures for improving and harmonising internal and external communication “which the management of an organisation or another responsible party has presented in a written form”.

According to Bergenholtz and Johnsen [28], a language policy can be defined as the deliberate control of language related matters. More specifically, a language policy in the words of these authors concerns the relationship between a language or languages on the one hand, so called interlingual relations, and issues specific to the language or languages on the other hand, so called intralingual matters. Bergenholtz and Johnsen observe that an increasing number of organisations have chosen to formulate language or communication policies, although the relationship between these two types of policies remains unclear. The authors state that “A general communication policy involves the deliberate control of an organisation’s internal and external communication in order to ensure the optimal functionality of the organisation, including product development and sales”, and furthermore “Unlike language policy, which solely concerns outgoing communication, communication policy may also address the issue of incoming communication.” These statements indicate that the communication policy is seen as a wider concept than the language policy. Bergenholtz and Johnsen go so far as to say that a language policy may be presented as part of the communication policy, although it is not a precondition to have a communication policy in order to have a language policy. Even if these two policies lie very close to each other, they both serve specific purposes and should therefore be seen as supplements to one another, Bergenholtz and Johnsen conclude.

Thomas [29] argues that language policies in corporations often are developed to address language needs, for example when the management of a firm implements a common corporate language to encourage employees to work in the same language. This author notes that linguistic diversity can represent both a resource and a barrier, as having foreign language skills can be seen as advantageous when these are utilised to enhance the strategic advantage of the firm e.g. in foreign locations, but disadvantageous if linguistic heterogeneity limits the firms operations. The use of a subsidiary language for example, given that the subsidiary is located in a country with a national language different to that of the headquarter location, may improve access to the foreign market, but it may also result in communication problems between locally employed employees and expatriates. Often then, companies choose to develop

language policy; firstly, the supra-national level, which would include the language policy of e.g. the EU or the UN;

corporate language policies based primarily on pragmatic considerations, balancing the costs and benefits associated with different language policy options against each other.

What this discussion has demonstrated so far is that there are some similarities and some differences in the way language policies are conceptualised in the sociolinguistic literature vs. the international management literature. In both research traditions the term language policy in its widest sense is used to refer to some type of control over someone else’s language use. The topic of investigation is in other words fairly similar, although the framing and level of analysis is somewhat different. In the selection of papers considered for this review, research drawing on sociolinguistic theories tends to emphasise the exercise and enforcement of language policies in the societal context in which they are implemented. Within the management tradition, the surrounding environment is taken more or less for granted, as language policies developed in the corporate world from the outset will be targeted towards language use in the context it is intended to regulate, i.e. the particular company the policy is designed for.

Put in other words; theories of language policies coming from the sociolinguistic framework tend to be more generic and wider in applicability than theories of corporate language policies, which address language policies specifically in the business context.

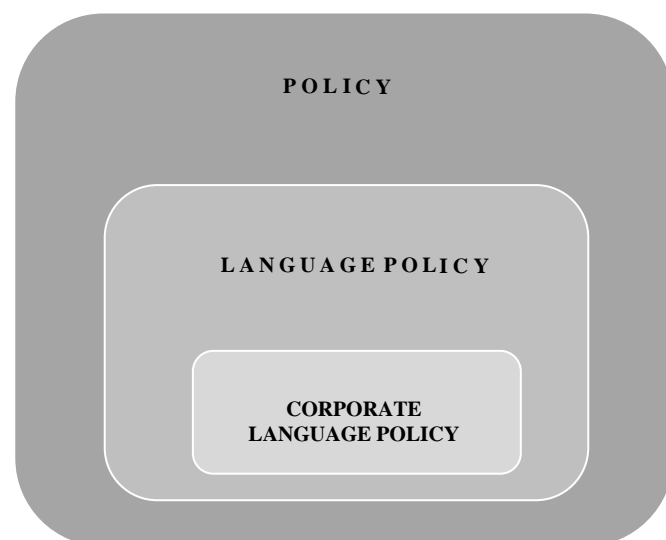


Fig. 1. A three level definition of corporate language policies.

### III. A THREE LEVEL DEFINITION OF CORPORATE LANGUAGE POLICIES

At this stage of the discussion I believe it may be useful to start over and return to the basics for a moment. When coming to grips with the concept of corporate language policy, the very first thing worth pointing out is that the term in fact is a combination of three words; “corporate”, “language”, and “policy”. This may seem like a superfluous observation, however, to give an accurate description of what corporate language policies actually entail, one does in fact

have to consider the following three progressive questions; (1) what is a policy?, (2) what is a language policy?, and ultimately, (3) what is a corporate language policy?

In other words, a complete definition of corporate language policies can be seen as a three-level definition consisting of the following layers illustrated in Fig. 1.

By following the logics of deductive reasoning I will now try to present my own definition of corporate language policies, as I interpret the concept within this three level framework:

#### A. What Is a Policy

Firstly, the term policy is a fairly broad concept which can be used in several different arenas and for several different purposes. One could for example use the term to refer to public policies in a national context, i.e. formalised and declared objectives that a government or public authority seeks to achieve and preserve in the interest of the greater community or certain groups within the community [30]. In an organisational context, the term policy can be defined as a set of guiding principles used to indicate the course of direction for the organisation in question [31]. A policy in generic terms, irrespective of the domain in which it is implemented, can in other words be understood as a type of plan, a statement of intent, or more formalised rules and/or regulations within a certain topical area.

#### B. What Is a Language Policy

The earlier discussion has demonstrated that one can find a large number of language policy definitions in the literature. There is no need to question that a language policy is a policy about language use, usually about the language use of others as determined by the language policy maker(s). However, what often is lacking from these definitions is a clear conceptualisation about the policy aspect of language policies. Some key questions could for example be: What kind of policies are we talking about, i.e. how formalised are they? Are we looking at loosely defined guidelines or rigid language laws? Who are the decision-makers and the authorities in charge? And ultimately, who are the policies targeted towards, and with what intended effect? It is exactly for this reason that it can be useful to emphasise once again that a language policy can be conceived as a policy as good as any other policy. Put differently; in order to give an accurate description of language policies as they unfold in real-life, one must also understand and convey the baggage that comes with the denotation "policy".

#### C. What Is a Corporate Language Policy

Just like language policies in general, it is also possible to find several definitions of corporate language policies in previous theoretical contributions. As already stated, corporate language policies are the type of language policies that are developed specifically for a business organisation or a unit within an organisation, for example the language policy of the customer service department of a company [32]. This is where the outline in Fig. 1 really comes to its right, as the three-level corporate language policy framework is intended to explain the formation of corporate language policies as one type of language policy, which again is seen as one type of policy. Just as corporations develop language

policies for how and in what language employees should communicate with each other, other institutions such as schools may have educational language policies for their language of instruction, e.g. English-medium schools in non-native English speaking countries, which can be related back to the sociolinguistic concept of "domains" [33]. But what makes corporate language policies stand out from language policies in general, is that the corporate language policy is a context-specific language policy; it is a policy about language use in a corporation.

### IV. SUMMING UP

This review paper has tried to investigate and analyse previously published material on the topic of language policies, and specifically corporate language policies. Considering the importance of efficient communication for successful collaboration and productivity, especially in multinational companies where employees must find a way to communicate despite their different language backgrounds, a company's approach to language may be a more strategically important decision than one might initially think. One of the main motivations for writing this paper has been to describe and clarify how language policies are defined within two research traditions, i.e. sociolinguistics and international management. The outcome of this theoretically founded discussion is an attempt to conceptualise corporate language policies, which are presented in the form of a three-level definition, emphasising the need to acknowledge each component of what makes a corporate language policy just that. The three-level definition is based on the argument that in order to fully grasp what corporate language regulation entails, one needs to consider three progressive questions; (1) what is a policy?, (2) what is a language policy?, and ultimately, (3) what is a corporate language policy?

Knowledge and understanding of the complex dynamic inter-play between language and other organisational issues is fundamental for the development of efficient language policies. Achieving successful language policy outcomes can turn out to be somewhat of a challenge if one is unaware of the fact that these policies in some cases may cause more problems than they solve. Fortunately, corporate language policy makers can learn a lot from previous studies that have investigated the role and effect of different types of language regulation in real-life organisations [34].

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