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The Role of Human Resource Management in Language Policies for Multilingual SMEs

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Even though we can observe the famous linguistic turn in the social and economic sciences, the mutual understanding of scientific results in management studies and linguistics remains rather limited. Having found a common research topic, i.e. language policies in organisations, researchers are still lacking concepts that explain and overcome the contradictions between an explicit and an implicit language policy and actual language practices in the world of work. Consequently, social multilingualism often becomes an illusion in business contexts, at least if the linguistic competences of the employees or the existence of “smaller” vehicular languages (Spanish, French, Italian, Russian) are taken into account. Instead, companies tend to favour explicitly monolingualism (only the official language of the country) or bilingualism (adding English as dominant lingua franca). In this way, not all of the employees’ linguistic competences are used and companies might miss out on competitive advantages. Furthermore, the identity-related needs of the employees might be overlooked.

To meet the challenge of multilingualism in enterprises, findings from human resource management (HRM) research can help to design an organisational language policy consistently, as implicit language policy often translates into HRM instruments. In addition, overall goals of HRM are, firstly, to balance organisational (e.g. an effective communication) and individual interests (e.g. the respect of linguistic rights) and, secondly, to provide instruments that systematically align all HRM functions with each other. This presentation therefore aims to propose an integrative approach to organisational language policy and HRM especially for SMEs, which integrates linguistic aspects into all HRM functions. Until now, studies in the field usually limit themselves to recruitment and to language training, whereas compensation, career and performance management, mostly, are excluded from reflections about linguistic competences in the business context. Moreover, in management studies, language policies are generally investigated only in the context of large multinational companies.

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Susanne Lesk holds Master degrees in International Business Administration from the WU Vienna and in Romance Languages from the University of Vienna. At WU, she has been university lecturer at the Institute for Human Resource Management since 1998 and is currently engaged in a research project (Third Language Learning Tandem-Skype / L3-TASK) at the Institute for Romance Languages. Within the project, she conducts an empirical study on language needs in companies. Her research interests include sociolinguistics, language policy, language and business and human resource management and embodiment. In her doctoral thesis (work in progress) she explores language policies in organisations in bilingual regions in Austria, Switzerland and France.