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English matters in multinational corporations: the multifaceted notion of corporate language

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There is no doubt about the key role of English in the globalization and technologization of today's business: it matters! English is the language which is predominantly selected as the corporate language in multinational corporations to enable their operations across linguistic and cultural borders. However, a question remains: what exactly does this role of English as corporate language entail and what kind of English 'matters'?

The role of English has been on the research agenda of both applied linguists and international management scholars. Applied linguists are interested in the actual interactions between individual employees of multinational corporations using English, or rather BELF (Business ELF), in their work, whereas international management scholars approach the language issue from a managerial perspective. In other words, they are attracted by such questions as how can a multilingual corporation be managed and how can the understanding, sharing and implementation of corporate strategy be ensured among the multilingual work force.

Not surprisingly, the conceptualizations of 'English' as corporate language can be very different. On the one hand, 'English' is viewed as a linguistic system comparable to Finnish, Swedish or Russian. On the other hand, it is viewed as a resource that can be drawn upon in interactions between speakers of different mother tongues.

This paper will discuss how English matters in the everyday operations of multinational corporations and how research has conceptualized the multifaceted notion of corporate language. Finally, it will present some practical implications for the teaching of 'English' in business schools.

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