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Toward understanding multinational companies'
practices of multilingualism and cultural diversity**

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‘In a corporate environment,
we need to be inclusive’
Toward understanding multinational
companies’ practices of
multilingualism and cultural diversity

Anthropological case study of
a South Asian MNC in Budapest



ABOUT THE PROJECT

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'IN A CORPORATE ENVIRONMENT, WE NEED TO BE INCLUSIVE'

TOWARD UNDERSTANDING MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES' PRACTICES OF
MULTILINGUALISM AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Zsuzsa Arendas

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present study is to give a qualitative research-based understanding of multilingual practices of a multinational company (MNC) located in the Central Eastern European region, in Budapest. The paper starts with analyzing the use of different languages, various company level practices of multilingualism, and opens up to wider issues related to everyday cultural practices related to cultural diversity of employees of such MNCs. Some of the literature in international management and business communication problematizes the questions of common corporate language used in such MNC environments (Barner- Rasmussen 2003). Others focus on the interplay between different languages, examining the discrepancies between corporate language policies and daily practices between employees (Barner- Rasmussen 2003, Marschan-Piekkari et al 1999). The later draw attention to the fact that often common company language (as a policy) may not be as widely shared among employees as desired; there could be important differences in language proficiency of different employees. In the last decades, several MNCs adopted English language, as an in-house common language, a *lingua franca*, to enhance communication within the company. This was especially important because of the foreign subsidiaries located at different parts of the world. (Feely 2003, Marschan- Piekkari et al 1999, Nickerson 2000). However, introduction of English as a common language may not lead directly to unproblematic communication due to the complex nature of communication itself. Fluency of speakers may vary; they may also speak other languages alongside English, using them in parallel to English during their daily work (Barner- Rasmussen 2003, Marschan- Piekkari et al 1999, Nickerson 2000, Pocini 2003, Sorensen 2005). “Multilingual reality” is a more realistic term to describe daily practices of language use and linguistic diversity at a company (Charles 1998). As some authors, studying communication of companies (MNCs) with headquarters and subsidiary units at different locations, state, they operate at the interface between several languages including the language of host country and home country, corporate language and “company speak” (Nickersson 2005). Studying MNC language and communication in this study includes studying attitudes towards and management of cultural heterogeneities and ethnic diversities. This approach broadens earlier interest in MNC practices regarding different language uses by stating that languages are embedded in specific cultural environments and relevant social contexts, thus analyzing the latter provides a better understanding of the complex socio-cultural processes of the daily realities of MNCs in Hungary or elsewhere.

This paper tries to problematize the issue of corporate language (English) and use of other languages (both for business and private purposes) in the company environment, and examines the role of culture and the place of cultural practices in successful/partly successful/ failed situations of corporate communication. From the field data it appears that the domestic/ Hungarian workforce shows stronger and clearer signs of linguistic nationalism, though others come to work to this company exactly for its diversity. Some of the interviewees understand diversity and multiculturalism as not something given or granted, but rather as something which needs to be ‘built’ both on individual and company-level. They also believe that this company excels in nourishing such values, integrating them into its work culture.

THE SOCIAL-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MULTILINGUALISM AT INSTITUTIONAL AND MNC LEVEL

The use of Hungarian and German languages was part of the state institutional culture during the interwar period, as a direct heritage from the times of the Monarchy. After the communist takeover, the German language lost its earlier role after 1948, and the status of other minority languages (Slovak, Croat, Serb, Romani) has not been thoroughly addressed for decades due to the ‘sensitivity’ of the ethnic minority question in the East European region. After 1989, the whole discourse on the nation-state and the national minorities has re-emerged in public discourses, e.g. Hungary became very vocal and political regarding its co-ethnics abroad. As part of this renewed interest and discourse, the question of Hungary’s minorities needed to be addressed. Accordingly, the *1993 law on national minorities*¹ dealt with their legal status (among others, language use, schooling, minority self-governments), although by the late 1980’s, large segments of linguistic minorities in Hungary underwent a massive state-assimilation.

After 1989, foreign companies, MNCs invested in the country, often with major need for people with knowledge of foreign languages like English and German. A whole new sector of language education was established in the form of private language schools, following this sudden mass demand of the job-market. Twenty-five years after the political-economic changes, a new generation of the workforce entered the job market, typically people with higher qualifications (diplomas) able to speak English and/ or German, and in some cases other European languages. It is also worth noting that Hungary continues to be a dominantly monolingual country, large segments of the population above 40 years of age speak no foreign languages or only with difficulties, and most importantly basic attitudes towards foreign languages have not changed dramatically since the regime change. This is also reflected in the statistics, according to which, 16% of the population speaks English, 11.2% German, and a few per cent other large European languages.

According to the *Special Eurobarometer 386 ‘Europeans and their languages’* (2012)² report, countries where respondents are *least likely* to be able to speak any foreign language include *Hungary* (65%) on the top section of this negative list of European countries. In contrast, the proportion of population able to speak at least one foreign language has decreased notably in Hungary, namely to 35%. Regarding professional, e.g. employees of managerial level, studies indicate that they may speak English/German at various levels and with different competencies. According to the Human Resource Foundation (HEA), language skills in general are not very good in Hungary, but those who speak a foreign language speak it with a high level of proficiency. This may indicate that the spread of foreign languages is very uneven in Hungary, many people don’t speak any foreign language at all; on the other hand, many of those who speak foreign languages speak them well. Another contrast to the poor

1 Nemzetiségi és etnikai kisebbségek jogairól szóló törvény.(Law on the rights of ethnic and national minorities) (1993)

2 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_386_en.pdf

foreign language performance of the majority of Hungarians is that those who speak foreign languages speak different ones, and many of them; in other words, the number of foreign languages spoken is high in Hungary. This is apparently one of the reasons why language-based consultancy service companies prefer this country, as our research material suggests.

According to the results of LINEE research project³, when examining linguistic diversity and communication in parent and daughter companies of large MNCs in Hungary, the investigation revealed that the language-use of the parent companies was 'project-based and dynamic, rather than representing a general approach toward to all their daughter companies or subsidiaries' (Linee 2009: 8). They recalled the example of German companies where it was assumed that people in CEE often speak German, that's why German/ and or English language use was accepted, unlike in other regions, such as Asia. The Linee research also revealed that most of the large companies had an official corporate language, but when employees were directly asked about it, they could very rarely articulate where and how this fact is recorded. Rather, they often referred to the use of one and only common language as a 'commonsensical' issue.

RESEARCH METHODS AND SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

The fieldwork took place between June 2015 and October 2015 by using qualitative interviews with employees of the company. Altogether 15 interviews have been carried out, out of which 10 were semi-structured interviews, recorded on company premises in the form of one-to-one interviews. The other five were informal interviews with company employees in various situations outside of the company premises. Interviewees belong to different levels of company hierarchy and various departments. Among them there were senior managers, managers, team leaders, and employees, HR personnel, trainees, IT experts and language experts. Most of the interviewees fell in the age category of 25-40, except for one senior manager. The majority of the interviews was conducted in English, except three cases, with a German-Hungarian manager, descendant of former Hungarian immigrants in Germany, a Russian team-leader, married to a Hungarian and speaking excellent Hungarian, and a Hungarian local employee of the company.

Hungary is a country based on the nation-state model, and linguistic nationalism is an integral part of the populist political thinking.⁴ Furthermore, Hungarians' attitude towards foreign languages has not improved over the years since the change of political regime in 1989, on the contrary, it seems that still a very low proportion of the Hungarian population speaks foreign languages or has positive attitudes towards foreign languages (see the statistical references earlier in this paper). This is in stark contrast with the increasing numbers in outgoing work-related migration of Hungarians, or the demands of the local job market, where positions on the higher levels of company hierarchy always require firm knowledge of at least one global language.

3 *Linee- Languages in a network of European Excellence*. (Thematic Area D- Language and Economy, area research report). Jiri Nekvapil, 2009. 12.10.

4 For instance, the Hungarian state invests significant amounts to support Hungarian minority communities outside the borders of Hungary to maintain their linguistic status quo and exercise their language rights (e.g. in form of minority language schools).

At the studied company, a South Asia-specific attitude to foreign languages and cultures defines the company norms. Cultural diversity is a rule, even if English language as a global language plays a lead role. Due to business reasons, other languages also have an important role in communication with business clients. A specific South Asian post-colonial approach to English and some other foreign languages⁵ (where English figures as a closely familiar or domestic language) meets attitudes of Hungarians and speakers of other European languages towards foreign languages in general.

MNC APPROACHES TO LANGUAGES

The studied company is a South Asian MNC, active in IT services, business solutions and outsourcing organization, being one of the largest business conglomerates of its country of origin. The company has over 160,000 consultants based in around 42 countries. It started its operations in Hungary in 2001 and currently has more than 1300 employees providing services to over 40 companies. Its employees working in the Budapest office, the place where the fieldwork for this paper took place, often emphasize their company’s diversity in culture, training, and knowledge. They are active in the field of BPO (Business Process Outsourcing), providing opportunities for potential employees (typically graduates) who speak several languages. Their IT Helpdesk provides customer service support in several languages for both global and European clients.

The Budapest service center of the company has *employees of 52 nationalities (globally 115 nationalities), who speak 34 different languages (globally 40-45 languages)*. Out of the 1300 employees in Budapest, *38% are foreign (non-Hungarian) nationals*. Every employee in the Budapest office speaks English, the common language of the company used for internal communication, and one more European language, which is used for business purposes. Regarding the level or proficiency in these languages, according to the general requirements, the level of English should be good/fluent enough to communicate both verbally and orally within the company (and occasionally with clients too, e.g. to India), and the European language proficiency should be very high/ excellent, as that is the language used with third parties (clients).

Budapest employees of the company are usually recruited through three different channels: from the Hungarian job market, from other companies with similar business profiles, through the global student organization AIESEC⁶, and from Hungarian job market.

AIESEC international student organization is represented by an intern working as a coordinator at the company’s Budapest office due to the volume and importance of the internship program between the company’s Budapest office and AIESEC. During the fieldwork, the AIESEC coordinator was in charge of 56 people and the numbers were expected to grow to 70 soon. According to the information provided by the coordinator, interns work for a year at this company within the internship program, and at the end of the year, they can become regularized by the company’s Budapest office. According

5 At the studied company, the home country of the company had a close contact with English, Dutch, Portuguese, French colonizers for a long period. The cultural and linguistic traces of the colonization still exist in the region, and in most of the cases feed into positive attitudes of the locals towards foreign languages, culture, and not in the last place, pride in a multicultural heritage and history.

6 <http://aiesec.org/>

to the annual statistics, 15-25% of the newly joined employees come through the AIESEC program. Interestingly, the coordinator is also responsible for coordinating the induction seminars for newcomers at the company (including AIESEC recruits), including seminars on multicultural workplace.

MNC APPROACHES TO MULTILINGUALISM

At the studied South Asian company, the official language is English, both in Budapest and in other European centres, with the exception of some South American office locations, where the official language is Spanish. The Budapest office has no direct communication with South America, thus the issue of language compatibility does not come up in daily practice. Our interviewees could not point to a single document which would specify the central role of English, and instead referred to it as a general practice. According to our observations, this general practice of the lead role of English is further supported by selection process, including an important section on English language competencies. All candidates for any company position are expected to speak English. This is assessed by a local language school from Budapest, using their own assessment methods (Berlitz scale). The expectations for the level of English for employees are of two types: those who use English for internal communication (both written and spoken) within the company, are expected to have a good, solid level of English, but not necessarily an excellent or an outstanding grip over the language ('they should be able to communicate' say most of the interviewees). For those employees, who are expected to use English as a language of business, with customers, their linguistic competence needs to be high. Most of the Budapest employees of this company are hired on the basis of another European (or other) language, which they use in services provided to the company's customers (in the form of IT support, or other types of services).

Due to the common understanding that the medium of communication in this company is English, all formal, written communication takes place in English including documents related to company administration and communication between employees and with business partners. However, in some instances communication with customers also takes places in other languages. In addition, despite English being the common language used within the company, low-level communication takes place in the local language too between local employees– in case of Hungary, between the Hungarian employees. This typically includes email communication, internal chat messages between employees sharing the same language outside the general sphere of English. These informal language uses are *tolerated* by the management to the extent they do not interfere with the flow of information on a higher, only English-speaking level. In latter cases, conflicts may occur from the presence of the local language in chain of information:

'I have personally seen email communication between Hungarian employees in Hungarian being forwarded to me with an English translation with an explanation what has been said or happening.' (senior manager from the company's Budapest office)

The interviewed manager admits that *'such an email is totally based on the relationship between two individuals, if they feel more comfortable that way...'*, thus it's a matter of convenience and something highly *situational*, according to the interviewee. He stresses that the company tolerates communication

of not very high level of importance in local languages, which is a sign of a certain level of flexibility in official language use. However, the same person occasionally feels outraged about such transgressions of the unwritten law of language conduct: ‘

‘If am cc-ed to an email communication which happens to be in Hungarian, I usually reply saying, ‘could you please write in English so that everyone understands?!’ A few years ago, I have even written [as a response to such an email] that it’s impolite to write in a language not understood by everyone...’

He ends by concluding that such language-related behaviours are always individual-based, depend on the ignorance of that particular individual, and thus difficult or simply unnecessary to deal with on a company-level.

As it was confirmed by our interviewees, the written language of company documentation is English. This is a general rule of thumb, which is part of the company culture. However, as a matter of convenience, some exceptions are made, when all the parties involved in the communication process agree to it: in some projects in France, the documentation takes place in French, and in language-based services the documentation takes place in two languages, in the language of the service (e.g. German, giving support to clients in Germany) and English (as the common language of the company). This linguistic practice applies to daily activities in the Budapest office as well.

Personal and distant call meetings are important parts of company communication and they are mostly based on the unwritten rules of company culture. Thus, it is important to see what is the language of these meetings and how do they work: both face-to-face, as well as teleconferences take place in English. This doesn’t mean that other languages are not being used briefly, as a sign of mutual trust or friendship. As the head of the Budapest office explained in an interview,

‘It’s a human habit that you in an unintended way slip to your language...For 9 years I lived in Ch., where the local language is T...I think people should feel free to talk in their local language (...) But of course in front of customers, it’s strictly English’.

He also admits that local languages are used as ice-breakers for a few words, or sentences at the beginning of a meeting or at the end of it. However, his South Asian colleague, a senior manager with a substantial international experience and exposure to Western (European and US) company culture expresses his deep dissatisfaction over the use of local languages as a sign of provincialism or nationalism.

‘In a corporate environment we need to be inclusive...in Eastern Europe especially, people because of their language, education system, the companies they work in, seem to have a smaller horizon, a smaller world, and they tend to think within that. If they work in a global environment where they need to be more inclusive, they often need more coaching.’

This is a very sharp observation about differences in language use in the Central Eastern European region and some other parts of the world. It touches upon important facts related to historic legacies and socio-linguistic characteristics of the region:

‘The lack of familiarity with multilingual environments and codes of conduct related to such environments, also elements of linguistic nationalism and ethnocentrism characteristic of the CEE region, limited role of English in the past.’

The selected interview excerpt speaks about the advantage⁷ of the former colonial subject (that is South Asians, in this case study) regarding her ability to think globally, and regarding the level of familiarity with English language⁸. It can be considered as part of a specific post-colonial experience, experience of transnational nations and communities, transmigrant localities, and the key role English plays in these situations to bridge geographic distances and to narrow cultural gaps.

The studied company offered an interesting case to research different attitudes to languages and language use in private and public sphere in South Asia and in CEE. Managers from South Asia living in Budapest reflect on the role of languages and their use in the following way:

'In our home country, speaking English or being able to use this language is a sign of being well-educated, of something very nice and positive. In a corporate environment, speaking good English is well-appreciated. Speaking H. or any other regional language...is just not professional.'

It is worth noting how the role of English has changed in the perceptions of these young professional since the times of anti-colonial struggles, when English was the language of the colonizers, and local national languages meant freedom and self-determination, thus linguistic nationalism, in a highly positive sense. The same SA manager speaks about the role of his mother tongue/ first language in public or private, and the differences in language use between his country and Europe or more specifically, Hungary.

'(...) so the perception of using the mother tongue of a M. (speaker of regional language, in SA) and a Hungarian, or a German is very different. We are a bit shy to use our mother tongue outside of our zone. We of course use it in public, but in business environment, we don't want to show that we speak the same language. But if we walk to each others' office, we of course speak M..[his former boss hails from the same region, they spoke M. between each other].'

Though cultural diversity is a guiding principle of the company culture, some of the interviewees expressed their concern over the fact that this diversity is *mosaic-like*, patchy, where people belonging to the same language group interact between themselves, and very little with speakers of other language groups. Moreover, because people work together on project basis and the language used in that project, this system reinforces those pre-existing *language-based groups*, interpersonal links and friendships. This may be a diversity management problem on a company level, but as far as it doesn't lead to any sharp conflicts, the senior management of the Budapest office doesn't feel the need to officially address it. The company organizes some cultural events to promote diversity, but as most interviewees believe, these events are too formal and rare to have any serious impact on employees' attitudes and daily practices.

Some employees complained about *linguistic/ cultural isolation* at the Budapest office, others consciously try counter it, like an Italian interviewee who decided to get rid of his Italian accent after joining the company and to befriend other employees, outside of his language group.

7 This is not to deny the several negative consequences of colonization or the difficulties of post-colonial societies.

8 Though this relationship was not without any conflict either in the past. For instance in India, after independence, the role of English was highly debated. Nehru thought that a short transition period is permissible when English is still tolerated for practical reasons, but ultimately local languages will take over. This happened only partly, as linguistic nationalism in India did get stronger in many parts of the sub-continent, but English hasn't lost its importance. On the contrary, it gained renewed significance in parallel to the strengthening processes of globalization.

Most foreign employees joining the company’s Budapest office do not learn Hungarian language during their stay in Hungary. The reasons are multiple, including a general perception that Hungarian language is difficult to learn, thus it is a time-consuming and long process. As most expat employees do not stay for more than 2-3 years in Hungary, learning Hungarian would be a disproportionately large investment on their behalf. Instead, they stay within their language group and within English-speaking expat circles even during their free time. Those who learn the Hungarian language usually have a Hungarian partner and/ or plan a long-term stay in Hungary. One of the Russian interviewees recalled her story with Hungarian language in her work environment: at the beginning of her stay in Hungary when she didn’t speak the language, she had experienced jokes being cracked in her presence without being able to understand or appreciate them, thus she felt a constant feeling of exclusion. After lot of effort she has learned the language, Hungarian speaking colleagues looked at her with disbelief and inspected her with suspicion. This short ethnographic evidence illustrates the ambivalence of many Hungarians regarding their expectation towards foreigners to speak Hungarian. In some instances, most Hungarians do not expect people from abroad to learn or understand Hungarian at all, but they do not feel restricted to use Hungarian in their presence. This is often interpreted as lack of linguistic manners or bad etiquette by foreigners. In other instances, if a foreigner speaks at least a few sentences of Hungarian, they appreciate it a lot as a nice gesture. But there are also instances, as the above example shows, that if a foreigner speaks fluently or close to a level of fluency, many native speakers receive it with disbelief or suspicion, perhaps feeling betrayed on the general myth regarding the extremely difficult nature of Hungarian language, which no one can learn unless one is born as a Hungarian.⁹

In line with the diversity principle of the company, employees are provided with the possibility of language learning in form of free language classes. Courses are available in most West European languages on different levels. Most of the interviewees appreciate this opportunity, though some complain about the obstacles in availing it. The courses are usually in the early morning hours or late afternoon. Those employees who work in different and often changing working-hours (e.g. providing IT support to companies in different time-zones) are not able to attend such language classes. Some others note that due to the fact that these courses are free of charge, employees don’t take it seriously. Despite all the difficulties, these in-house courses provide an opportunity for the interested to learn languages, and thus to increase linguistic diversity on a company level. Teaching Hungarian language is part of these services, however, foreign nationals don’t avail it in large numbers for the already discussed reasons.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE / USE OF LANGUAGE AND THE RELATED CULTURAL PRACTICES

From a managerial point of view, communication forms a team, *‘the quality of communication has a direct impact on the business output’*, as one of the senior SA managers put it. And to follow this line of thought, communication (thus the use of language), *‘the way we choose our words, is deeply cultural’*, he continues.

9 This may be connected to the ethnic definition of the nation, according to which blood and lineage is what defines the nation in combination with some cultural traits like language, customs, shared past.

‘The way you think, how you perceive words...It’s very complex. There are two ways...one, you trade everyone into a common boat of communication, which is impossible... It takes time.’

And he gives an immediate example:

‘A Hungarian employee replies to my question with “I don’t know”. For me this is a lack of ownership, for him it’s the translation of “nem tudom” (in Hungarian). What he wanted to say is that he doesn’t have full information and he doesn’t want to deliver me partial information. A SA would first give a high-level, overall information, and then go into details. SAs are educated to know the answer, most of the Westerners are educated to find the answers. (...) So the fundamental difference is in the education system- if you say I don’t know, it means I am bad in what I am doing (in SA). So it annoys me, because I expect hundred percent performance from my personnel. For a Western manager if you say, I don’t know, it’s fine, as far as you know how to find the answer.’

According to the above quote, for a South Asian manager at the company office, managing a team still involves lots of diversity management problems because of the various cultural backgrounds, socially acquired reflexes and different temperaments of the speakers.

Similarly, the manager of the accounts section explains that her South American employees often use English ‘in a Spanish way’, that is using ‘too strong’ and emotionally charged words which are just out of context in an English language text or language environment; similarly, using too many exclamations and other punctuations are inappropriate in a written business context.

The studied MNC is an interesting company from the point of view of cross-cultural communication: on daily basis, the Budapest centre communicates with the home country of the company, with other European centres run by this company and, clients situated in Europe and the US. In this ‘triangle’ (as they describe this relationship, or rather a densely knit web of interactions), according to employees working from Budapest, the South Asian speakers are the ones who are the most difficult to communicate with. European employees pointed to culture as a possible explanation for this phenomenon. According to these interviewees, the South Asians have the ‘strongest’ and ‘deepest’ cultural roots, thus they are unable to get rid of their ‘incorrigible’ cultural influences when speaking foreign languages, including English. The most obvious manifestation of this is *accent*, which will be discussed in a separate section. The cultural influences also clearly transpire, according to this interpretation, in the way South Asians use other languages (in this case primarily English): they do not communicate directly, rather they speak indirectly, especially if it takes place in a hierarchical relationship (e.g. for the question ‘do you understand?’ they wouldn’t reply with a ‘no’ if they don’t, instead would manoeuvre to avoid the negative answer). In contrast, according to the interviewees, European speakers would give a very short and precise answer. The choice between direct or indirect communication in a hierarchical situation, especially if it’s a rejection, is related to certain social norms and conditioning of the participants. It is interesting to note that interviewees identified the difference between these different linguistic behaviours, even though they experienced them through limited channels of internet and skype- communication and not through a face to face relationship with the SA partners.

SOUTH ASIANS, STEREOTYPES, THE EAST / WEST SLOPE

While in the previous sections we spoke about the perceptions and discursive practices of our interviewees, employees of the studied company, about the relationship between language and culture, many of them arguing for a deterministic relationship between culture and language use, in the following paragraphs we explore narratives through which stereotypes about ‘us’ and ‘them’ are created. These include narratives about ‘the South Asian’, ‘the Hungarian’, ‘the German’, while also establishing larger categories of the ‘East’ and the ‘West’ with the corresponding narratives, often stated only implicitly in the interviews.

In these narratives ‘East’ and ‘West’ appear as very specific cultural constructs, standing for a complex set of meanings, hierarchies and values. Edward Said in his well-known work *Orientalism* (1978) speaks about Orientalism in different ways, all of them strongly interdependent. The first one is a discourse of academic institutions, and of anyone who teaches or researches the Orient. The second one is a more general meaning for Orientalism, and designates a ‘style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident”’. (Bayoumi- Rubin 2000: 69) This involves large masses of writers, economists, theorists, administrators, whose common characteristic is that they accept the basic distinction between east and west, and use it as a starting point for their arguments and theories. Third, Orientalism can be looked at as a Western style of domination, restructuring and having authority over, in other words, controlling the Orient. This discourse-oriented approach, inspired by Michael Foucault and his writings like *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punish*, helps in explaining the ‘systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage- and even produce- the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively(...)’ (Bayoumi- Rubin 2000: 70). Understanding Orientalism in the second, more general and popular understanding, Attila Melegh (2006), analyses East European, mainly Hungarian population discourses. The author introduces examples on the operation of the East-West civilization slope and East-West dichotomies, and speaks about mechanisms through which local and global discourses come together in Hungary since the 1970’s. (Melegh, 2006: 51). Accordingly, anything related to the Western side of this sliding scale of progress (slope) gains the positive attributes of development, enlightenment, and progress, while the bottom side of the scale receives negative attributes.

During our Budapest company fieldwork, Hungarian and East European (Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian) interviewees expressed their opinions that Hungary and the region (CEE) is significantly closer to Western Europe when it comes to proficiency in foreign languages, less accent in English, positive attitudes toward foreign languages than to South Asian attitudes and language uses. An important cultural slope, with the West on the top of the slope and the East on the bottom, has been established in narratives of some of my interviewees, where US, and/ or Western Europe (particularly Germany) were positioned on the top of the slope, CEE somewhere in the middle (but culturally closer to the West), and SA, as representative of ‘the East’ at the bottom. Positive attributes like hard-

working, efficient, easy to communicate with, straightforward, able to solve problems easily were assigned to the top of the slope, and opposite/ negative attitudes were assigned to the bottom like difficult to communicate with, not straightforward, unable to think out of the box, and so on. The negative attributes were assigned to the faceless, unknown IT personnel sitting in SA and not to the top management in Budapest company centre. Many of the CEE interviewees were quick to add that SA is undergoing a transformation due to globalization processes and migration, thus many ‘Westernized Indians’ do not match the previously described image.

ACCENT / NEUTRAL ACCENT

When asked about language use in everyday situations and linguistic competencies of different speakers in a multilingual environment, interviewees usually start speaking about issues related to accent. There are two ways of speaking about accent as such: accent as a business tool (as something positive, when it matches the target communities or business partners), and accent as an obstacle (when it comes to regional language influences, which don’t match business partners’ needs), which needs to be normalized, fought against, or tackled.

To start with the first approach, which considers accent as a business tool, the head of the Budapest office in an interview referred to cases when a special need is articulated on the customer side to receive services by their company in a particular language and accent (e.g. British English, or American English, or in German different regional accents). In such cases, employees responsible for the given task/ project are selected on this basis, and or are trained for that accent.

It is worth noting that training for a particular accent or for no accent, the so called *neutral accent*, is a South Asian invention. The evolution of this phenomenon points back to the Indian call-centre industry in the 1990’s, when call centres began training their employees to mime certain types of accents, based on the needs of the clientele. Speaking a common language and a common accent in call centre industry means establishing a *mutual trust*, which provides a base for any successful business agreement. However, many problems emerged related to this linguistic mimesis. Due to the trained nature of the accent and the related linguistic competencies, call centre employees often ‘fell out’ from their role in unexpected situations, unable to respond to unexpected questions in an appropriate way, thus creating confusion and mistrust in their customers. As a result, a new business strategy and linguistic approach has emerged, aiming at successful communication instead of imitating an ideal way of communication (ideal accent). To understand and to be understood by others became the new goal. This influenced the pace, emphasis, intonation, and most importantly, the neutralization of the thickness of regional accents. (Aneesh, 2015)

Among the interviewees, hardly anyone spoke of having an ambition to mimic any sort of accent, probably they would have found it ridiculous or ‘unauthentic’, instead most of them spoke about getting rid of their own national/ regional accent, for the sake of an ‘international English’, that is an English without accent/ with a neutral accent. These interviewees found it important for at least two reasons: (1) because it communicates better, the message is delivered in a clearer and more efficient way, (2) because business is often more successful if regional identity of the speaker remains hidden, unimportant, and professional aspects come into the fore. One of the pre-sales managers explained that

'customers sometimes ask for neutral accent, which means, according to me, that there is no interference of any other language in his/her English, so that the speaker can't be identified which cultural background does she/he belongs to, and which geographical place.'

This is exactly the original idea of Indian call centres, so it is of no surprise that it resurfaces at a service sector company with South Asian ownership. According to some of the interviewees, accent invokes prejudices, thus it needs to be avoided. Some Indian managers recalled examples from India, where accented English means low level of language proficiency, and this latter suggests bad schooling and lack of professional expertise. This latter seems to be a very specific South Asian understanding of foreign language proficiencies and the related accents.

In a different context, regional accents often referred to as dialects are used for business purposes (e.g. in case of German, Dutch, and French languages) and can be a value addition to the services of the studied company, thus encouraged by the management.

A Polish interviewee, who noted with great satisfaction that he reduced his native language influence to almost a non-existent one, explained that *neutral* or as he calls it, *international accent* in English is important beyond mere work-related purposes. He considered international accent a product of globalization, and at the same time a sign of cultural openness and cosmopolitanism, thus he associated it with strong political meanings. He also thought that the company he worked for in Budapest represents a utopian model with its multiculturalism, a utopian society, which may have a positive influence even on societies like Hungary, which are known for closing down borders and becoming increasingly suspicious towards outsiders.

GENDER / HIERARCHY

According to the former head for the Budapest office of the discussed company, a senior manager from the SA region, the Hungarian employees in Budapest behave in a very hierarchical way, expecting their bosses to be very dominant, showing lot of respect, flatly accepting whatever they are asked to do. This was a surprise from him, reaching Budapest from his previous outposts in the US, where the company structures are typically very flat? and democratic.

'I consciously kept my door open so that anyone can walk in at any point of the day and tell his/her opinion or ideas. ...I was taken aback seeing that Hungarian employees, especially women, do not look straight into my face.. I found this a bit bizarre.'

This SA head of the company was expecting, especially after his US experiences, to meet the same kind of work culture that he experienced earlier in other countries with developed economies. However, as he explains in the interview, Hungary's work culture is slightly different, more authoritarian, *more hierarchical*, with significant gender inequalities at the workplaces. Surprisingly, it is an MNC with South Asian origins, a region not particularly known for non-hierarchical social relationships and balanced genders relations, which has an emancipatory role in a CEE work environment.

In other instances, Hungarian women employees reported about cases when the company's German clients, typically male, behaved or communicated in a dominant, derogatory manner, emphasizing the East European, non-native, women speakers' inadequate competencies, regarding their knowledge of German, IT knowledge (as the service they provided was an IT based one). In practical terms, this took place by using an informal way of addressing towards the company's CEE women employees and in return expecting the formal way of addressing from them, and reprimanding them when they tried to return the informal way of addressing.

Despite narratives based on sporadic experiences of typically female employees of language-based gender inequalities, or of male speakers experiencing too much of gender-based hierarchy in Hungary, gender conflicts were not much reported during the fieldwork. This can be for two reasons, according to positive reading, an MNC company from South Asia managed to establish a flat and democratic company culture in CEE, pre-empting most of gender-related conflicts in the company; according to a less optimistic reading, gender-related conflicts remain unreported when speaking about language use and culture, simply because speakers do not recognize the gender-related aspects of certain issues. This latter is a likely explanation to the above, due to the relatively low level of gender-sensitivity in CEE, including the local work environments.

SUMMARY

The studied case takes shape in a specific CEE context of Hungary, in a society lacking any strong traditions of multicultural exposure. This negative tradition is tangible in local company culture too, through the attitudes of local employees towards other cultures and languages, even if the company they work for is a MNC company.

The case of a studied South Asian MNC represents a specific case of multilingualism and everyday practices of multiculturalism— as we learnt from our interviewees, the interactions take place in a triangle between geographical places located in SA, CEE and Western Europe/ North America. Specific work cultures and practices of language use were assigned to each location by our interviewees. Challenges related to the flow of communication in this network of locations are often interpreted in primarily *cultural terms* by the speakers (at least the ones interviewed in Budapest), very often used as practices of 'othering'.

Interviews with employees of the Budapest office (typically Hungarian, or other CEE employees) indicate that narratives on language use (of other employees) often serve *as a pretext to position themselves* between the idealized and deeply ideological categories of the East and the West, notoriously identifying themselves more with the Western position. On the other hand, South Asian speakers emphasize in their narratives their own global perspective, as we suggest, as a direct consequence of their post-colonial situation. They often *stress their positive attitudes to English*, speak about cultural openness and daily transnational exchanges. They contrast these with provincialism and linguistic nationalism of Central Eastern Europeans.

Some of the interviews suggest gender-related language conflicts, though very few concrete examples have been narrated by the speakers. This may not necessarily mean that such issues are scarce; rather it suggests that these are difficult to articulate or even recognize.

As the research targeted a specific company of SA ownership active both in CEE and Western Europe, it would be interesting to compare the results of this ethnographic study with other cases of MNCs active in the region with West European or North American ownership (eg. a German company with offices located in CEE, Budapest and the Western Europe too). Another possible research direction would be to conduct interviews at the same SA company in its West European / North American offices and in its South Asian units too, to explore and better understand the variety of perspectives and narratives on the same issues of language use and cultural practices.

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