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## Multilingual workplaces – Interactional dynamics of the contemporary international workforce

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### Abstract

This introduction situates the topic of the special issue – interaction in multilingual workplaces – in a historical context of international trade relations. It goes on to outline the research context of contemporary studies of workplace interaction. The methodological framework adopted in the studies is Conversation Analysis, a research tradition that does not have a very long history of studying multilingual interaction. We thus present and discuss the benefits and limitations of this approach to the special types of questions associated with issues such as language alternation, lingua franca usage and linguistic proficiency. Furthermore, we give an overview of the two strands of CA research that have emerged within the fields of second language acquisition (so-called CA-for-SLA) and multilingual communication. A fundamental requirement for CA research is to show that the phenomenon under scrutiny is oriented to by the parties to the interaction, and thus we provide two examples of how issues of language diversity are made relevant by participants engaged in workplace interaction.

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The workforce in many organizations is becoming increasingly international. This is the result of two parallel globalization processes: partly with companies expanding to other countries or merging internationally, partly as a result of the labour force becoming increasingly mobile, with both ‘blue’ and ‘white collar’ workers seeking employment away from their native country. This leads to a situation where more and more employees encounter and/or use languages different from their first language(s) as their workplace language, and need to collaborate with colleagues with different cultural backgrounds. This special issue presents studies of the spoken (and embodied) interaction between such co-workers in their daily professional activities. The topics include lingua franca usage, second language interaction, displays of cultural diversity, and negotiation of identity and social relations. The approach adopted is Conversation Analysis, which sees issues of language, style, culture and identity as locally produced and managed. The studies thus aim to make a contribution to showing how issues of language and culture are contingent features of everyday workplace interaction, and focuses here on social action as an accomplishment, investigating the affordances and challenges such multilingual environments hold for the participants.

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The recent decades have seen an increased scholarly interest in issues of globalisation in a range of disciplines. However, it is worth keeping in mind that international trade is by no means a recent phenomenon, and that work-related interaction between people with different language backgrounds is thus an ancient phenomenon. We therefore start this introduction by reviewing some scholarly and more popular descriptions of the phenomenon from earlier times.

## 1. A historical perspective

Writing in *The Spectator* in 1711, essayist John Addison mused on a visit to one of the 18th Century's centres of commerce, London's Royal Exchange, how:

“Nature seems to have taken a particular Care to disseminate her Blessings among the different Regions of the World, with an Eye to this mutual Intercourse and Traffick among Mankind, that the Natives of the several Parts of the Globe might have a kind of Dependence upon one another, and be united together by their common Interest.”

Although this account pre-dates the use of the term *globalisation* by some 250 years, the observation clearly illustrates that however strongly transnational mobility and communication have generated scholarly interest over the past few decades, the phenomenon of globalisation is by no means a recent one. People from different regions of the world have come into contact with one another for as long as there have been communities of people traversing the continents. What is more, the reasons for contact between groups have often been premised – in a similar fashion to the traders and business people in Addison's account – on furthering the interests of some or all parties, for example through commerce, warfare, colonial expansion, or some other shared project. Where such trades-people, warriors, crusaders, wayward sojourners, artists and missionaries have crossed paths with others from different regions, they have turned to whatever semiotic resources were at hand to conduct their ongoing business, including any shared linguistic resources at their disposal.

In 14th Century Cyprus, for example, we find Augustinian monk Giacomo di Verona observing how travellers developed skills in a range of languages (Belletto, 1996):

“Everyone in Cyprus can converse in Greek, many know Saracen and Lingua Franca, but they use the Greek language more.”<sup>1</sup>

Such multilingual people could in turn also serve as translators and interpreters. Examples of these would be the designated *oranda-tsuuji* ('interpreters of Dutch'), who were members of Japanese hereditary interpreter families tasked with facilitating points of bilateral contact with European diplomats and traders; or the monk translators from Poland, Portugal and France, working on behalf of China and Russia in the drawing up of the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk, using Latin as an official lingua franca (Perdue 2010). It would not always, of course, have been practical or possible to travel with one or several interpreters on one's international expeditions. Hence, knowledge of more than one language may have proved expedient in a person, and voyagers or people resident in popular thoroughfares such as di Verona's Cyprus would also be well-equipped to deal with the ever-fluctuating linguistic demands of transnational mobility.

Away from these transient thoroughfares, one also finds descriptions of more stable heterogeneous communities of sojourners, for example John of Würzburg's account of arriving in Jerusalem in the 12th Century, where he describes a community of various sects of Christians, which included “Greeks, Latins, Germans, Hungarians, Scots, people of Navarre, Britons, Angles, Rutherians, Bohemians, Georgias, Armenians, Syrians, Jacobites, Nestorians, Indians, Egyptians, Copts, Capheturici, Maronites and many others, which it would be a long task to list.” (in Folda, 1996, 83). Such a wide range of linguacultural groupings living in close quarters with one another speaks of the kinds of diversity witnessed in present-day cosmopolitan centres worldwide, and attested to the multicultural make-up of the mediaeval Crusader communities. Expounding on this in 1124, Fulcher of Chartres notes how in the Levant there was a substantial amount of language co-existence as well as linguistic mixing, leading to new local varieties:

“People use the eloquence and idioms of diverse languages in conversing back and forth. Words of different languages have become common property known to each nationality, and mutual faith unites those who are

<sup>1</sup> “Omnes de Ciprio loquntur grecum, bene tamen sciunt saracenicum et linguam francigenam, sed plus utuntur lingua greca”.

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