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Language policy and social change: A critical examination of the implementation of an English-only language policy in a Danish company

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the introduction of English as a corporate language in a Danish consultancy company from a critical angle. Based on analyses of language policy documents and interviews with language policy makers in the company, we investigate the underlying assumptions of the policy-making process, and explore how the language policy functions as a means of exerting power beyond the domain of language. The article shows how the language policy is heavily influenced by the language ideology of English as the natural language in global business as well as by neoliberal ideals of international expansion. Drawing on the notion of language commodification, the article investigates how the language policy reconfigures the social space of the organisation. The analysis shows that while the language policy aims to change the company culture towards a more ‘global mindset’, it also effects social change by legitimising certain types of employees while marginalising others. (Language policy, social change, English as a corporate language, language ideologies, linguistic market, language commodification)*

INTRODUCTION

Today many workplaces transcend national, sociocultural, and linguistic boundaries. As companies and organisations become increasingly transnational in their activities, employees are stationed abroad, work in virtual teams with co-workers from various sociocultural backgrounds, and often find themselves in situations—abroad as well as at home—where internal collaboration and contact with external partners have to be achieved in contexts characterised by considerable linguistic diversity. As a response to such increased linguistic diversity, many companies choose to establish formal language policies intended to apply to the company at large. In Northern Europe, such language policies often amount to nominating English as ‘the corporate language’ (Lønsmann 2011; Angouri 2013; Sanden 2015). As has been amply illustrated in studies of language policy processes in private companies as well as institutions of higher education (Millar, Cifuentes, & Jensen 2013; Nekvapil & Sherman 2013; Mortensen 2014), English has

become naturalised as ‘the global language’ to a point where the choice of English as the default language for international purposes seems ‘obvious’ and ‘natural’ to many policy makers. In this article, we argue that the assumptions underlying this worldview—as well as its implications—are in need of critical attention and de-naturalisation through critical sociolinguistic examination. The argument is based on analyses of language policy documents and interviews with language policy makers in a Danish consultancy company that decided to nominate English as its corporate language in 2012. By investigating the language ideological underpinnings of the policy-making process, and by exploring how the language policy also functions as a means of exerting power beyond the domain of language, our analysis shows that the introduction of the new language policy is premised on particular hegemonic (language) ideologies, and it illustrates how the policy legitimises certain types of employees while marginalising others.

Recent research into multilingual workplaces has paid close attention to language ideologies and their role in the workplace (e.g. Angouri 2013; Nekvapil & Sherman 2013; Lønsmann 2014), but it is rare to see this perspective connected directly to a critical view on language policy in the workplace context. There is a well-established research tradition that links issues of language policy and language ideologies, but here the focus tends to be on educational settings and/or language policy issues at the state level (e.g. Shohamy 2006; Farr & Song 2011; Hultgren 2014; Mortensen 2014; Hult & Källkvist 2015; Martin-Jones 2015; Wright 2016). Kingsley argues that ‘the paucity of language policy research in multilingual workplaces justifies further investigation, particularly in light of the move towards English as an official language in international companies worldwide’ (2009:154). The present article aims to pursue this agenda by analysing language ideology and language policy issues within the setting of a multinational company.

We are particularly interested in mapping how language ideologies structure social hierarchies, and the ways in which the new language policy in our case company becomes instrumental in defining and policing what, from a corporate point of view, is considered appropriate and desirable behaviour—and what is not. As such, we position ourselves within the field of critical language policy studies, examining the potential of language policies to ‘create and sustain various forms of social inequality’ (Tollefson 2009:42). By bringing a critical perspective to the study of language policy processes in a workplace context (as opposed to educational institutions or nation-state-level language policy and planning initiatives), we aim to contribute to the sociolinguistic theorising of ‘the role language plays in the production, reproduction or transformation of inequalities, as work undergoes important transformation in the globalized economy’ (Dlaske, Barakos, Motobayashi, & McLaughlin 2016:8).

The article is organised as follows. First, in order to contextualise the study, we offer a discussion of the sociolinguistic changes that have propelled the use of English across multiple societal domains, integrating an overview of previous studies concerned with workplace language policy processes involving English.

In the next section, LANGUAGE, THE MARKET AND THE INDIVIDUAL, we briefly discuss the theoretical backdrop to our investigation before presenting our data and methods of analysis. The analysis is structured around two research questions: (i) How is the introduction of the language policy in our case company related to hegemonic (language) ideologies? and (ii) How does the language policy reconfigure the social space of the organisation and impact the opportunities of employees? We address the first question in ANALYSIS, PART 1: HEGEMONIC IDEOLOGIES AND LANGUAGE POLICY, while the second is addressed in ANALYSIS, PART 2: LANGUAGE POLICY AND THE INDIVIDUAL. The article ends with a discussion and concluding remarks.

‘ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE’: ISSUES
OF LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY AND POLICY

English is commonly characterised as a global language (cf. Crystal 2003:1), or even THE global language, evidenced by book titles such as *How English became the global language* (Northrup 2013), blog entries like ‘The world’s global language is English’ (Skinner 2012), and many similar examples. When English is characterised in this way, it implies a certain worldview that is intimately associated with a particular language ideology. Irvine (1989:255) defines language ideology as ‘the cultural (or subcultural) system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interest’. Even though it is beyond dispute that English is currently used in many parts of the world, in many societal domains and by a very large number of speakers, it takes a certain measure of language ideological belief to see it as a GLOBAL language, and an even further stretch of the imagination to see it somehow as THE language of the world—if this is indeed how we are to understand the notion of ‘English as the global language’. However, in doing so, certain stances, dispositions, and actions are naturalised and legitimised while others are devalued. Framing English as ‘the global language’ naturalises a system of ideas in which English is seen as ‘an obvious choice’ for internationally oriented companies and individuals alike, while the relevance of other languages is downplayed. In this section, we review central tenets of this language ideological framework, illustrating how it may impact on decisions about introducing English as a corporate language in multinational companies, including the case we are concerned with here.

In recent years, ideologies surrounding English as a global language have come into focus in studies from a variety of contexts (e.g. Park 2009; Seargeant 2009; Ricento 2010; Park & Wee 2012). With reference to the work of Beck (2000), Haberland (2009) discusses English as ‘the language of globalism’. As opposed to globalisation, which is essentially a concept used to describe a particular historical process, Beck (2000:9) describes globalism as ‘the view that the world market eliminates or supplants political action—that is, the ideology of rule by the world market, the ideology of neo-liberalism’. Haberland suggests that English has become the language of globalism, and that it is as such increasingly seen as

the ‘natural’ language for international communication, not least in business contexts—the heartland of neoliberal doxa. It is in this sense that English can be seen as hegemonic (cf. Gramsci 1971), as part of an ideologised ‘common sense’ that is accepted by friend and foe alike, and therefore hard to question. As Haberland explains, referring to Simon (1982), hegemony is ‘the organization of consent’ on the part of those who buy into the ideology, ‘not a relation of dominance by means of force, be it brute or symbolic’ (2009:20).

Several empirical studies of ideologies of English in corporate settings support Haberland’s argument. Millar, Cifuentes, & Jensen (2013) find that English is seen as ‘natural’ in the companies they have studied, Kingsley (2009) reports that English is considered important in international banking and in multilingual workplaces in general, and Nekvapil & Sherman (2013) argue that English is seen as universally useful for international communication. Lønsmann’s (2011, 2015) case study of a Denmark-based multinational pharmaceutical company finds that English is positioned by informants as THE language of internationalisation, and also that English is linked with power and prestige. Similarly, Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen (2010) report that their informants from five globally operating Finland-based companies find that the use of English is ‘simply work’, meaning that pragmatically appropriate proficiency in using English as a lingua franca becomes ‘vital’ (2010:207). As Cogo (2016) and several others have discussed (cf. below), the emphasis on English as the ‘natural’ language of business often goes hand-in-hand with linguistic practices that are de facto multilingual, particularly (but not only) when it comes to internal or ‘backstage’ communication.

The pro-English language ideological stances that have been reported in the literature are also explicitly espoused by some researchers in the field of business communication. Writing for *Harvard Business Review*, Neeley (2012:117) asserts that ‘English is now the global language of business’. She argues that ‘unrestricted multilingualism is inefficient and gets in the way of accomplishing business goals’ while ‘single-language policies help companies avoid these problems’ (2012:119). The single language in question is English. Neeley considers English the ‘NATURAL choice because it is already the dominant language of business’ (2012:119, our emphasis). Neeley’s article—as well as her recent monograph (2017) on the introduction of English as a corporate language in the Japanese e-commerce company Rakuten—presents clear examples of how English is also positioned as a ‘natural’ language and a necessity in ‘global business’ by scholars, and how the case for necessity is tied to the neoliberal logic of globalism in Beck’s definition above.

Arguably, there is empirical evidence to support the claim that English is used widely in the world of business. However, saying that English is ‘the natural choice’ is in essence an ideologically based move that promotes a particular (sociolinguistic) worldview and that may lead to other languages all but disappearing from view, at least conceptually. In the terminology of Irvine & Gal (2000), this amounts to a process of language ideological *erasure*. When English is not merely seen as the ‘obvious’ or ‘natural’ choice for international communication in business, but is

in effect presented as the ONLY option, other languages are ideologically positioned as irrelevant, in a sense made ‘invisible’, though they may still be used in day-to-day practices (cf. Lønsmann 2015; Cogo 2016). This is seen very clearly in Kingsley’s (2009) study of language ideologies and practices in international banks in Luxembourg. While an ideology of English as the most useful language for communication between multilingual employees has contributed to the choice of English as official working language in the banks, Kingsley’s informants report a wide range of languages used in the daily work, leading Kingsley to conclude that ‘employees in both banks flexibly and strategically use a variety of languages, in conjunction with English, to meet their needs’ (2009:164), and that these multilingual practices contrast with the monolingual English policies in place in the banks.

While English-only language policies are often seen as the solution to problems posed by linguistic diversity (with Neeley 2017 as a prime proponent), studies from the business communication literature and sociolinguistics have shown that managing diversity by introducing such policies is not as simple as it might seem. One of the problems that have been identified is that English-only language policies may generate opaque power structures. Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch (1999) show that the use of English as a corporate language may lead to ‘shadow structures’ where employees with competences in English and the headquarter language obtain positions of power unrelated to their position in the organisational hierarchy. This resembles SanAntonio’s earlier (1987) study of an American technology company in Japan with an English-only policy in which it is shown how language use becomes a tool in the competition for resources and power in the company, on the one hand enabling English-proficient Japanese employees to access organisational resources, for instance in the form of opportunities for promotion and training, while on the other hand reducing the relative influence of Japanese-only speaking employees. In this way, the language policy creates—or reinforces—a power imbalance in the company that essentially serves the interests of the American employees and managers (SanAntonio 1987). Tange & Lauring (2009) show that another—but related—problem is that English-only policies may lead to ‘language clustering’ where employees with similar language backgrounds group together, in effect threatening to undermine effective communication within the workplace.

As an alternative to English-only language policies, the principle of *parallel language policy* has gained wide support in the Nordic countries, particularly in higher education (see discussions in Hult & Källkvist 2015; Salö 2016; Fabricius, Mortensen, & Haberland 2017; Holmen 2017), but also in other settings, including private companies, which—to some extent—is illustrated by the case discussed in this article. Under the principle of parallel language policy, two (or more) languages are mandated (or believed) to operate in parallel within a given institution or societal sphere. The emergence of this policy principle can be seen as a reaction against perceived Anglicisation of Nordic universities (Salö 2016), but while a parallel language policy certainly represents a more pluralistic approach to linguistic diversity than the English-only approach, it does not in itself challenge the

hegemonic language ideological position of English as the ‘international’ language—often quite the contrary. In universities operating according to parallel language policies, English is quite standardly perceived as the ‘natural’ language for international communication (whether related to research or teaching), which conceptually diminishes—or indeed ERASES—the actual role played by other languages in transnational communication (Haberland & Mortensen 2012; Salö 2015, 2017).

Returning to the sphere of multinational businesses, the widespread naturalisation of English as THE language of global business involves a similar oversimplification of the sociolinguistic reality that most multinational companies represent. English is undeniably an effective medium in many contexts where communication across borders is required, but the *sine qua non* status it is habitually granted in business discourse represents the result of an ideological process where certain views of the world have become naturalised and acquired dominance at the expense of other, in principle equally valid, views (see Saulière 2014 for an example of a contrasting view from France). As long as this hegemonic ideology remains unquestioned, there is a danger that it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, inspiring an increasing number of companies to adopt English as the corporate language—even when this may not be the only or the most obvious course of action—thus reinforcing the hegemony of English in global business, promoting the erasure of other languages and, as we return to below, potentially generating linguistically founded social inequality.

LANGUAGE, THE MARKET, AND THE INDIVIDUAL

The naturalisation of English as ‘the global language’ is not merely an abstract discursive trope; it has very specific implications at the level of the individual. This aspect is clearly brought out in Heller’s (2010a, b) and Duchêne & Heller’s (2012) work on the commodification of language. The ‘new economy’ of late capitalism, characterised, among other social processes, by globalisation, computerisation of work processes, and growth of the service sector, has led to increased demands for language and literacy skills among workers, amounting to a commodification of language ‘as part of a general commodification of knowledge and semiosis’ (Heller 2010a:354). Similarly, Park & Wee (2012:125) discuss the commodification of language as the process where ‘language comes to be valued and sought for the economic profit it can bring through exchange in the market, rather than for some other form of significance’, which is the understanding we subscribe to in the following when discussing language as a commodity. That language comes to be treated as a commodity is not necessarily a problem in and of itself. Nevertheless, we believe it is relevant for sociolinguistics to investigate and theorise the social processes language commodification involves in order to explicate its potential social consequences.

Given the pervasive positive ideological valorisation of English as the language of globalisation (or globalism, cf. above), it follows that command of English

‘naturally’ comes to be seen as a central determinant for the employability of workers in international companies. Command of English is standardly treated in accordance with what Heller defines as ‘the ideology of language as a technical, universally available skill’ (Heller 2010b:103) and consequently seen as ‘a must’, to use the jargon of the business world. To illustrate this, we may refer to a study conducted by Mahili (2014) in the context of the economic crisis in Greece. While English is not the only linguistic commodity in the context examined by Mahili because command of the local language also has great utility, she nevertheless finds that mastering ‘foreign languages’, particularly English, ‘becomes a commodity employees can use to keep their job or secure employment elsewhere’ (2014:129–30). Mahili also argues that employees with the situationally appropriate language skills (whether it be in Greek or English) are able to exert ‘expert power’ deriving from their language proficiency, rather than other aspects of their knowledge or hierarchical position. This, Mahili argues (2014:131, 139), points to a potential democratic problem in the workplace since employees with desirable language competencies may be more highly valued than others—irrespective of their qualifications otherwise.

Looking at the process of commodification of language from a critical perspective, it is clear that the introduction of an English-only corporate language policy in a multilingual company cannot simply be seen as a reflex of contextual conditions—at least not if we want to arrive at a comprehensive analysis of the social processes involved. In understanding the choice to adopt English as a corporate language, perceived external ‘demands’ for increased use of English of the kind reviewed above (inherent in the language ideological trope of ‘English as the global language’) are certainly important, but the fact that the introduction of a new language policy also offers management an opportunity or an occasion to regulate the workforce should not be overlooked. In Heller’s (2010a:360) use of Bourdieu’s (1977) terminology, a new language policy regime in principle instantiates new linguistic market conditions in the organisation. Because groups and individuals have different access to the linguistic resources that become valued under the new regime, a change in the market also means a change in power relations.

The ideology of ‘English as the global language’ constructs English as the language everyone has access to (Kraft & Lønsmann 2018), and English therefore becomes the ‘obvious’ language of inclusion in linguistically diverse workplaces (Angouri 2013). But in practice, it is quite obvious that English is an unequally distributed resource, and many companies are well aware of this. In her article in *Harvard Business Review*, Neeley (2012) devotes considerable space to describing how ‘resistance’ towards an English-only language policy on the part of employees can be overcome (with resistance of this kind being one of the expected responses to changing market conditions; cf. Heller 2010a:360). Neeley suggests that ‘leaders should stress the importance of globalization in achieving the company’s mission and strategy and demonstrate how language [i.e. English] supports that’; she also states that ‘companies need to contract with language vendors who specialize in

helping employees at various levels of proficiency' (2012:123). In this way, the discourse of English as the language of globalism becomes individualised, putting the onus on the individual employee to 'acquire' English from 'language vendors' (in itself a highly interesting economic metaphor) in order to facilitate the company's ability to operate on 'the global market'.

As Bourdieu argues, a linguistic market will often construct one language (or language variety) as legitimate and others as illegitimate, and if speakers who operate in the market are unable to produce the legitimate variety, this may threaten to undermine their legitimacy as speakers. When language, through commodification, becomes linked with employability, changing conditions in the linguistic market not only challenge the legitimacy of speakers—the changing conditions also challenge the speakers' continued relevance as employees. It is in this way that an English-only language policy may be seen as more than a simple response to external pressure: It may also be seen as an instrument that can be used to regulate internal power structures, placing value on some employees (by virtue of their command of or willingness to acquire English) and devaluing others.

DATA AND METHODS

The analysis we present in the following pages is inspired by the framework of interpretive policy analysis (Yanow 2000), which draws on ethnographic interviews, observations, and policy documents, combined with critical approaches to the study of language policy processes (cf. Johnson 2011; Källkvist & Hult 2016). As argued by Moore & Wiley (2015), the framework of interpretive policy analysis is particularly useful for investigating the hegemonic nature of language policies and how language policies affect those they are aimed at, and it therefore sits well with the critical agenda that we aim to advance here.

The case company, which we call CONSULT for reasons of anonymity, is a multinational engineering and consulting company with 12,000 employees and operations in fifty-seven countries. The company headquarters is based in Copenhagen, Denmark. In 2012 a new CEO put CONSULT on an 'internationalisation journey' (as it is described in company-internal slides) with increased international revenue and more outsourcing to India as key strategic priorities. The new CEO also introduced two new slogans, 'Stronger together' and 'One company', both of which allude to the strategic focus on increased internal collaboration and globalisation of the company. Our study focuses on the Danish part of the organisation, here pseudonymised as CONSULT DK.

CONSULT DK has 3,000 employees across Denmark. Most of the consultants are Danish-speaking employees working with Danish-speaking customers in Denmark, though there are differences within the company, particularly between the Copenhagen headquarters and the regional sub-branches (which tend to be more locally oriented). At the end of 2012, the executive director for CONSULT DK initiated a language-strategy project with the aim of implementing English as a corporate

language. The strategy was directly linked to the internationalisation vision of the CEO, evidenced by the fact that written materials introducing the strategy stated that ‘We are on a journey and we will become even more international in future’.

While English had been the de facto corporate language in CONSULT for a number of years, no explicit language strategy or policy existed. The aim with the new policy was to implement English ‘for real’, as one informant put it. In 2013 a group of human resources and communication employees were tasked with the new language-strategy project. They began their work by ‘taking the temperature in the Danish organisation’ (as they expressed it themselves) with regard to the use of English. This was done through interviews with select employees, and by means of a broad questionnaire survey. While the aim of management was to make a shift to English more or less immediately, specifically to have all internal top-down communication in English only, the project group found a lot of resistance among the employees to this increased use of English, and they successfully argued for ‘a soft transition’ where Danish and English would be used in parallel in 2014–2015. In January 2016 the language strategy would be fully implemented, and all top-down information would be in English only. The main stages of devising and implementing the strategy are presented in [Table 1](#).

The first author conducted fieldwork in CONSULT between 2013 and 2015 on a number of subprojects related to the LINGCORP project.¹ For this particular subproject, fieldwork began in the spring of 2013 where two interviews were conducted with human-resources employees involved in the language-strategy project. In 2014, a follow-up interview was conducted with the employee then responsible for the language-strategy project, and documents related to the introduction of the language strategy were collected. These include the intranet news item presenting the strategy to the organisation, the full language strategy published in the employee handbook and PowerPoint slides sent by the communication department to department heads for use in introducing the language strategy. In 2015, the first author presented the results of the initial ethnographic fieldwork to a team of communication employees and managers. The recording of this feedback session is included in the data as well.

Using methods of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998), the full data set was coded for central concepts that were then organised into overarching categories that eventually formed the basis of the analysis presented below. Rather than detached description, the analysis is explicitly designed to provide a critical examination of

TABLE 1. *Main stages in the creation and implementation of the language policy.*

End 2012	Decision to make a language strategy: Implementing English as a corporate language ‘for real’
2013	Work group prepares language strategy
Mid-2014	Announcement of new language strategy: beginning of ‘soft transition’ period
2016	Implementation: English-only from management

the underlying logic of the language policy decisions in the case company and the potential conflicts the new policy relates to or may indeed give rise to. From the onset of the LINGCORP project, a central aim was to communicate research results to participants in a way that made the research useful to them, and this aim was made clear to participants. For this reason, the first author was positioned not only as a researcher during the fieldwork, but also sometimes by participants from CONSULT DK as a language policy consultant, both explicitly (e.g. being named so in emails) and implicitly (e.g. being asked to provide advice on the implementation of the language policy). In addition to balancing these two roles, the perspective of the current article adds the position of a critical scholar to the repertoire, which was not a position that was on the cards when the project was planned, but rather one that developed along the way. While the critical analytical perspective may not be met with agreement from all participants in the study, we nevertheless hope that the ambition of communicating research results to participants in a useful manner will be fulfilled equally by this approach. In the case of this study, the initial insights generated by the ethnographic fieldwork formed the basis for two sessions at the case company where the first author gave feedback on the language-strategy process, pointing out some of the problems it entailed for different individuals and groups in the organisation. One session (mentioned above) involved communication managers and employees, and another involved employees from participating departments.

ANALYSIS, PART 1: HEGEMONIC IDEOLOGIES AND LANGUAGE POLICY

Positioning English as the 'natural' language

As mentioned above, the overall aim of the language policy process at CONSULT DK was to introduce 'English as a corporate language'. This concept was eventually defined in PowerPoint slides produced to introduce the language policy to employees in the way given in (1) below.

- (1) By 'English as a corporate language' we mean the use of English as a common language across the organisation—the language we communicate in when speaking or writing to a colleague who does not understand Danish.
All internal written material from the Executive Management team and Business Support should be in English unless conflicting with legal requirements.
All employees should be able to understand, write and speak English when it is required and relevant in the given context.

This first part of the analysis investigates how central language ideological currents are manifest in the language policy documents, particularly ideas and beliefs about linguistic diversity. The documents collected as part of the ethnographic fieldwork are on the surface very positive and open towards linguistic diversity,

but this positivity is in conflict with the linguistic uniformity that they end up promoting, as indicated by extract (1). The formal language policy document that was drawn up in 2014 and that later came to feature as part of the internal handbook for employees contains the section reproduced here as extract (2).

- (2) Even though English is our official corporate language, we work with the concept of ‘parallel languages’ in CONSULT. This means that the use of English goes hand-in-hand with Danish, Swedish, German, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu and all other languages spoken by CONSULT employees. Your choice of language depends on the situation and the people with whom you communicate.
So English as our corporate language should not be seen as a way to restrict or limit our use of language, but rather as an important supplement to the linguistic diversity in our organisation.

This extract can be seen as a response to an implicit concern that the introduction of English as a corporate language might restrict the range of legitimate language choices in the company, and perhaps also as a way of pre-empting critique from employees. By invoking the notion of ‘parallel languages’ that is well-established in the Danish context, even if its definition is unclear (cf. the discussion above), the language policy in this version embraces linguistic diversity, and recognises the need for multiple languages in the company sphere. Several languages are mentioned explicitly, and it is stressed that ‘English... should not be seen as a way to restrict or limit our use of language, but... as an important SUPPLEMENT to the linguistic diversity in our organisation’. It is noticeable, however, that English has a dominant role, leaving the language-ideological hegemonic position of English unquestioned.

Having noted that linguistic diversity is explicitly part of the formulation in extract (2), it is interesting to note how a different picture emerges in extract (3), which is taken from an intranet news item published in 2014. In this distilled form of the language policy—which is now presented as a *strategy*—the text reads somewhat differently.

- (3) Our approach
English is our corporate language, but it goes hand-in-hand with the use of all other languages spoken by CONSULT employees. Your choice of language depends on the situation and the people you communicate with.
We wish to create a respectful process in our implementation of the strategy, where we take each other’s worries and challenges into concern. We support an open culture, in which it is ok to give a presentation in English even though you are not fluent, or contribute to conversations at meetings even though you feel that your English is somewhat unpractised. What matters is that we communicate and practice.

In this version, which, unlike the background policy document in extract (2), is communicated directly to employees, English has even greater prominence, partly

because there is no mention of other specific languages, which may be seen to amount to gradual erasure. There is still a sentence to the effect that English ‘goes hand-in-hand’ with other languages spoken by CONSULT employees, and a comment that ‘your choice of language depends on the situation and the people you communicate with’. However, English is clearly given primacy. Again, the text seems designed to take an implicit concern or critique into account, by assuring employees of the wish to create ‘a respectful process’ and ‘an open culture’, but it is striking to note that the respect and the openness does not seem to extend beyond English. The ‘open culture’ that the text talks about is not an open culture where all employees are encouraged to make use of their diverse linguistic resources, but an open culture ‘in which it is ok to give a presentation in English even though you are not fluent, or contribute to conversations even though you feel that your English is somewhat unpractised’—essentially positioning English as the only legitimate choice. The concern here is for employees’ level of comfort in communicating in English, and it only cements the unquestioned position of English as the ‘natural’ language for business in the company.

As illustrated by the extracts above, the language policy at CONSULT DK in part draws on what might be considered an inclusive language ideology of diversity where individual employees’ ability to speak multiple languages is recognised and given at least some legitimacy in the organisation by the invocation of the concept of ‘parallel languages’. However, it emerges from our analysis that there is an even greater premium on English. This is seen in the formal policy itself, and particularly in the way the principles of the policy are presented to the employees. Linguistic diversity may be given token recognition in background documents, but in direct communication to employees the ideology of English as the ‘natural’ language for business is being propagated. Throughout the process of devising and implementing the strategy, moving from the background policy document to the direct communication to employees found in the intranet item, English is increasingly being promoted as the only valuable language in the company context, and other languages are gradually being erased (cf. Irvine & Gal 2000). By drawing on ideologies about English as the ‘natural’ language of business, the message that transpires from the language-strategy documents is that people working at CONSULT DK may speak many different languages, but English is the language that matters, or in other words, it is the only language with real value in this linguistic market. We return to a discussion of the process of language commodification involved in this process below.

English, the ‘global mindset’, and the market

As summarised above, management at CONSULT has actively sought to make the company more international since 2012. One important strategic goal announced in 2012 was to boost international collaboration within the company in an attempt to

increase revenue, most prominently through offshoring to the Indian part of the company. The analysis of the language policy documents shows how the new language policy as part of this overall ambition for the company functions not only as a tool for managing linguistic practices but also as a strategic tool for achieving changes in what may be called ‘company culture’.

In a set of PowerPoint slides given to department heads in CONSULT DK by the communication department to aid them in presenting the language strategy to employees, the presupposed connection between English and international success is spelled out. Under the heading ‘Why do we need a language strategy?’, the following reasons are given in extract (4).²

- (4) English is key to creating a Global Mindset. We aim to work even stronger together internationally, and to employ more non-Danish speaking colleagues. International revenue should increase from XX% in 2013 to XX% in 2016. Cooperation with India should increase from XX% in 2013 to XX% in 2016. English as a common language is a prerequisite for sharing knowledge, setting the right team, employee mobility, and working internationally.

This extract explicitly draws on neoliberal ideologies that position economic growth as the natural goal and, equally explicitly, it links English with this goal through the construct of a ‘global mindset’ (see also Lønsmann 2017a). It is not clear what exactly a ‘global mindset’ is, but it is linked in the text to working ‘even stronger together internationally’ and ‘employing more non-Danish speaking colleagues’. Working more strongly together internationally is then in the following two sentences explicitly linked with increased international revenue and increased offshoring to India.

The concept of a ‘global mindset’ and the importance of ‘creating’ such a mindset occurs several times in our data, always more or less explicitly linked with the introduction of the language strategy and increased use of English on the one hand and with economic growth on the other. In this way, and through the construct of the ‘global mindset’, the ideology of globalism (Beck 2000) intersects with the use of English as a corporate language (cf. Haberland’s notion of English as the language of globalism).

On another slide in the same presentation (here partly reproduced as extract (5)), the link between language and company strategy is made even more explicit.

- (5) In the end—the use of English as common language across borders and cultures helps us reach the goals we set. Not only our own goals, but also those of our customers.

By linking English to company and customer goals, this extract is an explicit expression of an ideological link between English and the neoliberal worldview where market forces take priority.

This kind of discourse that positions English as necessary, but at the same time as a tool to reach a bigger goal, draws upon the ideology of English as THE language for international collaboration that we introduced above (cf. also Nekvapil & Sherman 2013; Lønsmann 2015). By positioning English as intimately linked with reaching strategic goals, English gains importance. In the terminology of Irvine & Gal (2000), we might say that an ICONIC language ideological relationship is created between the use of English and company success. The other side of the coin is that other languages—and their speakers—are devalued.

The message in extract (5) is unmistakably clear: English is now the corporate language, and this is important because it helps CONSULT reach its (economic) goals. We may assume that this positioning of English, embedded in slides sent to department heads to use in presentations to employees, is meant to motivate the choice of English as a corporate language to the employees. Yet, as documented in another study from the same case company (Lønsmann 2017b), management goals do not align with employee goals. While management takes a long-term strategic perspective, employees are typically concerned with reaching short-term goals, such as meeting a deadline at the end of the week. For Danish-speaking consultants working with Danish-speaking customers in Denmark (as most employees in CONSULT DK do), increased use of English does not help to reach these short-term goals, and therefore the need to use English is seen as much less urgent—if relevant at all.

What emerges from this part of the analysis, then, is that the language policy at CONSULT DK is heavily influenced by language ideological currents. What the language policy does—whether it is explicitly intended to do so or not—is to promote change in the company culture, encouraging employees to engage in the ‘journey’ towards increased internationalisation with English being positioned as the only legitimate linguistic conduit. Based on the underlying assumption that more English will lead to a more global mindset, which again will make employees ready to embrace internationalisation in the form of offshoring tasks to India, the language policy effectively links English closely with the neoliberal goal of economic growth.

ANALYSIS, PART 2: LANGUAGE POLICY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

In this part of the analysis we focus on how the language policy contributes to re-configuring the social space of the organisation, including how it impacts employees’ opportunities in the workplace.

Overall, we find that the new language policy at CONSULT DK exposes existing power differences in the organisation and appears to reinforce them. In a rather banal way, the asymmetry that exists between management and ‘ordinary employees’ is reflected in extract (6), which indicates how management in principle has the power to manipulate social contexts in order to render the choice of English

‘natural’. The extract is taken from a set of slides sent to department heads in Business Support, for example the human resources and IT departments.

- (6) Make it part of your business plan to recruit one or more non-Danish speakers in your department(s). All feedback from CONSULT DK states relevance as a key issue when it comes to English, e.g. you are working with someone who does not understand Danish and therefore forced to practice your English.

The message here is essentially to encourage department heads to recruit non-Danish speakers to compel Danes to speak English as a quite overt act of coercion, while effectively taking the non-Danish speaking employees hostage in a live linguistic experiment. Seen from the perspective of management, the problem being addressed here is that while English may be firmly established as the ‘natural’ language of internationalisation (language ideologically speaking), this may not be enough to counteract what Salö (2015) has called ‘the linguistic sense of placement’—that is, the experience that some languages are perceived as more ‘natural’ in certain contexts than others, in this case the idea that to use Danish in a workplace situated in Denmark, predominantly populated by Danish-speaking employees, is the most appropriate language choice (cf. Lønsmann 2014). Management is thus trying to influence the linguistic market (in the sense of Bourdieu) by making English necessary—or ‘relevant’—in the daily work of the organisation. If this strategy of consciously trying to change the linguistic market proves successful, management will in effect create a new situation in the company that puts non-English speakers, or speakers with limited English proficiency, at a disadvantage.

In extract (4) it is stated that part of the company logic is that ‘English as a common language is a prerequisite for... setting the right team’. The implication of this is that those who do not master English are in fact on ‘the wrong team’. In much of the material we have analysed, learning English or improving one’s English skills is presented as something that can pave the way for opportunities within the company. But with the new language policy, and the wider strategic move to change the company culture that it is part of, learning English is not simply intended as ‘an optional extra’. Under the new regime, English becomes an essential commodity and improving one’s English competence may thus in fact be a NECESSITY for remaining in the organisation. In extract (7), taken from a set of slides for managers to use to present the language policy to employees, we see that the topic of ‘English’ is meant to be part of the obligatory performance-management interview that employees attend annually, making the institutional importance of commanding English abundantly clear.

- (7) English skills will be part of the Mid-Year performance management interview. The purpose is to discuss with your nearest manager whether your English skills match your current and future tasks and responsibilities—or whether you need an upgrade.

The implication is that as an employee at CONSULT DK, your English skills may have a direct impact on your tasks and responsibilities. If your skills are not good enough, you may need ‘an upgrade’. In our reading, this *upgrade* metaphor positions employees without English as run-down machines, while implying that language learning is as easy for the individual as upgrading the operating system of a computer to a new and better version. Employers are obviously entitled to require certain skills and particular types of knowledge from their employees. If an employee is hired to do a job that involves the use of a particular type of software, it is perfectly legitimate—and very sensible, indeed—that the employer requires the employee to have knowledge of the software package in question. It is also reasonable that the employer expects the employee to keep abreast of new developments in the software, for instance by participating in courses. However, in the context of CONSULT DK where the employees are mostly Danish-speaking Danes working with Danish-speaking customers, command of English is not—in principle—a skill that is necessary for employees to carry out their daily activities. English is important for some employees in CONSULT, but certainly not all. Still, as a consequence of the new strategy, English is turned into a parameter for assessing all employees. For employees who are found to be in need of ‘an upgrade’ CONSULT offers English language classes. However, these classes take place outside working hours, in effect leaving it to the individual employee to make the investment required to fulfil the strategic goals of the company.

As indicated above, what we witness here is a process of commodification where, to repeat the definition from Park & Wee (2012:125), ‘language comes to be valued and sought for the economic profit it can bring through exchange in the market, rather than for some other form of significance’. While ‘profit’ may not be the immediate aim in this particular case, it is certainly the long-term one as shown in the examples where the use of English is linked with company goals. Regardless of whether it is relevant or not to use English on a day-to-day basis for the individual employee, English is positioned as an indispensable tool for all employees. It becomes a commodity that employees are expected to either simply HAVE or be prepared to acquire—that is, obtain and/or possibly even ‘buy’ in a metaphorical extension of that verb (recalling Neeley’s use of the term ‘language vendor’ above).

While such commodification of language can be a benefit for the employees who have the language skills valued in the market (as discussed by Mahili 2014), it puts employees without these skills in a precarious position. With inspiration from Heller (2010a,b), we might say that by adding English skills to the list of things to be discussed in the yearly performance evaluation, management constructs English skills as a value that can be regulated and measured. In this way English becomes linked with employee status and with job security. It may be expected that those who do not possess the valued commodity of English will potentially be given fewer opportunities in the organisation; if worse comes to worst, their jobs may be at stake. While the language policy does not on the surface construct

other languages as illegitimate, it does position English skills as necessary and hence the lack of English skills as illegitimate. In this way speakers who do not have the required English competence are in principle not fully legitimate speakers—or employees—in the workplace anymore.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the material that accompanied the announcement of the new language strategy, it was made clear that the new strategy should be introduced gradually.

- (8) We should support a respectful process and allow time for a transition phase where we practice, make mistakes, discuss and learn.
If a colleague is not comfortable speaking English, it is ok to contribute to the conversation in Danish during the transition period. This way we make sure that all opinions and views are expressed.

However, despite this promise of a ‘respectful process’ that would allow time for a transition phase where English and Danish would still be used in parallel, the fact remains that after 1 January 2016, only English would be used in communication from top management. Respect and tolerance in this case then seems to mean that it is important to take people’s insecurities into consideration—but only until the end of the transition period. Even if the idea of a uniform English-for-all policy is not fully implemented in 2016 (and our latest communication with CONSULT in June 2016 revealed that the transition period had been prolonged by a year), it is still clear that the language policy, heavily supported by an ideology of English as the ‘natural’ language to help CONSULT realise its international potential, had already at this point been established as a tool that managers can use to exert power over employees. The language-strategy process has resulted in a new language regime, a new linguistic market in which certain new ‘commodities’ are in demand and others are becoming relatively—and nominally—worthless. The ability and willingness to speak English has become institutionalised as the external indicator of a particular kind of ‘global mindset’ that is promoted as an indispensable requirement for those who want to join the company’s ‘journey of internationalisation’. In this way, the language policy contributes to entrenching ‘the inequalities between those for whom proficiency in English opens doors and those for whom lack of proficiency in English closes doors’ (Piller & Cho 2013:29–30, referring to English tests).

Given that English is not IN PRACTICE a necessary language for many employees in CONSULT DK, it seems relevant to ask why the company would choose to implement English as a corporate language. One part of the answer relates to the wider societal conditions. As we argued above, NOT to introduce English as a corporate language would be a marked choice for many international companies today, given the current ideological position of English as ‘the global language’ or

indeed the language of globalism. According to this logic, English is necessary if the company wants to be a player on the global market. Through the language-strategy process at CONSULT DK, English has gradually been established as the only relevant language for communication across the organisation. In the early documents, there is a clear and explicit recognition of the value of other languages and indeed linguistic diversity as such, but gradually—as the language strategy is communicated to the organisation—other languages are erased—both metaphorically and literally—from the strategy documents, eventually leaving English as the only language that matters. In this way, the hegemonic position of English as the ‘natural’ language of international business is displayed and reinforced.

Another part of the answer can be found at the organisational level. In CONSULT DK English is constructed as the language that will allow the company to realise its internationalisation journey, and willingness to ‘embrace’ English comes to be seen as an index of a ‘global mindset’. The local motivation for implementing the new language policy is thus closely linked with strategic goals related to increased offshoring and international collaboration and competition. This development, in turn, has consequences for how employees are positioned. The language strategy becomes useful as a tool for local management who are licensed—and encouraged, even—to use employees’ (orientation to) English in evaluating their performance. From this perspective, an employee’s competence in—and orientation to—the use of English becomes an index not only of a ‘global mindset’, but also a performative marker of company loyalty. In a process that constitutes an example of *fractal recursivity* (Irvine & Gal 2000), the language ideological logic that applies at the level of the company vis-à-vis the global market, comes to be mirrored at the level of individual employees vis-à-vis the company. In this sense, the language policy initiative becomes a tool that allows management to facilitate change in company culture well beyond practices related to language choice. As a tool for determining which employees the company should bet on in its new international future, the language policy leads to marginalisation and disempowerment of certain employees. As a private company, CONSULT has every right to do this, and there may be very good reasons for having English language requirements for certain employees. But the idea that English should be mandated for ALL employees seems to be a language ideological move that is in need of critical reflexivity, especially given the strong position Danish in fact has as the dominant language in Danish society and Danish companies (Lønsmann 2011).

This article presents a single case study, and we are not, on the basis of the study itself, in a position to say whether our findings would apply in other companies. Yet, based on studies from similar contexts, many of them referenced above, we do believe that the investigation points to important general sociolinguistic processes characteristic of late modernity. Many of these are well-known, including the widespread use of English as a lingua franca, the even more widespread ideology of ‘English as the global language’, and the general commodification of language.

Through this article, we have investigated what happens as these processes converge in a single case, namely the design and implementation of a new language strategy in the Danish branch of a multinational company. The picture that emerges is one in which it becomes increasingly difficult—the closer we look—to account for the distinction between societal and institutional structures and individual agency in tracing the drivers behind social change. If we look at the case from the perspective of the employees that to varying degrees have become disempowered as a result of the new language policy and the single-minded promotion of English, it is easy to frame company management in general and the new CEO in particular as the instigators of social change. After all, they are the people in power and the ones who have dictated the change. Yet, if we look at the situation from the perspective of management, the situation is perhaps less clear-cut. If, as we suggest above, the move to English as a corporate language is really to be seen as the unmarked and ‘natural’ choice for a company like this one, given the way the world is ideologically constructed and discursively perceived, then the issue of agency becomes more blurred. Management at CONSULT DK are obviously responsible for their decision to implement English as the corporate language, but, after all, they did not invent the assumption that English is the universal language for successful business communication, just as the process of language commodification certainly did not originate with them. So, to some extent, they have simply jumped on the bandwagon. The interesting issue, then, becomes who (metaphorically speaking) is actually driving the bandwagon, and what it is fuelled by. This is a task that goes beyond the scope of the present article, but one that we suggest merits further research.

In her article from *Harvard Business Review*, Neeley relates the following anecdote from her fieldwork in France:

Imagine that a group of salespeople from a company’s Paris headquarters get together for a meeting. Why would you care whether they all could speak English? Now consider that the same group goes on a sales call to a company also based in Paris, not realizing that the potential customer would be bringing in employees from other locations who didn’t speak French. This happened at one company I worked with. Sitting together in Paris, employees of those two French companies couldn’t close a deal because the people in the room couldn’t communicate. It was a shocking wake-up call, and the company soon adopted an English corporate language strategy. (Neeley 2012:117–18)

This is in many ways a fascinating story, but the ‘logical’ conclusion—or is it a language ideological moral lesson (cf. Irvine 1989)?—that we are invited to entertain is surely flawed. English may be perceived as the obvious solution to the experienced problem, but it is certainly no miracle cure and by no means the only solution. To suggest French as a corporate language in this context would—at least in principle—seem equally sensible. Enlisting the services of a professional interpreter would appear to be another viable (and probably cheaper) solution. We would argue that one sensible function of sociolinguistic research on language policy in international settings would be to dispel myths like the one broached here by Neeley. Not in order to promote a naïve vision of multilingualism, nor with a(n

equally utopian) view to overthrowing the dominance of English, but simply to create space for increased reflexivity by denaturalising the hegemonic position of English in global business and other societal spheres.

NOTES

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²Figures in the extract have been deleted due to considerations of confidentiality.

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