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The concept of language policy: proposal for guidelines for Danish Companies operating on a global basis

Introduction

During recent years, business has become global and improved communications have expanded markets to embrace the entire globe with the world becoming one single market place. Companies have to operate in markets where there are language barriers and cultural barriers. Language affects the ability of multinational companies or organizations to function in this global market.

The ability to speak one or more foreign languages and to understand other cultures is a core skill of the global worker in the 21st century. However, the full force of these developments and thus the need for corporate language policies has only been recognized by a small number of companies.

Research shows that on an international level, 20% of companies are losing business because they do not have an international communication strategy and the necessary language competence to meet their business needs. To ignore the forces of the international markets of today, to not respond in the languages best understood by the clients be it to answer the telephone, socialise, negotiate, compose letters, decipher them, make offers etc. is not a very fruitful strategy.

In this paper I will briefly describe the situation of international companies in a small monolingual country and how they face the new context of the globalised economy and show how they cope with the language problem in general. Finally, I will discuss the concept of language policy and try to establish a set of guidelines for companies about written language in order to help them meet their business needs in the new economy.

Danish Companies in the globalised market

Denmark is a small monolingual country. Danish is spoken in Denmark and understood in the Nordic Countries and has no effect in a globalised market. Thus, in order to be able to operate globally, exchange ideas, know-how, goods, to make foreign investments, out-sourcing and world-sourcing, Danish companies have to use foreign languages in their international communication, i.e. first of all English since the current world language for business is English.

English is used by about 92 % of Danish companies, German by 80 %. Other foreign languages are French, Swedish, Spanish, Norwegian, Italian and Portuguese in the mentioned order. However, it is predicted that by 2050 Chinese will challenge the position of English and many Danish organizations and leading companies are aware of this development. The big export markets of Danish companies are Scandinavia, Germany, France, Great Britain, USA and Spain.

During recent years, there has been a tendency in Denmark to focus on the importance of language competences as a consequence of the European Year of Languages 2001. The European Year of Languages 2001 was organised by the European Union and the Council of Europe with the aim of encouraging language learning throughout Europe.

The Year was an opportunity to raise awareness in the general public and to debate language teaching and learning at local, regional and national levels. Resolutions and plans have been adopted, proposing a series of actions to be taken at European level for the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity. Commitments have been made, language policies have been established or changed and languages and language learning have a higher profile in Europe than ever before.

Alongside this considerable momentum created by the European Year of Languages, Danish companies have also begun recognising the long-term benefits of efficient communications with their markets. There has been a decentralization of communication and everybody writes his/her own letters, e-mails, reports etc., so it is essential that not only key roles but all employees have common guidelines helping and guiding them in their written communication.

The concept of language policy

The concept of language policy is difficult to define as there are different definitions of what a language policy is and what it involves. The concept is used in different contexts, and each context defines the meaning of the concept. The concept of language policy is used

- at international levels i.e. within the United Nations and the European Union
- at national levels - France and Canada being obvious examples
- at the public sector level - and
- at the private sector level

Whereas language policies at international and national levels have existed for many years, the concept of *corporate language policy* has emerged in connection with the globalisation and is therefore a rather new phenomenon subject to confusion. At the same time, several terms like *language planning*, *language policy*, *language strategy*, *communication strategy* and *communication policy* are terms covering the same phenomenon.

Language is the cement that binds people together and enables them to communicate, develop and exchange ideas. It is therefore not surprising that people in different types of society (families, monolingual or multilingual groups or societies) want to control or affect how language should develop or be used either to symbolise power relationships, to maintain social order and discipline or to solve a specific communication problem. Language planning is important in all types of society at different levels. However, language planning has also become a political instrument in carrying out linguistic control of the status of a certain language in certain countries or regions like France, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Iceland.

According to Cooper (1989,31,183), language planning can be defined as

Deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the acquisition, structure or functional allocation of their language codes

And language planning is an explicit choice between alternatives, which consist of

Choosing a language or some languages and/or
Improving a language or some languages in order to obtain greater efficiency

In the above-mentioned context of the meaning of language planning, language policy can be defined as (Ager: 1996, 3)

All (national) choices concerning language and culture specifying the general objectives (educational level, function and status of the language etc.)

Language planning done by (governments, organisations, individuals) with the aim of embodying attitudes into action or distinct practices

What is a corporate language strategy and policy?

If we consider how companies use the different concepts, terminology changes in accordance with the general management terms but the ideas and the meaning of the concepts are very much the same. Instead of talking about *language planning*, companies talk about *language strategy* or *language policy* and the distinction between language policy and strategy is either not very clear or non-existing.

Some companies consider a language policy and language strategy synonym - which is the most frequent situation - others consider language policy a subordinate concept to language strategy. The simpler the “policy” of a company, the less you need a distinction between the two concepts. However, if a company operates with both a series of general guidelines and objectives and concrete and complex operations to achieve such objectives, it would be obvious and advisable to distinguish between “strategy”, which means decisions made by the top level of the company and a “policy”, which is the concrete and detailed realisations of the elaborate strategic plans put into operation at a lower level of the organisation – very often by the linguistic employees or translators.

On the basis of the above-mentioned observations and some attempts made by Danish companies and language experts to define what is meant by corporate language policy and corporate language strategy, I suggest the following definitions of corporate language strategy and policy

Corporate language strategy

A corporate language strategy contains activities systematically applied in the field of language and communication with the aim of improving the communication of the company in order to realise the business objectives of such company.

Corporate language policy

The actions leading to the concrete realisations of activities defined in the language strategy

However, for simplistic reasons, the term *language policy* will be used in the following covering both concepts.

Approx. 10 to 15 large Danish companies have publicly acknowledged having a language policy and using it as a competition parameter. However, many Danish companies have a language policy without acknowledging it or mentioning it. They may for instance have decided - without further notion - to choose English as their corporate language or as the language of their website alongside Danish or alone without Danish. However, in most cases, corporate language policies are more comprehensive and generally comprise the following three aspects

1. Efficient and correct communication
2. reflecting the image of the company (i.e. the corporate image) - with
3. focus on the target group

To be more specific, a language policy determines the linguistic guidelines for corporate communications such as

- Style and tone in regard to different media
- Deliberate linguistic choices
- Consistent use of terms and other linguistic tools
- Use of foreign languages

Furthermore, corporate language policy may contain a language manual with examples and steps to be taken to implement the policy.

The aim of a corporate language policy is to

- improve and assure the quality of communications in order to
- support the image or the prestige of the company and its products.

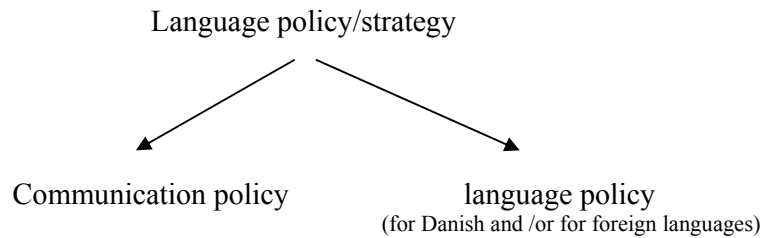
Typologies of corporate language policy: Danish companies

There are no official statistics of the number of companies having a language policy, but the general impression is that companies involved in *business-to-business* are more reluctant to introduce language policies since they feel no need, whereas companies involved in *business-to-customers* are much more eager on improving communication to the reader.

Companies with a corporate language policy usually make a commitment to improve the foreign language competences of their employees because they recognise the benefits of efficient communications in accordance with the image of the company.

However, as already mentioned some companies have a policy without having defined it and without mentioning it, which is the most simple form of a language policy. This may be based on the fact that English is typically used as the working language at group level (ex. Carlsberg) or that internal lists exist with recommended terms, abbreviations etc., which means that some form of language policy is implied because most communication is handled by a communication department or by secretaries or translators concerned with the quality of the communication but without any specific guidelines.

In the following, I will illustrate two typical typologies of a corporate language policy used by Danish companies or language policy experts.



The objective of the language policy or strategy as the wider term is

- to assure uniform communication of high quality which adds to the image

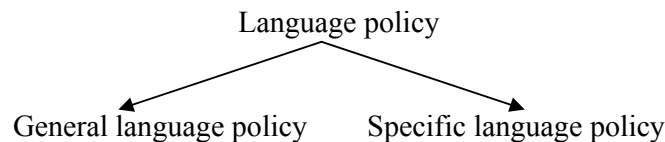
A communication policy comprises

- key words (i.e. openness, honesty) for the image to be reflected in the communication
- the objective of the language policy

A concrete language policy may contain

- guidelines for the communication of for instance spelling, punctuation, use of terms, and maybe
- a language manual or guide containing concrete examples
- an action plan for the implementation of the policy

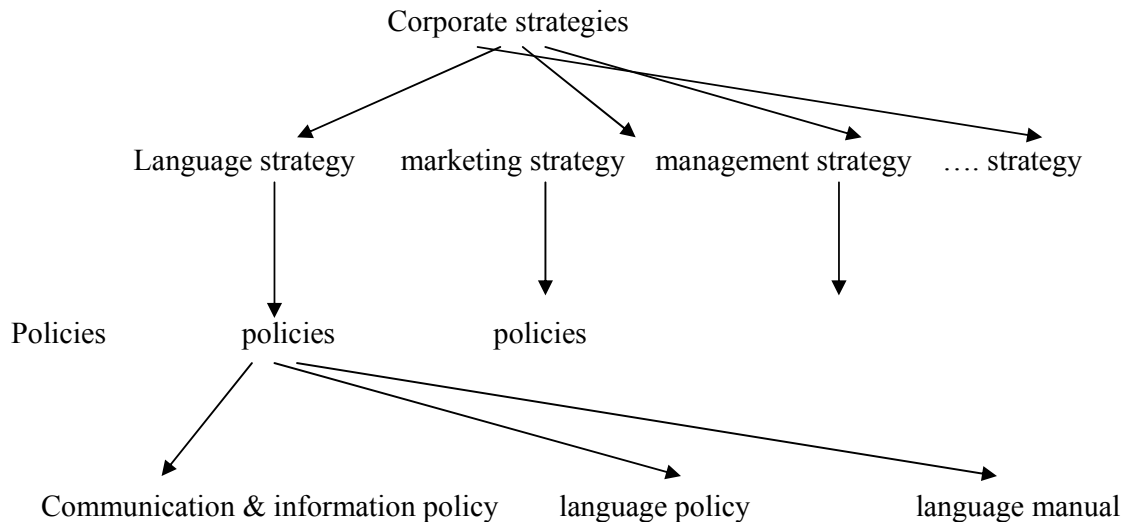
and another model



where general language policy equals communication policy of the first model and specific language policy is equivalent to the concrete language policy of the first model.

As can be seen from the three models, there is no general agreement on the terminology but, as has been mentioned earlier, the different terms cover more or less the same concepts. The problem, however, with the above-mentioned three models is that they have been formulated independently of the company's general strategies. Meanwhile, language should not only be looked upon as a tool for some employees in the company. Instead, it should be integrated in the entire organisation at the strategic level, which means that a language strategy should be formulated and implemented at the same level as the company's other strategies such as marketing strategy, it-strategy.

The following model illustrates how a language strategy and a language policy may be incorporated in the general strategic scheme of the company in a holistic way.



A communication and information policy represents the attitude of the managers on how the corporate identity should be communicated to the environment and the steps to be taken in that regard.

The language policy comprises guidelines for the use of the language (Danish, English or other foreign languages) with respect to the specific target groups (style, choices, consequence)

The language manual or language guide contains concrete examples of correct language (grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.)

Guidelines for a language policy in Danish companies: proposal

A language strategy embraces all aspects of corporate and in most cases, the managers need help from a team of experts (communication and language experts, computer experts, technical writers) to formulate the strategy and the language policy. Language expertise is supplied either by employees or by external consultants.

The *first step* of a language project is to develop a *communications plan* comprising the following:

- Determination of objectives and corporate image
- Analyses of the communication situation (internal, external, medias etc.)
- Decisions about what is good communication

- Suggestions for improvements and rules
- A language policy draft
- Implementation of the policy
- Language training and courses

Steps could be added or removed. It depends on how ambitious the company is.

The *next step* will normally be to establish the guidelines of the written language. The following proposal is mainly based on examples from Danish companies.

1. Considerations before you start writing

1.1 Sender: who are you?

- Consider the choice of using *I / we /the name of the company* depending on the situation

1.2 Message: the purpose of your text? Is it to

- Inform
- Instruct
- Motivate
- Invite
- Convince
- Apologize

1.3 Medium: where will the text be read/type of text?

- E-mail, letter, advertisement

1.4 Reader/target group: to whom are your writing?

- Supplier, colleague, customer, bank ..?
- You have to consider
 - the language
 - friendly, forthcoming
 - easy to understand – specialist to specialist
 - tone
 - and the cultural background / cultural differences of the reader

2 What is good communication and good language?

2.1 Write short sentences

2.2 Create links between your ideas

2.3 Adapt your text to the reader

- Write in the appropriate style and tone (formal, informal)
- Use terms that your audience will understand

2.4 Write correctly

- Spelling
- Grammar
- Punctuation

2.5 Write consistently

2.6 Abbreviations

3 Structure and layout (how to organize and design your text)

- Templates - in the form of
 - letters
 - faxes
 - memos
 - agendas

4 Particulars of X-company (something special in your company to take into consideration)

4.1 Company name (written with capitals, to be translated etc.)

4.2 Terminology – database

4.3 Corporate language: British English – American English

4.4 E-mail culture

5 Proofreading or quality control

5.1 Language service and support

5.1.1 Ambassadors or language pilots

5.1.2 Guidelines for proofreading

6 Dictionaries

6.1 Paper dictionaries

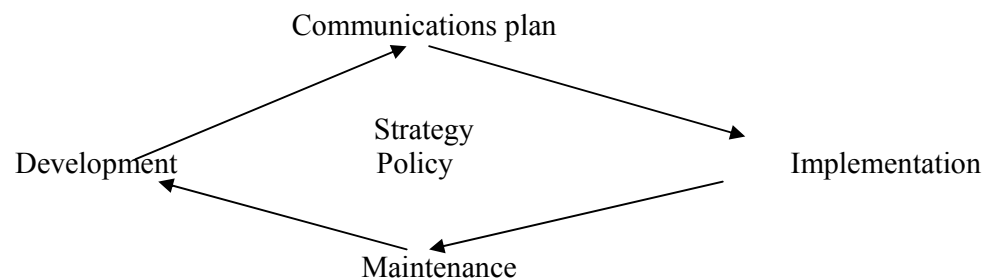
6.2 Online dictionaries

The *implementation* of the language policy is the most important step to be taken in order to ensure the impact of the language project. Successful implementation can only be achieved provided there is:

- Language policy considered as a long-term investment
- Financial support
 - dictionaries
 - access to the internet
- Staff investment by having
 - language ambassadors / network
 - language service / department
- Information visibility
 - intranet

- pamphlets / brochures with the most important rules
- seminars
- network groups
- Attitude-forming process
 - deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of the personnel
 - language is important: the image of the company
 - encouragement
- Willingness of the staff to accept language training
 - language competences and skills of the personnel
 - language level
 - selected groups
 - recruitment policy
 - language courses

After implementation of the communications plan, the policy should be followed up and further developed and ultimately lead to readjustment of the plan and the process repeats itself. The follow-up is illustrated by this scheme.



The following problems are often mentioned by companies in connection with language policy:

- Recognizing that language is important but only given second priority
- Abandoning Danish in favor of English for financial reasons: it is expensive to produce websites in both Danish and English
- Time factor, question of priorities (not sufficient time to improve skills, to learn language, to make quality control)
- Language policy has no evident and direct impact on the bottom line

Perspectives

As a consequence of the increasing world sourcing, global knowledge sharing and global innovation, the development of Danish company websites in English is expected to increase rapidly over the next few years. The target groups will become more global and we will see an increasing need for communication skills in English. This tendency is supported by the national language policy, which aims to strengthen both Danish and English.

Accordingly, the implementation of corporate language policies in a large number of Danish companies will be encouraged during the coming years due to several factors. The use of English as corporate language will increase the demand for English language skills and for some form of control of the communication quality since the employees will have to communicate in a language other than their mother tongue. This tendency will be reinforced by the fact that we will experience an overflow of company information due to mergers, which will increase the number of individuals working with communication. The sooner Danish companies become aware of this development and consider the formulation and the implementation of a language strategy an investment of benefit to the company, the better the chance of succeeding in the globalised economy.

However, in order to be able to do so, companies need qualified language experts able to propose, establish and implement appropriate language policies designed for each company's specific needs. A new market for language consultants ready to help companies establish language strategies is growing very rapidly, which forms the basis of creating didactic courses so that our students could be geared to take a more active part in making the companies aware of the necessity of actively defining and implementing a language policy benefiting the competitiveness of the companies on the global market. By implementing language strategies, Danish export companies can be transformed into truly international export companies.

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