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## **LINGUISTIC REPERTOIRES AND SEMIOTIC RESOURCES IN INTERACTION – a Finnish Manager as a Mediator in a Multilingual Meeting**

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This paper examines professional communication in a multilingual meeting in a small company in Finland within ethnographic, sociolinguistic, and discourse analytic frameworks. English is used as a lingua franca by a group of Finnish and Chinese business professionals. The aim is to study how language is used with other semiotic resources to construct meaning in interaction. In particular, with the focus on an individual participant who was the mediator in the meeting, the goal is to analyze participants' role alignment and interpersonal relationships. The results show that business professionals' roles are renegotiable in a meeting and by means of language accompanied by embodied actions such as gaze and gestures. The findings also reveal how different languages are used for particular purposes in the meeting.

**Keywords:** English as a lingua franca, multilingual meeting, role alignment, discourse analysis, embodiment

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'Globalization' is the buzzword of international business today, but what does it mean for individual business professionals? It means, among other things, that they need to handle various challenging situations with languages other than their mother tongue. In business settings, the choice of language(s) used is a delicate issue, affected by such factors as individuals' repertoires and communication skills as well as their interpersonal relationships. The interplay of various languages is one of the key features that characterize globalization today (Friedman, 2006, p. 10 cited in Charles, 2007, p. 260-261).

Globalization processes bring people from different parts of the world together to work. There is therefore an ongoing need for studies on language use at the grassroots level of business operations. English is used as the main lingua franca in international business, and its uses have been studied in the field of business communication research (Charles, 2007; Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005; Nickerson 2005). According to Charles (2007, p. 265-266), speakers of English as a business lingua franca (*BELF*) understand each other fairly well partly due to their shared business background and purposes. The common ground facilitates interpretation even though speakers come from a variety of backgrounds. Problems may arise when people have inadequate communication skills. (ibid: p. 265-266). How people in real-life workplace situations handle these situations is of interest in this paper: do they have problems and if so, how are they resolved?

Using English as a lingua franca is not a unitary phenomenon and Charles (2007) suggests that we need to "increase understanding of the different *Englishes* (emphasis added) and discourses used to conduct global business, and encourage the development of situationally appropriate communication skills" (p. 266). In order to gain more information on the diverse ways business is conducted in intercultural encounters, further studies with an ethnographic perspective are called for (Suchan & Charles, 2006, p. 395; Sackmann & Phillips, 2004), and as Suchan & Charles suggest, "we need to go into business organizations

and shadow first-line supervisors, midlevel managers, and support staff members to understand communication problems” (Suchan & Charles, 2006, p. 395). Ethnographic studies of the practices of a particular community are important since “being there” (Geertz, 1988) provides important insights into daily activities in globalized business: the way people interact with not only talk but also other non-verbal resources such as gestures. Furthermore, attending to people’s repertoires will provide insights on the delicate ways people manage interpersonal relationships in intercultural teams in actual workplace contexts. Although it is an important topic, it has not yet been studied much (Campbell & Davis 2006, p. 63-64).

To increase our understanding of individuals’ interaction in globalized business, this paper investigates communicative practices in a small engineering company based in Finland, in the context of a meeting between Finns and representatives from the company’s Chinese subsidiary. English is the shared language. The interaction between the Finns and their Chinese colleagues is examined and particular attention is paid to a Finnish manager who acts as a mediator in the meeting. The manager is not a language expert per se but he has been assigned the role of interpreter because of his English skills. The aim of this paper is to show how he manages interpersonal and social relations in the meeting by taking on different roles through his choices of using English or Finnish. The paper also examines the use of non-verbal aspects of communication such as gestures and gaze as they reveal what is the range of resources people use in communication besides language. This way the paper sheds some light on the complex and dynamic nature of multilingual and multicultural workplace meetings in which people’s linguistic repertoires vary. The present study is a follow-up project to a longitudinal ethnographic study that investigates five Finnish engineers’ biographies of language use, their discursive identity construction across time and trajectories of socialization into working life.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING A GLOBAL PROFESSIONAL'S REPertoire OF RESOURCES**

The approach taken in this paper is primarily influenced by ethnography, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, particularly interactional sociolinguistics which has been used in some earlier studies of international business communication (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Rogerson-Revell, 2007). Interactional sociolinguistics focuses on situated meaning and meaning-making practices in interaction, aiming at understanding the functions of language. In particular, this paper draws on the theoretical insights of scholars such as Hymes (1996), Gumperz (1982, 1992, 1999), Goffman (1959, 1974, 1981), Goodwin (2000) and those addressing issues of language and communication in the age of globalization (Blommaert, 2005, 2010; Rampton, 2006), and studying interpersonal relations in intercultural communication (Spencer-Oatey, 2000). In these frameworks, language is seen as a resource (Hymes, 1996) and part of a wider repertoire of semiotic resources (gestures, gaze, artefacts etc.) which people use to construct meaning (Goodwin, 2000). In order to understand the construction of meaning, it is important to look at how participants function in interaction in relation to others (Schiffrin 1994, referring to Gumperz and Goffman). In interaction, people perform actions through the use of their repertoires, composed of different semiotic resources; either talk, or embodied actions (Goodwin 2000), or combinations of these. What resources individuals use in order to “get the job done” and what consequences their choices have is the focus of this paper.

### *Language and Embodied Actions*

Using a foreign language and acting successfully in business situations demands not only knowledge of the lexical and syntactical elements of that language but also communicative competence in the language and the situation. This competence includes

skills such as knowing the required terminology and strategies of negotiation and knowing how to function smoothly in social settings, for example “do[ing] small talk” (Shanahan, 1996, p. 315-316). As this article will show, looking at linguistic performance is not enough to understand how global professionals succeed in interactions. People need interactional competence and the ability to manage interpersonal relations, which may be even more crucial when English is used as a lingua franca. In addition, functioning in intercultural situations also requires knowledge of social and cultural aspects of communication, such as how to address interlocutors. According to Shanahan (1996, p. 317), after a sufficiently high level of proficiency in a language has been achieved, the adoption of cultural nuances such as gestures, body posture, accompanying facial expressions, and the timing of remarks can advance the learning of more advanced skills. How do people use these non-verbal aspects of communication in a lingua franca situation where people come from a variety of cultural backgrounds? To find out about what constitutes competence in global business situations it is essential to look at individuals holistically and see how they use a range of available resources to carry out the desired functions in their daily business activities.

Goodwin’s (2000) ideas of participation as action and embodiment, which refer to the multisemiotic nature of communication, are useful when aiming at understanding such global business competence. Language is one component of communication but so is embodied action. *Embodied action* (Goodwin, 2000) refers to the use of a range of semiotic resources such as body movements, gaze, head nods, and facial expressions. By investigating how people in interaction use these various resources momentarily to construct meaning, Goodwin’s (2000) work represents the growing field of multimodal interaction research. But what kinds of functions do these resources have in interaction? From a pragmatic perspective gestures can make meaning more precise or provide a context of how a verbal expression should be interpreted (Kendon, 2000). In addition, they can also add meaning to what has

been said, which is why they should be looked at in order to understand what is inferred by the speaker. Gestures can also mark speaker attitudes toward what one is saying, expressing one's intended expectations as regards how the interlocutor should deal an utterance or conveying the nature of the illocutionary intent of the utterance (Kendon, 2000, p. 56). In addition to gestures, gaze has central functions in interaction: looking at one another affects the way participation is organized in interaction (Rossano, Brown, and Levinson, 2009). Usually speaker obtains the gaze of his recipient and a recipient gazes at the speaker when the speaker is gazing at the hearer (Goodwin, 1980). But as research findings show (e.g. Rossano, Brown and Levinson, 2009), the functions are diverse, complex and culture-specific and so heterogeneous that they cannot be covered here. In terms of participation and social relations, gaze is used to monitor each others' behaviour (Goodwin, 1980) or to shift recipients' attention to gestures (Streeck, 1993) for example. Furthermore, Olsher (2005) has found that for foreign language speakers' embodied actions can convey more precise meaning when linguistic explanations are inadequate.

These views suit well for the present study in which embodied action is used to refer to participants' nonverbal behaviour with their bodies (gaze, gestures, body movement). Although this paper focuses on language, meaning is seen as conveyed with multiple resources simultaneously which is why micro-level interactional phenomena are analysed to understand these meaning-making activities. Embodied action is considered as part of the process of gaining a holistic understanding of how participants construct roles and manage their relationships in the meeting.

### *Roles*

Furthermore, what is also at stake in multilingual business settings is that people need to align towards different roles accordingly. Shanahan (1996) suggests that "to reach a high

level of communicative competence in a second language is to begin to take on a new *persona*” and “to speak a different language is to adopt a radically different mode of behavior” (p. 317, italics in original). These ideas link with the notion of multiple identities that characterize late modernity (e.g. Rampton, 2006). Aspects of an individual’s habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) include different situated or local, interactional identities (Zimmerman, 1998), or roles into which people align in performance (Goffman, 1981). Individuals shift roles in interaction, which Goffman (1981) calls *changes of footing*:

a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance. A change in our footing is another way of talking about a change in our frame for events.... participants over the course of their speaking constantly change their footing, these changes being a persistent feature of natural talk. (Goffman, 1981, p. 128)

Changes of footing are changes in speakers’ positions signaled by shifts, which contribute to participant roles in the interaction (Blommaert, 2005) and show changes in the participation framework. This shifting can be observed in business meetings and according to Goffman (1981), the speaker can move between the roles of *animator*, *principal* or *author*. The animator refers to the “individual active in the role of utterance production” but does not necessarily involve one’s own voice; the author refers to “someone who has selected the sentiments that are expressed and the words in which they are encoded”; and the principal is “someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say” (Goffman, 1981, p. 144-45). Through footing shifts participation frameworks change continuously and thus for example the formal position of the manager does not necessarily mean that he is the only one to construct leadership and align into leader roles (see also Nielsen, 2009, p. 45). These locally situated aspects of identity are achieved interactionally by the participants involved and they are signalled by multiple means: language, body posture, gestures and gaze.

To summarize, individual's business practices should be situated in the workplace context which is governed by local norms and roles but they should be seen as open to renegotiation depending on the situation and task at hand. Competence in these situations constitutes the core of workplace activities.

### *Multilingual Business Meetings as an Object of Study*

Meetings are among the core activities in the workplace and are an important context for relational work (Fletcher, 1999). They also provide opportunities for exercising institutional power and building interpersonal relationships by, for instance, the expression of politeness, collegiality, and solidarity (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003; Spencer-Oatey, 2000). In the field of business studies, meetings have been popular sites of research (Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003). Studies have been undertaken for instance from the perspectives of discourse management (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997), strategies of meeting management (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003), intercultural processes as shown in talk (Poncini, 2007), accomplishment of interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Sarangi & Roberts, 1999) and leadership (Clifton, 2006), and the functions of phenomena such as backchanneling (Bjørge, 2009), humor (Holmes, 2000, 2006; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Vuorela, 2005; Gunnarson, 2009), and laughter (Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009). In these studies the data have consisted of audio and video recordings in either real or simulated situations. However, some of the participants have been academics and students (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003), in contrast to the present study, in which the participants are international business professionals.

Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris's (1997, p. 208) definition of meetings as "task-oriented and decision-making encounters" involving "the cooperative effort of two parties, the Chair and the Group" is rather apt for the purposes of the present study, as the meeting

under study takes place between five people, is task-oriented and has been called to make decisions. However, the situation is very dynamic since it is often unclear who is chairing the meeting. The participants' roles change continuously and are continuously negotiated in the talk-in-interaction (Drew and Heritage, 1992), although previous studies have shown that in formal meetings topics and turn-taking are typically controlled by the chair, while joint negotiation characterizes less formal meetings (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003, p. 68). In the present meeting, based on ethnographic evidence one could say that the participants' linguistic skills and their expertise in the matters discussed influence role shifting. It is therefore useful to investigate the present meeting from the viewpoint of its *functions*.

Holmes and Stubbe (2003, p. 59) focus on the functions of meetings and define meetings as "*interactions which focus, whether indirectly or directly, to workplace business*" (italics in original), which suggests that almost any gathering of people at work could be seen as a meeting. Meetings differ in terms of size, length, location, composition, style of interaction, structure, relationships between the participants, goals, and purposes, all of which are relevant when classifying meetings (Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009). According to Holmes and Stubbe (2003, p. 63), meetings can be classified on the basis of their overt primary or business goals and expected outcomes as: 1) planning or prospective/forward-oriented; 2) reporting or retrospective/backward-/backward-oriented; and 3) task-oriented or problem-solving/present-oriented. They have three main phases: an opening or introductory section, a central development section, and a closing section (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997; Boden, 1994 cited in Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009, p. 13-14). All three phases can be identified in the meeting focused on in this study.

## **DATA AND METHOD**

Conducting an ethnographic study involves doing fieldwork and collecting multiple data. It is also about participating in the people's lives in order to learn about them (Blommaert and Dong, 2010). The data used in this study come from an archive in which a Finnish engineer's (here called Tero) use of English at work has been audio and video recorded for over a year during fieldwork in his work trips and at his workplace. In addition, instant messaging and email communication have been gathered. Tero works as a global business developer and research and development manager in a small engineering company with about 50 employees in Finland. This paper analyzes video recordings which were made during a visit by two Chinese colleagues and a supplier to the company. The recordings were accompanied by participant observation, fieldnotes, and discussions with the participants involved in order to gain a holistic picture of communicative practices in the company.

The data excerpts chosen for closer analysis here come from a one and a half hour meeting between Tero, the Finnish managing director (Matti), a Finnish engineer (Ville), the manager of the Chinese subsidiary (Susan), and a Chinese quality manager (James). All names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality. All the participants except the manager of the Chinese subsidiary are male. The participants already knew each other, some of them having been in touch for years. They interacted outside the meeting as well. Susan and Tero use instant messaging for communicating almost daily. It is worth noting that both Matti and James do not know English very well. However, James speaks some English in the meeting whereas Matti does not speak English there at all but as the analysis shows, often he seems to understand what is going on. Part of Tero's job description is to act as interpreter for his manager.

The meeting took place in the company's office on the last day of the visit. The participants are sitting at a round table, Tero and Susan next to one another facing Matti and Ville, with James on the other side of Susan. The aim of the meeting was to discuss both the

visitors' experiences during the week and future plans. It was the most formal activity of the week as it was carefully planned, and all the key people involved in the running of the subsidiary were present. However, no explicit, written agenda was handed out either before or at the beginning of the meeting (compare Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009, p. 11 "meetings are generally set up by written invitations"). A typical feature of small meetings is the chair's significant influence on the development of the meeting (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003, p. 70). In this case Tero and Matti were in charge of the meeting and introduced and closed the topics of discussion (according to Tero this is standard procedure and had not been explicitly agreed upon prior to this meeting). Although English was the shared language, there were long stretches when the Finns spoke Finnish and the Chinese spoke Chinese in their own teams. In fact, about a third of the meeting included discussions in the participants' first languages. The Finns particularly often negotiated issues together before introducing them to their Chinese colleagues.

The data have been transcribed by carefully listening to the audio and watching the video. The present transcription method (see Appendix) includes written presentation of talk and nonverbal actions. Linguistic features are transcribed orthographically without attention to pronunciation as it is not considered relevant for the present analysis. In the transcript talk is written on the upper line and non-verbal activities (direction and movement of gaze, gestures and bodily position) are written below in italics at roughly the same point in which they occur with talk. As transcripts show analyst's research focus (Gumperz and Berenz, 1993, p. 119), in this paper only Tero's embodied actions are highlighted. Talk in Finnish is translated into English and marked below the Finnish utterance.

Drawing on ethnography, small details are looked at in their context to arrive at a holistic understanding of what happens in the meeting. The data is analysed in micro-detail in terms of speech and embodied action and combinations of these in order to study Tero's

management of interpersonal and social relations and his role alignment in the meeting. Also data gathered with other means (observation, discussions) is used in the interpretation of the activities. To reach the main aim, the following empirical sub-questions are asked: i) How and where does Tero use English and where does he use Finnish in the meeting? and ii) What other semiotic resources does he use alongside languages, and how? In the analysis different semiotic resources are treated as serving the function of *contextualization cues* (Gumperz 1982, 1992) which help speakers to infer the meaning of a message and allow interactions to continue without difficulty (Gumperz defines this as *conversational inference*). Cues serve to frame interaction “in such a way as to convey information on what is likely to transpire, what role relations and attitudes are involved, what verbal strategies are expected, and what the potential outcomes are” (Gumperz, 1992, p. 307). With contextualization cues participants are able to link their previous sociocultural knowledge to the current situation in order to understand what is going on. Hence contextualization involves the indexical relationship between micro and macro scales which means that instances of communication can be viewed indexically as understandable in terms of cultural norms and traditions (Blommaert, 2010). Different contextualization cues (talk and embodied actions) serve as signals for participants’ footings and participation frameworks.

## **FINDINGS**

This section presents the analysis and findings of the study. In a detailed analysis of extracts taken from the meeting the discourse content, participation frameworks, linguistic choices as well as the participants’ embodied actions are looked at.

The meeting under study enables as well as requires certain roles. Firstly, Matti and Tero both introduce items for discussion and close them. Secondly, Tero has been assigned

the role of interpreter and translator by the general manager. Thirdly, as Matti was unable to participate in their activities earlier in the week he asks a lot of questions about the visit. Fourthly, Susan as the manager of the Chinese subsidiary is the spokesperson for the subsidiary working in close co-operation with the quality manager, James.

### *Manoeuvring Between Roles*

The participants' roles are open to negotiation during the meeting as the discussion develops. This section looks at what choices Tero makes when he translates his manager's talk for their Chinese colleagues and what these choices tell about Tero's roles. Prior to the first excerpt the participants have been discussing the possibility of moving the factory premises to a new location in China. Tero has explained to Matti in Finnish why this is an issue now and he has discussed it with Susan earlier. In the first example they are talking about their requirements for the new premises: the rent should remain stable for more than a year, and the rent should be payable monthly. This is followed by a request concerning the quality of the premises.

#### **Excerpt 1: 200209\_no dump**

- 1 Matti ei sitte mitään hirveetä murjua  
(and then it shouldn't be an awful dump)  
((T and S gaze at M))
- 2 (1.2) ((T gaze at M))
- 3 Tero yeah and (1.0)  
((T shifting gaze: M à S))
- 4 heh (.) hhhfit has to bef (1.0)  
((S & J gaze at M, M glances at V))
- 5 [nice views and good looksf]  
((T hands widening apart twice, smiling, S smiling))
- 6 Matti [heheheh]  
((M leans backwards))
- 7 ((everyone laughs))

This example begins with Matti's turn in Finnish. It could be interpreted as an authoritative remark and a managerial directive that the new factory should not be an *awful*

*dump* (*hirveä murju*). This negative description is framed as direct and while Matti is speaking Tero and Susan shift their gaze to him. In line 3 Tero's *yeah and* acknowledges Matti's request as a way of initializing the translation (other instances in the meeting where a similar strategy was used lead us to suppose that translation is likely to follow). Tero's gaze shift from Matti to Susan confirms that he is about to translate to Susan. After *yeah and* a rather long pause (1.0) follows, after which Tero laughs a bit, smiles, and produces the word *it* laughingly. There is a shift of mode to humorous frame here. After *it has to be* there is a pause again, after which Tero says *nice views and good looks*, at the same time moving his hands apart twice. The other participants' actions are important too: Susan and James look at Matti instead of the speaker (cf. Goodwin, 1980), possibly noting that there is something peculiar in Matti's turn since it takes Tero some time to translate it. Matti at this point shifts his gaze from Tero and glances at Ville. When Tero produces his description *nice views and good looks*, Susan starts to smile. After this, Matti leans back and begins to laugh, which indicates that he has understood Tero's turn.

In this turn-taking sequence Tero shifts footing. The first shift is indicated by the pause in line 3, when it is accompanied by laughter and a smile. There is the following trajectory in the shift: pause – laughter – smile – linguistic form *has to be* – pause. These actions show that a shift of mode is called for. Two interpretations are possible here: either Tero is reluctant to translate Matti's negative description of the premises literally and thereby threaten the interlocutors' face and interpersonal relationships, or he is unable to translate it. Either way, there is tension between author and animator roles as the linguistic outcome is different from what Matti said: Tero describes the requirements positively as *nice views and good looks* in contrast to the negative Finnish description. The Finnish word *murju* is a colloquial word used for old and ramshackle buildings. Despite this difference, one should note that Tero does translate: he produces a description of what is required of the premises.

The participants respond to Tero's description with laughter. Hence Tero is managing social relationships by being the author of the laughter-invoking utterance *nice views and good looks*. The managing director's word choice, *murju*, is not very sensitive from the point of view of interpersonal relations, but as it is uttered in Finnish it does not threaten relations, and Matti knows that. He leaves it to Tero to decide how to translate it for the Chinese participants: Here Tero needs communication competence to decide what is appropriate in this situation.

#### *Choice of Language as Resource for Managing Social Relations*

This section concentrates on the use of Finnish alongside English. The following instance occurs in the middle of the meeting. Matti and Tero are talking in Finnish about a hook thread which is part of a larger object which James has had to learn to manufacture. Tero explains how James learned to manufacture the thread, and Matti confirms that the thread is produced by pressing.

#### **Excerpt 2: 200209\_***understand the process*

30 Tero se kierre ei oo ongelma  
(and the thread is not a problem)

31 James ymmärsi sen prosessin ettei sitä tehdä koneistamalla  
(James understood the process that it's not done by machining)

32 Matti joo elikkä  
(yeah so)

33 ja sitte se että se tehään niinku puristamalla  
(and that it's done by pressing)

34 Tero puristamalla  
(by pressing/pressure)

35 Matti että ei läpi (xxx)  
(and not through (xxx))  
vaan että se menee niinku *tsyyt* vaan sitte molemmin puolin  
(but it goes like *tsyyt* on both sides)

36 (1.0)((*T shifts gaze M à V*))

37 Tero yeah (0.8)  
(*T gaze at V, head nod*)

38 ↑so oo (1.0)  
(*T gaze at desk*)

39 we talk about that hook (.) threads  
(*T pointing in air, T and S gaze at J*)

40 James yes  
(*J gaze at T*)

41 Tero how we make (.)

42 James yeah

43 Tero so we make a ↑pressure  
(*T both hands on air, twisting move*)

44 <not going> through (0.8)  
(*T left hand sliding from back and forth*)

45 pressure (.) both sides.  
(*T both hands in air, twisting move twice, gaze at J, S nodding*)

46 Susan mm

47 (0.6)

48 James yeah

49 Tero you you understand the process now.  
(*T gaze and hand pointing at J*)

50 James yes

51 (0.5)

52 Tero ok  
(*T head nod, gaze at V à desk*)

53 (0.8)

54 Matti hyvä (1.0)  
(good)

As in other instances, here in line 37 Tero shows understanding with Matti and then addresses the Chinese by beginning a shift from Finnish to English in line 38. It is a point of transition from talk with Matti to talk with Susan and James. Participation framework begins to change here and line 39 shows this change: as Tero's gaze is directed at James. After hedging (*so oo*) and a pause he produces a summary in English of what he has been discussing with Matti: *we talk about that hook (.) threads*. This marks a shift in participation

framework as Tero acknowledges the Chinese participants' presence in the meeting. He does this also after long stretches of talk in Finnish. Furthermore, he summarizes in English what has been said in Finnish and thus ensures that all the participants know what is being talked about. Elsewhere this is accomplished by asking the Chinese to explain certain points or raise questions regarding what they have discussed during the week. Tero appears to manage social relations through his use of these strategies. Discourse organization such as this shows how moves between activities invoke different participation frameworks.

Embodiment is important in this extract in terms of how Tero accompanies language with a gesture: he is pointing in the air while he is saying *we talk about that hook threads*. This metatalk represents what Tero and Matti discussed earlier in Finnish. The deictic term *that* is used to refer to the hook threads in the factory just next door to the meeting room. In this instance the linguistic term, pointing gesture and body position (towards the actual location of the factory) function as contextualization cues for the referent being talked about (Hindmarsh and Heath, 2000) and facilitates understanding. In line 43 (*so we make a pressure*) Tero shifts footing and begins to speak as a principal regarding what the company employees should do. At the same time he interprets, or imitates Matti who a few turns earlier talked about how the thread should be made. Even though Tero said to Matti that James understood how the thread should be made (line 30), he begins to tell James in lines 43-45 how the part should be manufactured. This instruction is carried out through both language and gesture. In this instance, gestures are used to signal movement, such as twisting, where the movement of the hands is used together with the linguistic expression *pressure* and a sliding gesture with the left hand to symbolize the expression *going through*. They are also used to clarify the deictic referent and the semantic meaning of the action. Interestingly, Tero repeats the twisting movement three times. By highlighting the activity this way, Tero seems to view the action directed to James important. Tero thus utilizes a variety of semiotic

resources simultaneously to arrive at meaning, to construct actions (Goodwin, 2000) and to convey a more precise meaning (Kendon, 2000; Olsher, 2005). James' backchanneling *yeah* and *yes* as well as his gaze signal his involvement in the sequence.

After the instructing sequence, Tero produces a confirmation check addressed to James *you you understand the process now* (line 49). It is part of the sequential management of a problem of understanding and it invites James to answer. The pointing gesture, gaze and talk stress that James is the recipient of Tero's turn. This topic seems then to be closed, judging from Tero's *ok* (line 52) and Matti's proceeding to another issue with *hyvä* (*good*) and *ja tuota niinniin* (*and then well*, see below the continuation of excerpt 2), the latter of which can be interpreted as moving the interaction on to the next stage. However, Tero's embodied actions (he looks at Ville and then at the desk instead of James while saying *ok*) reveal that he orients to what follows later:

[*excerpt 2 continues*]

55 Matti ja tuota niinniin hh. hhh.  
 (and then well)  
 ((*T gaze at M, playing with an eraser on the desk*))

56 (2.4)((*T gaze at M*))

57 Susan ((speaking Chinese))

58 Tero pitäisköhän siitä vielä lähettää joku valokuva hmh tai joku.=  
 (should we send a photo hmh or something)  
 ((*T gaze at V, smiling*))

59 Ville =↑joo taikka video [(xxx)]  
 (yeah or a video)

60 Tero [↑video] joo  
 (yeah)  
 ((*T gaze at V*))

61 Ville (xx) kattomassa=  
 (xx) to look)

62 Tero =↑nii on  
 (yeah that's right)

After a 2.4-second pause, Susan begins to talk to James in Chinese (line 57). This appears to be a contextualization cue for Tero that he can start talking to Matti and Ville in Finnish. Tero's Finnish utterance in line 58 is important: *pitäisköhän siitä vielä lähettää joku valokuva ... tai joku (should we send a photo ... or something)*. He gives a suggestion about sending a photo and it is immediately followed by Ville's *joo taikka video (yeah or a video)*. Tero and Ville have thus negotiated and concluded that it would be a good business strategy to ensure that understanding has been reached. As such, this sequence is about sharing specific information in a shared language which is intended for the Finns only. The use of Finnish is also part of managing social relations, since the utterance implies that even though mutual understanding seems to have been achieved the Finns still think that a video should be sent.

In order to understand this last example better, some ethnographic contextual information is required. In a post-interview Tero explains how he after working for a year in the company has noticed that James does not always admit that he does not understand something, and that he almost always responds to questions with *yeah* or *yes*. On several occasions Tero has later learned that James has not understood something, despite claiming that he has. This is rather clear from the participants' orientations too. Firstly, Tero confirms James' understanding (lines 43-49) even though he says earlier how James has understood how the thread is made (line 31). Secondly, Tero and Ville entertain the possibility that there is still a potential problem or that a problem may arise in the future, as they talk about giving James more aids to understand how the thread should be made. For them, arriving at this conclusion has required previous interpretative work and, especially for Tero, socialization into the workplace culture and customs. He evidently suspects that James might have problems understanding, and a small cue shows that similar situations have occurred before: in line 58 Tero grins a little. Grinning in this context can be considered to signal amusement

and it indexically places this instance in the wider workplace context in which understanding problems occurs. In order to maintain good interpersonal relations with James, Tero negotiates this solution, of sending the video, in Finnish with Ville, who is a technical expert in the company. After this sequence, Matti continues to talk to Tero and Ville in Finnish, and Susan and James to each other in Chinese, after which a new topic is introduced. In terms of collegiality, then, Finnish can function as a tool for maintaining a smooth relationship with the Chinese subsidiary partners.

It is also worth thinking that perhaps Tero's choice of switching into Finnish has a negative impact in the eyes of Susan and James and it is possible that they consider it rude that Tero speaks Finnish instead of English. However, switching between languages is rather common in the meeting and it is possible that the participants are accustomed to it, without considering it as being negative. Nevertheless, what the Chinese participants do recognize is Tero's tone of voice and laughter which might function as contextualizing cues for them to interpret what Tero may be saying, that is, something about the possibility of a problem in understanding. In terms of social relations, then, directing the suggestion about sending a video directly to James in English might also be considered a strategy for maintaining good relationship, if it were formulated as a token of friendly help.

### *Achieving Understanding*

In the previous example the focus was on shifting from English into Finnish and what kinds of effects it might have for interpersonal relationships. There are also instances which show that people's face can be directly threatened and that interrelationships are not always managed smoothly. These are discussed in this section. The following situation (excerpt 3) occurs at the end of the meeting. Tero is explaining to Matti what the others have been discussing in English:

**Excerpt 3: 200209\_hardness testing or tester**

- 70 Tero niin ne just sitä että leik- pilikkos ja lähettäs sitte  
laboratorioon kovuustesteihin  
(so they're saying they'd cut them and send them to a lab for  
hardness tests)
- 71 Ville onksiellä aika lähellä sitä  
(is there one quite nearby)
- 72 Tero on se siellä Nangingissa mut- ↑how much is one aa: hardness test  
in that lab  
(yes there is in Nanging)  
(*(T moving body posture:leaning backwards,gaze at S)*)
- 73 Susan aa ↑six aa: euros every time  
(*(S gaze at V-M-T, J gaze at T)*)
- 74 Tero six euros.  
(*(T gaze at S and J)*)
- 75 James yes  
(*(J gaze at T)*)
- 76 Tero so hardness tester is aa: six hundred so one-  
(*(T gaze at J)*)
- 77 James each sample  
(*(S shift gaze to J)*)
- 78 Tero ↑each sample.  
(*(T gaze at J, smile)*)
- 79 James [yes]  
(*(J nodding)*)
- 80 Susan [yeah] one time  
(*(S gaze at T)*)
- 81 Tero so: I I I suggest that you buy own hardness tester if it is six  
hundred euros. (0.8)  
(*(T smiling, gaze at desk → M → V → J, tapping on the table with  
a pen)*)
- 82 [because you may-]
- 83 James [six ↑hundred] no six euro  
(*(J head nods on 1<sup>st</sup> syllables)*)  
(*(M's phone ringing)*)
- 84 Tero eyes butf  
(*(T moving body forward)*)
- 85 Susan one hundred [times]  
(*(S gaze at T)*)
- 86 Tero [€↑machine€] hardness tester machine is six hundred  
euros  
(*(T leaning forward and then backwards, gaze at J)*)
- 87 James six hundred  
(*(J gaze at T)*)

In line 70 Tero says: *niin ne just sitä... kovuustestiin* (so they're... for hardness tests) and Ville asks whether there is a tester in Nanjing, the city where the subsidiary is located. Tero in line 72 confirms that there is a tester there, and after this switches into English, asking Susan how much hardness tests cost in a laboratory. Similar to earlier case where there is a change from Finnish into English, speech and gaze jointly mark a change in the participation framework: the speaker, Tero, looks at the recipient, Susan and speaks to her. In her

subsequent turn (line 73) Susan answers the question addressing it to multiple recipients (she shifts gaze from Ville to Matti and to Tero). After this Tero asks for confirmation from Susan and James (line 74) and James confirms it in line 75. Then in line 76 Tero continues the topic by talking about a hardness tester which is six hundred euros (in fact, he has asked James the price of the tester about ten minutes earlier). James contributes with *each sample*, which is repeated by Tero in line 78 with a smile. This is part of Tero's orientation to the topic and to what he says later (makes a suggestion). Susan responds with *yeah one time*. This negotiation shows that the participants are trying to ensure that they are discussing the same issue but it does not look like they reach understanding. They do not seem to agree whether the topic is a test or a tester.

Later, Tero's turn causes problems of understanding and leads to difficulties: in line 81 he says *so I I I suggest that you buy own hardness tester if its six hundred euros*, thus taking the lead by suggesting how to proceed. Interestingly, however, he looks at Matti and Ville before looking at James again, probably seeking confirmation, perhaps a nod from them, that what he suggests is a good idea. Therefore, even though Tero uses metatalk saying how he suggests that the Chinese company buys their own tester, gaze at Finnish colleagues signals that his role is to talk on behalf of the company. Where Tero's personal orientation to the topic might come to the fore is in his embodied actions: he is tapping with a pen on the table. It should be noted, however, that Tero's use of *I suggest* shows that he has some power over his manager as he can make suggestions. It could be argued that due to his linguistic competence he can align into this role. Making decisions explicit in the meeting is a signal of this (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). If the meeting were in Finnish, the managing director would have been able to give the same suggestion.

The sequence is followed by James' turn in line 83, *six hundred no six euros*, which indicates that he is talking about a different matter than the others. Susan tries to help James

by saying *one hundred time*, meaning that one hundred six-euro tests would cost the same as the tester. Susan's body posture is interesting as she is oriented towards Tero, not James. Tero provides the next turn in line 86: *machine hardness tester machine is six hundred euros*. Since hardness test and tester sound similar and can be confused, Tero provides an additional reference, *machine*, and repeats the whole construct: *hardness tester machine*. There is stress on the first syllable in the word *machine* and it is directed at James, who seems not to have understood that Tero is talking about a machine. Even after this it is not clear whether James understands this, although he repeats *six hundred* in line 87. He does not, for instance, say 'ok, I understood what you meant'. As such metalanguage is missing, it is unclear whether understanding is achieved. The situation continues as follows:

**Excerpt 4: 200209\_hardness testing or tester [continuation of excerpt 3]**

88 Susan [but what if] [we buy] grinding machine=  
 ((S gaze at T))

89 Ville [so]

90 Tero [you you]  
 ((T gaze at S))

91 Ville =of course.

92 James yes

93 Ville some kind of=

94 Susan =we don't know how [much is it]  
 ((S gaze at T, shaking head))

95 Tero [>fyes yes] yes< ↑that's we are trying to  
 explain thatf  
 ((T tapping table with an eraser, nodding,  
 gaze shift: S à desk))  
 ((S begins to smile))

96 Tero you have to buy (.) <that kind of saw for aa: (2.8) ↑bars>  
 ((T gaze shift: S à brochure, pointing to brochure, during  
 pause shift gaze to piece of paper))  
 ((S smiling, gaze at T))

97 Susan yeah  
 ((S leans forwards, gaze at T))

98 James yes

99 Ville (xxx)

100 Tero ↑plus (.) hardness tester  
 ((T gaze at S, left hand with two fingers stretched apart,  
 right hand touching them))

101 Susan [yeah]

102 Tero [↑plus] [grinding machine.]  
 ((T gaze at S, right hand still touching the two fingers))

103 Susan [grinding machine.]  
 ((gaze at T))

104 James yes

((J gaze at T, S nodding 3 times))  
 105 Susan yeah.  
 ((S gaze at T))  
 106 (0.5) ((T nodding 3 times))  
 107 Tero yes

The sequence continues with Susan's counter-proposal in line 88, *but what if we buy grinding machine*. Now Ville enters the conversation, which he rarely does, with *of course*. It can be interpreted as a direct response to what Susan has said, treating Susan's proposal as obvious, something that does not need to be negotiated. From the point of view of interpersonal relations, Tero's line 95, *yes yes.. to explain*, a speaker-oriented turn which overlaps with Susan's turn *we don't know how much is it* in line 94, is interesting. As a response to Susan it is not very sensitive, as it implies that in Tero's view the participants are finally reaching consensus about what Tero has been trying to explain so far. Also Tero's embodiment (tapping on the table) shows this orientation. His production of a quick *yes* three times shows that on some level mutual understanding has been achieved. Moreover, Tero speaks as a representative of the company, as a principal (*we*), and his expressions are accompanied with non-verbal cues - tapping on the table with an eraser, nodding, and gaze shift to Susan - the latter of which also supports Susan's turn. At the same time Susan begins to smile, which indicates her collaboration with Tero.

After this, starting from line 96 Tero provides an authoritative list of what the subsidiary company should buy (*you have to buy*). Now he speaks more slowly and uses a pointing gesture, pauses and word stress (rising tone in *bars* and *plus*) to make his point. When saying *that kind of saw* (line 96) he points to the brochure on the table which has a picture of the saw. There are thus multiple semiotic resources at play: language, gaze, gesture and artefact. After this, during the 2.6-second pause (line 96) he looks at the piece of paper in front of him, probably trying to find something there that would give him his next move. The beginning of Tero's turn in line 100 shows that he is counting the items which Susan and

James have to buy. Firstly, he says *plus*. Secondly, speech is accompanied with gestures: his left hand is raised, his two fingers are stretched apart and the right hand touches them. These signal that a counting action is underway. The gesture stays until line 102 where Tero provides the third item to be bought which is the grinding machine.

In their responsive turns Susan and James provide feedback. However, bearing in mind Tero's views about James' understanding, it is not certain whether James has actually understood Tero's instructions. At least Susan does, which is shown by her collaboration with Tero: in lines 102-103 they jointly negotiate meaning by simultaneously providing the term *grinding machine* with their bodily orientation towards each other. Tero's listing of the items to be bought and his counting of them with his fingers help Susan to infer that the third item is in fact the grinding machine because they have discussed this already earlier. In this way the participants seem to reach agreement about what kinds of machines the subsidiary needs, and everyone agrees by providing linguistic (*yeah, yes*) and non-linguistic (nods) feedback. At the end, then, quicker and shorter turns and overlapping speech signal the participants' engagement in the meaning negotiation (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003, p. 67) and their shared attempt to arrive at understanding.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study investigated the linguistic repertoires and semiotic resources (gaze, gesture, body orientation) used in a meeting between Finns and Chinese in a small company based in Finland. A Finnish manager's communication was particularly in focus. The micro-discourse analytic study revealed the complex nature of interaction and communication in this business setting. Furthermore, by bringing the multisemiotic nature of communication perhaps more to the fore than in previous business communication studies in general, this study invites us to consider the diversity and complexity of intercultural and multilingual

business communication today. In particular, it showed how various aspects of communication help negotiate meaning, roles and leadership. In fact, workplace roles were constructed (Clifton, 2006) and emerged as a result of talk-in-interaction, as *locally situated* (Nielsen, 2009, p. 45-47, italics added) or as *situated actions* (Housley, 1999 as cited in Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009, p. 18, italics added). This study also showed how the management of interpersonal relations was in a constant flux (Campbell and Davis, 2006, p. 56) and was not necessarily explicit and overt, as in typical of small, informal meetings (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003, p. 61).

The findings also revealed some of the challenges facing those involved in business communication today: in multilingual contexts, where English is the language of interaction, individuals' language skills may be very unequal and even people in the highest positions may not know English very well. In these situations, those who do have the necessary skills have to take on the role of language expert. The results showed that due to his language skills, Tero had a central role in the meeting, and was the dominant participant in the performance, that is, the star, lead or centre of attention (Goffman, 1959, p. 103, 105). His role as language expert helped him to direct the discussion (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003, p. 71), hold and exercise power (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002) and thereby occupy a "gatekeeping position" (Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, & Säntti, 2005).

Tero frequently had to change roles in the meeting. He had to adjust to the goals of the business community, his manager's as well as his own, and thus shift between author, animator and principal roles (Goffman, 1959) accordingly. The other participants were the audience, occasionally laughing at Tero's humorous acts (Van Praet, 2009). Tero also functioned as an interpersonal and intercultural mediator in the creation of new discourse, since meanings changed in the processes of translation and interpreting. Tero's performance showed that he has become a successful communicator in the workplace community.

By considering language as part of a broader semiotic repertoire, this study showed how an individual exploits this repertoire in order to accomplish different tasks and align towards different roles. In the meeting Tero's use of English was closely associated with his body language. For instance, he used pointing and gestures to clarify a referent and an action. As regards social relations, handling issues of face was done through not only linguistic cues (Campbell et al., 2003, p. 186) but also nonlinguistic ones. The management of interpersonal relations involved monitoring others' behavior with looking. Thus successful communication took place through the participants' use of a range of linguistic and non-linguistic resources.

While the appropriate use of both verbal and non-verbal communication emerged as significant for successful communication in the business meeting the use of language cannot be underestimated. Firstly, one had to *know* English and, secondly, know *how* to use it *appropriately* in the meeting. Language skills are important in such situations and understanding problems could have been overcome if participants had better language proficiency (cf. Charles, 2007). The speaker with the skills had much responsibility: he had to decide quickly what to communicate in English since some of the issues discussed in Finnish could have harmed social relations if they had been directly translated. The interactional analysis revealed the details of this process. English emerged as an important mediating tool for Tero to manage interpersonal relations among the whole group, whereas Finnish had its own functions, as did Chinese (although the Chinese language was not looked at in this paper). Language mattered, and the findings showed how an individual's small choices in the use of his repertoire could dramatically shift the interaction.

As this detailed study of an individual's communicative practices has made clear, studies which look only at language may miss important issues. Furthermore, it also highlights that in order to understand the complex nature of today's business communication, it is useful to focus on individuals and their use of communicative strategies. As this paper

has shown, language proficiency may well need support from other resources, from other modalities, such as gestures, if individuals are to function successfully in intercultural business communication.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

As a contribution to the present Special Issue, this article has sought to show how detailed analysis of interactional practices in intercultural encounters can increase our knowledge of communicative effectiveness in international business, of the use of semiotic resources, and of the role of English in these practices. Language does matter and it is decisive in role alignment, identity construction and interpersonal relationships.

We need to take a holistic approach to English as “the common language” of international business professionals. Such questions as what kind of language is used, whose language, and how language is used together with other resources are important. Furthermore, what is appropriate use of language and when are native languages preferred over English? An ethnographic approach enables the in-depth investigation of these phenomena. Without observing the participants for several days, without getting to know them and most importantly, without video recordings, it would have been impossible or at least very difficult to understand what was going on in the meeting under study. The approach taken here allowed the researcher to explicitly pinpoint how the participants interpreted the interactive processes and managed their relationships at work (Stubbe et al., 2003).

However, there are several limitations to this study. With the focus on a single meeting it is impossible either to make any generalizations or point out any overreaching implications for the business world. Furthermore, in the analysis it was not possible to analyze the use of Chinese. Knowing what the Chinese participants talked about would have

revealed important information about interpersonal relations. In subsequent studies, all the participants' non-verbal communication, as well as the employees' own perceptions of other situations, could be incorporated in order to gain a better picture of the people, the context, and how business is conducted in the company. Nevertheless, this study has shown that business communication research could benefit from studies looking at the multisemiotic nature of business communication. In addition, it has revealed the usefulness of focusing on key individuals in international corporations (Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2007). Albeit a small case study, it has nevertheless shown how communication is carried out in a workplace context influenced by globalization processes, where people need to cope with their repertoires when doing a job, often under pressure to make rapid choices about what to communicate, to whom, and in which language. The competence required of business professionals today is a mixture of interpersonal, intercultural, semiotic, and interactional competencies which can be investigated by turning to the professionals themselves and their actual interactions.

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## Appendix 1

### Transcription conventions

[	the point of overlap onset
]	the point at which the overlap terminates
=	latching utterances, no break or gap between two adjacent utterances
(.)	a micro pause
.	falling intonation
↑	rising intonation
:	lengthening of the sound
(xxx)	unclear speech
>text<	faster speech
<text>	slower speech
£text£	smiling voice
TEXT	louder speech
<u>text</u>	emphasis
(1.0)	silence marked in tenths of seconds, in a separate line between speakers
((gaze))	embodied action
(word)	English translation