

JYX



JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO  
UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Stopniece, Santa

**Title:** Language as a site of search for common ground and power positioning in Chinese-Finnish negotiation

**Year:** 2019

**Version:** Published version

**Copyright:** © The Author & Journal of Intercultural Communication, 2019.

**Rights:** In Copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

**Please cite the original version:**

Stopniece, S. (2019). Language as a site of search for common ground and power positioning in Chinese-Finnish negotiation. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 49(March).

<https://immi.se/intercultural/nr49/stopniece.html>

# Language as a site of search for common ground and power positioning in Chinese-Finnish negotiation

*Santa Stopniece*

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

## Abstract

This paper explores some language-related aspects in investment negotiation between Finnish and Chinese partners, such as language choices, the role of interpreters, and overcoming misunderstandings. These are seen as sites of both search for common ground in terms of positive politeness (affiliation) and power positioning in terms of negative politeness (autonomy) (Brown and Levinson 1987). This study is based on data obtained by interviewing individuals who work for state investment attraction agency and local governments in Finland and observation in delegation meetings. While misunderstandings occur, overcoming linguistic, contextual and cultural differences in understanding is possible. Common ground is more easily achieved when using English, however changing power relations with China render the use of the Mandarin Chinese necessary as well.

**Keywords** *language, power, negotiation, China, Finland, co-operation*

---

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the topic

The importance of co-operation with China has been growing in Finland and the rest of Europe in light of the recent increasing importance of China on a global scale and interest in attracting Chinese investments. In 2014, China became the world's third largest investor, driven by extraordinary large reserves (3.7 trillion) and a need to acquire foreign assets. Privately owned companies now represent

48.8% of foreign investment, compared to state-owned enterprises. According to official data from the end of 2013, 8% of China's foreign direct investment (FDI) stock is in the EU. EU is a key destination for Chinese firms and amass 4 of every 10 USD invested in developed countries. Chinese investment hit an all-time high in 2014, at 20,170 million, indicating growth of 117% when compared to 2013. Chinese investment in Europe is concentrated in the countries of core economies, such as the UK and France. Chinese capital markets were in turmoil in the summer of 2015, but the trends suggest that Chinese companies will continue to internationalize (Casaburi 2015).

Finland and the Baltic Sea Region as a whole so far have not been the major destination of Chinese investments. However, there has been a rise in Chinese interest in the region during recent years, and also more awareness in Finland regarding the possibilities related to Chinese investment (Kaartemo 2007). Finland has established governmental agencies to aid Chinese investment and ensured the co-operation of regional and local governments in the framework activities, such as town twinning. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland released The China Action Plan in 2010 which recognizes the growing role of China on the international scene and states priority areas for co-operation. Finland is paying a lot of attention to investment promotion and facilitation which involves having special organizations for this purpose, informative materials, soft landing services, promoting investment targets, and being a bridge in-between investors and companies in need of investment. An important part of investment facilitation and wider co-operation comprises delegation visits by both interested nations to the other country. These involve enterprise interest matchmaking events, meetings with officials, company visits, etc. The terms of investment attraction, promotion and facilitation will be used interchangeably in this paper, and understood as activities aimed at increasing investment and enhancing its contribution to national economic development. It involves planning on the most effective use of resources, the organization of investment promotion activities in the government and developing policies which improve the investment climate (OECD 2015).

For the last 30 years, the majority of FDI projects between partners from China and the rest of the world have taken place in mainland China, and most studies have addressed this direction of investment (Fetscherin *et al.* 2010), focusing mainly on economic and political factors. However, communication is also important to consider in the context of investment facilitation. Due to communication challenges even well justified FDI projects can experience unexpected difficulties (Morck *et al.* 2008). So far, adjustment to the Chinese has been predominantly studied as an expatriate experience in China (Selmer 1999; Wang *et al.* 2014). At times this literature suffers from a traditional 'foreign-expatriate-in-China' complex, viewing China and the Chinese as "they" who need to be motivated, educated, managed and controlled by "we" (Fang 2012: 969). As investments flow in the opposite direction, the people in so-called Western nations are more often

taking the position of the ‘seller,’ offering investment targets to the Chinese or trying to gain a foothold in the Chinese market.

This study proceeded in an inductive manner with a broad interest in Finnish-Chinese communication in the context of investment attraction. The intertwining of search for common ground and power positioning emerged as the overall theme of this study. One of the smaller themes identified was language related aspects in negotiation, and in particular, the language choices and possible misunderstandings arising from using different languages. Thus, the overarching aim of this paper is to consider how aspects related to language underpin the search for common ground and power positioning in Finnish-Chinese investment facilitation. The component research questions of this paper are: What are the perceptions of the participants regarding language choices in Finnish-Chinese investment attraction settings and how do these reflect power positioning between representatives? What are the possible misunderstandings when using different languages and how can the common ground in understanding be ensured? What is the role of the interpreter in search of common ground and power positioning?

## **1.2 Language choices in negotiation**

In Finnish-Chinese investment facilitation, just as in many other contexts of international business affairs nowadays, English is mostly used as *lingua franca*, either directly or through interpretation. The concept of nuclear English is based on the fact that a single medium is needed for international communication, and the best candidate is English (Quirk 2006). English is a language of strangers, and it is a comparatively low context if compared to other languages and well adapted to explication (Katan 1999). English in this situation is not a way to imitate English or American culture, but a medium to express culturally and socially unique ideas, feelings and identities, to people in the world, native and non-native speakers alike (Berns 2006).

In negotiation practice, however, English is often not used directly, but through interpretation. There is a long history of using an interpreter in official negotiations with China, and a wealth of secondary materials on this topic. For instance, in the First Opium War (1839-1842) the Chinese and British, with huge cultural and language differences, had to rely heavily on a few exceptional individuals for translation and interpretation. The Chinese employed the compradors (trade intermediaries) and merchants, while the British employed missionaries and colonial administrators (Wong 2007).

There are issues when using English as the third language. Sentences that translate each other grammatically may be mistakenly taken as equivalent culturally. ‘(In)visible (mis)understandings’ may arise, because usually participants assume they understand the meanings, but there are times when sides together misunderstand each other and do not even notice it (Carbaugh 2005: xxii). There

may or may not be a ‘common ground,’ which is an important part of context of an utterance. Not everyone may know or believe the same things, and especially so for people with very different backgrounds (Korta and Perry 2011). Misperception, misinterpretation and mistranslation can easily occur when out-of-awareness orientations are not taken into consideration (Katan 1999).

In mediated face-to-face communication or dialogue interpretation, the intermediate position is evidently physical; the interpreter is the person in the middle. Thus, it is useful to think of an interpreter’s position in the interactional sense – the distance or proximity to each party and on whose side the interpreter is. An interpreter’s actions have immediate effect on the outcome of the interaction, so the role is seen as that of moderating and managing interaction to guide it towards a felicitous outcome. Examples could be explanatory additions, selective omissions, persuasive elaboration or the mitigation of ‘face’-threatening acts, intervening to reduce differences and promote understanding (Pochhacker 2008). Interpreters need to know about the geography and the contemporary social and political history, which form the backbone of the culture’s cognitive environment, and to be aware of the popular culture (Katan 1999). The mediator needs to participate in both cultures to some extent, be bicultural. In addition, the individual needs to be flexible in switching his cultural orientation (Taft 1981). Communication is based on interactive meaning generation and interpretation on the one hand, and on dynamic negotiation and interpretation of context on the other. All communication starts from a certain relevant given context, and dynamically and effectively arrives at the invisible implicit premise(s) and implicit conclusion (Hou 2003).

This study will contribute to the understanding of language related aspects in negotiation, such as the choice of language, overcoming misunderstandings, and the role of interpreter, by exploring a newly emerging context of Finnish-Chinese investment facilitation.

### **1.3 Theoretical framework**

*Power* and *common ground* are two important concepts of the study. Regarding power, the approach of ‘power as described’ (Jensen 2006) will be utilized. This approach treats power as a description of how people define their own actions in relation to power, so it is suitable for analyzing interview statements. Power will also be understood as something produced in interactions and within structures where people are placed in different positions and must make communication choices accordingly (Isotalus 2006). Social power, in particular, is distinguished as the potential for social influence, and Raven (2001) lists the following six bases of social power: reward power, coercive power, referent power, legitimate power, expert power, and informational power.

Common ground in a pragmatic sense can be understood as mutual interest in a matter that enables parties to move forward with some common goals in co-operation, trade or investment. Garber (2006) sees finding common ground as one aspect of collaborative management, since organizations everywhere are challenged to work more closely with one another. Stalnaker (1999) considers that common ground involves intuitions about what is not said, but merely presupposed and plays an important role in the communication process.

Theoretical framework of this paper is based on Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987). Common ground can be explicitly related to Politeness Theory, as it represents one of Brown and Levinson's (1987) main affiliation strategies. In their terms, it is a positive politeness strategy, indicating that at least in some regards the speaker wants the same thing as the hearer. It also signifies that the speaker is treating the hearer as a member of the in-group, emphasizing the common ground. Power, in turn, sometimes can be interpreted as autonomy in context of negative politeness strategies. Negative politeness is avoidance-based, assures that the hearer's freedom of action will not be impeded, and involves formality and restraint (Brown and Levinson 1987).

This theory also appeared relevant because of the concept of 'face' used by participants in the study to interpret some interactions, and also, it is one of the central concepts of Politeness Theory. The concept of 'face,' according Goffman (1967: 5), refers to the "image of self," but Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) interpret the concept of 'face' in terms of 'public self-image' which is more relevant for the study. 'Facework' involves accommodating two different 'face' needs: the need for autonomy and the need for affiliation, one of which may be stronger in a particular culture. Thus, two different 'face' needs impact the search for common ground; the 'face' of affiliation being in favour of it, while the 'face' of autonomy is possibly working against it. Another aspect of 'face' relates to straightforwardness vs. indirectness observed in Chinese-Finnish interactions, which in terms of Brown and Levinson (1987: 317), can be interpreted as going *on record* vs. going *off record*. Each of these choices carries advantages as well as risks. One may choose to go on record (state directly) to pay respects to 'face', or off record (implying) to avoid imposing.

#### **1.4 Methodology and materials**

Language related aspects of Finnish-Chinese investment facilitation in this paper are investigated from an ethnographic perspective, giving emphasis to the meanings ascribed by participants. Ethnographic research consists of 'noticing, discovering, and recording communication practices that are significant to those being studied,' attempting to understand the meanings of particular practices from the perspective of the participants themselves (Carbaugh 2005: 132).

This paper builds on data collected as part of a larger research project which includes previous publications on the search for common ground in Finnish-Chinese co-operation (Stopniece 2015); guest-host positioning during delegation visits (Stopniece 2017a), and adjustment by Finns to the Chinese (Stopniece 2017b). The study's main methodological approach was to utilize interviewing for the purpose of learning the meanings which Finnish representatives assign to their communication with the Chinese co-operation partners. In addition, some participant observation was also conducted to give access to naturally occurring negotiation, and to provide a fuller sense of the context. Observation, for six days in total, took place during delegation visits from Tianjin (major port city in northeastern China) to Turku (city on the southwest coast of Finland) in October 2013 and a Finnish delegation visit from Oulu (most populous city in Northern Finland) to Suzhou (city close to Shanghai) in May 2014. Unfortunately, it was complicated to obtain access for interviewing the Chinese visitors, due to short and fully packed visits. However, their concerns were mirrored in interviews with Chinese interpreters and Chinese employees of Finnish organizations.

This paper is mostly based on nine interviews carried out in the autumn of 2013 in the China Finland Golden Bridge (state agency for Chinese investment attraction) office in Helsinki and in local government offices in Turku and Lahti (economic hub city north-east of Helsinki). In a qualitative framework, research based on interviews sought to manifest meanings; hence, a small number of cases facilitated the researcher's close association with the respondents and inquiry in naturalistic settings (Crouch 2006). Interviewees were aged from their mid-20s to 60s and had experience in a Chinese co-operation from 4 to 20 years. Five of the interviewees were Finns, three were of Chinese origin and one was Japanese, but all had lived and worked in Finland between 5 and 20 years. Four of the interviewees were representatives of local or regional governments; three were team members of a state investment attraction agency, and two were Chinese interpreters working for the Finns. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions, encouraging interviewees to offer their own definitions of particular activities (Silverman 2006; Briggs 1986), broadly addressing the experiences of working with the Chinese and meetings in both Finland and China. Interviews began by asking the interviewee's about their role in the organization, background expertise and the patterns of exposure with their Chinese partners. Furthermore, questions were asked about the communication style with the Chinese and possible cultural factors involved in various settings of work, inviting interviewees to share positive or negative critical incidents and conclusions about co-operation at large. Interviews undertaken were about one hour long. The interviews were conducted in English due to the researcher's linguistic limitations of the Finnish language and also this is the language mostly used in the investment facilitation context. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviewees were coded IV1-9 according to the interview sequence, and their basic data are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewee codes and basic data

<b>Code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Title</b>
IV1Jp	female	Japan	Business Development Officer
IV2Ch	male	China	Interpreter
IV3Fi	male	Finland	Development Manager
IV4Ch	female	China	Interpreter
IV5Fi	male	Finland	Senior Advisor
IV6Fi	male	Finland	Head of International Affairs
IV7Ch	male	China	Business Development Manager
IV8Fi	female	Finland	Customer Operations Director
IV9Fi	male	Finland	General Manager

Close reading of the material allowed for some recurrent patterns to be found. Analysis began with interpretations of what the informants were up to, or think they were up to, and then systematizing those for thick description of major themes in data (Geertz 1973). The intertwining search for common ground and power

positioning emerged as the overall theme connecting all topics. This paper in particular considers how this overarching theme manifests in language related aspects of Finnish-Chinese investment facilitation.

## **2. Language-related aspects in investment facilitation**

### **2.1 The choice of language and interpretation**

From study data it emerged that English is often used as *lingua franca* in Finnish-Chinese investment facilitation, so at first it is useful to briefly turn to the status of English language in each country. Finland is linguistically a very homogeneous nation and populations representing foreign languages are modest in size. Finnish students need to know languages that are more widely used internationally; therefore foreign languages are introduced early in the school curriculum. By far the most popular first foreign language in Finland is English; there is overwhelming support for the view that English is the most important international language. English is also heard and used out of school – on TV, music, etc. Some schools use an immersion method where only English is used in learning, thus the language is acquired naturally (Björklund and Suni 2000). During the observation activities of this study, it was noted by an experienced consultant that both Finnish and Chinese youths may be shy to speak out in English. It was not however found to be the case among the Finnish professionals working for co-operation with China. All were fluent in English, which is a job requirement for their tasks, and often likely a skill perfected over time through considerable experience in international affairs.

Chinese Englishes, in turn, involve a rich history of cultural contact, learning and teaching from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century until now, where each historical period and geographical area can be characterized by a certain kind of English (pidgin English, Canton English, etc.). Nowadays there are new phenomena such as Li Yang's *crazy English* approach to teaching, which is aimed at making money internationally. Hong Kong English is a separate unit is characterized by a distinct accent and lexicon. The popularity of English has reached new peaks with government policy makers, educationalists, and the Chinese public (Bolton 2006).

Referring to the data of this study, English is most often used as *lingua franca* in Finnish-Chinese investment facilitation negotiations. In practice, however, English is often not used directly, but through interpretation to the Chinese side. Despite having learned English and possibly being able to read, write and understand it, the Chinese may not be good at speaking English because they are often socialized in a culture which does not encourage 'speaking out.' The Chinese ability to understand together with an inability to verbalize may give them significant

bargaining advantage at the negotiation table (Fang 1999). From interviews and observation of this study, it emerged that the Finnish side always used English directly in investment attraction context, but regarding the Chinese, the situation was described as follows:

*When you talk with the Chinese venture capitalists, they usually have a background that they have been studying in U.S. or have been going to an international business school. They have been running the funds all over the world, so these people, as a group in China, are quite global-minded and speak good English. (IV8Fi)*

*In my experience, mostly Chinese younger generation speaks English, not the government delegation leaders. Although one time, someone from the government came from the international exchange or trade center and he spoke perfect English. If the delegation leader requires an interpreter, maybe he is not so comfortable with English, or he is thinking about the rest of the group. In this case he either wouldn't speak English, or sometimes will pose a sentence or question to show that he speaks English, too. (IV4Ch).*

*Visiting Chinese speak English, but maybe older members of delegation don't. Mostly they then will have an interpreter or younger staff member who could speak English. (IV7Ch)*

The trend that senior government members rarely speak English was also verified in the observation activities. During a visit from Tianjin to Turku for instance, all official talks occurred through interpretation. Only at the break time, the youngest delegation member, a man in his early 30s was having some informal direct interactions in English with the Finnish hosts. Thus, while English is often used as lingua franca in Finnish-Chinese investment facilitation, it still often happens through interpretation from the Mandarin Chinese.

One interviewee shared that in his experience, government or local government delegation heads in particular, most often do not speak English or choose not to: "Usually the heads of delegations don't speak English. They almost always have someone to interpret." (IV3Fi) The lack of English skills was related by this participant of the study to a stronger affect of Chinese traditional culture: "The guys who don't speak any English and have not been abroad would like to have Chinese food." (IV3Fi)

It has been proposed that an intermediary is needed to bridge between in-group and out-group members and to initiate a new relationship (Ock Yum 1997). According to one interviewee, not speaking English directly can also be a conscious choice:

*The delegation leader actually may speak English and very good English, but it is kind of status thing – even if they speak English, they let somebody else interpret (IV4Ch).*

The language barrier may affect the effectiveness of co-operation, as observed by an interpreter accompanying delegations:

*The Finnish side usually would like to follow-up with what the Chinese wrote about Finland, but there are not so many materials, maybe this is also due to language barriers. They go to Finland, because they heard that there will be an interpreter, so even though they could not speak English, they just go to Finland, some other country. (IV2Ch)*

At the state investment attraction agency, Chinese employees are being hired for communication with the potential investors in China, which is considered a necessity:

*I think that they (investors /customers) prefer to use Chinese in all ways, either in meetings, e-mails or phone calls. It is a good thing that we have Chinese people who can do that. (IV9Fi)*

*I communicate a lot with our Chinese clients, and because I don't speak Chinese, of course some of the communication needs to be handled through my colleagues who can speak Chinese. Mostly it is kind of 'in-between the lines' information which might not be in the e-mails or in the English talk, for which customers are contacted by cell phone. (IV8Fi)*

*As a whole, this team works very effectively in the Finnish way. However, we have a Chinese interface, and when we are dealing with the Chinese, it is a little bit Chinese-like. It is very important that we have Chinese team members and the Chinese interface. (IV7Ch)*

Turning more specifically to the role of interpreter or mediator in negotiation, interviewees noted the importance of familiarity with Finland for successful interpretation:

*My first Chinese assistant had studied a couple of years in Finland, so she knew a little bit the Finnish way of thinking, which made things much easier. (IV5Fi)*

*The more the interpreter has background of the Finnish system and the Finnish way of life, the better, because then he or she can explain things better and open up what we mean. (IV6Fi)*

Whilst the familiarity of Finland is seen as a prerequisite for an interpreter of Chinese origin, good integration into the Finnish system, at times comes at the expense of getting further away from the Chinese side. Two Chinese participants of the study expressed their concern about the matter:

*If a Finnish-born Chinese takes the position of mediator, it doesn't have good result, only some level of co-operation and understanding, because such person doesn't really have the Chinese way of knowledge. I think it also requires mature person, not very young. (IV2Ch)*

*My family moved from China to Finland when I was seven years old. My spoken Chinese is fine, but my written Chinese is about lower elementary level. I cannot communicate in a very professional way in writing, so at the moment most of written interaction will be handled by my other Chinese colleague. Because of this background issue I am more interacting with the Finnish or other international people instead of the Chinese side. (IV7Ch)*

Thus, according to interviewees, it can be difficult to find a perfect match for interpreter or mediator and to obtain a balance of familiarity regarding both Finnish and Chinese systems, communication, and the way of life.

To sum up, while occasionally, English may be used directly in negotiations, especially with venture capitalists and younger delegation members, quite often interpretation is still necessary for the Chinese representatives. It is frequently related to a lack of English skills, but occasionally it is seen as a conscious choice to do so for other reasons. The Chinese delegation may have their own interpreter, or the Finnish side may need to adjust and hire a Chinese person for purposes of communication. The choices related to language and interpreter thus are also sites where power positioning and the search for common ground mutually occur. In terms of language choices, it can be concluded that there are positive politeness strategies and chiefly a search for common ground by Finnish representatives, while Chinese representatives may signify negative politeness and autonomy by insisting on the use of Mandarin. Regarding the interpreter, it can appear there is a ground for a power struggle as both sides indicated their desire to have someone closer to their own background.

## **2.2 Misunderstandings and search for common ground**

Joint use of English does not automatically assure that the message will come through. In various languages, there are different ways to express coherent sequence, request, statement requiring answer, situation requiring greeting, normal duration of silence, etc. Therefore, nonequivalence will manifest more visibly if shared language is second one for both parties, as mostly is the case for Chinese-Finnish investment facilitation. Even if both sides have a sufficient level of English skills to communicate well, non-native speakers will tend to use another language in their own distinct ways that may make the meaning blurred (Hymes 1974).

The essential challenge posed by difference between languages and related factors such as communication styles and culture were mentioned by several interviewees:

*There is huge difference in communication, the cultures are totally different, and language is so, so different. (IV3Fi)*

*It is a learning process that it is a big country with strange culture, strange language, strange letters and everything – so it takes time for you to believe (IV6Fi)*

The fact that misunderstandings tend to happen in negotiations was discussed by several interviewees:

*I sometimes I feel like I have to explain that same thing about five times by e-mail – this is how I want it! Misunderstandings... those can arise from the fact that we both are communicating in a foreign language. Our communication is in English, and it depends how good their English is. I think I have explained in an easy way, in easy English, but not necessarily for them, they are maybe thinking something else. (IV1Jp)*

*That is everyday business - there are always misunderstandings. You always need to make sure that you have understood right what the other party was saying, and that the other party understood that situation right. We always need to include that in the negotiations. The verbal and the written communication are both needed. And later on, if we feel there might be a misunderstanding, we ask our people to call them directly and ask in Chinese, what is the background of this and if we understood correctly (IV9Fi).*

Misunderstandings related to specifics of the languages may arise. One interviewee shared an area of such specific difference regarding numbers, which is particularly important in investment attraction context:

*We count – ten, hundred, one thousand, ten thousand, one million, etc. But they count differently - ten hundred, ten ten thousand, hundred ten thousand, and then there is a new word... Have to know this! Understand what is the idea, otherwise it goes wrong. So far, I never met an interpreter who got this perfectly. (IV5Fi)*

Recognizing the possible differences posed by languages and context, one interviewee suggested that the speaker needs to anticipate and to bridge the difference:

*When you use Chinese in the meeting, you really need to ensure that you find it really matching to as we understand it (IV9Fi).*

*When I speak or explain something and give a presentation, I have to carefully remember to give them tools, instruments how to realize what I am talking about, because the things that are everyday for me are not for them. I can go to the Mayor's room and ask his opinion about something. In China, most probably, you would have to write it down on an official paper that the secretary gives to the Mayor and then some day, you will get orders what to do. (IV6Fi)*

This, of course, works both ways – also the Finns need to understand the Chinese system to be able to correctly interpret what happens and is being said. The listener determines what the speaker says from linguistic meaning and contextual information concerning the speaker's intentions (Bach and Harnish 1979). Using a language that is other than the native, linguistic meaning can be unclear at times. In addition, oftentimes the listener may lack contextual information to interpret what

is being said. Thus, in addition to language, a successful interpreter also needs to know the context well enough:

*When it comes to the city organization or city tasks, so often an interpreter doesn't understand how the Finnish system works. Yes, they can do the interpretation, and they know the words, but you notice that they don't understand what you really mean. The systems differ, and the management and leadership also have a big difference. So you should start from very basics - telling about the political system, or the parties. (IV6Fi)*

The contribution of the interpreter is crucial for overcoming misunderstandings. Every interpreter is also a cultural mediator who facilitates communication, understanding, and action between persons or groups differing in respect to language and culture. This role is performed by “interpreting the expressions, intentions, perceptions, and expectations of each cultural group to the other by establishing and balancing communication between them” (Taft 1981: 53). In situations when interpretation is necessary, the interpreter has an important role, being an instrument in search of common ground. The experience of interpreting together with the knowledge of topic area matters:

*Definitely, in the beginning I was not so confident to interpret, even had some little misunderstandings, but later on gained the security and confidence. Also many tasks, the way of attitude and questions are pretty similar, then of course, it is getting much easier to handle. (IV2Ch)*

*Have to interpret the information with the right context so they don't get the wrong idea. I think now for better preparation I would ask them to give me some materials on the industries they own. But sometimes, they don't give you anything and it's difficult to interpret then. (IV4Ch)*

Since the reference systems for interpretation may often be different, there are many obstacles for getting the real meaning of the message through. However, people use all kinds of information available to get to the meaning of the utterance. According to the relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986), people naturally strive for maximization of relevance to achieve the best cognitive effect with the least processing effort. When sides are motivated to understand and be understood, also other factors, for instance, non-verbal communication means may aid for getting the message through (Korta and Perry 2011). Thus, despite the challenges, there is always hope for understanding each other. One person felt particularly positive about finding common ground between the Finnish and Chinese side:

*With my limited experience with the Chinese, I find it surprisingly simple from my perspective as a Finn. When I started this work I thought that it is more challenging than it actually is, so this is always coming from what kind of communicator you are yourself. I don't speak Chinese, but I find the communication very easy. Of course, there are some situations when I feel that I*

*do not really understand what just happened and how the person is interpreting me, but with an open and humble attitude in communication situations, you can overcome the small cultural obstacles. It's more like just finding your way; in a global context you have to be adjustable anyways. You are always mirroring how the other party is reacting. (IV8Fi)*

Another interviewee also expressed a positive attitude regarding finding understanding despite the language barriers:

*I don't have much experience with misunderstandings; maybe I have been interpreting so well. I think some minor misunderstanding may happen when using a bit different kind of phrase and words, but there haven't been major problems. To make it more efficient, I think that the best way is ensuring both agree to have the same level of understanding of the issue (IV4Ch).*

More experience with each other provides a better interpretive frame to get to the meaning of remarks:

*The more we start to understand their mentality - how people speak to each other, when they have to consider who is higher in the organization, how they discuss with each other, who gets orders from whom and what are cultural backgrounds for some of behaviors - the more relaxed you are and the more you can enjoy the situation. (IV6Fi)*

To sum up, misunderstandings were an important theme in the interviewees' answers. Misunderstandings were seen arising from the fact that both parties are not speaking in their own language, so the linguistic meaning at times may be unclear. In addition, the framework of context and cultural background is also necessary to interpret the utterances correctly. Being flexible, ensuring the same level of understanding and being familiar with the mentality of another were seen as helpful for getting to the meanings during negotiations. The interviewee's statements about understanding each other reflected mainly their effort at ensuring common ground and thus affiliation in terms of positive politeness.

### **3. Discussion and conclusion**

This paper explored one of the themes in study data on communication in Finnish-Chinese investment facilitation – the role of language, simultaneously seeing it as a site of search for common ground and power positioning. It allowed consideration for the context of language use from several angles, such as language choices, the role of interpreter, and overcoming misunderstandings.

English is most often used as *lingua franca* in Chinese-Finnish investment facilitation. While Finns use it directly, the Chinese side often resort to using an interpreter; especially typical for government or local government officials who are

mature in age. This pattern was evidenced in both Finland and China at meeting locations. Venture capitalists would often use English directly and tended to be of younger age. Thus, it appears that currently there are two directions regarding language use by the Chinese – more proficient English use by Chinese venture capitalists, but in some contexts, a stronger assertion of Mandarin Chinese by government officials. Direct use of English could be seen not only as a matter of ability or marker of a certain group (venture capitalist, young generation), but also making emphasis on common ground. While the choice of using Chinese at times has to do with the lack of English skills, it appears this is not the only factor. As representatives of a large nation with a long history, the Chinese may insist more on using its own language on official occasions and adjust to others less. ‘Face’ considerations, hierarchical thinking and preference for mediated communication may also render the use of an interpreter necessary. The choice to use the Mandarin Chinese can be interpreted as an indication for the autonomy need of ‘face’ and power positioning in the narrative of China as a large rising superpower. Finnish representatives at the state investment attraction agency extend common ground by adjusting and having staff who can speak Chinese, this way accommodating the Chinese partners. It suggests the necessity of Chinese speaking staff for smoother communication in the investment facilitation area. The new dynamics of investment attraction is seeing interactions with the Chinese investors as customer operations, thus the positive politeness and need for affiliation appears dominant in the response of Finnish representatives.

The interpreter can be seen as an instrument in power play – distance or proximity to each side plays a role in this. While Finns expressed a wish to have an interpreter who is familiar enough with Finland, the Chinese participants of the study expressed concern that this at times comes at the expense of getting further away from the Chinese language and culture. However, interpretation challenges are abundant in and between all language users. Referring back to Politeness theory (1987), the positioning of interpreter illustrates the tension between negative politeness manifesting as wish to assert own identity and positive politeness that involves forming common ground for practical gain.

Whether communication is direct or mediated, when using non-native language, misunderstandings do tend to arise. The fact that the utterance is not understood may have to do with the fact that English is not the native language for both co-operating sides. There may be a lack of contextual information and different meanings attached in different cultures. The meaning may get lost in the interpretation or be misunderstood due to imprecise wording. However, having the personal flexibility, ensuring the same level of understanding and being familiar with the mentality of another were seen as helpful for getting to the meanings during negotiations. The interviewee’s statements about understanding each other reflected mainly effort at ensuring common ground and thus positive politeness strategies such as attending to the hearer’s interests and meanings (Brown and Levinson 1987).

To conclude, the analysis of different aspects related to language reveals differences regarding use of negative or positive politeness. While the Finnish representatives mostly see language as a site of search for common ground and in terms of positive politeness and “on-record” strategies of directness (Brown and Levinson 1987), always using English directly and even hiring the Chinese staff for assistance with Mandarin Chinese when necessary, the Chinese representatives tend to speak more in their own language. It can be assumed that sometimes the autonomous ‘face’ needs to be accommodated by the Chinese representatives, asserting the power positioning over the search of common ground. Their ‘face’ of affiliation, however, manifests more in the area of trying to overcome misunderstandings where both Chinese and Finnish representatives appeared to be equally interested in finding common ground. Regarding the role of the mediator or interpreter, the Finnish side tended to show most assertiveness compared to other aspects, wanting to have a person who is familiar with Finland, but Chinese representatives emphasized it is also important to have sufficient integration with life in China and the Chinese side. Too much to either direction is also considered problematic. In this aspect, the negative politeness considerations seemed to be dominating in interviewees’ expressions of both sides, revealing autonomous strategies in terms of hedging and making sure one’s own interests come through. This study suggests the need for careful use of linguistic and cultural mediators, being aware that getting closer to one side comes at the expense of getting farther from the other. Finding an ideal balance is not an easy task.

To conclude, while positive politeness strategies in terms of affiliation and finding common ground were dominating in Finnish responses, in particular regarding language choice and overcoming misunderstandings, the Chinese representatives showed more of negative politeness and own power, in particular in areas of language choice and the choice of interpreter. Adjustments regarding language occur in hopes of reaping benefits from finding common ground, but in certain situations, own autonomy and power may also be asserted. It appears to be a complex endeavor to find the balance between the needs of autonomy and affiliation in the area of language.

The language is not necessarily the only tool for establishing common ground, and the interviewees statements suggested other essential qualities, for instance, presenting own areas of expertise and matching them with Chinese needs, making use of pragmatism typical of both working cultures, and forming long term relationships, which are explored further in another article (Stopniece 2015). In terms of power positioning, the potential impact of the hosts versus the visitors (for instance, location of the interaction) was not considered in this paper due to space limitations, but is addressed in a separate paper too (Stopniece 2017a). Status is a theme that appeared in this paper, and it seems to be primarily characteristic on a Chinese side, particularly for elder or high-ranking officials. Adjustment to Chinese hierarchy and difference with Finnish structures in this regard is addressed in a previous publication also (Stopniece 2017b). The paper on adjustment also

explores in more detail how the opposing on-record / off-record politeness strategies that can be termed as directness by Finns and indirectness by Chinese contribute to the dynamics between representatives.

This study mostly helped to get to know the meanings the Finns attribute to the language related aspects in their co-operation with the Chinese. An obvious limitation is that it was not possible to interview Chinese visitors, whose views and perceptions on language would be equally interesting and important to consider. However, the fact that the study involved three Chinese and one Japanese person working for the Finnish side allowed for some integration of Chinese perspective on the matter, as often they spoke on behalf of visiting Chinese, referring to their views. So even it is indirect, there is incorporation of the perspective of the visiting Chinese representatives. More observation data would allow stronger claims about certain patterns regarding language as a site of search for common ground and power positioning. However, at the present time additional data collection was not possible, so it remains a recommendation for further studies.

While ‘rising China’ phenomenon provides the context according to which one chooses either common ground or power (external circumstances), Politeness theory reveals more about inner motivations (considerations of ‘face’) for doing so. The narrative of the growing global status of China will continue to be a framework for positioning regarding the choice of language. In addition, the traditional notion of ‘face’ may continue to render the use of the Chinese language in these interactions necessary. Both aspects work more in favor of the Chinese side and the use of Mandarin Chinese.

This study raises several questions for future research. As the new generation will be gradually entering the power positions, will English be used directly more often by the Chinese side? And how to ascertain sufficient common ground in language for moving forward with specific goals in negotiation? It may eventually happen that, due to changing global marketplace conditions, the use of intermediary languages other than English, for instance, Mandarin, will expand along with China’s international growth. In view of ongoing technological advances, will new interpretation devices gain popularity in negotiation settings? Developments in language use continue to deserve the attention of future research.

## **References**

Bach, K., & Harnish, R. M. (1979). *Linguistic communication and speech acts*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Berns, M. (2006). English in Europe. Whose language, which culture? In K. Bolton, & B. B. Kachru (eds.), *World Englishes: Critical Concepts in Linguistics, Volume 3* (pp. 7-17). Abingdon: Routledge.

Björklund, S., & Suni, I. (2000). The Role of English as L3 in a Swedish Immersion programme in Finland: Impacts on Language teaching and Language relations. In J. Cenoz, & U. Jessner (eds.), *English in Europe: The Acquisition of a Third Language* (pp. 198-221). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Bolton, K. (2006). Chinese Englishes: From Canton jargon to global English. In K. Bolton, & B. B. Kachru (eds.), *World Englishes: Critical Concepts in Linguistics, Volume 3* (pp. 148-172). Abingdon: Routledge.

Briggs, C. L. (1986). *Learning how to ask: a sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carbaugh, D. (2005). *Cultures in conversation*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Casaburi, I. (2015). *Chinese investment in Europe*. Retrieved from [http://spain-china-foundation.org/files/documentos/53\\_Chinese\\_investment\\_in\\_Europe.pdf](http://spain-china-foundation.org/files/documentos/53_Chinese_investment_in_Europe.pdf) (Last accessed May 16, 2016).

Crouch, M. (2006). The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research. *Social Science Information*, 45, 483-499.

Fang, T. (1999). *Chinese business negotiating style*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Fang, T. (2012). Book review: Johan Björksten, Anders Hägglund, How to Manage a Successful Business in China. *International Business Review*, 21, 968–970.

Fetscherin, M., Voss, H., & Gugler, P. (2010). 30 Years of foreign direct investment to China: An interdisciplinary literature review. *International Business Review*, 19, 235–246.

Garber, P.R. (2006). *Fifty-one activities for collaborative management*. Amherst: Human Resource Development Press.

- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. N.Y.: Basic Books.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction Ritual. Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour*. N. Y.: Pantheon.
- Hou, G. (2003). Dynamic Context and Contextual Negotiation. *Foreign Language Education*, 1, 23-24.
- Hymes, D. (1974). *Foundations of sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Isotalus, E. (2006). Power and Constructed Realities in Research. In Ø. Dahl, I. Jensen, & P. Nynäs (eds.), *Bridges of Understanding: Perspectives on Intercultural Communication* (pp.227-240). Oslo: Oslo Academic Press.
- Jensen, I. (2006). The aspect of power in intercultural communication practice. In Ø. Dahl, I. Jensen, & P. Nynäs (eds.), *Bridges of Understanding: Perspectives on Intercultural Communication*. (pp. 85-100).Oslo: Oslo Academic Press.
- Kaartemo, V. (2007). *The motives of Chinese investments in the Baltic Sea Region*. Retrieved from [http://www.utu.fi/fi/yksikot/tse/yksikot/PEI/raportit-ja-tietopaketti/Documents/Kaartemo\\_72007.pdf](http://www.utu.fi/fi/yksikot/tse/yksikot/PEI/raportit-ja-tietopaketti/Documents/Kaartemo_72007.pdf) (Last accessed May 15, 2015).
- Katan, D. (1999). *Translating Cultures: An Introduction for Translators, Interpreters, and Mediators*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Korta, K., & Perry, J. (2011). Pragmatics. In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/pragmatics>. (Last accessed March 11, 2016).
- Morck, R., Yeung, B., & Zhao, M. (2008). Perspectives on China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 39, 337-350.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2015). *Policy Framework for Investment*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/investment/toolkit/policyareas/investmentpromotionfacilitation/41246119.pdf> (Last accessed May 16, 2016).
- Pochhacker, F. (2008). Interpreting as mediation. In C. Valero-Garcés, & A.Martin (eds.), *Crossing Borders in Community Interpreting: Definitions and dilemmas* (pp. 9-26). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing company.

Raven, B. H. (2001). Power/interaction and interpersonal influence: Experimental investigations and case studies. In A. Y. Lee-Chai & J. A. Bargh (eds.). *The use and abuse of power* (pp. 217-240). Ann Arbor, MI: Sheridan Books.

Quirk, R. (2006). International communication and the concept of nuclear English. In K. Bolton, & B. B. Kachru (eds.). *World Englishes: Critical Concepts in Linguistics, Volume 3* (pp. 218-231). Abingdon: Routledge.

Selmer, J. (1999). Culture shock in China? Adjustment pattern of Western expatriate business managers. *International Business Review*, 8, 515–534.

Silverman, D. (2006). *Interpreting qualitative data: methods for analyzing talk, text and interaction*. London: Sage Publications.

Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Stalnaker, Robert. (1999). *Context and content*. Oxford: Oxford University press.

Stopniece, S. (2015). China-Finland co-operation, trade, and investment: in search of common ground. *Journal of China and International Relations*, 3(1), 130-150.

Stopniece, S. (2017a). Chinese ‘enormous hospitality’ vs. ‘Finnish “meeting among friends”’: guest-host positioning in China Finland delegation visits. In F. Dervin, R. Machart (eds.), *Intercultural communication with China* (145-163). Singapore: Springer.

Stopniece, S. (2017b). “The Chinese will not change; we have to change:” adjustment of the Finns to the Chinese in a Chinese investment facilitation context. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 44. Retrieved from <https://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr44/stopniece.html> (Last accessed November 13, 2017)

Taft, R. (1981). The Role and Personality of the Mediator, In S. Bochner (ed.), *The Mediating Person: Bridges between Cultures* (pp. 53-88). Cambridge: Schenkman.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland. (2010). *China action plan*. Retrieved from <http://formin.finland.fi/public/default.aspx?contentid=326234&contentlan=2&culture=en-US> (Last accessed March 11, 2016).

Wang, D., Feng, T., Freeman, S., Fan, D., & Zhu, C. J. (2014). Unpacking the ‘skill – cross-cultural competence’ mechanisms: Empirical evidence from Chinese expatriate managers. *International Business Review*, 23, 530–541.

Wong, L.W. (2007). Translators and interpreters during the Opium War between Britain and China. In M. Salama-Karr, (ed.). *Translation and interpretation conflict*. (pp. 41-61). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

## **About the Author**

Santa Stopniece acquired her PhD Candidate of Intercultural Communication at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research interests focus on business communication in multicultural workplaces, and her dissertation work extends her previous exposure to Chinese investment initiatives in the Baltic Sea region into more detailed examination of the intercultural communication in this context. She is based in Suzhou, China and is a full time business lecturer at Global Institute of Software Technology, a program associated with Staffordshire University, UK.

## **Author's Address**

Build. 28, 1, District 4, Caixiang New Village, Suzhou, China  
Tel. 18994433509 (in China)  
e-mail: [santastop@inbox.lv](mailto:santastop@inbox.lv)