

1st Interdisciplinary Symposium: European Cultures within Business and Corporate Communication

1. Interdisziplinäres Symposium: Europäische Kulturen in der Wirtschaftskommunikation in Åbo/Turku (Finland) 8.-9. September 2001.

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At the beginning of September 2001, a symposium was held at Åbo Akademi, the Swedish speaking university of the old capital of Finland. It marked the official opening of a new forum for co-operation between scholars with very varied interests in the field of intercultural perspectives on business communication within European cultures with special emphasis on communication in German. It is the purpose of the group, which is open to researchers and practitioners interested in joining, to create a truly interdisciplinary forum where the common denominator is the intercultural aspects of business communication, but where knowledge from many different fields of study will be presented. Participants came from such different countries as the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland and France.

The intended variety of perspectives of the cooperative effort was reflected in the variety of topics and disciplines represented at the symposium. In the following, I will outline the most important aspects of intercultural business communication addressed at the symposium (cognition, interculturality, genre, corporate identity, language choice) and consequently characterising the future cooperative effort (although it was stressed repeatedly at the symposium that the forum should be open to new directions and relevant approaches).

The first aspect to be presented here is the aspect of cognition. Presentations in this group concentrated upon the description and modelling of the mental capacity of humans to cooperate communicatively and on the impact of culture on this

capacity. In this group, *Alexander Thomas* (Universität Regensburg) presented his paper “Interkulturelle Kompetenz als wirtschaftlich relevanter Erfolgsfaktor.” He attacked the notion of business communication as something taking place among “global players”, i.e. with people thinking as internationals rather than as nationals. The reason for attacking this ideal notion is that every human being is first socialised into a local culture which the individual cannot ignore. This takes away the possibility of a “global identity”. Instead he suggested the (consciously attainable) competence of acting interculturally on the local basis as a manageable alternative. *Christopher Schmidt* (Åbo Akademi), in the paper „Kognitive Modelle in der Öffentlichkeitsarbeit von Unternehmen im deutsch-finnischen Vergleich“ investigated the possibility of a standardisation of communication in the area of public relations from the point of view of cognitive metaphors. His study of a selection of the introductory “Reports from the CEO” from Finnish and German annual reports shows important parallels between the cognitive metaphors used in the texts, but identifies considerable cultural differences in the ordering and presentation of them. His conclusion was that, from this point of view, standardisation in public relations communication is hardly feasible, at least if we intend to achieve success in the area of persuasion. The paper by *Patricia Simon* (Universität Regensburg) “SYNPRO: Ein neues Interaktions-Beobachtungssystem zur kulturadäquaten Erhebung des Interaktionsverhaltens in Arbeitsgruppen verschiedener Kulturen“ introduced an empirically tested method for studying the interaction of work groups and for assessing the probability of success for the group. The method consists of a two-level description system in which the contribution of each participant to the group’s solution of professional problems is described according to a specific phase of an ideal problem solving process and according to a limited number of communicative functions connected to problem solving. The cooperative capacity of the group is then calculated on the basis of a culture-bound ranking of the different communicative functions. The next step will be the adjustment of the system so that it can also be used for assessing the cooperative capacity of intercultural group. As it is, the system cannot cope with this task because of the ranking system being culture-bound. Also connected primarily to the cognitive aspect, *Jan Engberg* (The Aarhus School of Business) presented the paper “Ein grundlegendes Modell zur Darstellung von Fachsprachlichkeit” which focused upon the characteristics of speciality and professionalism in the texts and linguistic means in business communication. The model is oriented towards the semiotics of Eco and Peirce and intends to depict the linguistically related knowledge of individual specialists and the possible development of this knowledge through communication. In the paper, the applicability of the model with respect to synchronic as well as diachronic questions was demonstrated.

Another group of presentations was especially concerned with intercultural aspects of the language of advertising. The presentation by *Nina Janich* (Universität Regensburg), “Probleme und Perspektiven interkultureller Werbesprachenforschung”, focused upon possible objects of study for a new intercultural oriented research discipline in the area of advertising. She located promising

research questions in at least three major fields: The field of ethnostereotypes, the field of contrasting advertising diachronically and interculturally, and the field of internationally standardised advertising. *Martin Nielsen* (The Aarhus School of Business) presented a paper with the title “Pkw-Anzeigen als Kulturanzeiger: Eine Relativierung bestehender deutscher und dänischer nationalkultureller Stereotype“. In the paper, he looked exactly at the first object of study mentioned by Janich, namely the ethnostereotypes. He presented results from an empirical study of car advertisements. The study showed that in recent advertisements from this trade there is no reflection of the generally stated stereotype of technicality (German) vs. emotionality (Danish). Advertisements from both cultures show similar results on this scale. On the same note, *Roger Crijns* (University of Nijmegen), in his paper “Vom ‘State of the [sm@rt](#)’ zum ‘ultimativen Karrierekick’. Kulturbedingte Wertepreferenzen in niederländischen und deutschen IT-Stellenanzeigen“, investigated possible reflections from national cultures of Germany and the Netherlands on the way job advertisements are written. He looked at job advertisements from the world of IT and focused especially on reflections of values in the headlines of these texts, using from the work of Hofstede and Schwarz, respectively. From a methodological point of view, he reported to have encountered problems, because more values were present at the same time, and because values present in the headlines seemed to be levelled out in the text of the advertisement itself.

The aspect of genre, underlying many of the papers, was methodologically central to two of the papers. *Eva Schiffer* (Universität Regensburg) presented her ongoing work on a PhD thesis in the paper “Freundlich tendieren, sich gut behaupten, nie leicht nachgeben – Börsensprache im deutsch-tschechischen Vergleich“. The presented project is a contrastive genre study of markets reports connected to stock exchange. The contrasting is done between German and Czech instances of the same genre and between instances of this genre and of instances of the genre of markets commentaries connected to stock exchange. In her paper „Zur Evolution der Marktkommunikation – am Beispiel des Geschäftsberichts“, *Marianne Ditlevsen* (The Aarhus School of Business) focused upon the possibility of applying the notion of genre to a diachronic object of study, namely the development of the annual report. On the basis of a triangular model combining situational elements, functions and linguistic means, she contrasted annual reports from the same Danish company between 1934 and 2000, looking especially on the macrostructure (constituents and organisation) and the use of visual means. The results of the study were furthermore contrasted with similar diachronic studies of other Danish companies and with synchronic studies of English, Lithuanian and Estonian annual reports, showing on the one hand intracultural stability between the findings and, on the other hand, intercultural differences concerning the pace of the development and intercultural similarities concerning the direction of this development.

A fourth group of papers focused especially on the aspect of corporate communication and identity. *Sandra Busse* (University of Nijmegen), in her paper

“Die Problematik der Unternehmens- und Kommunikationsstruktur am Beispiel einer deutsch-niederländischen Kooperation: aktuelle Ergebnisse einer empirischen Fallstudie“, investigated some of the potential factors which influence the structure and efficiency of communication within a company. On the basis of an empirical case study, she looked upon the impact of organisational structure on the corporate culture and on the communication structure of companies in general. Furthermore, the influence of national culture on the communication structure of two members of the same multinational company was investigated. In their paper “On the Construction of Organisational Identity. The Story of a Rapidly Growing Company”, *Eerika Saaristo* and *Nina Kivinen* (Åbo Akademi) looked upon the development of corporate identity. Especially interesting in the presented project was the theory used for the study which looks not only at the interaction of human actors, but also at the influence of non-human actors on the interaction in the company. These interactions are the primary source for the development of a specific corporate identity. And finally, *Martina Björklund* (Åbo Akademi) in her paper “‘Contacts’, *blat*, and corruption in Russian business culture” looked upon an aspect of Russian business culture which greatly impacts on corporate communication and identity in Russian companies. The paper (presenting work carried out at the Russian Department of Åbo Akademi) showed that the system of *blat* (inofficial system of favours), developed especially when the Soviet Union existed, is still to a certain extent alive in modern Russia, although nowadays with more clear traces of corruption. Business and business communication in Russia has to take this cultural aspect into account in order to be successful.

The last group of papers, reflecting a special aspect of the symposium, was connected to the question of language choice when communicating in international business. *Soňa Novaková* (Wirtschaftsuniversität Bratislava) presented a paper with the title “Interkulturelle Aspekte in der deutsch-slowakischen Wirtschaftskommunikation” in which she presented preliminary results of her work on a PhD thesis on the impact of language choice on cooperation between German and Slovakian employees in multinational companies. The paper concentrated on the design of the interviews used for collecting data. The interviews addressed such different topics as the establishing of contact (initiative, language, use of interpreters), argumentative strategies used and intercultural differences perceived by the participants. The study is intended to form the basis for establishing relevant intercultural training, especially in the Slovak Republic. In his paper “Einfluss von Sprachpolitik auf die Wirtschaftskommunikation. Der französische Purismus in einer angelsächsisch dominierten globalisierten Wirtschaft“ *Horst Schumacher* (Université de Paris / Sorbonne) investigated the practical reality confronting attempts to regulate the use of business language by way of statutes in France. In the opinion of the presenter, developments so far show that also the French will have to adjust to International English as a kind of Lingua Franca in international business if they want to participate in the economic globalisation process, as the (primarily) French speaking world is gradually diminishing. And as the last paper of this group and of the entire symposium, *Jaako Lehtonen* (University of Jyväskylä) presented his paper “Europäische Perspektiven zur Globalisierung,

interkulturellen Kommunikation und zum Postmodernen” in which he discussed the communicative aspects of the ongoing globalisation. Recent empirical studies show that at this point in time there is still no such thing as a European business culture. However, for the future, he foresaw the emergence of a highly important Lingua Franca English not only as means of communication in international relations, but also leading its way into everyday life and thus establishing a more globalised culture as well.

In order to emphasise the interdisciplinary character of the symposium, it is important to see that the above mentioned groups are idealisations in the sense that the papers have been grouped according to their most central aspect. The different aspects of the symposium were in many cases simultaneously present in one and the same paper. For example, the paper by Marianne Ditlevsen was *intercultural* in the choice of corpus, looked upon *genre* as a set of rules of applied language and thus as a part of *cognition*, and in the development of especially the use of visuals in annual reports looked at one way of presenting the *corporate identity*. Many other papers showed equal coverage in the treatment of symposium topics. This characteristic is a reflection of the intent for the developing cooperative effort to be as deeply rooted as possible in practical problems of real business communication. For in real life, different theoretical aspects are simultaneously present and have to be coped with at the same time.

The forum is still open to new participants with interests similar to the ones reflected in this report. The next meeting of the group is projected to take place in September 2002 at The Aarhus School of Business. The proceedings from the symposium will be published in a new series (Europäische Kulturen in der Wirtschaftskommunikation) from the German publisher Deutscher Universitätsverlag DUV. Editors of the series, and at the same time contact persons of the forum of co-operation are Dagmar Neuendorff (Åbo Akademi, dagmar.neuendorff@abo.fi), Christopher Schmidt (Åbo Akademi, christopher.schmidt@abo.fi) and Nina Janich (Universität Regensburg, nina.janich@sprachlit.uni-regensburg.de). The recently founded series will consist of collections of papers, proceedings, monographs etc. in the field of interculturality and business communication. It will serve as a channel for communicating results from the cooperative effort, but is at the same time open to other researchers with interest in the field.

ABSTRACT

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This report presents a new forum for co-operation between scholars with interest in intercultural aspects of business communication in a European context. The initiative intends to unite a great variety of interests, ranging from cognition and genre over interculturality to questions of corporate identity, and it is open to other researchers with interest in the field. The intended variety was reflected in the contributions to the 1. Interdisciplinary Symposium of the forum held in Åbo/Turku (Finland) 8.-9. September 2001. The report presents the papers held at the symposium, thus demonstrating possible lines of development in the framework of the co-operative effort.
