A brief history of the language of business in three snapshots

Nigel Holden©
Leeds University Business School

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Abstract

This survey of the language of business focuses on three eras: the Ancient World of the Mediterranean from c.500 BC to 250 AD, the Mediterranean business world from the 14th to 18th centuries, and the contemporary era. The conviction guiding this contribution is that the two historical periods supply not merely distant, but often strikingly direct correlates in countries and cultures right up to the present day, whilst providing an illuminating prism through which to view business language in today's world. Distinctive features of the respective eras will be highlighted: for example, the creation of sophisticated business terminologies in ancient languages, the massive importance of correspondence in the early modern period, and the speed and reach of the modern communication technologies as 'carriers' of the language of business. The survey concludes that in all these eras the defining feature of business language usage has been the navigation of multilingual realities through ad hoc and improvised translations. An augmented theory of language in IB is called for.

Introduction

There is a general consensus among scholars (e.g. Holden & Michailova, 2014; Janssens, Lambert & Steyaert 2004; López-Duarte & Vidal-Suárez, 2010; Mughan, 2014, Peltokorpi, 2007) that the issues of language as a central component of business communication are underrepresented in the contemporary literature on international business (IB). But to write about this theme with respect to the Ancient World and the early modern era in Europe may not appear to enrich scholarly understanding. After all, the sheer pace, scope, self-enveloping intensity and boundary-defying capability of modern business connectivity all too readily persuade us there can be nothing of value, nothing of interest or relevance about the peculiarities of language usage in far forgotten eras of history. However, the conviction guiding this contribution, based in part on Holden (2016a, 2016b) is that the ancient and pre-modern business language of the Ancient World and early modern Europe of the Mediterranean world respectively finds not merely distant, but often strikingly direct correlates in countries and cultures right up to the present day. But not only that: discussion of the topic supplies an unusual prism through which to view the modern business world and human action in unexpectedly rewarding ways without the all trammelling effects of the communication technologies.

Snapshot 1: the Ancient World[1]

> 'The world of business is a world of trust. It is also a world of risk, of speedy decisions, of people not always known to you, and of appearances.'[2]

On the spoken language

From what we know about markets and business in today's world, we may surmise that business in the Ancient World was characterised by:

(a) Relationship-building processes, underpinned by exchange processes
(b) Sharing of *anything tangible or intangible* with perceived value as resources among the parties concerned
(c) Time and effort on key relationships across functions as well as vis-à-vis markets
(d) The clustering of key relationships into (focal) networks, the all-important pathways to distant resources (based on Ford, 1990).

We can assume that the merchants of ancient times were motivated by profit and that they recognised that the greater profits were associated with long-distance trade and the greater risks of engaging in it.
Indeed, the international quest for profitable business would take them 'on pioneering explorations and new trade routes' (Roberts, 2011: 117) throughout the known world and far beyond to unconquered realms. We can further assume that none of the great business empires of the Ancient World, although they differed dramatically in structure, *Weltanschauung*, and relationships with their respective temporal, military and priestly authorities, could have sustained themselves without a fully functioning language of

[1] Based on Holden, 2016a
[2] Meyer (2004: 148).

business: in other words, an occupational communication system with spoken and written modes, which was sensitive to context, capable of bearing specific terminology to describe business operations, and permitting articulate communication at various levels of interaction.

After all one had to know how to speak to august patrons, to fractious suppliers, to fastidious customers, to unruly mule drivers, to exotic foreign business partners, barbarian or otherwise, and, last but not least, to the capricious gods. The often momentous travels of merchants required them to be, as we would say today, effective intercultural communicators in their business dealings, and with all manner of strange fellows at that. They might actually speak the latter's language passably well, or use a serviceable *lingua franca*, or simply strain to convey bonhomie and trustworthiness in their own unintelligible tongue, and all the while listening to the babble of those strange fellows as if their utterances were actually scintillating.

In their dealings one of the most important aspects of business communication – perhaps *the* most important – was to project a completely trustworthy self across all manner of linguistic and cultural divides. The Romans called trust *bona fides* ('good faith'). Indeed, a special calculus of ancient business informed the merchant's mind: how to project that all-important air of trustworthiness and how to minimise risk (which could literally take life-threatening forms). Indeed there was nothing that you could tell a merchant of those days about risk and the associated 'turbulent and volatile business environment', as the modern cliché has it.

Merchants knew in the end that trust was something that had to be earned – often under duress – and this in the end was something that not even the most benevolent of gods could grant. In a word, they had to be resourceful beyond measure beyond and possess a persuasive turn of phrase. They were masters of high-flown compliments, tried and trusted courtesies and (obsequious) flattery. Flattery has of course been an essential component of business discourse in every human tongue, ancient or modern: indeed for as long as there have been markets. No businessman in any era of history has ever seriously believed that 'flattery will get you nowhere.'

Nor would any merchant go to another country and offend its inhabitants by flaunting an ill-considered opinion about *their* gods. Only a madman would be so stupid, comments the well-travelled Herodotus (2003: 187). Merchants were only too aware that in their mysterious way the gods gave 'heavenly sanction and earthly direction to their international investments and partnerships' (Moore and Lewis, 1999: 97). It was therefore best not to tempt fate. Besides, merchants might often have to do business with the earthly guardians of the gods: the priests. Hence they had to master 'the bureaucratic language of temple and palace transactions' (Moore and Lewis, 1999: 56). Thus, for all his dissembling and banter, the merchant of ancient times knew how to apply the supreme 'law' of cross-cultural communication: to handle others, even barbarians, with 'intelligence and tact.'[3] In cross-cultural contacts, therefore, it is even quite possible that merchants as a generally loquacious species knew when on occasion to keep their mouths shut.

On the written word

A discussion of language and business in the Ancient World must give due prominence to the momentous invention of writing around 3,000 BC, which 'certainly transformed international trade' (Wilkinson, 2011, p. 56). Brosius (2008, p. 246) notes that the earliest transactions of grain, livestock and textiles in the temple and palace economies, but this was extended to record the economic and legal affairs of private and business enterprises.' Tablets in cuneiform, once deciphered, provide us with commercial terms in everyday usage.

For example, in Akkadian we find a word, *dam-gàr*, that refers to merchants, who formed 'guild-like associations' (Moore and Lewis, 1999: 58). Note that it is referring to a particular class of merchant. The word *naruqqum* is 'essentially a capital fund invested by several merchants for a merchant active in foreign trade' (Moore and Lewis, 1999: 67). This is a truly early reference to sophisticated financial practices, whilst the word *kârum,* which came to mean 'market' originally denoted a harbour – an unmistakable allusion to substantial sea-borne trade. One of the earliest recorded words in Hittite is 'contract' (Watkins, 2008: 6). Phoenician for its part makes a number of distinctions to do with merchants and even has a word (*tappatu)* which refers to partnerships that were 'a pyramidal form of partnership' (Moore and Lewis, 1999: 87). These few words alone indicate that merchants and traders created a necessary vocabulary for their activities, relationships and organisational forms.

Writing in Ancient Greece gave rise to two important marketing functions: advertising and branding. Potters and vase-makers produced their items 'for tailored markets,

[3] The British diplomat and Japanologist Sir Ernest Satow (1843-1929) wrote that handling relationships with the Japanese required 'the application of intelligence and tact.'

promoted their brand-name wares, and even publicly ridiculed their competitors with negative advertising' (Moore and Lewis, 1999: 270) – that is more than two thousand years before Pepsi so devastatingly mocked Coke ads. We might add that the Greeks also 'instituted trademark regulation' on their best wine, so that imports could 'not dilute the value of their own brand' (Roberts, 2011: 63). Similar practices were replicated in Rome.

Greek too was the first language to give legal force to the structures of business and commercial arrangements, but Latin extended the practice not only organically, but also internationally as well as across the centuries to the present day. Indeed, given that Rome in the first century AD dominated the economy of the known world, we may say that Latin was, as it were, the English of its day – the incontestable global language of its era. Neither Greek nor Akkadian can compare with Latin from this point of view. Indeed to regard Latin as a *lingua franca* on a par with others is to detract from its very greatness.

Latin for its part was surely the language with arguably the greatest number of commercial terms. Just as in modern languages, words to do with business and management could be semantically elastic. Aubert (1994: 6-7) points out that the verbs '*emere*' (to buy) and '*vendere*' (to sell), 'when used in legal texts, could refer to a wider range of transactions than just purchase and sale', referring to 'various activities, such hiring or renting commodities, facilities, or services, or acting as guarantors,' whilst the word *institor* designates a merchant, a retailer, or peddler … [and] …. 'ordinarily refers to a lower social stratum.' Various Latin words can broadly speaking be translated by the word manager in English: *magister, socius, negotiator*, *institor*, *manceps*, *publicanus,* words which taken together represent considerable diversity of business arrangements in Rome. (For a discussion of *manceps*, see Holden and Tansley, 2008: 200-202). Not for nothing has the eternal city been dubbed 'Rome Inc.' (Bing, 2006).

We may deduce that in the Roman era commercial language began to develop into two mutually reinforcing and interpenetrating modes: the written language for confirming arrangements allowing for the performative role of speech acts; the spoken language for creating atmosphere and informality among interlocutors (Baron, 2000: 21). It would, incidentally, be quite wrong to give the impression that most traders could read and write. For an absolute majority of them writing was 'a fairly impenetrable code' (Aubert, private communication). However, we should not exclude the possibility that the essentially illiterate traders acquired a smattering of writing and simplified and hence distorted signs into both a mnemonic and private code to record confidential information.

In passing we should note that the writings of literati of Greece and Rome reveal that the businessmen of those times were seen as little more than untrustworthy scoundrels. Such 'antimercantile views' (Curtin, 1986: 75) of the Greek and Roman élites far outlasted the Ancient World, of course. They exist until modern times. The Greeks left business to the capable Phoenicians, who incidentally were dubbed by Homer as 'greedy knaves' (Roberts, 2011: 37). Wealthy Roman families often employed slaves to perform the vulgarities of business. In Rome, exactly as in Great Britain at its imperial zenith in the 19th century, business people could emphatically not be 'trusted with the care of nation's continuity' (Wiener, 1985: 70). By contrast in Phoenicia merchants were so 'respectable' that 'the most successful might join the elite chariot corps and were sometimes ennobled' (Roberts, 2011: 32).

Interim conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is easy to regard Latin, Greek, or Babylonian as well as Punic and Aramaic as commercial languages or *linguae francae*, but in reality they are better seen as languages of administration, fully capable of sustaining (among other things) *international* economic life in their respective eras of hegemony. For their part, Akkadian and Latin are clear examples of ancient languages which developed business-related vocabularies for specifying relationships, methods and organisational forms. To regard all these languages as 'mere' languages in which business happened to be conducted is surely to miss the point, and no more so than in the case of Latin. In a nutshell, language in commercial contacts, negotiations *and* the Ancient World's equivalent of the business lunch were variously accommodating, evasive, high-flown and ever geared to the promotion of one's absolutely trustworthy self. In short, it would seem that for centuries the language behaviour among business people has been associated with histrionic effusion and ever preoccupied with impression management. There really is nothing new under the sun.

Snapshot 2[4]

'It befits a merchant always to have ink-stained hands.'[5]

[4] Based on Holden, 2016b

[5] 15th century Florentine humanist, author and merchant, Leon Battista Alberti,quoted in Origo (1959: 104)

Over the years the position of English as a *lingua franca* in the European context both ‘as a construct and as a reality’ (Pakir 2009) has been ‘hotly debated’ (Mauranen and Ranta 2009: 1) among language scholars. In so far as it has been applied to world business in general and European business in particular, the term *lingua franca* is quite incapable of even hinting at the multi-faceted role that English plays. This has little to do with the empirical fact that Europe is ‘linguaculturally … an extremely diverse area’ (Seidlhofer, 2010: 355); rather it arises from the fact that the notion of *lingua franca* is out of step with the operations of markets and attendant sheer pace, scope, self-enveloping intensity and boundary-defying capability of modern business connectivity.

Anyone who reads the literature by (academic) linguistics will be struck how little attention is paid to the socio-economic context in which *linguae francae* were or indeed actually used. This is a very serious omission, for it is surely the case that the term *lingua franca* is an infelicitous designation of English in contemporary business world. That case will be made with reference to the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean world during the 14th to 18th centuries.

Historically, the term *lingua franca* ‘seems to have been applied to an Italian trade language in the eastern Mediterranean region in the early modern period’ (Bloomfield 1979: 473). Seidlhofer (2011: 81) explains that ‘”franca” comes from Old French “franc” meaning “free” and lives on in Italian “franco,” as does Italian lingua, that is “tongue, language.” The word ‘free’ is held to suggest freedom ‘from connections with particular countries and ethnicities’ (Vikør 2004: 329; cited in Seidlhofer 2011: 81). Throughout the ages the purpose of *linguae francae* in general has been to help create ‘coherent trading zones’ (Braudel 1983: 138) and so ‘spread areas of intercommunication’ (Curtin 1986: 88). These are important points. One did not learn or engage in *linguae francae* to specialise (as it were) in dealing with one or two important business partners, but with as many partners as was feasible. Then as now, business people knew that ‘to engage in several activities was a sensible way of spreading risks’ (Braudel 1981: 320). English today of course allows business people to forge multiple connections on a scale and with a speed undreamt of half a millennium ago – not to mention even twenty years ago!

A good starting point for understanding the nature of international in the Europe’s early modern period is the recognition that the most sought-after commodity was *news*, ‘a luxury commodity was worth more than its weight in gold’ (Braudel 1981: 365), which was often passed on in confidence: ‘political news, military news, news of the harvest or about expected merchandise’ (Braudel 1983: 409). It may not look like it, but this tells us a good deal about the purposes to which business people put language then *and* now. First, the quest for reliable up-to-date information suggests the frequent use of language as an instrument of enquiry to interrogate informants and verify their utterances.

The point here is the merchants had to be very good at listening comprehension as distinct from ‘mere’ speaking proficiency in their own language, a foreign language or even a *lingua franca*. Second, updates of news forced business people to revise their plans and assessments.

This would be reflected in conversations marked by the future orientation of business language use: ‘what do we do, if .... ?.’, ‘Now we have no choice, but to ... ‘, ‘ Just as the past tense is the primary occupational modality of the historian, so for the business person, for whom even yesterday is in a manner of speaking history, the future tense is his or her principal shaper of thought and action: it is the mode for weighing up options; the mode of anticipation, speculation and decision.

Seidlhofer (2011: 3) has wisely pointed out that ‘the global spread of English [which] is unprecedented and unparalleled’ and comparisons with ‘Latin, French, Arabic and other lingua francas in earlier times simply do not hold.’ That is certainly true, as far as the world of international business is concerned, in which domain the term *lingua franca* needs to be treated with some caution. It far better suits the polyglot character of ‘the swift patois of the markets’ (Mantell 2009: 91) of earlier ages, when:

- markets were more far clearly demarcated as ‘favoured terrains of supply and demand’ (Braudel 1983: 26)
- the key commercial activity was ‘cross-cultural brokerage’ (Curtin 1986: 247), involving the trade of commodities (including, alas, slaves by the million)
- ‘capitalism and rationality’ (Braudel 1983: 575) had yet to make their stamp on business organisation and methods
- instantaneous global means of communication had yet to transform economic life, business thinking and the nature of international management.

But that is not all. Geographically the *lingua franca* was confined to the littoral of the Mediterranean: to be precise, to some 30 major ports engaged in maritime trade (Braudel, 1983: 185). It is unlikely to have penetrated far inland, where even prominent cities (such as Paris, Madrid, Vienna or Milan) did not act as bustling cosmopolitan entrepôts to be compared with Smyrna, Genoa or Barcelona. In other words, it was *not* a general language of the trade routes and the routes along the great rivers, which criss-crossed the mainland of European.

Furthermore, this shore-hugging *lingua franca* was not even used at all by the generality of the commercial classes directly engaged in the sea-borne trade. By far the greater part of its speakers were without a shadow of a doubt agents in the trading networks, who actively conducted the cross-cultural trade (‘did the haggling’) and, very importantly, chivvied and cajoled to ensure that cargoes, as negotiated, were loaded, all properly packed and labelled, on the correct vessel. Of the entirety of all those engaged in trade – the merchant houses, vendors, bankers, borrowers, creditors, shippers and so forth, agents as the key cross-cultural communicators constitute a distinct numerical minority.

The correspondence between the trading houses and their agents was preoccupied with three issues: ‘weights, measures and currencies’ (Braudel, 1983: 156). It follows then that its oral counterpart in far-flung places, namely the *lingua franca*, reflected those self-same commercial priorities. So it was that the everyday use of the *lingua franca* involved ‘perpetual calculation' (Braudel, 1983: 171) and conversion of quantities (currency exchange rates alone varied from city to city). Let no-one miss the point: *the efficacy of the lingua franca was directly related to agents' skills in arithmetical manipulation in their cross-cultural haggling.* It is also a very moot point whether the *lingua franca* was mutually intelligible throughout its port-based locales of use. For example, there were 'higher barriers between the Latin-based languages and the Arabic or Turkish of Muslim Lands' (Abulafia, 2011: 486). The lingua franca was in fact nothing more than geographically dispersed non-standard varieties of Italian without inflexions.[6] Did the merchants of Chios understand their counterparts in, say, Tripoli or Constantinople?

On the matter of correspondence it is easy to overlook the fact that this was voluminous and hand-written. Before the age of printing multiple copies (Origo, 1959: 107). Hence the merchant of five or six centuries was well accustomed to working, as we say these days, 24/7. For example, the forty years' correspondence of the Italian merchant Francesco Datini (c. 1335 – 1410) – the most complete extant collection of its kind – consists of 'some 150,000 letters … 300 deeds of partnership … 400 insurance policies and several thousand bills of lading, letters of advice, bills of exchange and cheques' (Origo, 1959: 11). This bears out the conviction that, given 'the slow pace and uncertainty of the mails' … the prime requirement was to send and receive large numbers of letters' (Braudel, 1983: 410). In the case of Dantini his letters were 'in Latin, French and Italian, in English and Flemish, in Catalonian, Provençal and Greek, and even a few in Arabic and Hebrew' (Origo, 1959: 83).

All this suggests that the written word in various vernaculars played an overwhelming important role in cross-cultural business communication in the times we are taking about. *Linguistically, it was the contents of commercial correspondence that really determined trade, not facility in the lingua franca, useful as that was in ad hoc contacting-making and haggling.* We should add that the letters were politely phrased and were as such the forbears of that stiff, formal business style that has all but disappeared, though only after the Second World War.

This Mediterranean *lingua franca* died out through lack of demand as a result of wars in the 18th century and the promise of the great markets opening up in the New World. In its heyday it was in terms of its main users the makeshift occupational language of predominantly one distinct class of commercial actors, namely agents; with regard to geographical distribution it was overwhelmingly confined to a scattering of ports; concerning its lexicogrammatical composition it was non-standard: that is so say it was not of a form considered by the educated classes to be correct or acceptable for other domains of life. If that had *not* been the case, it would have developed at least some extent as a language of philosophy, science and literature as well as government and administration. Nor did it even establish itself as the corporate language in any of the great merchant houses; it evidently lacked the translingual power for that purpose.

[6] The term 'non-standard' is based on definitions in the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2006) and *Collins English Dictionary* (1986) definitions of 'non-standard.' Regarding inflexions, cf. part of the definition of *lingua franca* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1970): 'A mixed language used in the Levant, consisting largely of Italian words deprived of their inflexions.'

And yet, in its way, the *lingua franca* served its fundamental purpose for several hundred years; of that there can be no doubt. But it was destined to die an economic and ergonomic failure, though it lives on as a linguistic curiosity as well as a theoretical concept in the linguistic sciences. Notably, the English language has been characterised as the *lingua franca* of business in Europe. But this is a remarkable deduction, bearing in mind that *lingua franca* was in practice an ad hoc mercantile lingo used by a numerically minor subset of all available commercial protagonists *and nothing more*. To what extent then can such a maritime commercial lingo, created for solely bargaining and networking and in all probability of restricted areal intelligibility, serve as an adequate descriptor of pan-European business English today with all its word-building power and multi-purpose flexibility?

Interim conclusions

The most striking linguistic feature of the Mediterranean era we have been describing concerns not the use of the *lingua franca* and its improvised variations is the dominance of correspondence as conveyors of detailed information and – importantly – instructions to agents and distant associates. In contrast to the instrumental informalities and necessarily causal nature of the *lingua franca,* the language of correspondence was firm, cordial and, as would say today, focused. Before the age of printing, the writing of correspondence was without a doubt the most time-consuming ‘language activity’, seeing that ‘corporate headquarters’ made multiple copies of all letters. As we have seen, correspondence was also multilingual (Dantini cannot have been an exception in this regard). In short, the written word governed the purpose and focus of the lingua franca *in situ.*

Snapshot 3

> ‘Translation is … not just switching between two languages, resulting in two texts, but an at once more complex, everyday, and hybrid performance.’[7]

Plainly, the context of modern international business and the role and function of language and languages differs awesomely in some respects, but only in some, from the context of the two previous eras we have been discussing. Here we must of course acknowledge the impact of the communication technologies (without forgetting the role of modern air travel) on the very nature of the language of business. Four crucial factors spring to mind:

- The speed (instantaneousness) and global reach; variety of media and multiple possibilities for information storage, retrieval, dissemination and modification.

[7] Steyaert and Janssens, 2015.

- The ever-expanding lexis of business and management in several languages
- Legal protection (copyright, liability, contractual arrangements, etc)
- The emergence of a form of writing (e-mail) which has conversational characteristics and a tendency to introduce informality into business exchanges

Regarding this last point, in 5,000 years of recorded human business activity, this electonically mediated ’speech-writing’ is something new, something revolutionary in fact.

Globally and within Europe – business communication is, as facet of corporate life, concerned with three linguistically significant facets: *networking*, *knowledge sharing* and *relationship management.* All three communication activities engage millions of people worldwide and are of enormous consequence for business in today’s world. In everyday business practice these three factors are *not* discrete functions. They perpetually reinforce each other. The internationally operating business executive is simultaneously a relationship builder, ‘knowledge worker’ (Drucker 1959)[8] and networker, regardless of whether he or she has a marketing or sales role, is in human resources or even R&D (an increasingly geographically dispersed activity). In other words networking, knowledge sharing and relationship management can be seen as both generic and task-specific. The associated language behaviour is specific to the business domain, the shared expertise and the length of the business relationship (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010), and has (at least) four key aims:

- to facilitate a conducive atmosphere for interactions (Holden 2002: 275-277)
- to inspire trust (Child 2001)
- to secure and maintain ‘common cognitive ground’ (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995: 14)
- to convey appropriate and timely information

In a world in each more languages and more cultures are in interplay than ever before in world history, the English language has emerged as the general language of business. But in this context we should not just be thinking of national language. The world of business is composed of ‘special languages’; that is to say ‘semi-autonomous, complex semiotic systems based on and derived from a general [i.e. from a national] language; their use presupposes special education and is restricted to communication among specialists in the same or closely related fields’ (Sager et al., 1980: 69). As well as specifying vocabularies of business

[8] Cited in: http://www.economist.com/blogs/schumpeter/2012/08/z-business-quotations-2

functions such marketing, HR, accounting, production and logistics and the collaborative work associated with those activities, they may be also refer to legal affairs, technical and scientific activities. Special languages in this sense are not in the slightest confined to the English language. In the case of MNCs, for example, it follows that a special language is intimately linked to its domain of operation both as a physical location and its distribution throughout networks of domain professionals. In today's business world the MNC – whatever the language of corporate headquarters – is a multilingual domain of special languages *par excellence.* It is these languages which in a manner of speaking are creating a new Tower of Babel.

As for the status of English, this topic has in recent years received enormous attention on the part of management scholars, paying especial attention its role in the MNC, where it is not only a language of business (in the popular sense of the expression), but also a language of international management. English is also the language of international teams. At the same time it is the paramount language of instruction in business schools throughout the world. This wider status has caused scholars to point darkly at the hegemonic role of English (Tietze and Dick, 2013); which brings us to the American English.

First, British English has *never* been able to compete with the brilliance and creativity of American English for generating new business and management terms and concepts, however untranslatable into other languages these may be! After all, British society has never accorded to business the social respectability that it has enjoyed in the USA for some 150 years (see Wiener 1980). Second, it was America, influenced by 19th century sociology being evolved in Germany (see Mintzberg, 2004:4-5), that invented scientific management and thus created new terms for the formal description of the interrelated activities of business and management. The seemingly endless flow of 'snappy neologisms' (Torrington and Holden, 1992) alongside the formal terminology derive from the American – and decidedly unBritish – preference for 'codification and preformulation … the sheer extent [of which] in all aspects of American business sets in apart from all other cultures of capitalism' (Hamden-Turner and Trompenaars 1993: 20).

Then of course the core vocabulary of modern electronically mediated communications is virtually all American in origin. Despite rear-guard actions like the Académie Française or he Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, all Europeans use the American terminology, the creation of scientists and geeks in constant evolution since the mid-1930s. And there is hardly anybody in Europe today who does not make frequent if not intensive of the @ sign, which invented by an MIT engineer in 1971 and has become 'the iconic symbol of the connected world' (Isaacson, 2014: 385). Once we accept the true American dimension to English as the paramount language of cross-cultural business and management in Europe, this might raise the possibility of replacing that weak term *lingua franca* with the more robust *lingua Americana*!

In a professional world dominated by national languages and vast hosts of special languages, not to mention the singular presence of American English, hegemonic or otherwise, the business person is confronted by several 'multilingual realities' (Meylaerts, 2103: 519), which require alignment if he or she is to make sense of given cross-cultural contexts and to say 'the right thing.' This facility to align is predicated on competence in handling and moving among repertoires, being 'languages in the traditional sense, language varieties, (e.g. dialects and specific codes), modalities (visual, gestural, intonational, aesthetically organized styles and genres' (Blommaert, 2006: 168). From this perspective we can envisage cross-cultural communication 'as translingual practice' (Steyaert and Janssens, 2015: 139). This novel perspective is important because it recognises the centrality of translation to the enterprise of establishing cross-cultural intelligibility.

Here, though, we must be careful what we mean by translation. The point is that we are all strongly conditioned to view translation as the art of transposing meaning from one national language into another. But the realities of modern business practice 'on the ground' require acts of multilingual translations, which involve 'effective' handling of repertoires and knowing how to repair faultlines which frequently occur at interfaces (a word I prefer to the more fashionable term 'boundary'). This way of looking at translation is more than 'multilanguaging', i.e. 'mixing multiple languages at the same time in order to achieve specific communicative purposes' (Barner-Rasmussen, 2015: 146) – at least if one thinking of national languages *only*. It is surely incontestable that translation in this extended view (which involves the alignment of multilingual realities) lies at the heart of international business. After all 'IB is literally unthinkable and impracticable without translation' (Holden and Michailova, 2014). But, crucially, the translations performed by business practitioners are perforce 'spontaneous, ad hoc and improvised' (Holden and Michailova, 2014). It must surely be the case that these translations are so imperfect (or inadequate, as linguists might say) that they engender confusions and misunderstandings of varying degrees of magnitude.

Translations of this nature have been central to international/cross-cultural business for as long as there have been markets. And who are we to say that we are actually better at it than our forebears? As for major differences between translation in, say, the Ancient World, and in today's business world, I would highlight the sheer proliferation of special languages, which inform idiolects, corporate discourse and international communication, on the one hand, and – this is important – anonymity, on the other. Never before in world history have so many people done business or attempted to do business with each other as *strangers.*

Interim conclusion

The specification of the language of business in the contemporary world is a task so difficult that all one hope for is to provide approximations of its peculiarities and complexities as a distinctive occupational language. Among notable factors we may include its composition of an uncountable number of special languages, the creative ascendency of American English, the role of English in interplay with other languages (business English has not replaced *any* national language), the trend towards informality, the nature and still under-researched role of translation, the anonymity of business interactions in cyberspace, and the recognition that the language of business operates within various multilingual realities.

Main conclusions

In this all too brief survey of the language of business over some 5,000 years we attempt to view business language as a generally understandable and distinctive linguistic form. We see clearly that business people have a long history of harnessing technology, starting with the crucial invention of writing. From the earliest times, it seems, business practitioners have used very polite and even florid forms of address with each other for the all-important purpose of achieving instrumental bonhomie as an essential ingredient of economic exchange. Over the centuries *linguae francae* have emerged to facilitate cross-cultural business in 'coherent trading zones.' But the status of English today cannot be readily compared to any other international language with reference to the world of business. I would that say that to describe English as a *lingua franca* is most unsatisfactory. If pressed to characterise the defining feature of the language of business in today's world, I would suggest that it is to do with *the navigation of multilingual realities through ad hoc and improvised translations to a greater extent than any other human activity*. But, on reflection, that comment can certainly apply to the age of Mediterranean trade in the pre-modern period and even in the Ancient World. Intriguing indeed are the research possibilities! At all events perhaps we should be moving towards the creation of *an augmented theory of translation in IB.*

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