

Reseñas/Book Reviews



Post-Merger Intercultural Communication in Multicultural Companies. A Linguistic Analysis

Christina Burek.

Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010. 173 pages. ISBN: 978-3-631-60389-5.

The current globalization processes have brought together individuals from different countries and cultural backgrounds who need to interact and communicate between them regularly. Although English has become the most common *lingua franca* for people all over the world, in their daily practice, professionals come across not only linguistic but also cultural barriers which often generate problematic misunderstandings that are at the heart of their business relations failure. Consequently, nowadays, in economic and pedagogic contexts, there is a significant awareness about the relevance of intercultural competence which has fostered the demand for research on the field of cross-cultural pragmatics. Christina Burek, with her book *Post-Merger Intercultural Communication in Multicultural Companies* has made an undoubtful contribution to this field of study.

This academic work “focuses on how cultural differences can be treated as an explanatory variable in cross-cultural pragmatic studies” (page 13). Burek discusses the principles that underlie successful intercultural communication and those which cause communication disorder resulting in pragmatic failures and misunderstandings that lead to non-cooperative behaviours within a multicultural working environment. More specifically, the author analyses the post-merger integration-phase of a cross-border company acquisition as an intercultural communication process, placing the emphasis on the different politeness strategies applied by the managers of different cultures to maintain face. The data and examples collected for the analysis revolve around different reactions, attitudes and communication aspects that frequently occur in the workplace interactions. The information was provided by senior executives and managers from the four different cultural

backgrounds involved in the multinational corporation where the research was conducted: German, Swiss, US American and Australian. As such, the findings of the analysis do not only generate a better awareness of cultural differences among the employees in the post-merger phase and the effect they have on daily business, but they also provide the basis for the recommendations formulated at the end of the book with the intention of assisting multicultural companies to enhance effective communication among their workforce.

The book opens with an introductory chapter where the author gives a complete outline of the key claims of the work and the structure of its contents. The subsequent chapters (seven in total with conclusions) can be coherently grouped into four main parts. In the first part (chapters 2 and 3), Burek argues the relevant role of culture in the communication, management and, therefore, performance of globalised cross-border business alliances. This part also provides comprehensive background information on an array of concepts of culture and it presents the underlying theories and principles in the linguistic field of intercultural pragmatics that focus on politeness strategies. The still valid concepts of politeness and face of Brown and Levinson (1978) and Grice's (1975) conversational maxims are specially considered by this study. However, some more recent bibliographical sources would have been welcome.

In the second part (chapter 4), some of the most commonly used methods of data collection and analysis in research are assessed. Taking into account the limited target group of managers and the subject of the study, the author accurately decides to base the methodology of the study on the combination of a quantitative analysis of data collected from question items that are similar to those used by the discourse completion tasks (DCT) method (a questionnaire) and the qualitative interpretation of follow-up interviews and discussions with managers.

In chapter 5, which can be considered the core part of the book, Burek explains how she applied the quantitative and qualitative methods, the principles behind the construction of the questionnaire and interviews and their scale of ratings. The decisions made have allowed for the collection of data for the analysis and exploration of culture-specific tendencies and values of the cultures involved in the recently merged multinational corporation, their expression in situations of conflict, their use of certain wordings such as apologies and thanking expressions, and their views

towards each other. The results obtained from the answers of 141 people are presented in detail in this chapter, accompanied by an additional summary of the questionnaire and of the interview overall key findings classified by nationalities. Particularly useful for spot-check data is the table on page 101 which shows the combined interview results for questions on perceived cultural characteristics and communication styles. The complete questionnaire, the tables with the statistical data of the analysis of the answers and an interview guide are also presented as appendices, which are very illustrative materials for those interested in having a quick and complete overview of the research. The analysis shows that different cultural communication norms affect many business situations and that “managers recognise the importance of being aware that cultural differences exist and that their existence can affect the business success” (page 111).

For Burek, the findings of the study still leave the question of “what skills global managers should have to arrive at a fairly high level of mutual understanding, reducing inefficiencies in time and effort” (page 113) to be addressed. Thus, in the fourth part of the book (chapter 6), she presents a critical analysis and evaluation of the effectiveness of the cross-cultural training programme in the recently merged company. Her analysis confirms that the focus of such programme is primarily on cultural values, and that a stronger emphasis on linguistic aspects is required so that their managers can achieve the desired business outcomes. In the light of this conclusion, Burek further offers a set of recommendations regarding the content, structure, methodology, learning objectives, length and timing of the training programme, and develops an intercultural communication training model based on the principle that “[i]t is vital that participants understand linguistic sources of communication problems first and are then assisted in developing relevant strategies to smooth or avoid potential communication problems” (page 123). For this purpose, Burek proposes that the participants should analyse “real-life” examples of cross-cultural miscommunication dialogues in order to identify the main sources of pragmatic failures, which may include misinterpretation of an utterance or an action by the listener. The linguistics aspects within Burek’s intercultural communication training model are clustered into four categories: culture-specific communication norms, rules and styles; cultural values; cross-cultural communication strategies; and cross-cultural communication dialogues. The complete training model is illustrated in a “compressed” chart on page 132.

All in all, *Post-Merger Intercultural Communication in Multicultural Companies* is a good contribution to the rising of awareness that cultural aspects are highly important in global corporate training and, therefore, in the teaching of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), nowadays better called Communication for Specific Purposes (CSP). Burek's study argues the dependence of language on culture, and its results and recommendations provide a comprehensive list of characteristics to be taken into consideration, especially, but not only, by those involved in designing and teaching International Business Communication (IBC) courses. The study can also serve as an illuminating source of ideas and resources for researchers on intercultural communication.

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Reviewed by **Carmen Foz**
 Universidad de Zaragoza (Spain)
 foz@unizar.es

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