English as a lingua franca in Nordic corporate mergers: Two case companies

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Abstract

The article is based on findings from research into communication and language use in two international corporations, both formed as a result of a merger between a Swedish and a Finnish company. A questionnaire was sent to representatives of each case company, focusing on language use, communication practices, and cultural views. Using some of the results of the questionnaire as a starting point, we have studied two of the most frequent communicative events where English was used as a lingua franca in internal communication: email messages and meetings. This article focuses on the discoursal (dis)similarities of Swedish and Finnish interactants, and the resulting cultural and communicative challenges.

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1. Introduction

For people in the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – the use of English as a means of communicating with each other is a fairly recent development. English speaking countries have not played a major role in the

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history and politics of the region. The traditional *lingua franca* of the region has always been Swedish – or rather a variant usually referred to as ‘Scandinavian’ (*skandinaviska*), which is a fluid combination of Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Icelandic, all very closely related languages. ‘Scandinavian’ is created more or less *ad hoc* according to the nature of the communicative situation and the communicators’ language skills, for the sole purpose of being understood by the interactants, whatever their native Nordic language might be. Finnish, the mother tongue of the vast majority of Finns, differs greatly from the other Scandinavian languages and does not feature in ‘Scandinavian’. Finns gain access to ‘Scandinavian’ communication through Swedish, which most Finns know at least to some degree as it is a mandatory subject in Finnish schools. Swedish is also the mother tongue of a 6% minority in Finland and has the status of second official language.

The switch from ‘Scandinavian’ to English as the regional *lingua franca* is reflected in the fact that today, pan-Nordic corporations increasingly choose English as their corporate language. In practice, this language choice means that corporate level documentation and all reporting is done in English, and communication between different units is also mostly in English. Though standards of English are generally high in Scandinavia, with virtually everybody studying the language at school for several years, the use of English – a foreign language in all Scandinavian countries – to this extent and in these kinds of demanding professional activities nevertheless puts great pressure on staff, particularly in competitive international business, where the requirements and stakes are high. These pressures become particularly acute in merger situations. In the past few decades, there has been a substantial increase in the number of cross-border mergers and acquisitions (*Cartwright, 1998*, p. 5), and this trend is especially strong in Scandinavia.

It is widely acknowledged that a merger is likely to bring significant changes to the communicative patterns and practices of the participating companies, and employees are faced with a new corporate culture and often new communication channels (see, e.g. Säntti, 2001; Tienari & Vaara, 2001). When the merging companies represent different countries, languages, and cultures, they will face a significant challenge, especially in the internal communication of the new combination. In cross-border mergers, one of the key strategic decisions is the choice of the corporate language.

In this paper, we will report on a case study of internal communication associated with two corporate mergers in Scandinavia. The merging companies investigated are from Finland and Sweden, having Finnish and Swedish as their respective native languages but using English as a *lingua franca*. One is a globally operating paper manufacturer (in 1998, the Finnish paper company ‘Paper’¹ and the Swedish ‘Giant’ joined forces to become Paper Giant) and the other is a banking group (in 1997, the Finnish ‘Pankki’ and the Swedish ‘Banken’ became ‘PankkiBanken’, today Scandibank), whose primary markets are in Scandinavia and the Baltic countries.

¹ For reasons of confidentiality, pseudonyms will throughout be used for the companies investigated. Likewise all names of employees have been changed.
In the beginning, the two groups chose different language strategies: Paper Giant, the paper manufacturer, announced that the common language for the new company would be English. For a global company, this was the obvious language choice. The management of the banking group, however, was in a different situation, as the two merging banks mostly operated within Scandinavia. Therefore, they defined Swedish as the ‘reporting language and the language for the management’. This statement was largely interpreted as an endorsement of the status of Swedish as the corporate language, whereupon many Finnish-speaking employees enrolled in language courses to improve their, often rusty, skills in Swedish. In spite of the official second language status of Swedish in Finland, many Finnish people’s ability to speak Swedish is not at a standard which allows even general communication to take place easily, let alone professional communication (for more details, see Charles, 2002). For the new banking group, however, opting for Swedish was a highly pragmatic decision – yet one that had to be reconsidered in view of later developments. As Marschan-Piekkari, Vaara, Tienari, and Säntti (forthcoming) point out, it was felt that, since the majority of Finnish employees spoke Swedish at least at some level, using Swedish as a joint language would save time and money; for example, a lot of company documentation already existed in Swedish. What the management had not foreseen was the problems that this would cause for many Finnish speaking staff.

In the year 2000, the banking group expanded to Denmark and further to Norway. In the wake of these new mergers, the bank decided to adopt English as their official corporate language. While this decision alleviated some of the problems involved in language use and communication – as everyone was now speaking a foreign language, and therefore staff were theoretically on a level playing field – it by no means eliminated all the communication challenges (see Charles, 2002). The complex web of social, historical, and cultural experiences, expectations, and resulting assumptions remained, though now they had to be dealt with in English.

This highly interesting situation was the starting point for our research. We wanted to find out how employees were coping with the cultural and linguistic challenges resulting from a cross-border merger. As a first step, we therefore studied communicative practices in the companies concerned. We were also curious about the perceptions that employees in Finland and Sweden had of each other’s communication cultures and communicative practices, specifically about perceived similarities and dissimilarities. Finally, we wanted to examine the discourse that the employees produced when they were actually working together on a day-to-day basis. For this last purpose, we analyzed meetings and email messages.2

The kind of language use that we focus on here is referred to as English Lingua Franca (ELF) communication in, for example, Lesznyak (2002), Mauranen (2003) and Seidlhofer (2002). To specifically focus on Business ELF situations, and to explore and discuss issues related to the English used in our case companies, we will use the term Business English Lingua Franca (BELF). BELF refers to English used

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2 The spelling email rather than e-mail is used in this study, since hyphens can be seen as temporary scaffolding in the building of new words (see, e.g. Andrews, D., 2003). By adopting the spelling without a hyphen, this study aims to make a statement about the permanency of email in today’s world.
as a ‘neutral’ and shared communication code. BELF is neutral in the sense that none of the speakers can claim it as her/his mother tongue; it is shared in the sense that it is used for conducting business within the global business discourse community, whose members are BELF users and communicators in their own right – not ‘non-native speakers’ or ‘learners’.

This nature of BELF we have postulated above, however, is not unproblematic: If we accept the idea of BELF as a highly functional form of communication – a ‘code language’ for business purposes – are we suggesting that this language is culture-neutral or cultureless? According to Meierkord (2002, p. 109), discussions about the role of culture in lingua franca communication in general cluster around two poles. Some authors (see, e.g. Hall, 1966; Zima, 1977; and later, Crystal, 1997) describe ‘pidgin-like’ lingua francas that do not convey emotional ties or identity, but are culture-neutral. An opposing view is presented by Meierkord (2002, p. 110) who argues that seeing lingua francas as cultureless ignores the fact that the speakers creating (emphasis added) the lingua franca do have a cultural background and, in fact, a diversity of backgrounds. In this article, we adopt this latter view and suggest that not only do BELF speakers bring into business interaction their own culture-bound views of how encounters should be conducted but also discourse practices stemming from their respective mother tongues.

Our research framework is provided by interactional sociolinguistics (see Gumperz, 1977, 1982; Tannen, 1984; for an application to professional discourse, see Yamada, 1992). This framework acknowledges the interaction between cultures and language use. As Yamada (1992, p. 2) points out, an overreaching premise of interactional sociolinguistics is that meaning is based on shared expectations and can only be understood in the context of interaction. To create meaning within context, interactants use three mutually influential and interacting spheres: the spheres of culture, encounters, and conversation (here, we refer to the latter as discourse). In multicultural situations, the various cultures of the interactants interact with and influence encounters, which, in turn, influence the nature of discourse. As discourse then shapes and structures encounters and cultures, the three create a constant, dynamic interactive process.

This article starts with a description of the corporate environment where BELF is used in our target companies, and reports on findings from a survey on language use, communicative practices, and cultural perceptions in Paper Giant and Scandi Bank. We then discuss the ways in which the cultural views presented in the survey are reflected in meeting discourse. Finally, we report on similarities and dissimilarities in email messages written by Finns and Swedes.

2. (Un)shared experiences, expectations, and perceptions: results of questionnaire and interviews

A survey (for a full report, see Louhiala-Salminen, 2002a) was conducted in our target companies, both in Finland and in Sweden, to map out the communicative environment and to serve as a basis for further studies. More specifically, the pur-
pose of the questionnaire survey and related interviews was to investigate the impact of the merger on communicative practices and to examine factors and attitudes affecting language choice. In addition, we wanted to identify any possible communication problems and describe the employees’ views of potential differences in communication.

The questionnaire survey targeted at the Finnish and Swedish employees of Paper Giant and Scandi Bank was conducted in January–May 2001. The Paper Giant (PG) respondents and the Finnish Scandi Bank (SB) respondents replied to the 30 (PG)/32 (SB) questions via the Internet, and the Swedish Scandi Bank respondents, in accordance with their wishes, used the traditional pen-and-paper method.

The questionnaire was addressed to 520 PG employees (260 in Sweden, 260 in Finland) and 400 SB employees (200 in Sweden, 200 in Finland), selected randomly among the employees in different organizational positions in the different units or divisions, and the corporate headquarters. The response rate of the Scandi Bank sample amounted to 55%, which was distinctly higher than Paper Giant’s 33%. The difference cannot be explained by the partly different response methods, i.e., via the computer vs. on paper, as not only were the Scandi Bank response rates from Finland using the Internet, and from Sweden using internal mail, practically the same, but also Paper Giant’s lower figure was achieved via the Internet. Instead, through the analysis of the replies and the interviews, it became obvious that the research topics in the study, i.e., language use and communication, were regarded as issues to be discussed in Scandi Bank to a greater extent, and SB employees were therefore more motivated to answer the questions. In addition, in accordance with the wishes and instructions from the company representatives, the PG questionnaire cover letter was sent from the Helsinki School of Economics and signed by the researcher. The SB cover letter, again, was signed by Swedish Scandi Bank representatives in Sweden and Finnish Scandi Bank representatives in Finland, which was likely to increase the motivation of the employees to fill in the form.

Although the Paper Giant response rate of 33% cannot be regarded as fully satisfactory, the rates were, however, considered acceptable for the purposes of this study, since the aim was to look for general trends among the views of the employees, not for exact information on the distribution of the population’s views. In addition, the respondent profiles of both the Paper Giant and Scandi Bank respondents largely seemed to correspond to the characteristics of the populations. Also, the interview study consisting of 31 interviews in the two companies complemented the data received from the questionnaire.

The answers received were coded and a statistical analysis was carried out. For most of the questions, the percentage distributions and mean values in the total samples of PG and SB, and separately in both Finnish samples and both Swedish samples, were analyzed and compared. Also, cross-tabulations were conducted between the variables that were found to be relevant. The open-ended answers were approached both quantitatively and qualitatively. In other words, where possible a quantitative approach was taken, for example the percentage distribution between Yes/No was calculated, but the free comments, which were often long stories, were
treated in a similar way to the interview data, i.e., emerging characteristic features and trends were looked for.

The findings of the study can be divided into two main categories. On the one hand, it was shown that the daily routines of communication and the use of languages in both companies, and in both countries, were largely similar. On the other hand, Finnish and Swedish respondents and interviewees emphasized their views of significant differences in how some of the communication practices were realized. They did not always share expectations and perceptions of their own and their Swedish/Finnish colleagues’ communication.

Some of the quantitative findings describing the communicative practices are shown in Table 1. The figures are mean values of the percentages given by the Finnish and Swedish respondents, in Paper Giant and Scandi Bank.

The similarities include, for example, the fact that, on average, company-internal communication accounted for a significant amount, i.e., approximately 80%, of the respondents’ writing and speaking (for an in-depth discussion of the shared practices, see Louhiala-Salminen, 2002a). In both corporations, more than half of our respondents reported that they have regular, i.e., daily or weekly, contacts with the corporation’s units outside their own country. Overall, the increased use of English was mentioned as the most striking change in the employees’ post-merger communication. As can be seen in Table 1, the respondents in PG Sweden estimated that the average percentage of English communication had grown from 10% to 19%, and in Scandi Bank Sweden from 4% to 19%. The growth patterns indicated by the Finnish respondents were fairly similar, but the pre-merger levels in Finland in both companies were somewhat higher, and the increases were therefore also smaller. In spite of the increase in the use of English, the proportion of mother tongue communication still amounted on average to nearly 80%, but there were large differences between respondents as well. Contrary to expectations, however, the proportion of English used did not correspond directly to the respondents hierarchical position in the organization; at all levels there were individuals who reported that practically all their company-internal communication (all written material, the majority of meetings and telephone calls) was in English, and there were those who almost entirely used their mother tongue. Although this survey did not give us data to examine what kind of tasks in the organization require more proficiency in English than others, it was possible to see that in these multi-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables describing communicative practices as reported by respondents</th>
<th>PG Sw (%)</th>
<th>SB Sw (%)</th>
<th>PG F (%)</th>
<th>SB F (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of respondents’ internal communication</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees with regular contacts with other nationalities</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of English used pre-merger</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of English used at present</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F, Finnish respondents; Sw, Swedish respondents.
national organizations, such positions exist at all organizational levels and in all business units.

The respondents also agreed when reporting on the time they spent on the three most important communications media: approximately two thirds of the time used on internal communication was spent in meetings, on the phone, or at the computer, reading and writing email messages. However, in comparing these three media, we found that in both companies Swedes tended to sit more in meetings while Finns spent more time on email. For example, in Paper Giant, where the difference was larger, Swedish employees reported that they spent 29% of their time in organized face-to-face meetings or negotiations, whereas the corresponding percentage for Finnish respondents was 20%. Email, again, took up 29% of the Finns’ time but only 16% of the Swedes’ time.

The respondents seemed to have a very pragmatic view of the reasons for language choice in any particular situation. They reported unanimously that the most important factor affecting language choice was the target group and group members’ language skills: if other nationalities were involved, which meant that the participants’ mother tongue could not be used, the language was English. Some respondents also referred to the status of English as the corporate language, and some pointed out that writing was mostly in English, but in oral communication other, situation-specific, alternatives were possible. For example, some of the Finnish Scandi Bank employees continued to speak Swedish with some of their Swedish colleagues if they had initially started to communicate with that person in Swedish. In social settings, such as, for example, dinner table conversations, Swedish was also occasionally used.

As the merger, for many, had meant changing over to a foreign language in many of the tasks that earlier had been carried out in the mother tongue, it was not unexpected that ‘foreign language use’ was regarded as the main source of communication problems. This was more conspicuous in the replies to the open-ended questions by the SB respondents; Finns, in particular, reacted strongly against the earlier practice of using Swedish as the common language. They pointed out that when Swedish was used, Swedes were able to use their mother tongue whereas many of the Finns felt that “Swedish is not my best foreign language”. They explained, for example, that learning banking terminology in another language was not a problem, but finding the right expressions in ‘ordinary small talk’ or acting assertively in negotiations was difficult. Overall, the descriptions of problematic situations in ‘foreign language use’ that the respondents or interviewees offered would seem to indicate that in most cases problems appeared in oral communication: the telephone was frequently mentioned, as well as the difficulty in meetings of being prepared to suddenly and effectively express opinions or convey nuances.

As we have discussed above, employees in both companies and countries, to a large extent, shared views of everyday communicative practices, language choice and potential problems. However, the qualitative data revealed unshared perceptions concerning views of what was considered as ‘effective’ communication.

The informants seemed unanimous when agreeing with the considerations of what characterizes ‘typically Swedish’ and ‘typically Finnish’ communication: Swedes were
seen to be ‘discussive’ and ‘wordy’, Finns ‘direct’ and ‘economical with words’. At first, it seemed that this message was so much in line with the discussion in the Finnish and Swedish media in recent years (e.g. Ekwall & Karlsson, 1999) that it was difficult to distinguish between media-talk and personal talk. However, as the examples and stories continued in their abundance, all confirming the Swedish ‘discussion’ and the Finnish ‘directness’, we had to conclude that the statement by one of the interviewees, “first we thought that we are alike, now we know that we aren’t” is not a cliché learnt, but a lesson experienced by the respondents and interviewees in our target companies. The informants also pointed out that it was difficult to distinguish between the effects of national, corporate, or organizational cultures on communication. Mostly they seemed to construct a national framework to explain different behaviours, as in the following reply by a Finn: “The Swedes talk a lot and want to reach a common understanding, the Finns are quicker in decision-making”. A Swedish respondent, on the other hand, argued: “Finns do not say much, difficult to interpret reactions... Rather quick reactions which are wrong than thoroughly weighed decisions that are right”.

The different perceptions and expectations concerning effective communication can be seen in the following characterizations given by the survey respondents. The following descriptions of Finnish communication (translated into English from the original Finnish and Swedish replies) were most frequently offered by Finnish respondents

- Directness and facts, no small talk, equality.
- Effectiveness, efficiency.
- To the point, no unnecessary chatting.

and by Swedish respondents

- Quick, sometimes too quick decisions that may be later changed, the boss is the boss.
- ‘Few-worded’, economical with words; reserved.
- That communication is direct, sounds harsher than is intended.

The following are most frequent characterizations of Swedish communication, by Swedish respondents

- Dialogue.
- Consensus, everybody participates, a lot of discussion, everybody talks.
- Discussion so that everyone is happy.

and, by Finnish respondents:

- Endless discussion.
- Polite talk without practical measures, avoiding conflict.
- A lot of extra talk before getting down to business.
Interestingly, as the above examples reveal, the views of Finns and Swedes of their own and each other’s communication often seem to refer to the same characteristic feature, but they used very different evaluative language to describe it. For example, Finns considered themselves as ‘factual’ and ‘direct’ communicators, implying that they are effective, while Swedes referred to essentially the same characteristics as ‘blunt’, ‘pushy’ and ‘few-worded’. Swedes, again, described themselves as ‘discussive’ and ‘democratic’, implying that they are effective, while Finns thought they were ‘wordy’ and ‘talked endlessly’.

The survey and interviews discussed above gave us information on the communicative environment in the two companies, and the findings were used to determine the communicative practices that would be studied in detail. The discoursal and social expectations and perceptions that emerged in the survey served as the interpretive frame for the analysis of Finnish/Swedish meetings and email exchanges. In the next section, some aspects of the two companies’ BELF meetings will be discussed.

3. The interplay between cultural perceptions and discourse in BELF meetings

To find out whether the characteristics attributed by Finns and Swedes in the survey to each other (and themselves) are actually corroborated by their discourse, we focused on the dimension that both agreed was a key cultural difference – the dimension our respondents referred to as “wordiness” or “discussiveness” (a Swedish characteristic)/“economy with words” or “directness/bluntness” (a Finnish characteristic).3 Our data comprised 4 video’d meetings (a total of c. 9 hours of talk), with a total of 16 Finnish and 15 Swedish participants, who represented various business units and various organizational positions. The meetings were fairly informal group internal discussions focusing on mutual jobs, with no overt conflict. The aim of one meeting was to plan and decide on the contents for the next issue of the globally distributed company-internal magazine; the other meetings dealt with software problems, translation problems, and monthly progress reports.

The simplest way to look at the ‘wordiness’ dimension is obviously to count the number of words uttered. Words were here taken to include various murmurs and mutterings, conventionally transcribed as, e.g., ‘err’, ‘umm’, ‘uhuh’. As the chairperson’s role in a meeting is unique, we excluded chair talk. The number of words uttered by all Finns and all Swedes were separately calculated. As the number of Finns and Swedes, however, varied in the meetings, we worked out the average number of words uttered by each. The resulting figures are shown in Table 2.

As we can see from Table 2, there are considerable differences in the number of words spoken by Finns and Swedes in some meetings (particularly in Scandi Bank 1), while in others there is no great difference (most notably Paper Giant 1). More

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3 Incidentally, this characteristic is also a popularly held stereotype of Finns and Swedes. Here, however, we will not enter into a discussion of stereotypes. The characteristic is treated as a finding obtained from our survey, albeit most probably respondents were influenced by the popular stereotypical views of each other.
interestingly, in three of the meetings, the ‘silent’ Finnish participants actually spoke more on average than did the ‘discussive’ and ‘wordy’ Swedes. No straightforward conclusions about ‘discussiveness’ can therefore be drawn. However, when we supplement the quantitative data with observations made from a qualitative analysis, a fuller picture emerges: Firstly, differences emerged in word counts for the same individual in different meetings, and even within one meeting, talk from one individual could be distributed very unevenly. This unevenness of talk was more conspicuous with the Finnish participants than it was with the Swedish. Secondly, differences in the nature of speech emerged between the Swedes and the Finns. These observations will now be considered in more detail.

Let us start with the case of Maija – a Finnish female employee in Scandi Bank, who participated in two meetings. In one, Maija accounted for nearly 20% of the total word count, but in the other, less than 1%. An explanation for the large difference may well be found in the different roles that she had in the two meetings.\textsuperscript{4} When Maija spoke nearly 20% of the time, she was in the role of a “technical expert”, and her job was to explain certain technical aspects of the software used. The obvious role expectation is that she would share her knowledge, i.e., speak – which she did. On the other hand, in the meeting where she spoke little, she had the role of “receiver of information”, i.e., a listener who is there to learn about issues related to her job. As a listener, Maija’s discoursal contributions were divided between four exchanges: She spoke when she was addressed directly, or when she seemed to feel strongly about an issue, as we will show in the following examples.

Example 1 illustrates Maija’s talk when she feels strongly about an issue, e.g., when protesting about a ‘bad’ Finnish translation. The translation had already been discussed for some time, but Maija had remained silent. When there was an obvious risk that the ‘bad translation’ would be accepted (lines 1, 2), however, she joined in.

\textbf{Example 1.}\textsuperscript{5}

\begin{verbatim}
1 C: But you are ready to accept this
2 F1: Yes definitely I am yeah
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{4} On some of the interactive, tactical, and professional roles that people have in negotiations and meetings, see \textit{Mulholland, 1991}; also \textit{Spangle and Isenhart, 2002}.

\textsuperscript{5} In the transcriptions, C = Chair, F = Finnish speaker, S = Swedish speaker, * = overlapping speech, (.) = short pause.
As we can see from the example, Maija focuses on the reason why the translation should not be accepted. The illocutionary force of what she says – a counter-argument – however, is only marked with an unstressed ‘but’ (line 3), which provides the only textual clue for interpretation. Her argumentation thus largely relies on what she assumes to be a shared value/assumption in the group: ‘a bad translation is not acceptable’. Using Halliday’s (1974) terminology, we could say that in Maija’s contribution to the conversation, the ideational level is strongly at the forefront, with little focus on the interpersonal or the textual level. As a result, the argumentation is impersonal and issue oriented. We suggest that issue orientation, accompanied by lack of interpersonal metadiscourse linking an utterance to the rest of the interaction, may well be what the Swedish respondents were thinking of when they described Finnish talk as ‘blunt and direct’ – and also what the Finns referred to as ‘efficient, straight to the point’. Interestingly, however, Maija’s argumentation works. There were no comprehension problems; the shared value/assumption obviously existed, and the translation was, in the end, not accepted.

While reliance on shared values and assumptions was found to be a recurring feature in Finnish discourse in our data, we found that Swedish discourse exhibited greater interpersonal and textual orientation. This is illustrated in Example 2, which is an extract from the discussion preceding Maija’s protest. The explicitly interpersonal features of S1’s turns are underlined.

**Example 2.**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>C since this is in Swedish Bob why don’t you er comment on it first please</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>S1 Yes I think er we got the status and I think you Chris has also made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>comments on it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>F Yupp I have yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>S1 Er so I think most of us have seen this text or (.) is it new for anyone (.) er (.) that they say in (.) er from Company D side that they say that what you have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>said from the Finnish side er it’s about ‘tycke och smak’ what’s what is it in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>English I don’t know and er… you agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>F yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>S1 in that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>F yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>S1 maybe you can continue I think</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although the two extracts discussed here have somewhat different functions, they nevertheless both introduce issues on which there is factual or potential disagreement: Maija takes a stand and disagrees with her colleagues, while S1 in Example 2 avoids taking a stand towards a controversial issue. In Example 2, we see how the desire to involve other participants as well as the need to place his utterances into a broader discourse context were high on S1’s agenda, while in Example 1 they were obviously low down on Maija’s. S1 refers to a previous contribution (lines 2, 3), explicitly talks through his assumption about others having seen this text (line 5), and then checks whether the assumption is true (line 5). In an indirect and hedged manner he invites a discussion of whether the Finns agree with what has been said about their comments (line 8), and finishes by explicitly asking for a discussion of the issue, although he again includes a hedge (line 12).

Another example of a contrast between the Swedish ‘wordiness’/‘discussiveness’ and the Finnish ‘economy with words’/‘directness’ is given below. The example illustrates conversational cooperation and the way the two different styles of talk feed on each other: the Finnish speakers’ succinct talk seems to encourage Swedish discussiveness.

Example 3.

1 S: And my contact person in Stockholm. His name is Pelle Svensson.
2 Should I write it down?
3 F1: No.
4 F2: No
5 S: If if Mats Mats wants to know *who
6 F2: *ya-ah
7 S: who are you talking to ((pause)) Pelle *Svensson
8 F2: *ya-ah.
9 F1: *ya-ah
10 C: You can’t talk to so many others and Pelle Svensson I suppose it is (.) project
11 S: He is Mister Project
12 C: Yes. He is . . .

In Example 3, the key idea is the name of an important person – Pelle Svensson. Using a question to address his interactivists, the Swedish speaker (S) offers to write it down (lines 1, 2), obviously to assure himself that the Finns will get the name right. The offer – made in question form – introduces a dialogic element into the conversation. This dialogue, however, is rejected by the Finns, with their monosyllabic ‘No’ (lines 3, 4). To the Finns, the ‘no’ obviously signifies that writing the name is unnecessary as they already know it. S, however, continues in a discursive manner, explaining why the name is important (lines 5 and 7), repeating the name (line 7) – to make sure the Finns remember it – and is then joined by the Chair (also a Swede, incidentally) who mentions the name for the third time in a very short period (line 10). Throughout, the Finns backchannel (lines 6, 8, 9) – thus, in effect, avoiding dialogue, and not confirming that they know and remember the name. As in Examples 1 and 2,
we see the Finnish speakers being economical with words and issue oriented, relying on shared information (i.e., the Swedes finally knowing or realizing that the Finns know the name as they do not want it repeated), and the Swedish speakers being ‘wordy’, taking their interactants into account, and being less reliant on what is taken to be shared assumptions. Examples of this type abound in our data.

To sum up: This brief glimpse into meeting talk between Finns and Swedes leads us to suggest that culture bound discoursal features can be identified and would seem to be transferred into BELF interaction. This is in line with views expressed by, for example, Scollon and Wong Scollon (1995) and by Sajavaara (1999). They are also in line with Mauranen’s (1993) findings from Finnish discourse, albeit discourse in another domain, that of academic writing. As illustrated in the examples discussed above, it would seem that interpersonal orientation, together with queries, questions, hedging and copious use of metadiscourse, might well contribute to the perceptions of Swedish talk as ‘discussive’, ‘wordy’, and ‘dialogic’ (see Fant, 1989 on discourse in Swedish business negotiations). On the other hand, perceptions of Finnish talk as ‘few worded’, ‘factual’, and ‘direct’ may well have more to do with its tendency towards issue orientation, a relatively low level of interpersonal orientation, and relative scarcity of metadiscourse, queries and questions than with the actual number of words spoken. Moreover, our spoken data would seem to suggest that Swedish speakers rely less on shared context or shared values, and use more explicit rhetoric and conversational gambits than do Finnish speakers, whose discourse was more tightly bound to what they assumed to be shared. Findings from our analysis of meeting discourse therefore also suggest that there is some truth in the popular characterizations of Finns’ and Swedes’ communicative styles – reflected in the views expressed in our survey and interviews. The reality, however, is much less simple than the interviewee perceptions would lead us to believe.

In the next section, we turn our attention to email messages written internally at one of our case companies, Paper Giant.

4. BELF in Finnish/Swedish email messages

According to the survey we described above (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002a), around a quarter of all company-internal communication takes place via email in the case companies. However, knowledge about the specific features of this kind of corporate communication, in lingua franca English in particular, is scarce (see however Nickerson, 2000). We examined a corpus of 114 English messages written by 27 Finnish and 23 Swedish employees at Paper Giant. The messages were collected from a Vice President’s mailbox over three weeks and the writers represent men and women of different ages, and in different organizational positions and corporate functions. Unlike the analysis of the meetings, the analysis of email messages was started from

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6 None of the messages was written by a Swedish-speaking Finn; thus, the adjectives Swedish and Finnish refer to both the mother tongue and the nationality of the writer.
the identification of some similarities and differences between the Finnish and Swedish writers, and these were then interpreted within the framework of the questionnaire survey.

5. Shared features in BELF messages

The BELF email messages written by Finns and Swedes share certain generic features in terms of their form, content, communicative purpose, and linguistic characteristics. First, although the form of the messages is that of the memo, they have some features reminiscent of letter or fax discourse, such as salutations and complimentary closes. Almost 80% of the messages contain salutations and practically all messages have a complimentary close. The Swedish *Hej* and *Med vänlig hälsning* are used by both Finnish and Swedish writers, most probably to emphasize togetherness, and deference for the recipient (Connor, 1999; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002b). No Finnish salutations were used presumably because Finnish is not a shared language for the interactants. Sometimes the writers end their salutations with an exclamation mark and start the first sentence of the message with a lower case letter; both practices are possible in Finnish and Swedish (see Sajavaara, 1999 for a discussion on transference). The second similarity between the Finns and Swedes is the content of the BELF messages which reflects both the ideational and interpersonal level of discourse (Halliday, 1974, see also Rogers & Hildebrandt, 1993). The ideational level can be recognized in the discourse topics and the ultimate aim of the messages, that is, the promotion of company operations (see also Suchan & Dulek, 1998). The interpersonal level, on the other hand, is reflected, for example, in the frequent use of first names, especially in salutations and complimentary closes, which contribute to the maintenance of social relations within the company. In this respect, both writer groups were equally interpersonal, in contrast to our meeting data discussed earlier.

Finally, both writer groups use the same three genres recognizable by their communicative purposes and related linguistic features (see, e.g. Bhatia, 1993; Louhiala-Salminen, 1999; Martin, 1985; Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). Kankaanranta (forthcoming) identifies the three genres, and terms the most frequent genre, i.e., that used for exchange of information, the “Dialogue genre”, and the other two the “Postman genre” (to deliver documents for information and/or for comments), and the “Noticeboard genre” (to inform employees about corporate issues), respectively. The linguistic features typical of each genre reflected the mailbox owner’s own understanding of how the messages would have been delivered before email technology. The Dialogue messages contained the most features identified as typical of oral discourse (see, e.g. Biber, 1988; Chafe, 1982) and, before the email era, they would have been delivered by telephone or fax. The Noticeboard messages and the short Postman messages, which frequently contain phrases, such as

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7 *Hej* corresponds to *Hello* or *Hi* and *Med vänlig hälsning* to *With kind regards.*
Please find enclosed, typical of business letter discourse, came closest to the traditional style of business letter writing; these messages would previously have been faxed or delivered by internal mail. Although email communication represents a hybrid, a combination of spoken and written language (see, e.g. Baron, 1998, 2000; Collot & Belmore, 1996; Crystal, 2001; Gains, 1999), the relevant features are not distributed at random but seem to be connected specifically with one of the three genres. Example 4 below shows a typical Postman message delivering attachments; it was written by a Finnish female employee.

**Example 4.** Postman message.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From</th>
<th>Pääjärvi, Pirkko</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Tue, 26 Jan 2001 13:57:28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To</td>
<td>Laine Eija; Rahkola Seppo; Suomi Hannu; KA5 (+30 other recipients)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>PaperBuyer Munchen’s visit report 18.01.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dear Colleagues,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please find enclosed a summary of our visit at PaperBuyer Munchen factory 18.01.2001.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wishing you all a nice weekend!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best regards,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pirkko</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Converted: “c:/eudora/attach/PB MU 180101.doc”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Example 4 shows, a set phrase Please find enclosed, no longer recommended in modern business communication textbooks (see, e.g. Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman, 2003; Munter, 2003), is used to indicate that documents have been attached. Somewhat outdated individual phrases like this were still used by both Finnish and Swedish BELF writers. Furthermore, the interpersonal level of discourse is reflected in the salutation and in the wish for a nice weekend, which is an indication that Finns can also engage in “unnecessary” talk.

6. Differences between the Finnish and Swedish BELF writers

Although the Finnish and Swedish writers seem then to share a number of generic characteristics in their BELF messages, the ‘bluntness’ or ‘directness’ of the Finnish communication we have discussed above in meetings receives some support on the basis of this email corpus, since an investigation of the individual requests revealed differences in the level of politeness included (see Brown & Levinson, 1987), i.e., Finnish writers favoured more direct requests, whereas Swedish writers used more indirect alternatives. Some examples of both direct and indirect requests are given below:

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8 The example is authentic in the sense that no corrections to the language have been made. However, all names, dates, etc. have been changed for reasons for confidentiality.
(1) Please check it.
(2) What was the outcome of your discussion with Henrik Lindfors?
(3) Could we get approx 2000 mt 265 gsm trimming machine for Feb production?
(4) I would appreciate your comments to a few questions.

Examples 1 and 2 are classified as direct requests as they are realized in either the imperative or the interrogative form, whereas 3 and 4 represent indirect alternatives realized in the modal initial or declarative form. As the examples show, direct requests leave less room for negotiation and thus threaten the face of the interactant without redress, whereas in indirect requests face redress is present. In our analysis of the requests, we could only consider one of the key variables that play a role in politeness, namely the ranking of the imposition, as we did not have access to enough background information on the interactants to be able to take social distance and power distance into account. In most cases, the ranking of the imposition associated with the request seemed to be viewed as routine as the requests contained hardly any downgraders to minimize the potential threat to face (House & Kasper, 1980, p. 169). It may be the case that in these routine situations politeness plays a secondary role, since in a shared corporate environment, in particular, both the requester and requestee can be seen as being engaged in a collaborative activity in which the exchange of information is equally important to both of them.

Over 60% of the Finnish writers’ requests were direct, whereas the figure for the Swedish writers was 46%. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of direct requests between the Finnish and Swedish writers.

More than half of the Finnish writers’ requests appear either in the imperative (48%) or the interrogative (15%), while less than a half of the Swedish writers’ requests are realized in these forms (22% and 24%, respectively). The Swedes preferred more indirect alternatives, such as modal initials and various want/desire statements. In other words, whereas the Finns are inclined to write Please comment on this, the Swedes would generally use Could you please comment on this.

In spite of these differences in the frequency of direct requests between the Finnish and Swedish writers, it is still evident that requests in the BELF messages overall tend to be direct. This finding is in line with previous research (e.g. Alatalo, 2002; Mulholland, 1999; Nickerson, 2000), according to which the use of straightforward, minimalist politeness forms has become a shared value among email communicators. In light of this previous research, it could even be suggested that while the Finns seem to make use of the shared value of minimalist email politeness, the Swedes tend to favour more deferential strategies.

Table 3
Distribution of direct requests (in the imperative and interrogative) of all requests by Finnish and Swedish writers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother tongue of writer</th>
<th>Imperative (%)</th>
<th>Interrogative (%)</th>
<th>Direct requests/all requests (n = 106) (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To summarize, the generic similarity of the BELF email messages examined supports our survey findings on the similarity of communicative practices in general between the Finns and the Swedes, i.e., the email messages share a number of features related to their form and content, and in the way in which the three genres were used. In addition, no differences were found in the use of names in salutations, such that both writer groups were equally interpersonal. In making requests, however, the Finnish writers behaved according to the characterizations of the survey respondents: they were more direct than their Swedish counterparts and they used the minimal politeness forms that other researchers have associated with email communication.

7. Summary and discussion

This paper has explored internal communication in two companies formed as a result of a merger between a Swedish and a Finnish company. We have examined communicative practices in our two case companies, cultural perceptions that employees have of each other and how – or indeed whether – these perceptions might be apparent in the discourse produced in our case companies.

From previous studies we know that in a cross-border merger, the choice of corporate language is one of the strategic issues to be decided upon; it can also become a considerable challenge (for a discussion of other challenges see Cartwright, 1998). We also know that, in Scandi Bank, language had been a problematic and controversial issue, involving a switch from Swedish as the language of management to English as the corporate language. In this respect, findings from our survey confirm the conclusions of earlier studies (Marschan-Piekkari et al., forthcoming; Sääntti, 2001; Vaara, Tienari, Sääntti, & Marschan-Piekkari, forthcoming), which point out the linguistic and professional challenges that employees face in a merger. In our interviews, Scandi Bank employees told us, for example, how Finnish managers and staff started to feel handicapped because of their limited ability to speak Swedish – then the common language of in-house communication. They also linked language skills with power (see also Marschan, Welch, & Welch, 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al., forthcoming; Vaara et al., forthcoming): an employee might not, for example, be invited to a meeting – and therefore be excluded from decision making – because of lack of communicative proficiency in the language used. It is these kinds of problems that seem to have been alleviated through the adoption of BELF as, by definition, BELF interaction has no ‘native speakers’ and no ‘non-native speakers’; neither does it have ‘learners’. It merely has business communicators going about their everyday jobs. In this sense, the adoption of BELF (rather than Swedish, for instance) has helped at least some employees cope in the post-merger communicative challenge.

However, although BELF facilitated communication in some respects for some people, it by no means eliminated communication problems; neither can BELF be taken to be ‘neutral’ or ‘cultureless’. Rather, it can be seen to be a conduit of its speaker’s communication culture. This was seen in our analysis of discourse produced in the two merged companies, where differences linked to cultural perceptions...
could be identified. Meetings in particular displayed some of the differences that respondents pointed out in our survey and interviews, while email messages revealed greater similarity between Finns and Swedes.

Interestingly, our survey indicated that the differences between the two communication cultures, Finnish and Swedish, were seen as greater than interviewees had expected on the basis of their pre-merger experiences. In both corporations, there seemed to be a clear awareness of cultural differences and changes in communicative practices, although that awareness was greater in Scandi Bank, where the merger, with its accompanying controversial language decisions, had been more of an issue throughout.

Some earlier studies (e.g. Larsson & Risberg, 1998; Very, Lubatkin, & Calori, 1998) have shown that if, at the time of the merger, the parties are fully aware of the significance of communication and its role in the construction of a new culture for the new, merged company, it is possible that a cross-border merger is, in fact, more successful than a domestic one. In all kinds of circumstances, however, it will take time, before employees can fully identify themselves with the new group, and feel that it is ‘us’, instead of ‘us and them’. In our survey, respondents emphasized cultural differences; their discourse, as far as it has been analyzed here (see also Nikko, in press), suggested that some cultural differences might indeed be discernable. However, in spite of differences possibly attributable to national culture, there was no evidence of conflict or misunderstandings. Quite the contrary, meeting discourse demonstrated conversational cooperation and understanding of the discourse even when it relied heavily on what the speaker assumed to be a shared value although this was not necessarily explicitly stated as such (see Example 1). This would seem to indicate that shared values were already in existence – whether through the cultural and geographical proximity of Finland and Sweden or through the experiences obtained through work. Nevertheless, we tentatively suggest that the process of creating a new, shared culture – as required in a successful merger – had already started at the time we collected our discourse data (some two years into the merger).

In considering cultural differences in business, Holden (2002) suggests that differences can, and should, be acknowledged as a resource, rather than as a constraint. He goes on to suggest that out of these differences a ‘culture three’ can be created – a culture that, in our case companies, would be neither Swedish nor Finnish, but a new combination where interaction proceeds smoothly and contains discoursal features of both cultures. The creation of this culture three requires the kind of pragmatic and flexible approach to language use which our interactants seem to have: pragmatic reality decided language choice on a day to day basis, and effectiveness and efficiency in communication governed language use rather than linguistic correctness as such. From our data it was obvious that the phonemic and syntactic levels of communication, though sometimes clearly non-native speaker-like, rarely hindered communication.

Our primary aim in this paper has been to increase understanding of BELF and language choice issues in multinational corporations. However, we see our study as having pedagogical implications as well. The main implication would be that the ‘BELF perspective’ should be in the forefront in language training. What we mean
by this can be summarized in three main points. Firstly, the pragmatic communication aspects of language use should be emphasized (see also Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002). In BELF teaching, learners should be trained to see themselves as communicators, with real jobs to perform and needs to fulfill; it is these jobs and needs that should be emphasized, not the language they use to carry them out. Secondly, learners should be helped to use contextual cues and to identify the situational presuppositions of the other interactants. This means actually listening to what the other BELF speakers say and imply in interaction – a basic, though demanding job, as any communication trainer will know. Thirdly, learners should be encouraged to be aware of their own and of their interactants’ discourse practices, conventions, and cultural preferences. When they learn to know and appreciate a range of communication cultures, including their own, they will also learn to appreciate the need to be flexible. And if they become flexible, they will then have learned one of the most important skills needed in the rapidly changing business community of today.

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