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Cross-Cultural Communication in a Postmodern Business Environment: the Role of French Language and Culture in New Zealand-French Business Relations

Karin Elizabeth Speedy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in French, The University of Auckland, 2003
Abstract

In international business, notions of homogeneity and standardisation are promoted as necessary parts of the globalisation process. “One world” is equated with “one language” and English, portrayed as the global lingua franca, is seen as the only language needed to operate successfully in world markets. Using Jean Baudrillard’s theory of the cyclic superposition of the singular, universal and global as a framework and applying it to the business communications between New Zealand exporters and their French buyers, this thesis questions the beliefs underpinning Anglophone reliance on English, and the value of this reliance, in a postmodern business environment. It first examines historical shifts in attitudes to and use of both dominant “universal” languages and individual “singular” languages and finds that tensions tend to arise when dominant powers try to impose, in an imperialistic fashion, their language on the “Other”. It argues that the universal ideals of unity and openness popularly associated with globalisation are myths expounded by Anglophone big business, which, as the advocate of English as the language of international commerce, fails to recognise the hegemonic implications of its discourse.

Through both qualitative and quantitative field research, it reaches the conclusion that, aside from a lack of attention paid to foreign languages in business, international business writers offer outdated and often erroneous cross-cultural advice for doing business in France. This cultural guidance is tainted by both the universalist/structuralist frameworks employed by the writers as well as their own inherent cultural assumptions, and is found to be of little use to New Zealand business people. By reviewing previous research, the thesis determines that New Zealand business has demonstrated a slight shift in attitude toward foreign language use in recent years. The results of my survey, designed to gauge the present attitudes to and use of French among New Zealand exporters, show that while some firms have embraced the idea of using French in business, most are still reliant on English for day-to-day business communications with their French customers. In the view of the latter, however, this behaviour does not foster efficient and equitable business relations. For the French, a New Zealand exporter prepared to use French in the French market would have a competitive advantage. Set in the context of Baudrillard’s paradigm, the thesis demonstrates that within the New Zealand-French business relationship the perpetual struggle between local and dominant languages continues to be a critical issue that requires urgent redress.
I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the numerous organisations and people who helped make the writing of this thesis possible. Thank you to: the Foundation for Research Science and Technology for the funding of my Top Achiever Doctoral Bright Future Scholarship, my two supervisors at the University of Auckland, Professor Raylene Ramsay in the French department and Professor Nigel Haworth in the International Business department, Mrs Glenn Ekambi, Dr Rosemary Arnoux, Dr Jean-Christian Pleau, Youcef Boukhelifa, Dr Brian McKay, Maureen Benson-Rea, Matthew Hansen, Martin Ross, Brigitte Azoulay, Charlotte Londiche, Joëlle Blondel, Ophélie Dunn, Sonia Plantey, Max Rutherford, Meike Panzner, Catherine Picq from the Chambre de Commerce et d’Industrie de Paris and all those who participated in my research from both New Zealand and France. Merci à tous!
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“Languages, it has been well said, are the lubricant of trade.”
David Crystal\(^1\)

In international business, globalisation is often perceived as synonymous with standardisation. Notions of homogeneity and universalism are to the fore amongst those who espouse a capitalist, modernist, production-focused view of trade. In this environment, English is promoted as the only language needed to successfully engage in business with all of the world’s citizens. Indeed, the “global” era is one where many predict that the role of English will burgeon into that of universal language *extraordinaire*, facilitating communication and breaking down barriers while at the same time reducing costs to industry.

Yet this proclamation appears arrogant and somewhat premature within a historical perspective that considers the way in which dominant languages have come and gone throughout the ages. Moreover, it seems out of step with the current socio-political climate where the particular is perhaps poised to overtake the universal. In a postmodern world where emphasis is shifting from the universality of production to the singularity of the consumer, universalist visions have been challenged by those who claim that world markets can never be homogeneous when natural entry barriers like cultural and linguistic differences remain. Rather than taking an imperialistic standpoint and insisting on the ironing out of these differences, the proponents of market adaptation maintain that the only way to achieve success in the global marketplace is to conduct business in the customer’s language. In this way, non English-speaking business people will not feel excluded and condemned to function in a linguistic no man’s land, a state that Jacques Derrida refers to as the “monolingualism of the Other”.

The highly regarded British linguist David Crystal spurns the commonly cited “economic” argument against linguistic diversity whereby, as he paraphrases, “having so many languages in the world is a waste of money, because individuals and firms have to spend so much time and energy on translating and interpreting.” He writes, “If there were just one language, so this argument goes, everyone could get on with the job of buying and selling without having to worry about these barriers.” He responds to this commonplace claim by arguing that the “fallacy is to think that it is money wasted. Indeed, the view that foreign languages get in the way of buying and selling has been frequently countered, in recent years, by evidence from the business world itself, where knowledge of a foreign language is so often seen to be a competitive advantage. Given two British firms, trying to sell to the Arabic market, and one is capable of using Arabic and the other is not – all else being equal, which firm do you think will more impress the buyer? Languages, it has been well said, are the lubricant of trade” (Crystal 2000, 30).

Set in the context of this debate, this thesis takes the case of New Zealand firms that are exporting to the French market and endeavours to determine, through qualitative and quantitative methods, whether knowledge of French culture and use of the French language constitute a competitive advantage, or could be seen as critical success factors, for New Zealand exporters to France. Before attempting to answer this question, however, the thesis delves more deeply into theoretical and ideological issues, adopting Jean Baudrillard’s paradigm of the cyclical superposition of the singular, universal and global as a framework for understanding the current tension between universalist supporters of English as the global lingua franca and particularists who seek to defend the rights of individual languages. Transposing this framework onto the Franco-New Zealand business situation, it seeks to ascertain whether New Zealand firms are tending towards the singular or the universal by undertaking a diachronic and synchronic investigation into the attitudes and behaviours of New Zealand companies towards the use of French in business. It also reviews the cultural guidelines and advice produced for a universal audience by Anglo-American business writers and questions their relevance for New Zealand exporters. Then, turning attention to the “Other”, it asks how French clients of New Zealand firms assess the
linguistic and cultural behaviour of New Zealand exporters. Once these matters are discussed, the thesis then addresses the main research question outlined above.

The thrust of the argument developed in the thesis, that universalist and hegemonic tendencies parading under the guise of globalisation serve to exclude the “Other” and may be anachronistic in a constantly changing world, concerns all types of international relations. Indeed, the theories expounded in this study have a wide application. In this thesis, however, I concentrate particularly on New Zealand’s business relations with France and there are several reasons for this focus.

First, as the world’s fourth largest economy and fourth largest importer of foreign goods, France is a wealthy market.² Sophisticated and affluent French consumers are interested in buying high quality, high value products and are prepared to pay for them. France is therefore becoming an increasingly attractive market for quality New Zealand products. Despite its lingering reputation for protectionism, it is nowadays a very open and lucrative market. Yet, while visible trade barriers are increasingly disappearing, many companies are unsuccessful or achieving only limited success in selling to the French.

On the surface, it might appear that New Zealand is making progress in the French market. New Zealand is exporting a more diverse range of products to France than ever before, and in dollar terms New Zealand exports to France have increased slightly over the years especially in meat, seafood, dairy and honey. In 1986, for instance, New Zealand exports to France totalled FF 1,146 million and in 2000 they were at FF 1,641 million.³ However, looking at the bigger picture, and keeping in mind the size of the French economy, it would seem that New Zealand exporters have not, as yet, come to terms with the potential of doing business with the French. In 2000, France just made it onto New Zealand’s top 20 export markets list, in 18th place. In fact, our exports to France represent less than one-tenth


of 1% of France’s total imports (Ross 2000, 5). With these less than impressive figures, one has to wonder why the French market has remained so underdeveloped?

There are a number of arguments put forward by business people to explain why they have not attempted to do business in France or have tried and failed. The first of these is distance. While it is true that France is at the antipodes of New Zealand, the United Kingdom, which is our fourth largest export market, is right next door and Germany, another neighbour, ranks ninth. Indeed, New Zealand prides itself on being a trading nation, able to send its products to all four corners of the globe and remain competitive on price. This would appear to negate the distance argument.

Another common claim is that France is a closed market. Stereotypical images of mad French farmers on the motorways, burning tyres and protesting against agricultural imports, spring into the minds of many New Zealand exporters. In such a climate, one imagines, it must be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve market entry. However, this is not quite true in reality. In fact, statistics prove that France is very open to trade. As a member of the EU and the WTO, France imposes tariffs or quotas that are no different to other European countries. As far as agricultural products are concerned, about 10% of France’s imports are in the food and beverage sector and France is the third market in the world for New Zealand sheepmeat (TRADENZ). For other sectors, of course, the mad farmers do not even enter the picture. If a company has a good quality product, the French will be interested.

Other fears, which centre on Franco-New Zealand political relations, such as the nuclear-testing issue, are also unfounded. For the majority of French business people, politics and business do not mix. For them business is business (Sweeney 1996, 5). Proof of their lack of animosity, can be found in the high level of French investment in New Zealand (at around NZ$155 million in 2000) with some 50 companies having set up or bought into operations in New Zealand (TRADENZ).

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4 France’s actual position on our top export markets list may, in fact, be a little higher (perhaps twelfth or thirteenth), as products exported to France sometimes enter Europe via another port (often in Belgium) before going on to France (Martin Ross, personal communication).
In this era of high speed transport and communications and the WTO, these oft cited barriers to doing business with France are in reality nothing but myths. Why, then, have New Zealand companies not exploited the French market to its full potential?

This study posits that one of New Zealand’s major stumbling blocks in the French market is New Zealand firms’ ignorance of French language, culture and business protocols. As Richard Gesteland points out in his “Iron Rule # 1”, “In International Business, the Seller Is Expected to Adapt to the Buyer” (Gesteland 1999, 15). This suggests that the seller would be well advised to use the buyer’s language. Nowhere, it would seem, is this adage more pertinent than in France. While some countries are prepared to switch to English in business, the French remain attached to their own language and although many French business people do have a command of English, French is preferred. Using French with the French is therefore advantageous and, it is suggested, may in fact constitute a competitive advantage for the Anglophone firm willing to make the effort.

Aside from its former role and mystique as “the internationally accepted language of diplomacy” (Lewis 1997, 206), there are many reasons for the continued importance of French, not least of which is the active “defence” of the French language by the French themselves, demonstrated in the passing of the Toubon Law in 1994. This law promulgates the use of the French language as “un élément fondamental de la personnalité et du patrimoine de la France” (Durand 1996, 81). As far as its relevance to international business is concerned, it makes French “compulsory in the advertising, description and directions of use of products; it also demands that bills and receipts are couched in French” (Durand 1996, 82).

Jacques Durand outlines further key arguments for the promotion of French:

---

5 Translation: “a fundamental element of the personality and patrimony of France.”
France is not the superpower it was in previous centuries. Nevertheless, France still occupies an important position in military and political terms. It is a permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations. It is a nuclear power ready to challenge the world to remain in the nuclear race. It is at the hub of the community of French-speaking countries which at one time or another formed part of its old colonial empire [. . .]. The defence and promotion of French is therefore part and parcel of a wider strategy to maintain France in an influential position at an international level (Durand 1996, 82).

While much of the international business literature hardly touches on the role of foreign languages in trade, some writers focusing on the cross-cultural aspects of business single out the French language for special mention. Gesteland writes, “Despite the fact that so many French business people speak English well, French is the language of business” (Gesteland 1999, 203). Edward and Mildred Hall stress, “the most important skill for any foreigner who wishes to function effectively in France is to learn to speak the language well” (Hall and Hall 1990, 93). And despite acknowledging that English is becoming more widespread, Colin Gordon asserts, “a mastery of French can open many doors” (Gordon 1996, 159).

Robin Walden sums up this sentiment as follows: “In discussing a business relationship with France, language comes at the top of the pile as the ‘mother’ of non-tariff barriers in working with this market [. . .]. The French are fiercely proud of their mother tongue and strongly resent any Anglo-Saxon encroachments. It is perhaps the defence of their language which fosters the view in their own minds that if you are going to deal with them, you will jolly well speak their language, like it or lump it. Make an effort and it will make a difference” (Walden 1998, 64).

Despite their underperformance in the French market, it would appear that New Zealand firms produce what French customers want: high quality, high value goods. To what extent can their lack of success in France be attributed to linguistic and cultural factors?
Undertaking an in-depth study into the role of French language and culture in New Zealand-French business relations allows us to test the hypothesis that cultural knowledge of the target market and linguistic proficiency in the customer’s language enhance the seller’s performance, while at the same time providing us with some interesting insights into the universal/particular debate on the place of language in business.

The thesis begins by reviewing the literature and identifying the theoretical frameworks that best serve to inform the debate. Chapter 1, “‘Us and Them’ or ‘United We Stand, Divided We Fall’?: the Singular versus the Universal in the History of Language”, takes as a reference point Jean Baudrillard’s vision of the cyclic superposition of the singular, universal and global and follows shifts in attitudes to and usages of dominant and “universal” languages in Western history. It argues that the present modernist and universalist reliance on English condemns non-native English speakers to the “monolingualism of the Other” and posits that in a postmodern world, where singularities are celebrated, Anglophone hegemony may not retain its dominance.

Chapter 2 builds on this premise and, in the context of the universal-singular cycle, discusses the concept and nature of globalisation and, more specifically, its impact on attitudes to language in international business. The chapter first seeks to identify the many understandings of globalisation before examining how common and perhaps mythical perceptions of the homogeneity and universalism of globalisation have a bearing on the way in which linguistic issues are viewed in the business world.

Where Chapter 2 begins to expose the perfunctory handling of language in the international business literature, Chapter 3, “Sex, Lies and Stereotypes: Putting Cultural Tips for Doing Business in France to the Test”, examines in depth the way in which culture and the cultural aspects of doing business are presented by international business writers. It finds that many of those writing on culture, non verbal behaviour and business etiquette fall into the structuralist trap of making comparisons based on their own inherent cultural assumptions. The chapter discusses the results of fieldwork, carried out on French business people, designed to test the veracity and relevance of the cultural tips for doing business in
France and the guidance on French body language and gestures given in international business texts. In many cases, the information is based on outdated research that remains grounded in space and time and can be shown to be stereotypical, superficial and erroneous.

Given the nominal treatment of things linguistic and cultural in textbooks, Chapter 4, “Foreign Language Use in Business: Surveying the Surveys”, turns to investigating the role foreign languages and cultures play in business in the real world and focuses particularly on the use of the French language, as reported to date, by New Zealand firms that deal with France. The chapter analyses the findings of surveys on the use of foreign languages in business carried out in the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand over the past 30 years or so. These indicate that although American business has remained fairly universalist and monolingual in its outlook, British companies have shifted to a slightly more linguistically open approach to overseas markets in recent years. The New Zealand surveys, too, demonstrate a change in attitude from the decidedly monolingual 1960s. However, while there was an increased use of foreign languages in written material such as brochures and advertising by New Zealand companies in the 1990s, there remained a high level of reluctance to carry out day to day business, for instance phone calls, meetings, negotiations and even correspondence, in anything but English.

In order to see whether this predominantly universalist stance is strengthening or changing, it was decided to create a further survey, dubbed “the new millennium survey”, that would be sent to New Zealand export companies that deal with France. The firms were to be questioned on their attitudes to and use of French language and culture in their business relations with their French customers. Chapter 5, “Survey Methodology: If at First You Do Not Succeed… Think of Descartes and Turn to PR”, begins by describing the process of creating and disseminating a pilot survey. Then, drawing on the wise counsel of René Descartes, it turns to the analysis of the methodological reasons for the lack of success of this pilot survey and the description of the ways it was improved to suit changed business and societal contexts.
The results of the new millennium survey are detailed in Chapter 6 “When a Picture is not Necessarily Worth a Thousand Words: Behaviour and Attitudes of New Zealand Companies in the French Market”. Taking into consideration both quantitative and qualitative data and comparing findings with those of the earlier studies described in Chapter 4, this chapter reveals that while some progress has been made in the use of French in certain business contexts, most New Zealand firms still rely heavily on English to carry out their day-to-day business with French buyers.

In view of the hostile reactions of many French people to globalisation and “Englishisation” that Amin Maalouf, for example, describes in *Les identités meurtrières*, Chapter 7 reports on research carried out on French clients of New Zealand companies. The research centred on investigating the satisfaction of the French participants with the current state of business communications between their New Zealand supplier and themselves and ascertaining whether, in their minds, the use of the French language and knowledge of French culture are critical success factors for New Zealand firms dealing with France.

In the final chapter, the overriding opinion of these French customers, that using only English in business is not conducive to good business relations, is taken on board and compared to the findings of previous chapters and to theoretical positions.

This thesis is groundbreaking in a number of ways as it draws on the theories and methodologies of the humanities and uses these as a critical framework through which to analyse linguistic and cultural issues relevant to the field of International Business. While it makes definite steps toward an interdisciplinary approach, drawing to a certain extent on the International Business literature, it remains grounded in French Studies and is written primarily for an audience in this domain. It can be seen, however, as a first attempt to open a door through which both language and business disciplines can respectfully engage on each others’ terms.