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Linguistic Insights

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Intercultural and International Business Communication

Theory, Research and Teaching

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Developing Linguistic and Cultural Competency in International Business Communication

1. Introduction

An increasingly multilingual and multi-cultural globalized communication environment requires that international business communicators translate messages across national languages and take into account cultural differences in this translation process. In such a globalized world of business, individuals are likely to interact in any of three kinds of communication situations: native speaker to native speaker (NS-NS); native speaker to non-native speaker (NS-NNS); and non-native speaker to non-native speaker (NNS-NNS). All individuals can take part in this communication or translation process but they must use different strategies and practices based on their own language and cultural proficiencies as well as those of their interlocutors. It is in fact the actual or potential language and cultural proficiency matches of the interlocutors and their corresponding efficient use of strategies fitting the matches that enable them to communicate successfully and avoid cultural misunderstanding. It follows then that language and cultural competency are prerequisites for successful international business communication exchange.

The language-based communication zones model (Babcock and Du-Babcock, 2001) provides a framework for organizing the diverse language (NS-NS, NS-NNS, and NNS-NNS) and culturally (Hofstede, 1991) influenced communication patterns in international business communication. Because of their language competency matches,

interactants form one of eight possible language-based communication zones and communicate through direct channels using a shared language or through indirect channels with the aid of link-pin translators. In this paper, we add the concept of culture corridors to the model in order to show how culturally proficient communicators can also achieve cultural understanding in the language-based communication zones. After forming a language-based communication zone, interactants must exercise both linguistic and cultural competencies as they use communication strategies and practices appropriate to their particular zone in order to efficiently exchange information. To communicate information in situations where these are cultural differences, interactants pass messages through culture corridors that reside in the zones. In this international business translation process, proficient international business communicators adjust to the linguistic and cultural competency levels of their interactants to successfully exchange information and avoid cultural misinterpretation of exchanged messages.

In this paper, we therefore focus on how international business communicators (unilinguals, partial bilinguals, and full bilinguals) can utilize both linguistic and cultural competencies to communicate effectively in the language-based communication zones. This is done by providing an overview of the global communication environment, summarizing the language-based communication zones model, and introducing the concept of culture corridors in the communication zones. We will also examine the importance of language and cultural competencies to the success and effectiveness of the international business communication by providing examples to illustrate the cultural and language practices of unilinguals, partial bilinguals and full bilinguals. We explicitly recognize how cultural differences and similarities impact information exchange, and discuss how unilinguals, partial bilinguals, and full bilinguals can exercise their linguistic and cultural competencies in order to communicate efficiently within language-based communication zones and the culture corridors that reside in these zones.

2. Global communication environment

Within the global communication environment, individuals who speak different languages, possess varying levels of competencies, and represent diverse cultural groups interact directly and indirectly in interconnected global communication networks. In their roles as producers and customers, they create interrelated global value-added chains (Porter, 1985). Messages may undergo multiple translations through various languages as they travel upstream, mid-stream, and downstream within an industry as well as horizontally across industries and with other institutions and constituencies

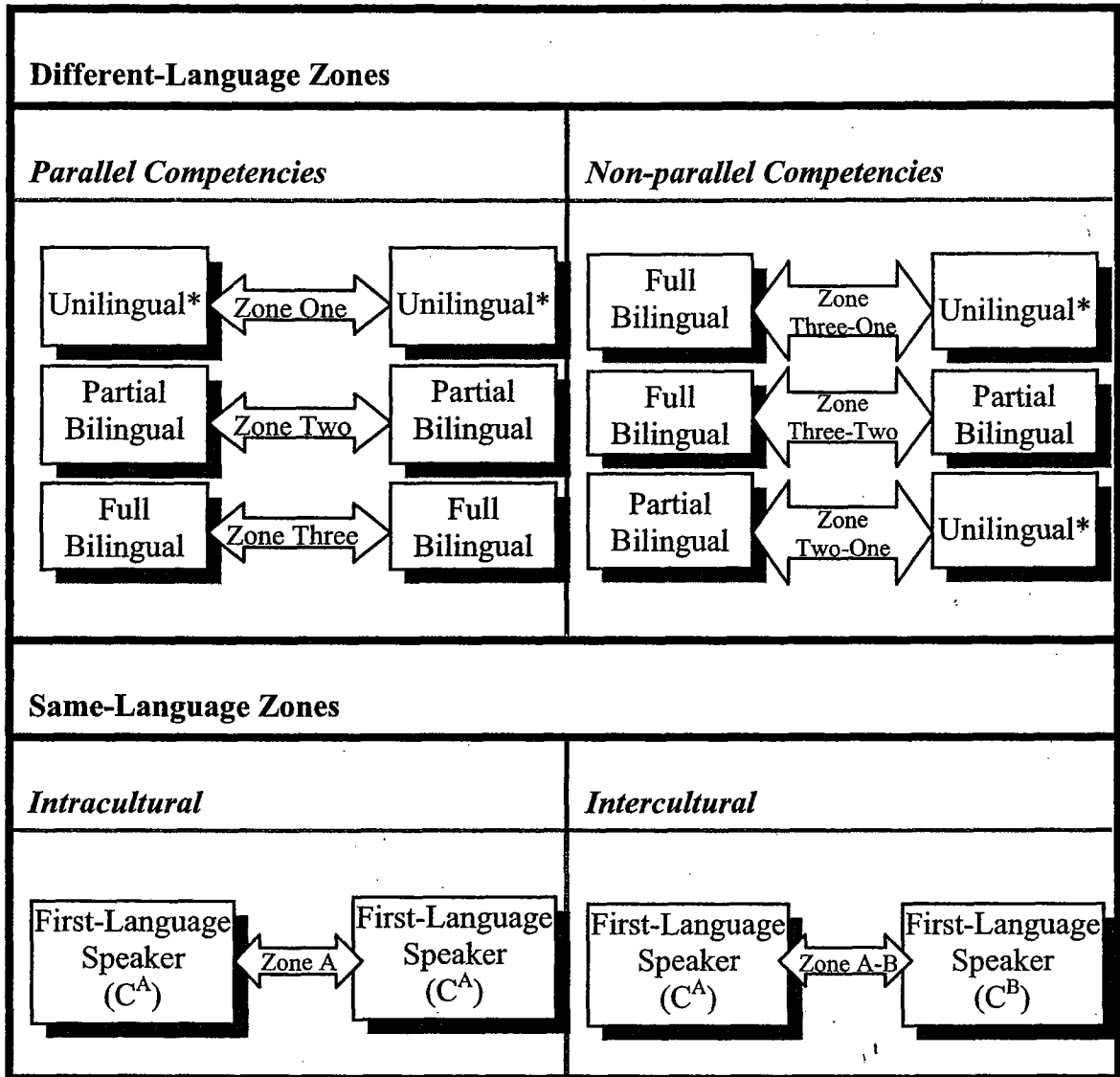
Constant advances in communication technologies are enabling a rapidly expanding volume of messages to be exchanged at significantly lower transaction cost. Integral to these changes is the competitive pressure on international firms to develop world-wide communication networks within their own firms, with their suppliers and customers, and with other external constituencies such as governmental agencies and special interest groups. In particular, the migration of workers and international relocation of production facilities have created multilingual and multicultural workforces. Expertise is no longer located solely within advanced countries as expert workers from developing countries can now be accessed at lower cost. Furthermore, customers from around the world, who drive the competitive process, are concurrently exhibiting both increasingly similar and divergent buying behaviors and preferences in choosing not only standardized world-class products but also customized culture-specific products. Given these conditions of globalization, international business communicators must now develop and display both language and cultural competencies to meet the increasingly complex and diverse challenges of the evolving global communication environment.

3. Language-based communication zones framework

The language-based communication zones model (Babcock and Du-Babcock, 2001) identified eight language-based communication zones based on the language competency match of potential interactants. In creating the model, they distinguished full bilinguals, partial bilinguals, unilinguals, and first-language speakers according to the interactants relative capabilities to exchange information in a language environment (see Figure 1 which appeared in Babcock and Du-Babcock, 2001: 381). With prospective communication partners, full bilinguals have equivalent linguistic abilities in their first and second languages, and can handle the requirements of both professional and social conversations. Partial bilinguals have sufficient control of the language structure and vocabulary of the second language to handle some professional discussions and most social conversations. In contrast, unilinguals cannot speak or understand enough speech acts of the second language in use to fulfill the complete communication process in a communication environment, even though some of these individuals might be able to use the second language to encode greetings, ordinary social expressions, and simple questions in their daily encounters.

In the language-based zones framework, prospective interactants who do not share a first language (different language zones) are placed into parallel and non-parallel categories according to the second-language proficiency of the interactants. In parallel zones, interactants possess equivalent language proficiencies and adjust to each other from equivalent language competency positions; whereas, in non-parallel zones, interactants possess unequal second-language proficiency and so interact from language superiority or subordinate proficiency positions. To finish the model, two Same Language Zones (Zone A and Zone A-B) were added to distinguish between intracultural communication (Zone A) and intercultural communication (Zone A-B) with speakers sharing a first language. For example, interactions in English between Americans or between Australians are examples of intracultural communication within the same country culture (Zone A), whereas interactions in English among

Americans and Australians are examples of intercultural communication representing the cultures of two countries (Zone A-B).



Key:

C^A: Culture A

C^B: Culture B

*: Includes bilinguals in language environments where their languages are not spoken.

Figure 1. Language-based communication zones in international business communication.

From language proficiency positions, prospective interactants must first choose a medium of communication to establish communication zones. This choice sets off differing patterns of communication dynamics including channels (whether direct or link-pin), duration of zones (how long the zones are active), and the nature of the interactions (the communication practices and adjustment movements of the interactants).

In situations where interactants in Different-Language Zones cannot find a linking language, do not possess the requisite language competencies to exchange information directly, or choose to communicate indirectly or through intermediaries, then link-pin communication channels arise. These link-pin channels (see Figure 2) can be used either in immediate or non-simultaneous communication. In immediate communication, messages flow through a single link as intermediaries translate messages exchanged between primary communicators. In non-simultaneous communication, messages may pass through one or more intermediaries before being translated into a second language by a language link-pin at a language cross-over point.

Unilinguals must communicate through link-pin channels for all but simple and symbolic messages (Du-Babcock and Babcock, 1996). Partial bilinguals must utilize link-pin channels for complicated messages and interactive message exchange but can negotiate some direct channels that correspond to their language proficiency levels. Full bilinguals may also use link-pin channels for a variety of reasons but which are independent of language proficiency constraints. For example, they may wish to monitor the conversations of intermediaries in immediate communication or maintain the position of outsiders in cultural environments (Du-Babcock and Babcock, 1996). As we will show, the use of link-pins can have a significant effect on the communication process and results.

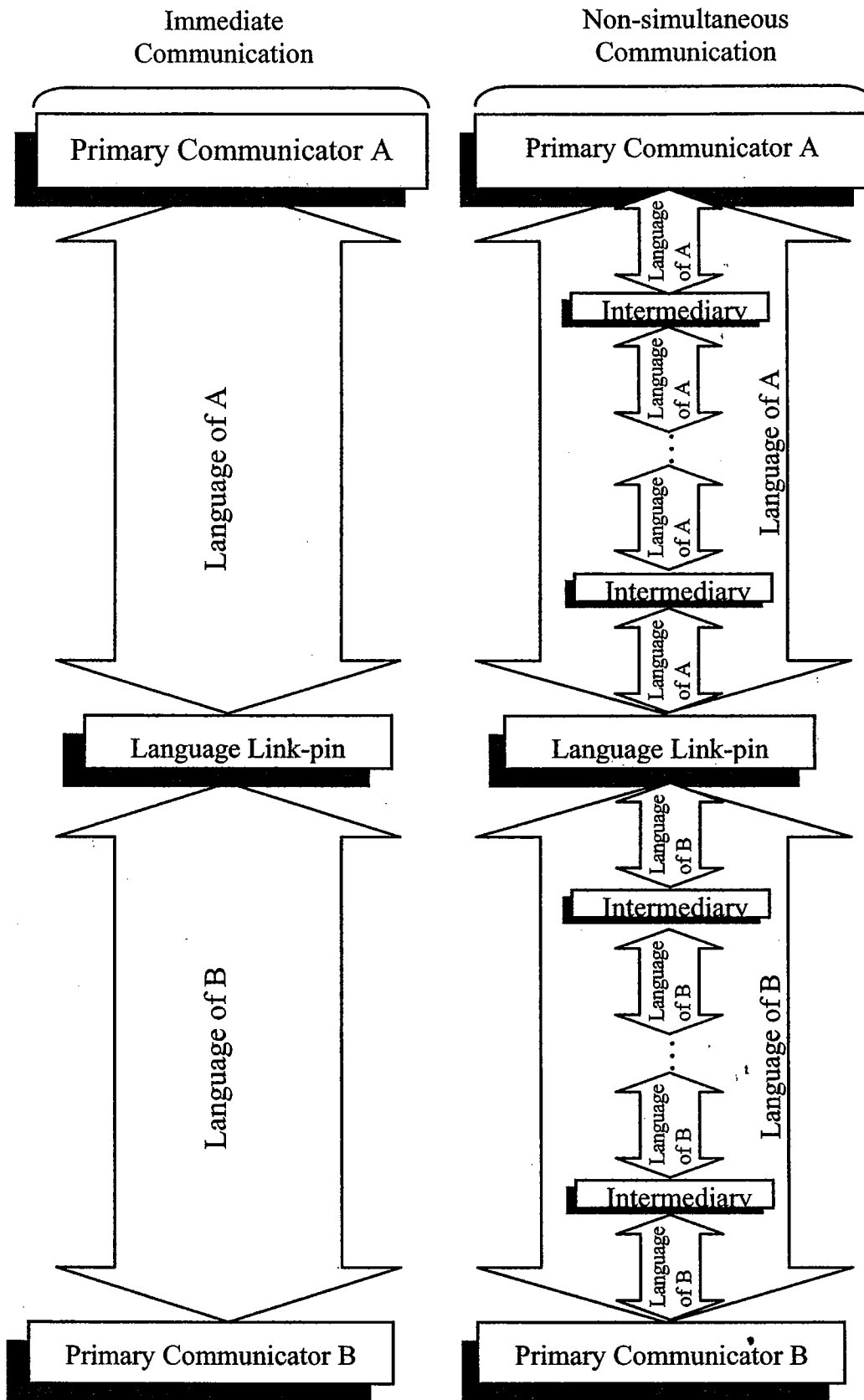


Figure 2. Link-pin communication channels.

4. Culture corridors within language-based communication zones

To more explicitly describe how cultural competency in addition to linguistic competency affects international business communication, we add the concept of culture corridors (see Figure 3) to the language-based communication zones framework. To successfully exchange information about subjects where there are cultural differences, interactants must adjust their communication behaviors to the cultural competency levels of their communication partners. Messages falling outside the boundaries of the culture corridors cannot be accurately interpreted and consequently become noise as interlocutors engage in the inter-cultural communication process. Culture corridors arise in all language-based communication zones where there are cultural differences.

Cultural competency can be divided into three interrelated components: attitude or orientation, knowledge, and skill (Beamer and Varner, 2001) and an interface component (Du-Babcock and Babcock, 1996). Attitude or orientation is the relative willingness to accept cultural differences where there are ethnocentric positions (rigid assumption that the home culture is always best), polycentric positions (tendency to overvalue and not critically look at a foreign culture), and geocentric positions (realistic appraisal of home and foreign cultures) (Perlmutter and Heenan, 1986). The knowledge and skill components are activated by the orientation position where ethnocentric individuals filter information to reinforce their attitudes and thereby do not develop cultural competencies; whereas, polycentric and geocentric individuals are open to the acceptance of new information and the development and refinements of cultural competencies.

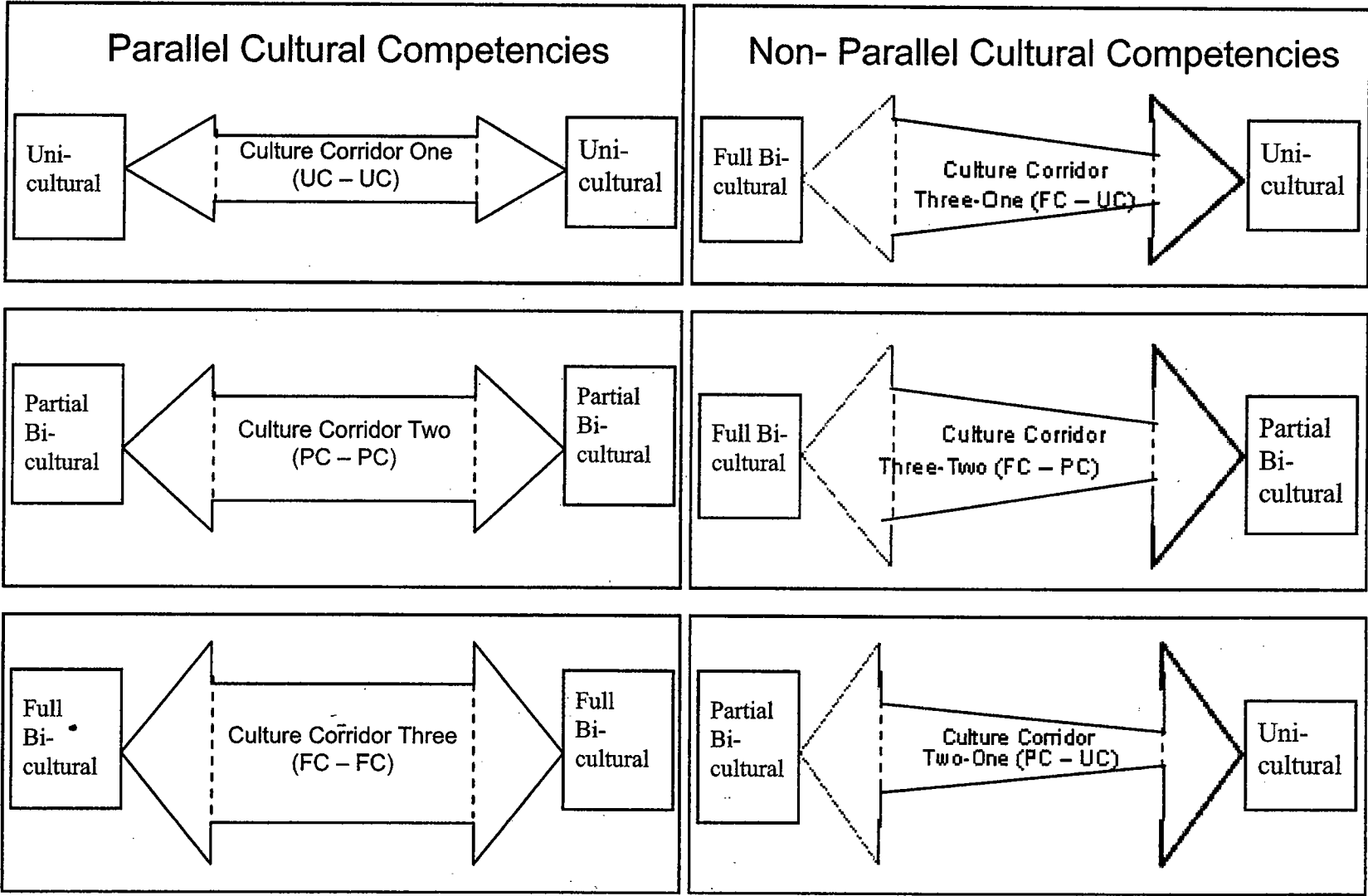


Figure 3. Culture corridors in language-based communication zones.

We next compare the intercultural communication process in the six culture corridors that reside in language-based communication zones. For consistency, we have adopted the terms used in the language-based communication zones model and apply them to the culture corridors; consequently, Culture Corridor One (UC-UC) refers to cultural interactions among individuals who possess very limited understanding of the counterpart culture or who are unicultural (UC). Culture Corridor Two refers to cultural interactions among individuals who are partially bi-cultural (PC), while Culture Corridor Three refers to cultural interactions among individuals who are fully bi-cultural (FC). In parallel corridors, interactants possess equivalent competencies and thereby start to adjust from the same cultural competency positions. In Culture Corridor One (UC-UC), all of the components necessary for successful intercultural communication are absent and cultural contact may even solidify or increase cultural misunderstanding as a divergence interaction pattern is set in motion. The presence of a favorable orientation component in Culture Corridor Two (PC-PC) and Culture Corridor Three (FC-FC) establishes the prerequisite for successful intercultural communication. In Culture Corridor Two, cultural misunderstandings can arise as interactants act on incomplete knowledge and underdeveloped or undeveloped skills to understand and overcome cultural differences. In Culture Corridor Three, however, all the components are in place and establish the basis for unrestricted and enlightened intercultural communication. Convergent interaction patterns are also introduced as interactants move toward one another in their parallel culture corridors.

Non-parallel culture corridors are communication channels where interactants start the interaction process from unequal cultural competency positions. In these corridors, higher proficiency interlocutors (partial biculturals and to a greater extent full biculturals) interpret cultural information from a competency position enabling them to understand the interlocutors' culture as well as their own cultures. In Culture Corridor Two-One (PC-UC) and Culture Corridor Three-One (FC-UC) bicultural interlocutors can use their cultural competency to frame messages that fit within the cultural understanding of their unicultural interlocutors. These bi-cultural individuals also have a higher ability to interpret the cultural messages

of uniculturals. Although the potential of achieving satisfactory cultural understanding in these cultural corridors involving uniculturals is limited, the bicultural communicators may prevent the escalation of cultural conflict in their communication exchanges while still being able to satisfactorily transfer culturally-neutral information. In Culture Corridor Three-Two (PC-UC) full biculturals have to adjust to the cultural competency level of their partial bi-cultural interlocutors but can also expect convergence behavior as partial bilinguals come to better understand the nuances of cultural differences.

5. Formation of language-based zones and cultural corridors

To communicate effectively in the increasingly multilingual and multi-cultural global communication environment, individuals utilize their linguistic and cultural competencies in communication zones that can form for one period of time in the same language environment or over time in different language environments. In the global communication environment, and depending on linguistic proficiency, the same individual may take the proficiency positions of full bilingual, partial bilingual or unilingual as language-based communication zones are formed. In addition that individual takes on the proficiency position of full bicultural, partial bicultural, or unicultural.

To illustrate the process of zone formation at one period of time (i.e., who is included and who is left out), we describe a three-sided communication episode. Two Chinese engineers and a French engineer were looking together at the drawing on a computer screen in Zhuhai, China while figuring out how to arrange the machine rows in a factory under construction. In this episode, three communication zones could be formed among these interactants; namely Zone A; Zone Three and Zone One (see the terms used in Babcock and Du-Babcock, 2001). The Chinese engineers could speak to each other in

Chinese (Zone A). Also, as one of the Chinese engineers was fully bilingual (English was his second language), he was able to communicate in English with the fluent English-speaking French engineer (Zone Three). The second Chinese engineer (a unilingual Chinese speaker) and the French engineer (a unilingual English speaker in this language proficiency match) could only interact by passing messages through their bilingual Chinese colleague who served as their link-pin (Zone One). The fact that the French engineer spoke French is not relevant in this language environment; i.e., he was not a bilingual according to our context based definition. In this episode, the full bilingual Chinese can understand the total conversation, whereas the unilingual French engineer can comprehend only the English language part and unilingual Chinese, the Chinese language part of the dialogues. In addition all of the participating engineers possessed sufficient cultural competencies (partial to full cultural competency) so that differences of opinion were resolved without cultural conflict.

Different zones can form over time in different language environments as an individual encounters potential communication partners with varying language and cultural competencies. In these language environments, international business communicators experience different language and cultural proficiency matches, and these differences in turn activate differing communication dynamics and adjustment patterns. For example, a unilingual English speaker can enter multiple zones with interactants of varying language competencies while traveling from an English-speaking country (e.g., England) to non-native English-speaking countries where people possess varying English-language proficiency levels (e.g., high in Holland, much lower in France). In Holland, this native-English speaking traveler may be able to conduct all professional affairs in English and only be excluded from Dutch personal conversations (Zone Three-One). However, in France, this individual may have to communicate through link-pins in both professional and personal discussions (Zone One). In both of these language environments, this English-only international traveler is potentially excluded from native-language conversations and may, to varying degrees, experience the sensation of isolation or exclusion. By choosing certain communication strategies and practices that are associated with Zone

Three-One (Holland) and Zone One (France), this individual can make the communications in both countries more effective. It follows, therefore, that language competencies provide the primary background enabling conditions for zone formation and influence the interaction patterns and cultural contact within the communication zones. By exercising cultural competencies within these language zones, this same individual can further enhance communication effectiveness and avoid arousing cultural misunderstanding and conflict.

Once communication zones are formed interactants must assess the cultural competencies of their communication partners in order to communicate culturally appropriate messages through cultural corridors in the communication zones. Cultural misunderstandings and conflict arise and remain in Culture Corridor One (UC-UC) as uniculturals do not possess the necessary criteria (orientation, knowledge, and skill) to understand cultural differences and resolve cultural conflicts. Cultural contact is likely to stimulate a divergent adjustment pattern where cultural misunderstanding and conflict intensifies. In Culture Corridor Two (PC-PC) partial biculturals even though they may experience some cultural misunderstanding and conflict have sufficient cultural competency to establish convergent interaction and adjustment patterns. As they interact over time partial biculturals, especially if the orientation component is highly favorable, can achieve increasingly effective intercultural communication. In fact as cultural competency is learned through experience, either or both of the interactants may move to the full bicultural competency position. In Culture Corridor Three (FC-FC) the interactants possess all the prerequisite components (orientation, knowledge, and skill) of cultural competency and therefore can develop and maintain effective intercultural communication. In the non-parallel culture corridors the interactants in the superior cultural competency position carry the responsibility for at least maintaining the culture competency positions and hopefully educating and moving their interlocutors to a higher cultural competency position. The adjustment patterns in these zones can be either conversant or divergent.

6. Communication in language-based zones and cultural corridors

We next examine how individuals in unilingual, partial bilingual, and full bilingual language competency positions can communicate efficiently in language-based communication zones. Different linguistic and cultural adjustments and practices are required as individuals enter and interact in different language-based communication zones. The overall process for an interactant is: (1) assess the language competency of a prospective communication partner(s), (2) form a communication zone based on matching language competencies, (3) assess the cultural competencies of your communication partner(s) and form a culture corridor in the language zone, and (4) make appropriate language and cultural adjustments and carry out language and cultural practices dictated by your language competency position.

From the unilingual language competency position, individuals may enter into Zone One (equivalent language competency) and Zone One-Three or Zone One-Two (superior language competency). The differing language competency matches in these zones dictate the development of different language adjustments and language patterns.

In Zone One, unilinguals send and receive substantive and complicated messages through link-pin channels and supplement these messages with face-to-face communication. In link-pin channel unilinguals communicate first language messages to the language link-pins whose levels of second-language proficiencies are such as to not require language simplification or the use of extra energy to send (encode) or receive (decode) messages. Unilingual expatriates reported that, except for significantly less use of slang or Western humor, they could communicate without feeling any inhibitions and could use sophisticated technical genre (Du-Babcock and Babcock, 1996). For effective communication these link-pins also had to possess full bicultural competency and their cultural adjustments moved their behavior toward the cultural behavior of the unilinguals. Through continuous interaction these unilinguals occupying upper management level positions and their intermediaries develop close

working relationships. By means of interaction with enterprise staffs the language link-pins guide the processes of both downward, upward, and lateral organizational communication to accurately translate cultural messages. The language link-pins must take in consider the cultural competency levels of the primary communicators and frame and interpret message that fit within the culture corridors.

Du-Babcock and Babcock (1996) distinguished language link-pins into primary language link-pins, secondary language link-pins, and secretarial language link-pins categories (see Du-Babcock and Babcock, 1996 for details). Primary language link-pins are individuals who continuously interact with unilinguals, and act along with the secretary link-pins, as the “ears and eyes” of the unilinguals. Secondary link-pins are individuals who are singled out or step forward to serve as a bridge between the unilingual communicators. These secondary link-pins, fluent in the languages of both communicators, translate difficult-to understand expressions, including slang or idiomatic expression, from one language to another. Secretarial Link-pins are assistants who take on the role of linking the unilingual bosses to their immediate subordinates as well as with all other unilinguals throughout the organization. Executive secretaries, together with primary language link-pins, are at the core of link-pin communication through scalar and work flow channels.

In direct channels, unilinguals can make person-to-person contact with primary communicators, assess their cultural competencies and check on and confirm messages received through link-pin channels. For example, unilingual expatriates in Taiwan used a “direct channel” pattern to establish their images throughout the organizations (Du-Babcock and Babcock, 1996): By making themselves visible, the expatriates were communicating with a wide range of personnel at all organizational levels. Through direct observation, the expatriates also secured unfiltered information about the cultural competencies of the staff in their organization. In general, this pattern could be described as a version of “management by walking around.”

In the communication process, the expatriates would randomly engage in conversations with enterprise personnel as they wandered through various departments, especially in production departments. The medium of communication can be described as “ritualized” and

“token Chinese.” Because of the constraint of second-language competency, the expatriates could communicate only a few understandable words in English and say only a few token words in Chinese. Observation also played an important role in this communication process as the unilinguals were learning about the cultural behaviors of their primary communications.

In Zone One, unilinguals have extensive direct cultural contact with link-pin translators and limited and mostly indirect cultural contact with their primary communication partners. To avoid cultural mistranslation unilinguals should attempt to send messages containing culturally related content through full bicultural link-pins. This means that unilinguals should develop skill in identify culturally competent link-pins and providing them, if possible, with training to further improve their cultural competencies.

The cultural competency levels of link-pin translators in non-simultaneous communication are likely to be different and consequently open the possibility of the mistranslation of messages. There may be a tendency to frame and interpret messages in lieu of the cultural competency of these link-pins rather than the competencies of their primary communication partners. To accurately encode and interpret messages sent through link-pin translators, unilinguals must assess the cultural competencies of their interlocutors rather than those of their intermediaries in order to have messages flow through the culture corridors. Learning about the cultural backgrounds, norms, and competency levels of probable primary communicators establishes the foundation for effective intercultural communication. Unilinguals can use this knowledge in encoding and decoding messages.

Unilinguals also can facilitate their cultural communication effectiveness by developing a mutual context with their primary communicator partners so that messages they send through link-pin channels are interpreted against this context. By making themselves visible in organizational and inter-organizational settings, unilinguals are establishing the basis for communicating with a wide range of possible primary communication partners. In the process, potential primary interlocutors share and discuss their individual impressions of the unilinguals and gain a composite impression that develops into a shared context.

In Zone One-Three and Zone One-Two unilinguals, interacting from a language superiority position, must adjust to the language competency levels of their interlocutors in order to successfully exchange messages. To guard against miscommunication in Zone Three-One, unilinguals need to develop cultural competency that allow them to take into consideration the fact that full bilinguals are communicating in a second language. Native-like second-language proficiency and knowledge of local affairs and customs by full bilinguals may mask and hide possible cultural differences with their unilingual interlocutors. With the unconscious expectation that bilinguals will automatically comprehend local and colloquial speech acts, unaware unilinguals may introduce unintelligible messages into Zone Three-One channels and thereby provide the basis for miscommunication if the bilinguals “guess” at the meanings incorrectly. This kind of miscommunication error is more likely in the early stages of interaction before bilinguals make language accommodations. Of greater consequence, unilinguals with limited cultural competency of the counterparts may compound communication errors by incorrectly attributing their cultural communication norms and habits to their bilingual partners who represent cultures with differing communication norms.

From the partial bilingual language competency position, unilinguals may enter into Zone Two, Zone Two-One, and Zone Three-Two. In bilingual language zones (Zone Two and Zone Three-Two) the language competency positions may change after prospective interactants choose a language. In Zone Two where the language competency position is equal before language choice, the zone becomes non-parallel if the interactants choose the first language of one of the interactants. In Zone Three-Two where the language competency position is non-parallel before language choice, the competency position becomes roughly equal if the interactants choose the language of the partial lingual. In this case the communicators are interacting at full bilingual or native speaker competency levels in zones resembling Zone Three or Zone Three-One.

In Zone Two where the partial bilinguals speak a third language and remain in the initial parallel competency position, their major challenge is to balance the use of link-pin and direct communication channels. They also have to identify cultural differences and take

these differences in consideration as they engage in convergent cultural communication. In this situation, partial bilinguals can usually master linguistic requirements within a routinized communication environment and in specialized topic areas even though they do not possess adequate vocabulary to communicate outside their specialized topic areas or handle the demands of spontaneous conversations. Partial bilinguals interactively engage in a process of defining their zone boundaries and finding understandable linguistic and cultural and communication practices. In the process, they establish shared vocabulary and culturally appropriate communication style to compensate for their language deficiencies. These interactants can, therefore, communicate directly when it is desirable or possible and can supplement the directly exchanged messages through link-pin channels and written communication for more advanced topics.

To illustrate the nature and scope of Zone Two communication in a third language, we present contrasting examples of a partial bilingual Taiwanese product manager interacting in English with her partial bilingual German and French customers respectively. In both cases, the purpose of the discussions (conducted in English) was to finalize the overall electrical design of a cooking grill that the Taiwanese home-appliance supplier had contracted to manufacture for the German and French customers. As it turned out, the vocabulary required for the discussions with the French customers was far more complicated than for the conversations with the German customer. In discussions with the German customer, the interlocutors were able to quickly exchange understandable information and reach agreement so that the Taiwanese supplier could proceed to build a prototype model of the grill. In contrast, the language requirements for the discussion with the French customer were more difficult as the prototype model had to conform to the French legal requirements for electrical circuits which are different from and more complex than those required by Germany and other northern European countries. In France, the circuitry for grills requires specifications to carry higher and uneven electricity flows and falls under regulations different from those governing other small kitchen and cooking applications. Consequently, in order to communicate directly with French customers, the Taiwanese product manager would need to have English language

proficiency in vocabulary areas related to electricity and legal regulations.

The Taiwanese product manager had negotiated previous subcontracting agreements for small appliances with the same French engineers and designers, and the parties had developed an effective Zone Two channel. This time, the language proficiency required for specifying the grill prototype fell outside these Zone Two boundaries. Although the partial bilinguals were unable to finalize the prototype, they were able to communicate well enough to pinpoint the source of their communication difficulties and agree on the initial steps toward developing a workable prototype; namely, to purchase a competitor's product, take the product to Taiwan for disassembly and analysis, and thereby learn the required circuitry for French grills. Armed with this knowledge and an expanded vocabulary from this interaction and related discussion, the partial bilingual Taiwanese product manager was then able to follow up and finalize the prototype design with the partial bilingual French engineers and designers. Ultimately, the Zone Two channel width was widened as the partial bilingual Taiwanese product manager acquired the necessary vocabulary and communication skills to discuss the required circuitry, and as the French accommodated by giving more detailed explanations, slowing down the conversations, and checking from time to time to see if the Taiwanese product manager understood them correctly.

In successful Zone Two third language communication, the adjustment process is typically mutually converging as the interlocutors move toward the establishment of a common vocabulary and an understandable cultural communication style. In addition, under certain circumstances, partial bilingual interactants seek to increase the proportion of messages exchanged directly and thereby expand the outer boundaries of the communication zone. We found that this strategy occurs when dependable link-pins are unavailable or are too costly. In other situations, communicators have link-pins and are reluctant to communicate in Zone Two without them. By using these link-pins, communicators are engaging in uncertainty reduction behavior and avoiding the possibility of introducing mistakes into the communication process (Gudykunst, 1983). For example, we found that upper-level partial-bilingual Taiwanese engineers made extensive use of mixing technical English into their Chinese deliberations and

even preferred to speak English in some professional communication situations. In Zone Two communication channels, individuals representing authority and subject expertise are most likely to engage directly in the international business communication process. In general, successful Zone Two communication is facilitated in situations where partial bilinguals face predictable and routinized language environments and can draw on shared contextual background and supporting written documents. Even though Zone Two dialogs may sound disjointed and fragmented, the exchanged messages are often still capable of meeting the information requirements of the communicators.

In addition, the language deficiencies of partial bilinguals in Zone Two communication can be advantageous under some conditions. In such circumstances, partial bilingual communicators may in fact be more effective as their encoded blunt or "rude" messages are more likely to be tolerated and attributed to their language deficiencies than would be the case for full bilinguals or native speakers. In addition, the language deficiencies of partial bilinguals may reduce superfluous conversations and the possibility of making offending comments.

Silence and pauses in conversation are normal and accepted parts of Zone Two communication that may relate to either language or cultural behavior. Partial bilinguals with cultural competency in Zone Two can strategically use breaks in the conversation flow—even in situations where they could process information faster and send messages sooner. In essence, periods of silence provide the twofold advantage of reducing the possibility of introducing unproductive and destructive comments into conversations and providing breaks for reflection, digestion of ideas, and planning of communication strategy and tactics. Consistent with the norms of Chinese and Japanese language patterns (Graham, 1985), partial bilinguals did not experience anxiety with the breaks in the conversations, but we suspect that Westerners might have discomfort in the same situations.

In non-parallel language zones where partial bilinguals are interacting from an inferior language superiority position, they have to exercise cultural proficiency in deciding whether to use a passive or an interactive strategy. The communication issues and communication process of partial bilinguals are presented in Figure 4. Passive and

interactive communications are represented by opposite poles of three sub-dimensions: frequency (less to more), situation of second-language use (social or business), and activities (passive listening or interactive listening and speaking). The cumulative impact of the sub-dimensions indicates movement toward either the passive communication mode or the interactive communication mode. Placement on the insider-outsider continuum represents an expatriate's relative position as a cultural insider or outsider, and is a function of the expatriate's relative position on the passive communication and interactive communication dimension.

To illustrate the cultural implications of language use and the development of the interface component of cultural competency, we describe on the experience of partial bilingual expatriates and their Chinese interlocutors in multinationals located in Taiwan (Du-Babcock and Babcock, 1996). With a passive strategy, the expatriates and Chinese interlocutors confined their Chinese language exchange to social situations. In moving to an interactive strategy, the exchange was gradually broadened to include business conversations – especially those conducted away from the office and in a social situation. In the passive stage, the expatriate was solely or primarily a receiver. Upon moving to the interactive stage, the expatriate initially responded and increasingly initiated conversations. This movement from passive to interactive communication carried with it social implications; that is, the expatriate was gradually moving from being an outsider to becoming an insider.

Successful partial bilingual interlocutors (expatriate and Chinese) developed a balance of English and Chinese communication. As the Chinese proficiency of the expatriates increased, the possibility of using Chinese in various occasions also broadened. In a parallel development, as expatriates initiated more social conversations in Chinese, the Chinese responded by talking more with the expatriates with a greater number of business-related conversations in English and social exchange in Mandarin. The dual use of language was mutually reinforcing and in effect increased the total amount of verbal communication between the expatriates and the local Chinese.

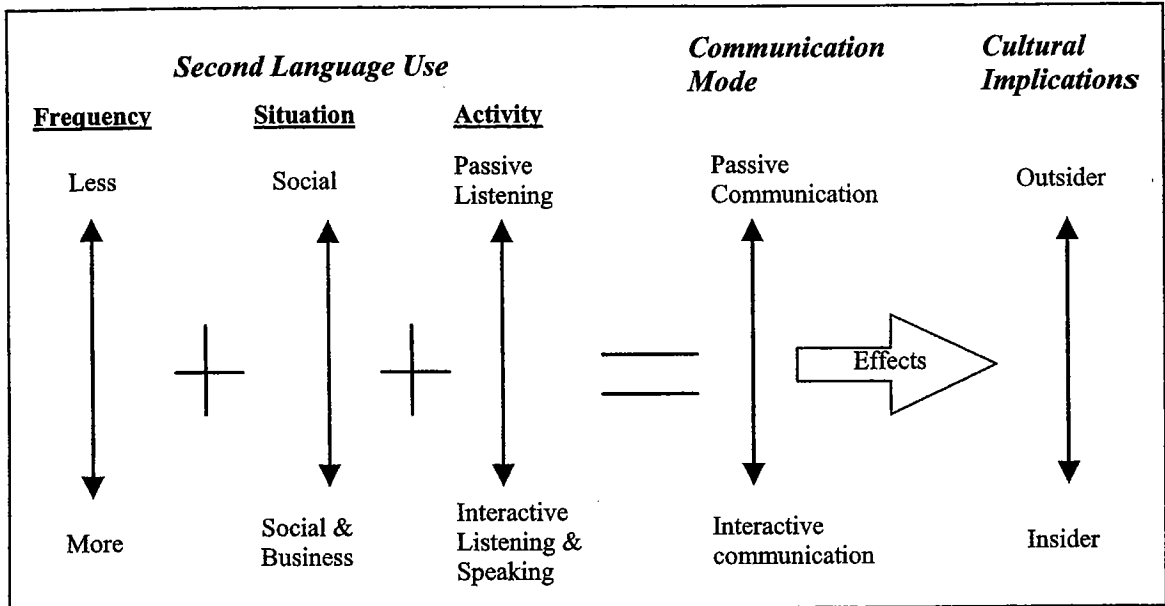


Figure 4. Cultural implications of language use (Du-Babcock and Babcock, 1996: 155).

The partial bilingual expatriates, although they could communicate in Chinese, still spoke less fluently in Chinese than their Chinese counterparts did in speaking English. The challenge for the partial bilingual expatriates was to match English or Chinese with appropriate situations. With Chinese individuals having limited English speaking abilities, partial bilingual expatriates used Mandarin to their obvious advantage. Without speaking in Chinese, these partial bilingual expatriates would not have been able to effectively communicate with their limited English-speaking Chinese subordinates.

One partial bilingual expatriate effectively participated in polite Chinese conversations with the plant operatives in his periodic plant tours. He would ask about the workers' families and in some cases, would gather information ahead of time so he could express his special concern. At other times, he visited employees in hospital and used Chinese during these visits. By following this practice he was developing his image as a benevolent leader (adopting the positive part of Chinese leadership behavior) and reinforcing the Chinese imagery of family. This expatriate was replicating behavior that equated with the honorable gentleman and faithful Chinese father (Hsu, 1981).

Balancing the use of Chinese and English was the challenge of the partial bilingual expatriates. In the passive stage, the expatriates selectively used Chinese, and English remained as the major medium of exchange. In the interactive stage, the balance of English and Chinese became more equal.

Moving from the passive communication stage to the interactive communication stage, the expatriates gained the potential for improved communication but this also carried with it the dangers of cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. Communicating in a second language brought the partial bilingual expatriates in close connection with Chinese individuals and, at the same time, created pressures for the expatriates to abide by Chinese cultural norms. In effect, the increased second-language use by expatriates meant that the expatriates were more connected to the Chinese social system and were moving from being outsiders to becoming insiders.

In Zone Two-One and Zone Three-Two (where the language of the full bilingual is chosen), partial bilinguals can facilitate this adaptation process by engaging in clarification and question-asking behaviors. With communicators representing face cultures (Bond and Lee, 1981), there is a general pattern of under-adaptation where communication errors were introduced because receivers did not acknowledge their lack of understanding of message content due to the fear of potential loss of face from admitting language proficiency deficiencies.

From the full bilingual language competency position, full bilinguals may enter Zone Three (equivalent language competency), Zone Three-Two (superiority or roughly equal language competency), or Zone Three-One (slightly inferior language competency). Figure 5 describes the language communication process of the full bilinguals. Language deficiencies do not constrain the communication transactions of the full bilinguals; these individuals can choose to communicate in their first and second language and through direct or link-pin channels. Full bilinguals, however, face the same insider-outsider dilemma as partial bilinguals but have much greater control in the use of language.

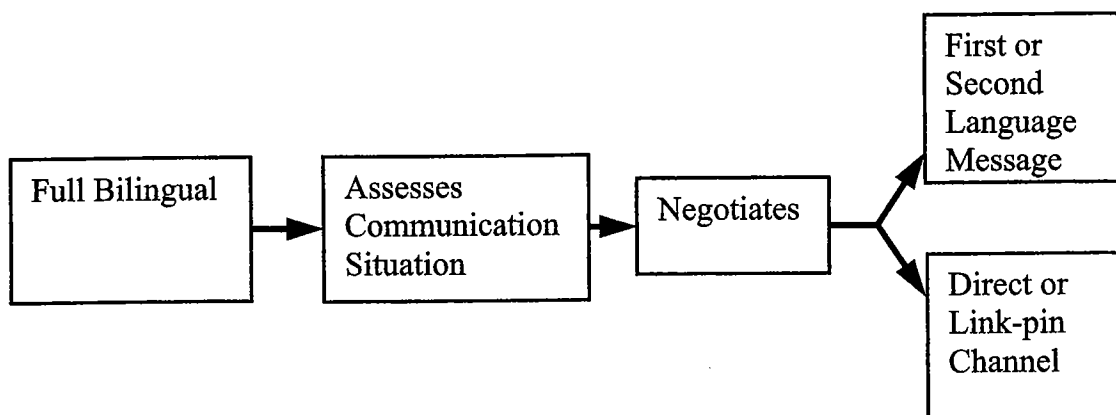


Figure 5. Model of language choice and channels by full bilinguals (Du-Babcock and Babcock, 1996: 159).

There are two contrasting Zone Three language proficiency starting points that evoke differing communication dynamics and accommodation processes. In one, full bilingual communicators share full fluency in each other's language but do not speak a common third language. In this case, interlocutors must choose to communicate in a language that represents the first language of one of the interactants. During the interactive process, the interlocutors have access to and can draw on the vocabularies of both languages. Code-switching and code-mixing may well become an integral part of the communication process as communicators can draw on the language that best expresses the concept. Reflecting this pattern, Hong Kong Chinese injected English words and phrases into their Cantonese dialogs in social and business contexts (Gibbons, 1987; Du-Babcock, 1999; Li, 1999) and used English in business conversations with non-Cantonese bilinguals.

Du-Babcock and Babcock (1996) explored the consequences of language choice by bilingual expatriates (fluent in either English or Chinese) in Taiwan. By selecting English, these bilingual expatriates remained outsiders and so were less likely to be sanctioned for not following the country's customs and social norms. By choosing Chinese, however, they became insiders and developed closer interpersonal relationships with Chinese colleagues and had more access to "soft" information. Consequently, language choice has implications for the nature of the relationships that Zone Three

interactants develop with their communication partners and for being included or excluded in the grapevine communication channels.

The other starting point for Zone Three communication channels is where the full bilinguals cannot speak each other's first language and therefore exchange messages in a third or linking language. In these Zone Three communication channels, these full bilinguals probably know they are each communicating in a second language, and this recognition establishes a basis for successful Zone Three communication. Enlightened Zone Three interlocutors can therefore practice simultaneous and converging accommodation (Giles et al., 1987; Gallois et al., 1988) by establishing mutually acceptable communication norms and practices (a shared culture). Our findings indicate that bilinguals in a third language are less bound by cultural restrictions than native-language speakers and can thus establish their own norms and practices as they interactively determine the basis of their interaction process.

In Zone Three-One, full bilinguals have to make some minor language adjustments to the local language customs when entering a new language environment, such as when a full bilingual expatriate takes on a new assignment. In this situation, perceptive bilinguals accommodate by introducing these speech acts into their speech repertoire as they become familiarized and learn the local dialect.

In Zone Three-Two situations where interactants use a third or linking language, full bilinguals tend to accommodate toward their partial bilingual interactants by simplifying their language to establish the zone boundaries and understandable communication practices within the zone. In Zone Three-Two channels where the interactants use the native language of one of the interactants, the communication and adjustment patterns are a function of their language choice. If the interactions take place in the native language of the partial bilingual, the language proficiency match gives the zone participants equivalent language proficiency positions.

If the interactions take place in the first language of the full bilingual and the second language of the partial bilingual, the language proficiency match is such that the full bilingual takes the superior language proficiency position. Consequently, these language match differentials stimulate differing communication dynamics in these alternative Zone-Three situations. The most likely scenario is for

the interactants to choose the native language of the partial bilingual where information sharing possibilities are larger. Through this choice, all communication can theoretically take place directly without resorting to the creation of a supporting link-pin channel. In this case, the communication dynamics activated resemble those of a Three-One Zone, with the exception that the interactants have access to the vocabularies and communication styles of both languages.

Consequently, code-mixing and code-switching becomes an available and integral part of this communication pattern. That is, both bilingual interactants will inject words and phrases from each other's native language during the course of discussion, especially in social contexts.

7. Implications

International business communicators are finding themselves in an increasingly complex and diverse global communication environment. This complexity and diversity is characterized by the creation of interconnected global communication networks where communicators interact directly and indirectly as they speak different first languages, emanate from different cultures and process varying levels of linguistic and cultural competency. The language-based communication zones and cultural corridors model provides a framework to differentiate, describe, and organize the differing communication patterns that arise in eight language-based communication zones and six cultural corridors in this global communication environment. To communicate effectively interlocutors need to exercise both linguistic and cultural competency as they develop and carry out communication strategies and tactics that are appropriate for and fit the zone and corridor that represents their competency match.

By using our suggested framework to guide their studies, researchers can more accurately and thoroughly investigate the communication dynamics and patterns in the language-based communication zones and cultural corridors. In turn, international

business communicators can use our framework and future research findings that fit our framework to guide their communication practice. By identifying the communication zones and the cultural corridors within the zones in which they will be communicating, international business communicators can increase their communication effectiveness.

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