The Driving Trends of International Business in the 21st Century

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Edited by

Jessica Lichy

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-3525-8
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3525-1

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INTRODUCTION: FACING CHANGE & CHALLENGE IN 21ST CENTURY INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

XU GUOLIANG

The chapters of this book are drawn from studies presented at an international conference held in Zhejiang Business College (Hangzhou, China), organised in collaboration with IDRAC Business School (France). Aimed at scholars and practitioners, the book provides illustrations of international best practice for conducting business beyond borders. The intention is to raise awareness of various factors that need to be taken into account before venturing into transnational operations. The authors share insights and advice on a number of challenges for international business, spanning international communications, regional economic development, emerging consumer trends, branding, expatriation, financial models, digitization, managing human resources, and tourism. Achieving sustainable success requires much more than expanding business operations overseas to reach new clients or customers, with a view to increasing profits – as this book will demonstrate.

The book reflects the extent to which today's business world is both global and online, driven by the accelerating pace of technological developments. Advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) have brought individuals closer together via virtual platforms. While ICT continue to transform business (economics, markets, industry structure, consumer segmentation), the impact has been perhaps greater on society (jobs, consumer values, consumer behaviour, labour markets). The chapters provide a brick-on-the-wall snapshot of the changing landscape of international business in a global, online society.

ICT have changed the way we see the world – and ourselves in it. For example, Lichy and Ramphort trace the emerging trends and patterns in language and communication, half a century after the inception of the Internet. Reflecting on rapid developments in information and communication

technologies (ICT), their study contributes to the literature on the broad impact of ICT on language and communication, with the intention of highlighting the transversal dimension and reducing the 'silo' approach to research in this field – which often neglects to consider the socio-linguistic and socio-technical dimension. The chapters embeds ongoing research into ICT usage beyond borders in order to further our understanding of the consumption of the Internet in different cultures and linguistic communities.

Turner and Skinner, in their chapter dealing with *Self-Initiated Expatriates* (SIE), explain the individual's need to consider moving abroad for finding suitable employment, going hand in hand with the intensification of globalization. Perhaps the arrival of digital natives in various economic sectors will significantly alter the labour markets with higher numbers of highly skilled SIEs using their digital services across the world.

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the business world continues to face large-scale change and uncertainty. In this setting, Thraya and Al Sharif identify the leading models of financial systems and their respective financial cultures. They observe the link between corporate governance and financing strategies through a comparison between the French Anglo-Saxon financial cultures. Reflecting on the European financial crisis, Thraya and Al Sharif believe that the French capitalistic system is moving from a bank-dominated system to an Anglo-Saxon type stock market oriented system. Legal structures such as the passing of the Sarbanes Oxley Act in the USA has drawn attention to the accountability of managers as an inherent part of doing business – and thus reduces the possibility of a further financial crisis. Nevertheless, following this Act, research by Harvard professor Suraj Srinivasan showed that smaller international companies were more likely to be listed on the stock exchanges in the U.K. rather than U.S. stock exchanges. Therefore, it remains debatable whether the French transitioning towards the so-called 'Anglo Saxon' financial culture is a judicious one, especially amidst the current debate surrounding Britain's exit from the European Union.

Focusing on the impact of digitizing business activities, Aissa weighs the challenges of digital transformation in the context of the restaurant sector. The chapter underscores the notion of interconnectivity and accessibility via digital devices, and draws attention to the risks involved in integrating digital tools to the restaurant sector. Digitalization has irreversibly changed our daily lives, from digitizing POS (Point-of-Sales) units such as digital menus and payments methods to online restaurant reviews such as TripAdvisor. Yet, in the specific example of the restaurant sector, the 'proof

of the pudding' still lies in the eating. In other words, the quality of food is the overwhelming criterion of choice, far outweighing digital options.

Addressing change in the service sector, Fox and Jiang explore the emerging market of pre-owned luxury goods. In this rapidly growing market, they identify various motivational factors that influence individuals to buy, sell, rent, donate or collect pre-owned luxury goods and fashion accessories. In a world that is moving towards contrasting poles of 'selective consumption' and 'decluttering' – as proposed by Marie Kondo, the Japanese organising specialist – the luxury industry is traditionally based on 'quality' over 'quantity' for a select few. However, the ICT-based sharing economy has made significant impact in the world of pre-owned luxury market despite obvious cultural differences affecting its growth across the world, and is now disrupting conventional business models.

One particular sector that stands out for transcending cultural differences and enhancing the local economy is *Trail* running. Participants and spectators come from across the world to be part of Trail running races; the runners engage wholeheartedly, pushing their own physical and mental capacities to exhaustion. They transform the regions that they run in (or visit) into vivid spaces, increasing the local population for the duration of the race, which can last for several days. Lemoine and Pereira explain how Trail running events have overcome physical boundaries to create a new market. The chapter shows how this sector has integrated ICT-based marketing tools to target a global audience, emphasising the experience by using images of headlight-bearing runners in remote, rugged terrains against the backdrop of a rising sun.

Taken together, the chapters provide a contemporary snapshot of international business. The book draws attention to prevailing challenges, highlighting the transformations brought about by ICT, and suggesting avenues for further research. The intention is to raise awareness and stimulate debate.

MANAGING LINGUISTIC HEGEMONY & COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

JESSICA LICHY & DOBRINA RAMPHORT

Abstract

This enquiry traces emerging trends and patterns in language and communication, half a century after the inception of the Internet. Reflecting on rapid developments in information and communication technologies (ICT), our contribution adds to the literature on the broad impact of ICT on language and communication, with the intention of highlighting the transversal dimension and reducing the 'silo' approach to research in this field – which often neglects to consider the socio-linguistic and socio-technical dimension. The enquiry draws on ongoing research into ICT usage beyond borders in order to show how the pace of technological developments is reshaping language and communication; new patterns of communication are emerging which are challenging linguistic identity.

Introduction

The Internet can be described as the ultimate expression in freethinking and creativity; it is the epitome of post-modernism. As a stand-alone system, it is a technological and cultural embodiment of a century of massive change – a system which not only reflects our individualistic lifestyle and the atomisation of society but also precipitates the fragmentation of civilisations, beliefs and the individual self (Lichy and Stokes, 2018). Across the globe, Internet users have access to a vast amount of data and unbounded communication. As Internet usage reaches saturation for some user groups, it is acknowledged in the public domain that Internet access is now extensive and that most *netizens* are heavy users of modern information and communication technologies (ICT), particularly social media (Perrin and Duggan, 2015). Although younger adults are more likely to use the Internet, seniors are nevertheless showing faster adoption rates.

The context for this query is the widespread use of the World Wide Web for communicating and sharing information. In a relatively short space of time, the Internet has created new forms of communication that cross languages, cultures, national borders and social classes. McLuhan's '*global village*' is epitomised by blogs, chats, instant messaging, pagers, cell phones, i-Pads, Internet telephony, YouTube and other virtual platforms. Technology is breaking down barriers; changing the individual's view of the world and how the individual sees themselves in the digital era (Cupchik, 2011; Wessels, 2014). Identity is extremely fluid on the Internet (Gauntlett, 2002), evoking the sketch "On the internet nobody knows you're a dog" by Steiner (1993). While the medium fosters an increasingly individualistic lifestyle by reducing the need for face-to-face physical communication, netizens engage in extensive online interaction, often beyond borders (Rainie and Wellman, 2014). English is frequently used by non-natives when engaging with a wide audience but there is mounting language diversity as non-English speakers create and consume content (Pimienta, Prado and Blanco, 2010).

Reflecting on recent developments in ICT, this enquiry adds to the literature on the broad impact of the ICT usage in the workplace, from a socio-linguistic and socio-technical perspective. The intention is to highlight a transversal dimension and thus reduce the 'silo' approach to research in this field – often dominated by publications of Anglo-Saxon origin, and thus overlooking the socio-linguistic dimension of how the ICT is consumed in different cultures and linguistic communities. The enquiry draws on ongoing research into the use of ICT for interpersonal communication in the workplace in order to investigate emerging trends, with specific reference to Internet usage in a Francophone setting, increasingly characterised by subtle bilingual wordplay despite the politics of language and legislation (Lamarre, 2014). While linguistic legislation in France stipulates that one must demonstrate a certain level of language proficiency, linguistic competence is often determined by more than just the ability to use a language; it depends on the ability to prove cultural legitimacy, which is directly tied to understandings of race, nationality and language ownership (Smith, 2015).

The metamorphosis of English

Digital technologies have enhanced the reach, richness and range of international business opportunities (Wells and Gobeli, 2003), making it a valuable and lucrative tool (Bell and Loane, 2010). Although the success of

these opportunities is largely dependent upon effective communication strategies and skills, many managers overlook the importance of cultural awareness in business communication (Lillis and Tian, 2010). Effective communication in the international business environment requires not only an understanding of language but also an awareness of the non-verbal aspects of communication that are part of any speech community (Ferraro, 1994). Companies with a multilingual workforce often communicate in *globish* (see Nerrière and Hon, 2009), a minimalist subset of the English language of around 1500 high-frequency words (Stern, 2006). Although globish provides a vehicle of communication for non-native speakers of English, is unlikely that it "will end the dominance of real English, with its cultural and political baggage, and take the pressure off other languages such as French" (Thorne, 2007: 20) since it is a manufactured language, void of nuances. It would be expected that speakers of globish would strive for fluency in more complex English, since such a simplified version of English cannot meet the sophisticated needs of today's global online business world. An alternative vehicle of communication is *offshore English* - a form of English spoken by people whose first language is not English and who have learned the language as adults in a professional context rather than at school (Rees and Porter, 2008). However, neither globish nor offshore English can prepare the speaker for the pitfalls that can arise from different styles of communication.

In the early years of the Internet, the dominance of English online caused anxiety about a possible threat to minor languages and cultures. Although the volume of web content in English has since decreased, there is still concern about how English and other languages interact online. To Anglophones, this attention to language might seem excessive, but most native English-speakers are not confronted with non-English web content. If and when the situation arises, it can generally be ignored. It is simply not a cause for concern – for the time being. However, it is worth bearing in mind the speed at which Internet user behaviour and web content are evolving, and the changes that this evolution imposes; there is currently a greater volume of non-English web content than English web content (Chung, 2008; Fulgoni and Lella, 2014).

For many businesses, English is the *de facto* language of international communication but this trend is far from widespread in certain countries, particularly France. As language is inextricably linked to identity, French speakers are linguistically anxious about the decline of their language (Tor Faus and Wolff, 2014). The problem partly stems from the fact that French has long been fighting a losing battle against English for the position of

dominant language in global communications and within the institutions of the European Union (Oakes, 2002; Wright, 2009). The admittance of more countries into Europe preferring to communicate in English threatens to render French an increasingly marginal language (Borowiec, 2002). In the French hierarchy of prestige, language is a source of authority and intellectual superiority (Tombs and Fournier, 1992). France prides itself on its individuality and on its continuing refusal to accept English as the world's *lingua franca*. What concerns the government most is that as French becomes less important on the international stage, the language becomes increasingly degraded (Lannes, 2011). Carrère d'Encausse (2013) of the *Académie Française* – the body responsible for regulating the French language – sees the threat as threefold: the encroaching use of English, the improper use of French by the country's own elite and, above all, the lack of French language competence among younger generations due to inadequate teaching. Language purists lament the incorrect use of French, such as the use of the anglicised phrasing *"Vous êtes demandé au téléphone"*, instead of the correct sentence structure *"On vous demande au téléphone"* (Bherer and Floc'h, 2013). Technology-infused French is slowly but surely transforming the linguistic landscape of Francophonie (Guikema, 2012).

The preservation of French

Certain 'change agents' are accelerating the natural evolution of the French language, in particular the influence of technology and contemporary vernacular. Technological developments have brought about new lexicon and modes of communication. Equally, the *« langue des cités »* or urban slang spoken by younger generations in the *banlieues* (slums, suburbs) is driving semantic change (Messili and Ben Aziza, 2004). In terms of etymology, the word *banlieue* (ban + lieue), has a historic context (Jourdan-Lombard, 1972): literally 'excluded' from the city proper, yet 'subject to the authoritative dictates of [its] power structure(s)' (Fielder, 2001, p. 271). The evolution of the French language is a topic of discussion in the international business press; *The Economist* (2015:23) illustrates how the language of Molière has adopted an 'Arabesque' lexicon. In this respect, language protection laws have been ineffective in maintaining the purity of French.

The French state has historically imposed the French language within its borders (Article 2 of the Constitution), including parts of the country that have their own language and cultural identity (and somewhat anti-French

spirit) such as Breton and Alsatian (McDonald, 2004). In other words, regional and minority languages are not tolerated within France. While measures are taken to promote linguistic homogenization across France, concerns are increasingly focused on the international position of the English language compared to French. In one comparison, Jack Lang (former French Minister of Culture) accused the USA of "linguistic McDonaldization" (Sonntag, 2003: 39). Given the level of linguistic control in France, this is a classic example of double standards in the French wrath against global English hegemony; the French state is both defender of linguistic pluralism ***and*** instigator of linguistic homogenization. This hypocrisy is based on the presumed threat to French by English domination and is noticeable in the French government's efforts to reintroduce French as a major language within the EU (DGLFLF, 2006).

Linguistic legislation sends a clear message: France is a French-speaking society and so the economy and society must function in French. However, when judging the efficacy of language laws, one has to take into account not only the wording but also the logistics of implementation in everyday life. For example, knowledge of the French language is essential in order to be employed in France (RF Social, 2007), but in reality this requirement is not enforced in the workplace or online. Concerning digital content, as the Internet is now the first port of call for businesses and individuals alike, Internet users expect web content to be available in several different languages. To offer multilingual web content is an indication of the extent to which a content provider acknowledges the international dimension of Internet usage. Even the General Directive for French Language and Languages in France (*Délégation Générale à la Langue Française et aux Langues de France*) recommends a 'pluri-lingual' Internet.

Language has always been a political issue in France (Hagège, 2007). The 1975 law *Bas-Lauriol* prohibits the use of foreign words where a French equivalent exists. This piece of legislation was modified to emphasize the notion that the language of the Republic is French for every citizen living in France – and was introduced in 1994 as part of the *Loi Toubon* (Bentz, 1997). Certain phrases and words are therefore prohibited in France if a French equivalent can be used. French authorities consider the language as a compulsory condition to ensure the principle of equality. Beyond the considerable dimension of national identity (Debbasch, 1995), the Toubon Law targets social integration through equal access to information *in French* for every citizen in French society (Frangi, 2003). Unique in Europe, *l'exception française* – what others may call French chauvinism – is based

on a specific social model including the linguistic protection of the French-speaking consumer and the defence of the principles of 'public service'.

In today's digital era, the Toubon Law is woefully inadequate for maintaining language purity (Conseil Constitutionnel, 1994). This law regulates the use of the French language in official government publications, advertisements, commercial contracts, in the work place and so on, but it does not concern private, non-commercial communications, such as non-commercial web publications by private bodies. In 2004, the Law *LCEN* (*Loi pour la confiance dans l'économie numérique)* was introduced to instil trust in the online environment; it excludes the enforcement of the Toubon Law for Internet communication. Article 1 of the LCEN law defines and distinguishes audio-visual communication (covered by the Toubon Law) from public communication via digital means. Transposing the EU Directive 2000/31/CE from the 8/6/2000 edict on digital trade, the LCEN obliges any person or company established in France to conduct digital business in French. This condition, however, is not compulsory for non-French customers, intermediaries or trade partners. It could have been considered as a step forward, had it not been for the *Marini* ministerial proposal (draft-law of 10/11/2004). By considering the LCEN Law incomplete, the Member of Parliament Philippe Marini suggested including within the Toubon Law 'advertising by ICT', meaning that all advertising via the Internet aimed at French consumers should be in French. This proposal has not (yet) been enforced, on account of the emerging patterns of communication. Thus, the main input of the LCEN Law is the adoption of the principle of country-of-origin for trade and advertising via the Internet and specific regulation concerning information and communication technologies by the French authorities. The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) considers that certain dispositions of EU law contravene the Toubon Law (decision 12/9/2000); the interpretation of the EU regulations could also be considered contradictory (decree n° 84-1147). Despite the controversy, the French State remains reluctant to make modifications to the existing legislation that regulates the French language.

Over the years, various non-legislative measures have been introduced to promote and preserve the purity of the French language. The continued efforts to increase the presence of the French language online seem colossal and yet the results have not been sustainable, as will be demonstrated in the following three examples. Firstly, a large-scale project was launched to develop a French news channel, *Chaîne d'Information Internationale*, to rival the dominance of online English-speaking news, namely CNN and the BBC (El-Najjar, 2003). The project attracted much media attention but was

abandoned in 2003 after it ran into financial difficulty. Most Francophone media increased their presence online following the LCEN legislative changes in 2004. *Radio France Internationale*, the TV news channels *France 24* and *TV5Monde* created the holding «*Audiovisuel extérieur de la France* ». The TV5Monde channel launched a massive subtitling programme in French and other languages and created a Smartphone application "*langue française*". Since 1998, the "*Inforoutes*" digital TV channels have been regularly financed by the *Inforoute Francophone Fund*, part of the International Organisation for Francophonie – which sets out to improve the presence of French online and to promote humanist values. Secondly, in 2008 the national libraries of France, Belgium, Canada, Luxembourg, Quebec and Switzerland (later joined by various documentary institutions of the Southern countries) implemented a Francophone Network of digital national libraries (www.rfbnn.org). The aim was to create « *La Grande bibliothèque numérique francophone* » through the worldwide broadcast of francophone documents. Lastly, when the popularity of online communications became apparent, work began on a state-funded Franco-German search engine, *Quæro*, to challenge Google. The inspiration for *Quæro* www.quaero.org was largely based on the notion that Google is perceived to be too Anglo-centric; it was thought that Google may portray a distorted view of French culture (Croft, 2005). This illustration highlights not only the importance of cultural identity in the online environment, but it also raises the issue of high-context versus low-context communication styles (Hall, 1976). High-context communication style, common in France, tends to generate websites that are cumbersome to navigate and read, less effective in the use of colour and graphics, and less interactive for Internet users (Usunier and Roulin, 2010). It would seem that the habitual high-context communication style so common in France is somewhat mismatched with the philosophy of Internet communication, predominantly low-context.

The *Modus Vivendi* of Internet communication

Today's society is characterised by the global flow of the cultural economy and the accelerating speed of technological progress. New technologies allow tasks to be carried out faster, better and more cost-effectively; they are literally transforming culture and human consciousness. In addition, since culture is perpetuated through acts of communication, symbols and beliefs, it follows that modern communication technologies are the most powerfully transformative of all (Wright, 2012). In countries where Internet access is regulated, "online discussion is one of the very few outlets

available for citizens to express opinions about government and politics" (Chan *et al.*, 2012:345).

Developments in ICT have irreversibly shaped (and continue to re-shape) how individuals interact both interpersonally and with technology (Kumar, Sachan and Mukherjee, 2017). Today's hyper-connected digital society interacts "on a 24/7 basis through platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Google, Instagram, and YouTube" (Ireland, 2015: 157). The way in which individuals consume (and, in some case, rely upon) ICT reflects the subtle interaction between technology and society. The term 'sociomateriality' (Leonardi, Nardi & Kallinikos, 2012) covers the many different approaches to describing the relationship between the 'social' and the 'material'; it seeks to redress what is perceived as the neglect of the material in broader social and organisational theories (Mutch, 2013). Equally, socio-technical theory emphasises that the design and performance of *any organisational system* can only be understood and improved if both 'social' and 'technical' aspects are brought together and treated as interdependent parts of a complex system (Bostrom & Heinen, 1977; Cartelli, 2007). Social media provide a vector for a diverse variety of collective formations of digital users – including crowds, networks and communities (Dolata & Schrape, 2014) which constitute a socio-technical environment (Cheong, 2009). The way in which individuals engage with ICT can be interpreted through socio-technical theory, focusing on the identification of important social and technical factors that affect user perception, trust and intention to use (Hajli *et al*., 2017).

Within organisations, the Internet has enabled wider interpersonal communication among employees throughout the hierarchy, both top-down and bottom-up. It can therefore be considered a most democratic form of conducting business (Rodrigues, 2001). Yet, caution is needed since the present-day emphasis on the *speed* of digital communications can increase the potential for linguistic and cultural misunderstanding when, for instance, Internet users share one terminology but with different intended meaning – resulting in ineffective business communication. This notion weakens the assumptions about the 'global' nature of Internet communication. 'Cultural adaptivity' is often lacking (Reinecke and Bernstein, 2013). Within each country, diverse subcultures co-exist with different languages and social contexts (Recabarren, Nussbaum and Leiva, 2007). Indeed, the Internet has enabled many 'excluded' communities to connect and communicate with the rest of society but it has not (yet) contributed to the mutual understanding of people or produced a 'fairer' society. In other words, access to

information via the Internet does not automatically produce the correct and effective use of it.

Across Europe, English dominates as the language most used for online communication (Europa, 2012). Within metropolitan France, 97.2 % of citizens speak French at home, compared with 1.4% who speak English (DGLFLF, 2013). In the workplace, some 1.8m employees (26%) use English as a first foreign language in their daily professional activities; languages used at work include English (89%), German (5%), Spanish (2%) and Italian (1%) (DGLFLF, 2006). There are concerns regarding the obligation to communication in English at work; many employees aged over 30 declare feeling uneasy while using documents or working online in English (MFI, 2009). These concerns have provoked strong Trade Union action combined with state controls and sanctions. The French Courts (GE Medical Systems, 2006; Europ Assistance, 2007) repeatedly sentence companies that impose upon their employees any English-language software or working documents available online. Advertising and product/service descriptions must be available in French. Foreign words or expressions can only be used under the compulsory condition of facilitating understanding.

Language is shaped by ongoing technological developments, expanding the range and variety of language styles and forms, providing unprecedented opportunities for businesses and personal creativity (Elis-Williams, 2005). Moreover, the Internet can enable users to overcome inhibitions when communicating online in a foreign language (Stapa and Shaari, 2012). Conversely, the Internet can also be criticised for 'dumbing down' language on the basis that 'techno-speak' and 'txt' language have entered mainstream jargon, causing standards to drop and diminishing creativity as globalisation imposes sameness. To this end, the Internet is held responsible for encouraging "linguistic vandalism" (Gordon, 2002). Irrespective of the impact of the Internet on language, the ability to read and write remains unchanged and is increasingly essential for communicating online in today's digital society (Wright, Fugett and Caputa, 2013). Digital literacy is now part of the necessary core skills that schoolchildren and students need to master in order to enhance employability and global citizenship.

The modern focus on digital skills entails the dissemination of American ways of speaking and writing which reflect a consumerist culture (Block and Cameron, 2002). Anglo-American in origin, values of this nature are more easily accepted in English-speaking countries like Britain, but less so in France. Besides, given that the transmission of the American lifestyle

goes beyond the arts and media, it promotes the notion that individual freedom has a higher value than government authority (Garten, 1998). This notion is discordant with the French mind-set. The French are particularly hostile to an open global market which encourages diffusion of cross-cultural ideas, new products and services (Doole and Lowe, 2007). This hostility is one of the reasons which led France to support the adoption of UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005), enforced in March 2007.

The Internet has the potential to balance the benefits that can be gained from globalisation, enabling individuals to communicate worldwide at low or no cost. However, transnational communication calls into question the issue of a global *lingua franca* in the digital era, even if there is no conceivable way in which any authority could define a single official language for the Internet. The Internet as a whole is not managed by any authority or person, a reality that will never change unless every country were to reach an agreement, or if the entire world fell under the control of one government. In the early years of the 21st century, it was estimated that three-quarters of the world's Internet population was non-English speaking (Marcus, 2003); today the figure has shrunk to approximately 40% as English has become more of a second language in the online environment (Zuckerman, 2013). There is a dearth of information on how much time people spend using the Internet in their native language compared to in a foreign language. The paucity of research in this domain indicates the difficulties associated with gathering data on Internet usage across different languages.

While the diffusion of Anglo-American culture cannot be stopped, there are signs that local cultural industries are emerging, for example the designation 'Made in Europe' (Kassapian, 2009) and 'Made in France' (Vallez, 2015) particularly in the luxury industry (Koromyslov, 2012). In time, there could be a fairer representation of cultural and linguistic diversity in society. The onus is on cultures worldwide to take responsibility for creating web content which reflects non-American cultural values. The website *War'l Leur* http://www.warleur.org is a fitting illustration of how the Internet is being used to promote minority communities and languages; in this case, a group of 73 Celtic associations share Breton cultural and linguistic values. This type of initiative demonstrates how the Internet can be used to maintain cultures offline as well as online (Hardouin and de Montesquiou, 2000). In this sense, the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF)* promotes the notion that "the WWW appears to be a medium that will contribute to the preservation and promotion of regional and minority languages" (Wright, 2006: 231) given that certain regional and minority

languages now occupy a greater percentage of Internet space than they ever had in print publication.

The openness of the Internet has been the driving force behind many improvements and developments (Hardmeier, 2005). Wireless and mobile technology allow users to access the Internet while moving from one geographic location to another, thus multiplying the opportunities for user interaction via location-based services which connect users with a range of services and products in their immediate vicinity (Sciandra and Inman, 2013). As the number of Internet uses continues to increase worldwide, it can be expected that the online population will fragment into different user groups united by shared values, often cultural in nature. Widespread use of the Internet is leading to the emergence of a global cyber-culture characterised by a heavy reliance on online services (Lichy and Kachour, 2014). Despite this convergence, online consumers are much more likely to explore a web site and make a purchase if the site is in their native language (Cremers, 2006). This dynamic is contributing to a fragmentation of segments based on cultural and linguistic preferences. In some parts of the world, repressive governments will maintain efforts to prevent access to popular social media (for example, Turkey and Vietnam), by installing sophisticated software to filter, block and monitor hundreds of thousands of sites (for example, Tunisia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, China, etc.). Yet, many Internet users in the Middle East and North Africa will continue risking long prison sentences for airing views online that are perceived to violate Islamic tradition (Zaid, 2016).

Segmentation in the online environment results from the fact that the Internet is not a culture-free product (Hermeking, 2005) since Internet consumption tends to depend on marketing, and marketing is largely influenced by culture. Thus, Internet users from different cultural backgrounds are likely to use social media, particularly Facebook, in different ways (Huang and Park, 2013). Culture and institutions are obstacles to sharing information; if members of a society do not easily trust each other, they are less likely to form networks and share information (Hidalgo, 2015). In Anglo-Saxon communities, Internet users are more likely to share a point of view on a topic (professional or personal) via social media, than their French counterparts. A study by EMC (2014) found French Internet users to be reticent about sharing private information online and divulging research information online; some 91% of French Internet users would support legislation that prohibits the use of private information by a third party without their consent. From a cultural perspective, the personal image and the perception of feeling constantly ‘judged’ or watched

seem essential for understanding the French behaviour online (Lancelot, 2011). The importance of how people are seen by others has led to a clear distinction between public and private life in French society, supported by highly protective legislation (art. 8 Code Civ., Art.9 de la CEDH). Being considered as a 'privilege' in Common Law, private life has the value of a Human Right in Statute Law, which explains the difference in the way French people tend to use ICT and their primary reluctance to reveal private information in Internet.

Rationale

In the light of the current language legislation governing the use of French (see Lamarre, 2014; Smith, 2015), our enquiry sets out address gaps in the literature by providing insights relating to socio-linguistic and socio-technical aspects. Specifically, our objective is to ascertain the extent to which the language of communication has an impact on the nature of the information shared by an individual. Drawing from existing literature, we put forward the following research question: "*to what extent does the language of communication affect information sharing?*"

Methodology

The focus is therefore to determine the nature of information sharing among adult Internet users in the workplace, in the light of the current language legislation in France. If the literature is applicable then it would be expected that French-speaking Internet users will demonstrate a somewhat restrained information sharing. This notion was tested using a combination of survey and interview approach. While secondary information could have been sourced from online forums such as Yelp or TripAdvisor, or from YouTube, it was decided more insightful and constructive to gather data face-to-face.

Based on the review of literature, we drew up a pilot survey in order to gain insights into the nature of the information shared by Internet users. The survey was administered face-to-face to employees at a language training company (anonymity requested) for a period of three months. Following the survey, the results were shared with the survey participants by email. The participants were invited to (i) reflect on the results and (ii) share their reactions, interpretations and thoughts on the subject. Five participants agreed to share information. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participants who accepted to comment on how they share/divulge information online in a personal and professional context.

Key findings

The survey results revealed that French Internet users are sharing/ divulging a wide variety of information relating to different aspects of their life. Seven dominant types of information-sharing can be identified, summarised and 'labelled' in the list of typologies below.

i. **'stalking'**: These digital users never (or very rarely) post content or comments. They will read everything posted by competitors rather than by colleagues. They spend a lot of free time online looking for gossip and information that can be used for personal gain. They use digital with the aim of observing and following other users.

ii. **'bling bling'**: These digital users like to show that they have money and a high-level lifestyle by sharing images and status updates while away on vacation, pictures taken with luxurious cars, expensive watches, and glimpses of bank notes. They invariably 'like' their own posts, photos and clips, and regularly update their selfie profile photo.

iii. **'over-sharing'**: These digital users post a lot of content daily. Most of the time, they share something that another person has previously posted – a quick look at their timeline reveals the extent to which the posted content is 'recycled' from other users' posts of articles, photos, videos, locations and so on.

iv. **'geek'**: These digital users are always online, and claim knows everything. They will not only post content several times a day, but also tag friends on photos and videos, comment on every subject, as well as answer messages within 30 seconds. When they receive a link about a humorous topic, they will respond along the lines of "Yep, nice, I already saw it 2 weeks ago!"

v. **'iMessenger junkie'**: These digital users subscribed to Facebook a few years ago and are now tired of using it. However, they maintain a Facebook account for chatting with friends via Messenger. They no longer post or 'like' content or comment, or even post birthday wishes in response to the push notifications'.

vi. **'clubber'**: When these digital users post content, it generally relates to information about organising or attending an event. Their friends will often post photos of them inebriated, or out socialising 'glass in hand' (and sometimes 'bottle in hand'). They are regularly tagged by their friends while out at a party.

vii. **'wannabe influencer'**: These digital users are a popular profile on social media, with 5000+ friends and followers – but unlikely to know a tenth of them in person. S/he likes to post frequent clips on

> YouTube and Instagram of her/himself to attract followers, in the hope of attracting sponsorship from advertisers.

The different types of information-sharing reveal the depth and breadth of the various categories of digital users who are present in the online environment. The Internet has irreversibly changed our routine habits, ways of communicating and thought processes. Information and communication technologies have shifted the onus on to the individual user to be available 24/7 and respond swiftly to incoming messages. There is an expectation to maintain contact with colleagues, family and friends, to share information updates and to solicit feedback on content posted. While some digital users seem to be more reliant (dependent) on sharing information about themselves, others are more restrained and careful to avoid divulging too much information.

These initial results were disclosed (anonymously) to the survey participants by email who were then invited to reflect on the results and to indicate willingness to share their thoughts on the subject. Five participants came forward to provide further insights. The verbatim responses (below) reveal different styles and behaviours regarding attention paid to syntax used and content posted.

> "I use a lot of *franglais* and text speak when posting comments and content. Nobody uses full sentences any more. People post all sorts of rubbish: the good, the bad and the ugly … it's all about the visual, not the written."

> "I post what goes through my mind, mostly in English but also in French; my online conversations are guided by what's going on around me ... I see lots of 'bad buzz' like trolling and flaming. I try and keep my private life offline but if friends tag me in a photo, my life is splashed across the Internet."

> "No-one uses email outside work these days … instant communication is here to stay, changing the way we speak and think … look at Donald Trump's never-ending tweets and fake news, mostly misspelled and factually inaccurate!"

> "Sometimes I share information about political views in response to current events, and sometimes I share information about family issues or leisure – I write in a way that makes others want to join my conversation."

> "Before posting content, most of us check what we've written and modify anything outlandish, to avoid giving the wrong impression. It's not good to brag or openly criticise, especially if friends, family and colleagues can see – *and condemn* – what we're posting!"

These comments point to a certain level of self-censorship among Internet users and recognition of tolerance towards other Internet users. The participants are aware of the limitations and pitfalls of posting random information. They draw attention to the vast diversity of user groups online today, generated by ongoing fragmentation of the online environment. While there is a total absence of reference to language legislation, participants are nevertheless aware of changes in the language used online such as "bad buzz" and "fake news".

Discussion

The various legislative measures that have been taken over recent decades to protect the French language show how the French authorities have reacted to change; they are linguistically anxious. The popularity of *franglais* suggests that linguistic legislation has had limited impact, and thus calls into question the use of having language protection laws when other concerns (such as rising unemployment and social unrest) need urgent attention. Moreover, it can be argued that controlling the evolution of modern-day French can be considered as excessive state intervention. Legislation in linguistic matters can also be perceived as an improper and repressive attempt to exclude spontaneous expression which, by virtue of the spontaneity, is natural and free.

Echoing the work of McLuhan and Fiore (1967), the results of our study underscore the extent to which 'the medium is the message', according to which a technology (i.e. the medium) can directly determine its usage and effects. In the Internet era, it is reasonable to put forward that this notion has been replaced by "the medium matters more than the message" (Schultz, Utz and Göritz, 2011:20). In other words, a medium that can offer collaborative, authentic and credible dialogue among individuals is more effective than traditional media (Soulez and Guillot-Soulez, 2011).

In the modern-day workplace, managing language usage and enforcing linguistic legislation is incredibly complex. The written word is interpreted differently, depending on the medium of communication used. New information and communication technologies are frequently integrated and combined with legacy technology, with the aim of improving performance and cost-effectiveness. Each new medium is thus *superimposed* on existing media (without necessarily replacing them); Kalika, Charki and Isaac (2007) refer to these tiers (or layers) of technologies within an organisation as "Millefeuille theory" – literally, 'a thousand layers'. Given the perplexity and plurality of information and communication technologies, it is likely

that attention is shifting to ability to use the technology, to the detriment of ability to articulate language correctly.

Concluding comments

Acknowledging the global online nature of the contemporary business world, increasing emphasis is being given to communicating effectively with stakeholders. The written word is still of great important in formal communication and for grammar aficionados who adhere to '*orthographe impeccable*' (perfect lexicon). However, for many Internet users, the emphasis is shifting towards responding – often in real-time – to in-coming messages, increasingly via voicemail, video clip or text messaging. 'Getting the message across' seems to be taking priority over 'using correct grammar and spelling'.

Limitations of the study & future research

One of the main challenges of studying Internet usage is the timeframe for the enquiry. The starting point of our enquiry drew on literature from the beginning of the 21st century when the impact of rapid technological developments attracted heightened interest from the academic community. Future studies would benefit from collecting data over a longer period – combining the opinions and thoughts of Internet users with a numeric measure of Internet usage – in order to provide contextual evidence of evolution in digital usage. Equally, it would be constructive to compare two different language settings to produce a comparative study of language change. Future studies could also look at other user groups, such as adolescents or retirees, rather than focusing on the working population. To enrich the debate, it would be particularly interesting to solicit feedback from the *Académie Française* – the body responsible for regulating the French language – to further our knowledge of language legislation in the digital era.

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