

# Language Policy and Language Practice in the Workplace

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## RÉSUMÉ

Les changements socio-politiques continus au sein de l'Europe au sens large de cette notion ainsi que la mobilité et la collaboration grandissantes entre les pays de cette région sont en train de façonner un nouvel environnement socio-économique et multilingue.

L'objet de cet article est d'examiner l'utilisation de la langue au sein de quatre sociétés multinationales situées dans un pays de l' Union Européenne, à savoir la Grèce. Dans cette étude l'auteur s'efforce d'analyser l'ampleur des dynamiques d'utilisation de la langue étrangère qui se reflètent sur la politique linguistique du pays dans le milieu du travail. Une attention particulière est accordée à l'usage du grec dans les entreprises où la langue officielle de travail est l'anglais. L'article fait état des données recueillies à partir de deux projets portant sur la politique linguistique au sein des sociétés mentionnées plus haut et sur l'utilisation de la langue. Les résultats montrent qu'alors que l'anglais est une langue considérée nécessaire par les employés, d'autres langues (incluant le grec comme langue étrangère) jouent un rôle important au niveau des interactions d'affaires.

## ABSTRACT

The continuous social-political changes in the broader European region as well as increasing mobility and collaboration between countries are shaping a new financial-social and multilingual environment.

The aim of this paper is to discuss language practice in four multinational companies situated in one EU country, namely Greece, and to problematise the extent to which the dynamics of foreign language use are reflected in the country's language policy regarding workplace languages. Special attention is paid to the use of Greek in companies where the official working language is English. The paper reports data from two projects on language policy and language use. The findings show that while English is a language reported as needed by the employees, other languages (including Greek as a foreign language) play an important role in business interactions

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## Introduction

The progressively international nature of socio-economic activity is resulting in a multilingual environment which impacts on every level of social activity. Economic research (for instance IRDAC 1991) links the growth of European companies with the development of skills for effective cross-language communication. And extensive research carried out in a number of EU countries the last three decades (for instance Emmans 1974, Ostarhild 1998) has revealed that the majority of employees, apart from those engaged in manual labour, in both the public and private sectors, engage in cross-language communication in every day transactions. Overall, several surveys (for instance West et al., 2000) and studies on language training/learning carried out in EU countries, have shown that there is a need for more than one foreign language (FL) and that languages that are still less widely taught in the EU/EEA (e.g. Central and Eastern European languages, Chinese, Japanese) are of growing importance. Multilingualism is either an every day practice or a key challenge nearly all European companies have or will have to face.

At the same time, English is often referred to as the modern *lingua franca* of commerce and it is still commonly believed by certain business circles that “you can go anywhere in the world and you will nearly always find someone who can speak English” (Hagen 1998: 20; Hagen 2005). Even though it is a fact that English is the working language of a number of corporate companies irrespectively of their location and primary ownership, language practice is much more dynamic as “communicative events are considerably more complex than the label of English as a *lingua franca* would suggest” (Nickerson, 2005: 371). Undoubtedly, high levels of proficiency in English are reported as needed by the employees in modern workplaces (Angouri, 2007). But a number of other FL languages are also needed and used for different purposes in the workplace, particularly by multinational companies (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 1999). For instance, research undertaken in Sweden (Gunnarsson, 2006) has shown that though English is an important business language for white-collar employees, “spoken discourse preserves the local language” (2006: 259). More explicitly, the local languages are used in a wide range of situations such as informal meetings and every day interactions. At the same time, research on language use (e.g. Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Vandermeeren, 1999) has revealed the importance of language skills in a number of languages other than English for business success. And recently Fredriksson et al. (2006) show the different perceptions of employees regarding the importance of the “common corporate language” (2006: 419).

Language policy has been repeatedly discussed (e.g. Phillipson, 2003) in relation to globalization and/or post colonial discourses (e.g Pennycook, 1998). The straightforward link between language policy and planning is also foregrounded in relevant literature (e.g. Kaplan, 2005) including issues of literacy (e.g. Liddicoat, 2007). Kaplan & Baldauf (2005) in their recent work provide an overview of language policy research indicating the wide range of studies in the field (often operating from different perspectives and with different foci to studies on language rights and/or imperialism). As it has been suggested “there is a great deal of language planning that occurs in other societal contexts [not necessarily at governmental level] (...) for other purposes” (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997: 3).

Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is twofold; at a macro level it discusses the official language policy in relation to workplace languages in one EU country, namely Greece. At a micro level the discussion is focused on foreign language use in the context of a sample of multinational companies situated in Greece where the official working language is English. Given that European workplaces are typically multilingual (e.g. Fredriksson et al., 2006), I focus here on Greek workplaces and I discuss whether multilingualism<sup>1</sup> is indeed the reality of companies situated in Greece. I also examine the language ecology represented by the official workplace related language policy in public sector companies in Greece. Special attention is paid to the use of Greek as foreign language in private companies where the official working language is English.

The paper is organised in five parts. In order to place the discussion in context, a brief overview of the modern workplace is provided. I next move on to the methodology I used for this study and I discuss data on the language policy in public companies in Greece. I then turn to data from a sample of multinational corporate companies and I close the paper by discussing implications and conclusions that can be drawn.

## **1.0 The modern multilingual workplace**

According to Earley and Gibson (2002: 15) the two most significant changes in the workplace, over the last decades, are the globalization of the market and the restructuring of companies. As far as the former is concerned, the open borders, the harmonization of business regulations and the single currency, have carried Europe to an economic integration. A significant interrelated dimension of the internationalisation of business is

the clear impact on the mobility of businesses and people within the borders of Europe and beyond. Business mobility is a characteristic of the global economy as “business success depends on expanding the global reach on an organization” (Early and Gibson 2002: 17). Self evidently, mobility and language skills are directly related and since 1995, the European Commission (White Paper, 1995) has considered the acquisition of at least two foreign languages a necessity in order for the citizens of Europe to exploit professionally and individually the opportunities provided by the union (the latter being largely reliant on the mobility of the European citizens). Figures from 2001, however, show that the mobility rate in the EU was six times lower than in the US, arguably lessening the Union’s economic competitiveness (COM, 116: 6). So the continuous/ vocational training in what the EU considers as “basic skills” and which includes the acquisition of foreign languages, is seen as necessary.

At the same time, the companies are transforming into multilingual mosaics not only in the upper posts, but also in the level of the blue collar workforce. This obviously creates a new environment and another challenge to the management of business, but also to the smooth operation of the groups of employees that have to work together. Janssens et al. (2004) in a recent study suggest that “international companies are confronted with language diversity throughout their daily organizational communication practices” (2004: 427). In their study Janssens et al. (2004) highlight the complexity of deciding on the companies’ ‘official’ languages and the repercussions on the power balance deriving from including or excluding languages from the linguistic repertoire (I return to this point later on in the paper in the light of the data discussed here).

It is noteworthy however that the diversity of the workforce is not only an unavoidable result of the macro environment (for instance the country) where each company is located. The diversity is also perceived as beneficial for business. As Carnevale (1999) argues there are several reasons why the companies wish to maintain a diverse workforce. More explicitly, it is stated in his work (Carnevale, 1999: 6 and in Winston et al., 2001: 68) that, a) diverse workgroups are reported (see also Ely & Thomas, 2001) to be more innovative and flexible, b) a company is more likely to be successful in identifying and hiring good talent from a broader, more diverse, rather than a narrower labor force and finally, c) excellence in product creation and customer service can not be achieved without a diverse workforce that can address customer needs and expectations (Janssens et al., 2004). While all

these factors should probably be further analysed from a managerial perspective, what is important for this paper is that multilingual workforces will continue to be a central feature of global economy. Interconnected to the importance of language use is the complex nature of the tasks and the activities, the employees encounter. Arguably this complexity emanates directly from the very complexity of the workplace (Mercado et al., 2001). The overwhelming majority of employees have to work effectively with colleagues from diverse national backgrounds, increasingly using foreign (or second) languages in their every day routine at work.

A relevant point here is that the nature of activities of each company, play an important role to the languages that may be needed for efficient and effective communication (e.g. Reeves, 1990; Reeves & Wright, 1996). The linguistic needs of employees also include languages they may use to efficiently serve their potential customers. Hence, language needs are both inward and outward facing. And different languages are needed and used for inter- and intra-company communication. In a recent study (Angouri, 2007) I have argued that variation in language use is noted according to both the post and position the employees hold in the company (e.g. senior vs. junior managers), but also in internal (i.e. intra) vs. external (i.e. inter) company communication. One could therefore, forthwith argue, that the languages the employees need to use depend on the business needs and the aims of each company and their post and cannot be easily predetermined. Even though this might seem 'common sense' to many a reader, I come back to this point when discussing the language policy as reflected in the Greek public sector.

## **2.0 Method**

This paper draws on two different datasets; one from a project on the analysis of job advertisements where specific languages constitute a qualification for recruitment in the Greek public and private sector and one on language policy and practice in a sample of multinational companies situated in Greece.

The aim of the first project (completed in 2003) was to investigate which foreign languages were required for the public and private sector in Greece as stipulated by the companies' policy documents and the job advertisements in the press. I discuss here only findings regarding the public sector (see Angouri, 2003 for a fuller account) deriving from systematic indexing of all published announcements of the Superior Council for the Selection of

Personnel (ASEP) in the Official Gazettes (FEK) during the years 2002-2003, until the Official Gazette nr 60, which was published on April 15th 2003. The project registered the foreign languages used in the public workplaces and the fields that require the use of foreign languages. According to the indexing, out of 5.000 job offers that were registered during the said period, the knowledge of a foreign language constituted a qualification for recruitment in 2.781 cases. Through the indexing I also registered all the areas where the knowledge of a foreign language at a specific level constitutes a necessary qualification for recruitment. Data from the public sector are of interest here, since I a priori accept that the official language policy is reflected in the languages that are used, promoted and constitute qualification for recruitment. The main reason that can be grounds for this assumption is the fact that the public companies do not determine independently the particulars of each post, but through a collective governmental authority which is responsible for specifying the qualifications required by each post.

The second dataset derives from a project on communicative activity in multinational companies situated in Europe (Angouri, 2007). It was conducted only in private sector enterprises because the free market is indisputably more flexible to the requirements of the market and functions, according to economists, a self-adjusting mechanism. Arguably this flexibility is due to the fact that the sustainability and development of the private enterprises directly depend on their adaptability and competitiveness. Therefore I consider the private sector companies to be more responsive in terms of the language needs and the foreign language skills the employees need to develop in order to be able to communicate effectively and efficiently. The study in question was conducted in two phases: the 1st phase was the pilot research which involved only qualitative research and its main purpose was to explore the workplace settings, observe the foreign language use in everyday interactions and help me design the 2nd main phase of this research which consisted again of two phases: the 1st phase involved qualitative research to explore the company workplaces that constituted my sample. In the 2nd phase quantitative research was conducted in a sample of international multinational companies in four European countries. This paper focuses on and discusses data from four international companies situated in Greece. In all cases the companies' working language is English. In this paper I report on my findings emanating from the analysis of questionnaires and interviews. The

questionnaire was considered as the most appropriate technique for collecting information regarding the profile of employees and companies (including self reported accounts on language use)<sup>2</sup> because of the large number of interviewees and the geographical distribution of the companies. In addition, with the use of the questionnaire I have assured anonymity and minimized the time the employees, supervisors and managers had to spend in order to participate in this research. Between August 2004 and January 2005, 357 participants filled in the questionnaire distributed to them by the researcher herself. My sample consists of general managers, line managers and postholders. The distribution of the sample reflects the distribution of staff in the companies. Therefore 32% of the sample consists of line managers, 66% of postholders and 2% of general managers. The findings presented in this paper focus on the analysis of the questionnaires completed by line managers (LM) and postholders (PH)<sup>3</sup> in Greece.

A comparison of the two datasets is considered to be of interest, as the former provides us with a macro focus on Greece's official workplace related language policy, while the latter with an insight in the 'multilingual reality' (Charles, 1989) of corporate companies. An attempt will be made to discuss both aspects below.

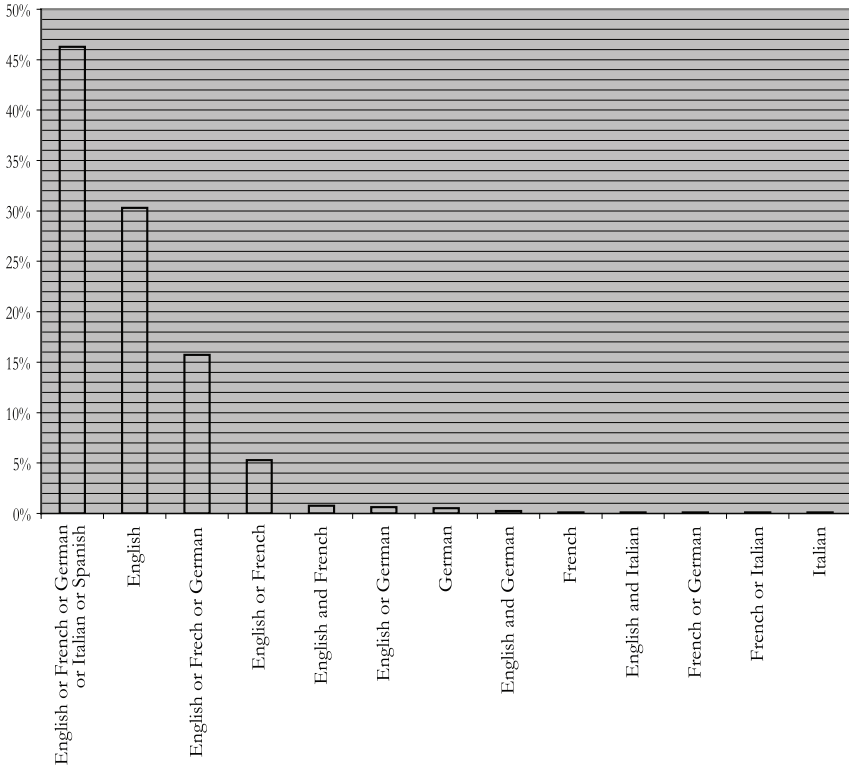
### *3.1 Greek public sector: language policy in practice*

The linguistic profile of the public sector in Greece presents interesting particularities. In the public sector the general qualifications for recruitment in public authorities are determined by the presidential decree nr 50<sup>4</sup>. As a supplement, each authority proceeding to an announcement of recruitment can mention any additional qualifications required by each post. In addition, all recruitments are carried out through the Superior Council for the selection of Personnel<sup>5</sup> (ASEP) and are published in the Official Gazette (FEK). This qualification list reflects the policy of the Greek government and encompasses the qualification the personnel of the public sector should have, like degrees held, professional qualifications, IT skills and foreign languages –and the knowledge level required–.

As can be seen in graph 1. below, 46.27% of post announcements during the said period in the public sector require the knowledge of one of five European languages (English, French, German, Italian and Spanish).

Graph 1

Foreign Languages in the Public Sector



What is noteworthy here is that the knowledge of any of these languages is viewed as a qualification of equal importance. The location, activities or even strategic plans of individual companies or bodies do not seem to affect the general policy, as companies with very diverse profiles (i.e. the public sector includes companies –such as PPC– but also bodies –such as City Councils–) recruit personnel with skills in one FL which, in almost half of the job announcements included in this sample, is not specified. This language policy raises questions, concerning on the one hand the criteria of selecting the languages that form these ‘groups’ and on the other the extent to which these languages can meet the companies’ needs.



Another striking observation is the lack of non widespread European languages, as well as non European languages from the public sector<sup>6</sup>. As we live in the era of globalization one would justifiably expect a more diverse linguistic landscape. Interestingly, even companies that have expanded into other markets, recruit personnel on the basis of the language policy briefly described above. In addition, the knowledge of certain languages seems to be required, regardless of the specific needs of each company. The fact that English is the only language that also appears autonomously at a high percentage of job advertisements, shows that knowledge of English, constitutes an important qualification for recruitment in the public sector. While I would not doubt the 'usefulness' of the language, the question is to what extent this reflects the actual language needs of employees in public companies or reflects a widely held assumption regarding the importance of English for business communication. At the same time it is the case that public sector companies have a very diverse profile and subsequently diverse needs and multilingual realities. However, out of a sample of 250 employees in public sector companies who were asked if the current policy meets their needs, 63% suggested it is unsatisfactory.

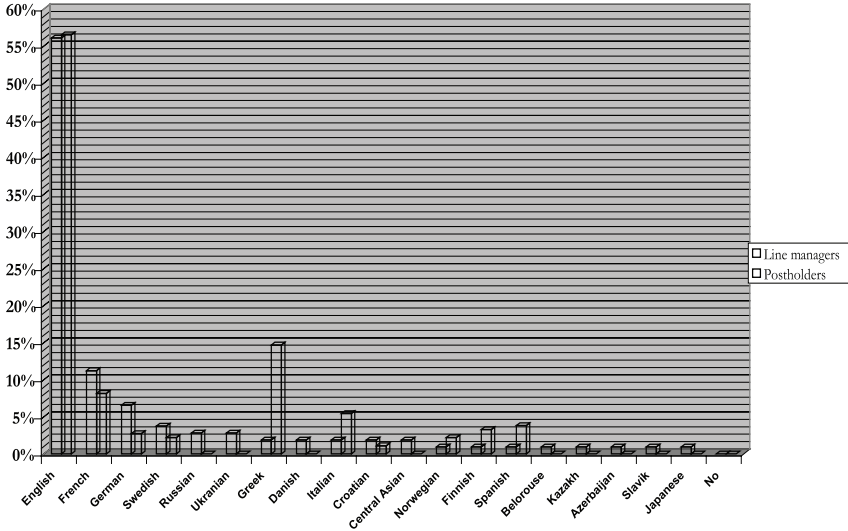
In contrast with this rather limited number of languages that seem to be required on the basis of the 'official work related language policy', the everyday linguistic reality of employees in corporate companies seems to be much more diverse. I briefly discuss this in the next section.

### *3.2 The language ecology in multinational companies situated in Greece*

My analysis shows that a number of languages are used by the employees for work-related purposes. I consider indicative of the multilingual nature of modern workplaces that 19 languages are reported as frequently used (graph 2). Interestingly a significant percentage of the languages shown in graph 2, are not widely taught/learned for business purposes; consider for instance the case of Greek as a business language.

Graph 2

Foreign language use in the workplace

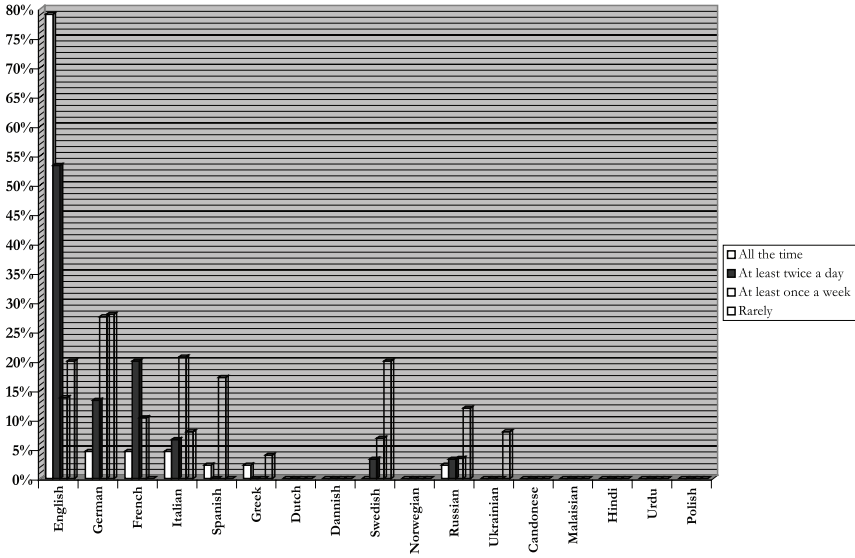


To take this further, the next two graphs (graphs 3 & 4) show the most frequently used FL and provide details as to how often each language is used. Even though there are differences between the two strata of employees, one can easily see that a number of languages are used on daily basis.

In so far as Greek is concerned, 2% of LM and 14% of PH need to use the language regularly for work-related purposes. The difference in the language needs between the two strata is noteworthy and can be related to the role and responsibilities the employees hold in the company. As graphs three and four indicate, the frequency of FL use also varies between the two strata. Gunnarsson has recently argued about a “hierarchical divide” (2006: 260) according to levels of competence in English. Even though in my study both LM and PH use English in their daily life and report high levels of competence<sup>7</sup>, the issue of perceived ‘bad English’ that impedes the flow of communication in inter/intra company communication was reported as one of the reported ‘communication barriers’. The relationship between English as a working language and empowerment of certain groups of employees in the multinational workplace warrants further research, as it carries with it very serious implications.

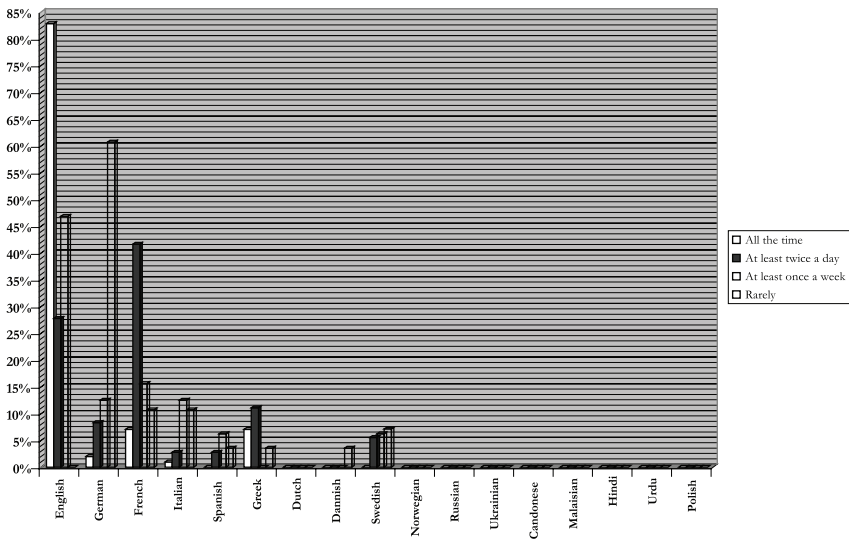
Graph 3

Foreign language use by the Line managers



Graph 4

Foreign language use by the postholders



Despite the space limitations, one additional point regarding the actual communicative practices is worth making. My findings highlight the importance of local and other foreign languages (see also Seargaeant, 2008 for a very interesting discussion on global vs. local). As one LM suggests:

“oh well you know when we can we speak to each other in our own language and the funny thing is that then we summarise in English for the others (.)”

In the case of this interviewee then English offers the possibility to ‘cut across’ other languages used in the company<sup>8</sup>. Hence, one ‘working’ language does not seem to limit the important role of local, -or other first- languages in the companies studied. And even though other research suggests that the use of a common language may be imposed by top management (see also Fredriksson et al., 2006) in my dataset, senior managers were flexible in so far as the company’s working language is concerned. This raises then a question regarding the perceived importance of the company’s policy for the employees. In the four companies discussed here the use of a number of languages (including Greek) is encouraged alongside English. In fact senior managers encourage the use of any language(s) that would enhance their business activities. A senior LM explains:

“uh with certain markets uhh in countries like (.) French speaking markets, like certain countries in Africa or in Spain, you can’t possibly use English. We would lose business if we were to depend only on English. And it helps you know, even here in Greece, it helps that we can use the language. It’s always better if you can use the local language”.

Overall language policy in these multinational corporations is a flexible concept. Even though most employees are aware of its existence, what became obvious on the basis of my findings is that employees typically take a ‘what works’ approach regarding language practice. Also the employees who form my sample proffer rather vague interpretations of what the existence of a language policy implies for their everyday working lives. In other words they seem to be very instrumental in the languages they use, the main criterion being ‘what fits best’. As one senior PH suggested

“When I need to talk to [refers to office in Athens] I always use Greek. My Greek is not perfect, but uh well I can control the information, uh the information flow and I know [name] loves it, so it always works [laughter] for us”.

The overwhelming majority of employees in my sample has a number of languages in their repertoire and chooses the one that meets the needs of the situation. This is actively supported by the senior managers who clearly encourage a ‘what works’ disposition.

“I want [refers to his team] to achieve our deadlines. If uh Italian helps them, fine with me, [laughter] I don’t see why it [the communication between colleagues] should be in English (.). Well uhh the [refers to types of documents] need to be in English but [name] well that’s easy (...)”.

Friedriksson et al. (2004) also show similar ‘ambiguity’ in applying the company’s working language. In their study an argument is made about the tensions that may derive from ‘imposing’ a language on interactions. Hence, an ‘ambiguous’ policy may serve the company’s interest and save managers from ‘policing’ language use. It is left instead “to solve itself in an emergent manner” (2004: 420).

The use of a working language has repercussions for employees who do not have high competency in the language in question, as they are excluded from at least a substantial part of all communication (see Gunarsoon, 2006 on democracy in the workplace). While the findings of my research give support to this argument, low competency in local languages –and other foreign languages widely used in the companies- is also affecting how much employees can ‘fit’ in teams. For example, table 1 summarizes the most frequent situations where Greek is used as a FL, according to both LM and PH.

**Table 1**

<b>Situations where Greek is used according to LM and PH</b>
Informal meetings
Business calls
Business e-mails
After sales services
Negotiations
Give information to staff
Give/ask for advice
Small talk

Source: J. Angouri (2007).

A cursory examination of the table indicates that the items refer to very different events; some refer to specific tasks (e.g. give information to staff), while most of them refer to events that involve a number of tasks (e.g. informal meetings). A further analysis is not relevant here. What does remain important, however, is that the 'local language' is used in a range of situations and events. And I consider that this table further emphasises the complexity and multilevel importance of FL in the workplace.

#### **4.0 Implications and Concluding remarks**

Greece's official work related language policy as reflected in the qualification list can be briefly summarized by the following three points: a) the requirements are limited to European languages only, b) the required linguistic skills refer to language groups rather than being language specific, c) the required languages are not identified on the basis of each company's specific needs. What is rather disquieting is that the language policy does seem to be based on empirical research, or to comply with the actual language practice, or to emanate from the current socioeconomic status quo. Therefore the rather traditional, language policy does not seem to ensure that public companies can remain competitive in an ever changing market. Having said this, it is interesting to note that the most frequently used foreign languages in multinational companies are indeed the five European languages which constitute a qualification for recruitment in the public sector. However, I do not consider this to provide grounds for predetermining needs and/or excluding a number of languages that may be used either by a smaller percentage of employees, or less frequently, but fulfill important functions. By predetermining the language needs the companies have, the Greek official language policy regarding workplace languages undermines the role these companies can play in the Balkan, the larger European market and beyond, rather than empowering it. As a result, the country faces the risk of being powerless in front of the constantly increasing linguistic needs of the modern multilingual workplace settings. I would, therefore, argue that the complex nature and activities of modern workplaces should be more thoroughly and systematically researched to identify each company's specific language needs. And the employees' specific language needs should be given a far higher priority at the planning stage than they are at present, as the current language policy seems to comply more with a traditional language learning view rather than a research based dynamic approach that can address current linguistic needs.

At the same time equally important are the findings from the private sector companies where the assumption that the companies operate on the basis of the working language only, is not supported by this study. The studied workplaces are indeed multilingual with English being the most frequently used FL. The use of the other languages, is related to specific business activities, but is still important, since the majority of both LM and PH claimed that a command of English alone is not enough in today's economy. Hence, this paper would provide further support to studies emphasizing the role both local and foreign languages play in the running of multinational corporations. Arguably the need for the range of foreign languages shown in graph 1 stems from the specific activities of the participant employees/ departments and if different companies had been included in the sample, the table above would be different (e.g. Hagen, 2005; Huhta, 1999 where different languages are reported as frequently used). In fact, the linguistic landscape is very different to the other companies I have studied as part of my project on workplace talk (Angouri, 2007). This point further emphasizes the limited view of the 'official' language policy as previously discussed, but also provides further support to the dynamic and complex realities of modern multilingual workplaces.

To conclude the paper, I would like to use a quote from a LM who suggested that:

“we need too many languages here (.) you see language, languages is uhh is kindof ((laughter)) power for us (.) if we are to play an active role [referring to the communication of that subsidiary with headquarters and other branches as a whole] and be successful”.

## NOTES

1. I will not discuss the EU language policy here (and/or criticisms on selective multilingualism (see Phillipson, 2003) and I am not going to distinguish between 'national' vs. 'minority' languages.
2. These accounts were compared and contrasted with data from ethnographic observations and real life data (Angouri, 2007).
3. The terms are used to indicate levels of responsibility; the line managers are responsible for a subsection of the department or groups of employees within the department, and the postholders were responsible for no one but themselves.

4. Known also as “qualification list”.
5. [www.asep.gr](http://www.asep.gr)
6. The data discussed here provide a snapshot of the situation in 2003. However, more data are being collected from job announcements in 2008-2009 –to allow for comparisons between the two datasets–. The preliminary data of this ongoing work indicate a similar picture, though job announcements are registered where Russian is included in the ‘groups of language’ that constitute qualification for recruitment.
7. High levels of competence in the company’s working language was a prerequisite for participation in the research.
8. Clustering of teams around L1s goes beyond the scope of this paper and will be discussed elsewhere.

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