Globalisation and the tower of Babel : case study : English as the tool for cross-cultural communication in a global corporation

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GLOBALISATION AND THE TOWER OF BABEL

CASE STUDY: ENGLISH AS THE TOOL FOR CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN A GLOBAL CORPORATION

L'article en question examine l'emploi de l'anglais en tant que *lingua franca* du travail dans un milieu professionnel plurilingue. L'étude a été menée dans un département plurilingue au siège d'une entreprise globale, située en Suisse. Se basant sur deux théories, celle de Howard Giles "Speech Accommodation Theory" et celle de Ferguson "Foreigner Talk", l'étude démontre, à travers un questionnaire et des enregistrements, les avantages et désavantages de l'utilisation de l'anglais en tant que moyen de communication interculturelle ainsi que les changements survenant dans la langue anglaise utilisée comme *lingua franca*. Les résultats obtenus contribuent à une meilleure compréhension des mécanismes linguistiques et sociolinguistiques dans un milieu de travail plurilingue et discute de la nécessité imminente d'un futur plurilinguisme en complémentarité d'une langue de communication universelle. Cet article se base sur des travaux de recherche effectués dans le cadre d'un mémoire sous la direction de professeur Richard Watts de l'Université de Berne avec la généreuse collaboration de l'entreprise interviewée, ainsi que les encouragements de Cornelia Tschichold et Professeur Normand Labrie de l'Université de Toronto.

1. Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that the English language has become the *lingua franca* of work in today's multilingual and multicultural professional world. In a time of growing multicultural corporations, communication is a crucial issue for successful cross-cultural co-operation as well as for economical prosperity. The English language has become the universal working language. As Coulmas (Coulmas 1992) states, "it is incredible how modern society has come to depend on and use the English language".

This article arises from a research for a thesis carried out in 1999 under the direction of Professor Richard Watts at the University of Bern and was made possible by the generous participation of a global corporation with headquarters in Switzerland as well as the encouragement of Cornelia Tschichold and Professor Normand Labrie at the University of Toronto.

The paper examines the use of English as a *lingua franca* in a multilingual and multicultural professional environment. Its aim is to obtain an idea of present and possible future trends, leading to recommendations regarding possible measures to be taken to cope with future needs and tendencies concerning languages on a socio-economic basis. The research analyses linguistic variations as well as speech and communication strategies in the social setting of a multinational department at the head offices of a global corporation located in Switzerland. The organisation selected counts world-wide 200,000 employees and

is a US$ 30 billion engineering and technology group (Annual Report 2000). It is one of the most culturally diverse corporations in the world and it has established English as its official corporate language. In such a multilingual work environment, where English is used as *lingua franca*, speakers' use of and sensitivity for accommodative speech strategies as well as their linguistic and sociolinguistic competence play an essential role in the success of cross-cultural communication. Indeed, English used as *lingua franca* of work is a good solution but not always satisfying. Cross-cultural co-operation can easily collapse due to linguistic and sociolinguistic factors.

Grounded on two theories of intercultural communication analysis, namely Howard Giles' Speech Accommodation Theory and Fergusons's Foreigner Talk, the research's aim is to demonstrate on one hand the necessity and utility of the use of English in a multilingual work environment and on the other hand its drawbacks.

The article will consist of three moments. In a first stage, a brief introduction outlines the reasons, which lead to the subject of the research. Namely, the extension of English on a world wide scale, the economic value of the English language and its impact on the schooling system, and the evolution of the *lingua franca* English. A second part sketches in more details the research, explaining the aims, the field of the study, the sample, the methodologies and the main theories applied. The final part will outline some major results and recommendations in regards to the use of English, including suggestions for the education system and for making cross-cultural communication easier.

2. Motivations to carry out the research

The following observations mainly lead to the subject of the study.

One of the first reasons, was certainly the amazing spread of the English language, especially in the last ten years, in oral and written language. English is present in all spheres and layers of society and this in countries, like Switzerland, where it has no official status and no historical roots. The English language takes increasing importance in the day-to-day activities and is dominant in many areas, whether it is advertising, media, radio, television, entertainment, education, etc. In Switzerland, examples can be found easily, such as on advertisements "See Blausee", "The Snack, Tilsiter" (see Appendix 1) or on some publicly owned cars by the City of Zurich marked with "trouble shooting". The use of regular loan-words only reflects the customary communication style of the colloquial speech in the streets, on radio and television. What determines the use of English are people's jobs, hobbies and field of study (Strevens 1991). Additionally, the use of English words in non-anglophone languages is fashionable. It stands for youth, freedom, technical competence and being in touch with the modern world (Dürmüller 1994). Young people in particular are very much attracted by the English language. In this way, the English language modifies and enriches local languages (see Appendix 2).

Consequently, with this incredible extension, English has an enhanced "market" and "economic" value. Especially so, on the job market, where it has become compulsory to have a sound knowledge of English in order to access a large number of jobs. When asked, one of the main reasons given by non native speakers of English (NNSs) for learning English, is an instrumental one "for business and job opportunities", besides tourism and entertainment. English, undeniably, is the dominant language for international relations, media, advertising, broadcasting, education, motion pictures, popular music, international travel and safety, science, technology, medicine, software, tourism, etc. (Crystal 1997). It is, therefore, no surprise that many companies carry out their oral and written activities in English and determine English as their official corporate language. Such corporate decision influences the global pattern of a company such as brand names, slogans, manual instructions, job titles and even company names, which are being anglicised. This tendency seems even more crucial for companies that deal with export-oriented activities and are located in countries with a rather small home market, like Switzerland (see Appendix 3). A direct consequence of this economical demand are the language requirements. Switzerland and multilingual continental Europe see the necessity to give the English language a new status in the present education system. However, changes in language policies are not without causing questions of national identity and financing. It is, therefore, not without reasons that in Switzerland opinions are presently still split on this very topic.

While we acknowledge the spread and intrusion of the English language into virtually all local languages, modifying and enriching vocabularies, we may also wonder whether the extended use of English might imply a kind of simplification. As some fear the disappearance of language diversity because of the extension of one single universal language (Crystal 1997), others fear the "decline of the English native speaker". English, being used all over the world by non native speakers, begins to develop new spoken and written varieties, which are employed by local people as symbols of their identity. It is, therefore, questionable whether through this simplification and/or diversification, English might not loose its function as a *lingua franca* and become unintelligible between nations (Crystal 1997).

3. Outlines of the research

3.1. Aims

The aims of the research meant to determine: a) whether the use of English in a multilingual work environment is effectively more efficient and whether cross-cultural communication is really made easier, and b) whether changes could be detected in the English language used as

lingua franca, which could eventually diminish the clarity and the level of comprehension of a message (oral and/or written).

3.2. Field of the study

In order to obtain representative results applicable to the entire international business community it was important to select a large operating industrial corporation. The organisation selected counts world wide 200,000 employees operating in over 100 countries and is a US$ 30 billion engineering and technology group (Annual Report 2000).

The research was carried out at the company's headquarters located in Switzerland. The head offices are divided into fourteen basic sections and number about 140 people of 17 different nationalities. Among these sections the Corporate Communication Department was selected. It was most suitable for the topic of the study, due to its intrinsic activities and its ethnolinguistic diversity (eleven people from nine different nations).

The global company selected is said to be one of the most culturally diverse corporation in the world. This is certainly due to its corporate history but mainly so, to its world wide activities. Multiculturalism is one of the corporation's strength. The group wishes to create successful teams from many cultures in order to break down the cultural barriers, preconceptions and biases. The idea is that in order to be flexible, innovative and fast it is salient to build cross-cultural teams. A group of people from several different cultural backgrounds is more likely to come up with an innovative idea than a group from a single culture. Thus, English holds an important role in this corporation, as a matter of fact, it is the official corporate language. An English, however, which is often referred to by employees as being "broken English" or "corporate English".

3.3. Methodology

In order to collect as much data as possible, two methods of investigation were selected. In a first stage a mail questionnaire was sent out, intending to gather people's values and perception about working in a multicultural work environment, and in order to illustrate the dynamics of attitudes as well as the motivations, intentions and consequences of certain speech behaviours. In a second stage, audio taped recordings of spontaneous discourse in formal and informal context were carried out. This in order to verify the results obtained from the questionnaire and to analyse the real spoken discourse taking place. Both, questionnaires and recordings, give more transparency regarding the language modifications taking place in cross-cultural encounters and hint to the "hybrid English" created by non native speaker's extended use of English. Of the 31 questionnaires sent out, 18 were thoroughly answered. Twenty eight participants from eleven different nations took part in the entire study.

3.4. Theories

The data collected was analysed within the perspective of Howard Giles' Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) (Giles 1991) and Ferguson's Foreigner Talk (FT) (Zuengler 1991). Both appeared most accurate to explain and understand language shifts, modifications and strategies in cross-cultural exchanges between native speakers and non natives speakers of English. The Speech Accommodation Theory seems particularly adequate, as it examines the accommodation strategies in speech. The theory explains how people are motivated to adjust their speech toward each other. The extent to which individuals shift their speech style by converging toward or diverging away from the speech style of their interlocutor(s) is a mechanism by which social approval or disapproval is communicated. Accommodation enables to obtain the listener's approval, reach a higher level of efficiency in communication and maintain a positive social identity (Crystal 1997).

Ferguson's Foreigner Talk is interesting, as it raises the issue of language learning. An individual may for example master different levels of sociolinguistic and linguistic competence. This theory analyses the different methods of speech accommodation between NSs and NNSs, such as modifying different areas of language including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, speech rate, pitch, use of pauses, utterance length and vocal intensity. Foreigner Talk is often compared to how mothers talk to young children.

4. Results

The research clearly shows that in a multilingual professional environment, both, plurilingualism and one common language of communication are not only complementary but necessary. The study clarifies that it is essential, in an international environment, to work with one commonly shared language, which is the only solution for efficient communication and co-operation. Nonetheless, the research also suggests that it is not sufficient enough to know just one global language of communication, mainly because linguistic homogeneity does not signify cultural homogeneity. There is thus, an eminent necessity for plurilingualism, as it allows a profound understanding of one's own and others' culture, and enables one to communicate more easily with other language communities.

The results of the study can be summarised in three moments. The questionnaire and recordings firstly explain the advantages and disadvantages of the use of a *lingua franca* at work. Secondly, they point out changes and/or evolutions observed in the English language used as a *lingua franca* of work. Finally, the answers to the questionnaire offer a set of recommendations that could facilitate cross-cultural communication.

4.1. Advantages and Disadvantages of English as lingua franca of work

The research suggests that there is a crucial necessity to have one common language for cross-cultural communication at work. Participants say, "If there is no common language it is not possible to work efficiently on common goals". English fulfils this role and thus enables and facilitates cross-cultural communication. Moreover, being so well established all over the world as the "global language" it does not make sense to challenge its universal position. Native speakers of English (NSs) and non native speakers of English (NNSs) accept this fact and learn to deal with it. Nevertheless, the solution of communicating by means of one global language is not without creating new challenges and/or problems. It can still lead to unsatisfaction, misunderstandings, miscommunication and reduce the efficiency of work. The use of a *lingua franca* at work, in order to be efficient and successful implies a set of qualifications described by Kim (Kim 1991) as the intercultural communication competence (ICC) viz. tolerance, open-mindedness, flexibility, patience and adaptability. Participants confirm the ICC theory enumerating and rating tolerance, open-mindedness, patience, communication skills, flexibility and experience as the highest assets and qualifications for working in a multinational team.

The use of a *lingua franca*, such as English, requires above all an extra effort of accommodation and mutual convergence. Employees admit that it needs certain efforts to work in multinational teams: "one has to understand and respect other's ways of doing things and this takes efforts from both sides" and "There are no restrictions, no barriers apart from having to speak English".

In order to reach a high level of comprehension and to co-operate successfully, native speakers as well as non native speakers of English need to converge towards each other on a linguistic and sociolinguistic level. They are both aware of the stakes of mutual accommodation.

The results demonstrate that in order to maintain harmonious co-operation and reduce miscommunication, accommodative strategies are applied in most interactions — excepting, maybe, moments of crisis or fatigue, when less attention and focus might be given to mutual convergence. In general, the convergence process seems to be applied and used efficiently. While NNSs accept to communicate in English, a language which for most is a foreign language or a second language, NSs on their side accept to communicate in a, what could be called, "simplified" version of their mother tongue. Testimonials are such as: "A global understandable English is spoken in our company, it is neither British nor American English", "Speaking English at work was tough at the beginning, now it has become a second language". A sensibility for the many different cultural values behind the "globally spoken *lingua franca*" is necessary and required from both NSs and NNSs, many state: "The different cultural backgrounds need to be taken into consideration to avoid misunderstandings". The research explains that a range of divers speech strategies are being applied by native speakers, who converge towards their non native colleagues. They will, for

example, use less humorous speech, less idiomatic or colloquial expressions, adopt a slower speed, a clearer and more standard pronunciation, use more questioning, easier syntactical structure, emphasise by using louder speech when reaching a key moment in a discussion and ignore mistakes. One of the NSs states "It is natural to speak in colloquialisms and clichés. It takes an effort not to do this when speaking with a non native speaker of English but the effort is worthwhile as the result is a better use of English communication".

Some of the main reasons given for misunderstandings and for a diminished efficiency at work are the following:

− The difficulty of conveying humour as a non native speaker. Humour, considered an important and useful speech strategy, is often avoided by both, NSs and NNSs, as it may lead to misunderstandings or even may damage a relationship. NNS: "My selection of humour is more narrow", NS: "If it is badly translated, the joke falls flat and this is often the problem", NNS: "The problem was not work but social contacts, insider jokes, I felt I was not quick enough to grasp the meaning. On the other hand when I said something, it sometimes sounded too direct or not sufficiently polite", NS: "Misplaced cultural-specific humour can damage relationships."

− Speech and communication behaviours specific to a certain culture, such as syntax, choice of words used in a request, turn taking, etc. can sometimes lead to misunderstandings. NNS: "I was advised to rather say: 'I strongly recommend to (…)' instead of 'I want this to be done'.", NNS: "Germans are of thought to be too direct in their wording" or NS: "Culture more than language can be an obstacle […] in business, not everything is made explicit in words, the cultural context is important".

− The use of colloquialism and idioms is generally avoided by NSs and NNSs and, therefore, makes a conversation less lively and natural, to the regret of both NNS and NS. NS: "with a fellow native speaker I would use more colloquial phrases, descriptive language, more humorous speech."

− Differences between the expected linguistic and sociolinguistic competence may also create misunderstandings or tensions. NS: "Sometimes I take it too much for granted that because NNSs speak so well English, then they understand everything. However this is not always true."

− Over accommodation or lack of accommodation can be very damaging too. Participants are aware that both behaviour can have negative consequences as they are face threatening (Clyne 1994). Testimonials are, NNS: "I don't like it when communication is restricted down to 'baby talk'", NNS: "NSs can exclude you from a discussion very easily, when they are among each other".

− The fact that most NSs do not master a foreign idiom is often resented by NNSs as it would sometimes help to clarify a situation. NNS: "There are not many anglophones who speak fluently a foreign language", or one NS says "There is sometimes a feeling that the rest of the world will adapt to us".

− Participants believe that, the use of a *lingua franca* speeds down the pace of work as it requires more questioning and mutual double checking.

− NNSs sometimes get the impression that NSs are quicker thinkers and are closer to perfection, at least regarding language. This can be frustrating and unsatisfactory. One NS admits, "English gives you superior competence, particularly in discussions, arguments and written work. But the person who knows English and other languages is in a more powerful position" and "There is a basic failure to communicate ideas, which becomes more important as complexity increases".

− The fact of having to double check an important piece of work, especially in written tasks, can be frustrating and especially very time consuming, even though it is more professional. NS: "We are seen as editors too often, which is a distraction from our real work", NNS: "A lack of native English competence is a weakness in particular tasks and it is frustrating".

− Language mistakes made by NNSs are rarely corrected, however when they are, it is a delicate task as it may be face threatening even if it is appreciated. On the other hand, because they are not corrected some mistakes are repetitive or even get spread and used by NNSs as well as NSs. One NS says "Many speakers develop some bad habits, [...] some speak too fast and miss out words [...], others have a restricted vocabulary" or "Often I have been disappointed to see spelling or language mistakes in public notices which have been badly translated into English".

4.2. Evolution and changes of the lingua franca *English*

The study shows that there is a tendency to create new spoken as well as written varieties of English.

They could be termed as "local Englishes" which distinguish themselves from the "standard Englishes" mainly by their syntax and pronunciation. They are hybrids. One often hears the terms of "Eurotalk" or "Euroenglish" or even "world wide pseudo English" or "Franglais" (Swan 1996) (see Appendix 4). Participants to the study confirm this evolution in the sense that the global English used as *lingua franca* differs from the standard versions. Several NNSs say "Native speakers have a head start, but I have the feeling a different English is developing in international contexts, that makes them as helpless as we (NNSs) are referring Eurospeak and company broken English." Participants get the feeling that English is being simplified. Some NSs find that their own English deteriorates as the English used in a multilingual context is often a basic, simplified, restricted or professional jargon type of English. NNSs: "The English spoken at the corporation is dominated by our own languages which can lead to misunderstandings"; NSs: "Many speakers develop some bad habits. Incorrect words or pronunciation. Experience tells you what they meant to say". The danger of such a simplification is that when applied in official situations it appears very unprofessional and can even be totally inefficient as it does fail to convey the message and

lacks clarity. Consequently, through the accommodation process and the snowball effect, certain hybrid words and expressions are adopted even by native speakers. More than one NS says "Over the longer term I feel that my own English is deteriorating (spelling, vocabulary)", "I resist the changes, but often it is easier to let it go". Traces of such shifts might be found in the following examples, when we hear people replacing "who is the person in charge" by "who is the responsible" or when two native speakers talking on the phone will use the following:

> A: mmh do you have a handy or/
> B: eum yes I I just/ the only problem is I don't usually switch it on.

Of course native speaker A does not mean to ask native speaker B whether he has a washing liquid called "Handy". But A is simply using the local xenism "handy" which stands for mobile phone, as naturally as any local non native speaker would. Astonishingly enough, the native speaker B does know what A means, most probably through his own experience with this xenism.

These are only a few examples of a long list of changes including altered grammar and meanings, bad translations, bad pronunciation and/or spelling taking place in the English language used as a *lingua franca* of work.

4.3. Recommendations and Suggestions

A set of recommendations and suggestions were given regarding possible measures to be taken in order to ameliorate and facilitate cross-cultural communication in a multilingual work environment. The most eminent factors emerging from the study seem to be: firstly, the need for plurilingual or at least bilingual and possibly bicultural people, along with the knowledge of a *lingua franca*. Secondly, the necessity of integrating into the apprenticeship of a language sociolinguistic and cultural aspects.

The results show that in order to avoid miscommunication and the risk of damaging a relationship an adequate level of linguistic and sociolinguistic accommodation is required. However, to find the ideal level of accommodation certain knowledge and experience is necessary. It involves, for example, people's attitude towards other cultures and languages, as well as the support of the education system and continuous language or communication seminars offered by companies.

Participants to the study suggest to focus on the following issues:

– Teaching languages at school, including sociolinguistic aspects such as humour, cultural specific behaviours, maxims of conversation, idiomatic and colloquial expressions, etc.

– The earlier introduction of a second language at school (using the system of immersion or bilingual classes for example), the school programs would need to be adapted,

– They insisted on the benefits of abroad exchanges, as this type of experience represents an essential element in the understanding of "the other's language and culture",

– Participants suggested corporate seminars or workshops focusing on teamwork, cross-cultural communication, the subjectivity of comprehension, body language, as well as multicultural workshops, social hours or even something like an international corporate club,
– They also recommended continuous language courses in order to correct mistakes, especially for the *lingua franca* in use, as NNSs should master it as well as possible in order to maintain a high level of comprehension and competitiveness.


5. Conclusion

The results hopefully contribute to a greater sensitivity towards multiculturalism in the work environment and hopefully give more transparency regarding the language modifications taking place in intercultural interactions due to the extended use of English.

While the study's results suggest that one global language of communication is an eminent necessity for making cross-cultural co-operation possible and efficient, they also show that one universal language is by no means sufficient. Indeed, to answer future economical needs it appears crucial to master several idioms along with one universal language including sociolinguistic aspects. This apparent urgent need for plurilingual competence represents an increasing demand on the work market, and could possibly enable a greater openness towards other cultures as well as a more harmonious cross-cultural understanding and co-operation. The public schooling system as well as continuous studies in schools and companies should aim to support such economical and linguistic evolution.

In sum, the results suggest that one global language of communication and language diversity are not only complementary but a crucial necessity. Indeed, plurilingualism could not only increase open-mindedness and a better understanding of other languages and cultures but it could also give the necessary flexibility needed to respond to any future linguistic and economic evolution. As Truchot says (Truchot 1994) "Il est tout aussi vain de nier cette diversité que de dénier un rôle à l'anglais." However, it is most probable that the cohabitation of one universal language with several other idioms can only be attained successfully through a sensible language planning and continuous education programs responding to the market's needs. Moreover, in order to answer more thoroughly and efficiently the future needs and trends regarding the use of English and languages on a socio-economical level, more cross-disciplinary research on multilingual professional environments and the spread of English as a working language would be profitable.

Appendix 1: The use of English in advertisements
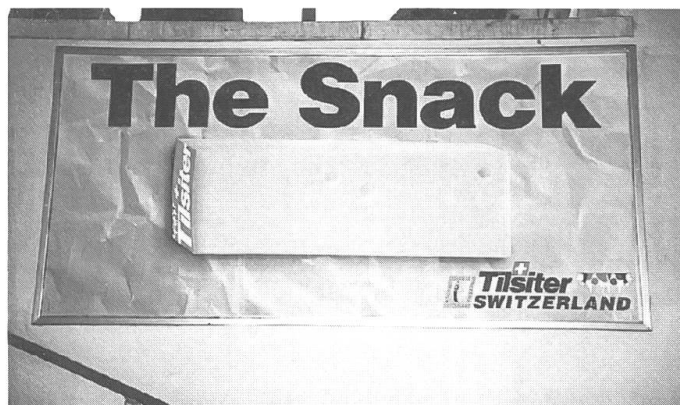
Appendix 2: English borrowings in local languages, the example of Swiss German youth talk

A: Sorry, aber dä finge ig jetzt huere schleimig, so ne pseudo coole Schiss

B: Fahrsch de öppe uf lockeri matchos ab, wie dä. Dä het doch scho so ne beknackti Schabe.

A: bä nei, uf Sönigi Type schtoh ig ou nid. Momant, ig bime emau e angeri Schibe ine, heavy geile Sound säge ig dir. Nei lueg (…).

B: Keep cool, muesch halt chli Action mache mit dene Type, ufputsche, de fahrts voll ine! Power, yeah, und d'Message chunnt ubere.

A: Null Bock, isch doch toti Hose da. Ig zieh eumau ab, susch gits no troubles, auso, Knackarsch, see you!

B: Bye Babe!

Appendix 3: English as the world wide business language

Le Temps, September 2000
By Serge Jubin
"Le réseau urbain de Watch Valley"
"(…) La Nouvelle Economie ne se décline qu'en anglais, justifie-t-il (Ton Korper). Pour réussir, il faut un slogan universel. 'Watch Valley est une traduction du bilinguisme de la région horlogère', ajoute, avec une pointe d'humour, le maire de Bienne, Hans Stockli.

Le Temps, 18 Mars 1999

By Thierry Meyer

"pour la plupart des grandes entreprises suisses, l'anglais est souvent la langue officielle".

"les anglophones dominent, sinon en nombre, du moins parce qu'ils ne parlent pas d'autres langues,…".

"Dans les couloirs de l'entreprise, on se dit désormais bonjour en anglais".

"L'anglais est devenu la première langue. Son conseil d'administration et sa direction générale l'emploient dans leur réunion."

International Herald Tribune, 2000

By Barry James

"English is our *lingua franca*", said Markus Peyer of Bertelsmann AG, the German communication giant (…). "It is absolutely necessary, spoken and written. Germans take a pride in their language, but you need another to get along in the world".

Appendix 4: An "international English" is developing

Tages Anzeiger, August 21, 2000

By David Haeberli

The Duden now accepts words such as "ich habe downgeloadet" or others like "verlinken , highlighten, chatten"

Associated Press, 2000

By Paul Ames

(…) English is spoken widely but not always well. A few examples: A tailor on the Greek island of Rhodes couldn't guarantee he could finish summer suits ordered by tourists. Why? "Because is big rush we will execute customers in strict rotation." Or the Bangkok dry cleaner's boast: "Drop your trousers here for best results."

International Hearld Tribune, 2000

By Barry James

"What passes for English in many corporations is enough to make a purist wince. (…) it tends to a "subset of simple, fractured language" with no nuance or precision."

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