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DRAFT

**The Evolution of English as the Business Lingua Franca: Signs of Convergence in
Chinese and Finnish Professional Communication**

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Abstract

This study questions the conventional view of the indirectness of Chinese communication. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Finnish and Chinese business professionals, the authors examine the effect of cultural identity on the directness of the communication of Chinese professionals who work for internationally operating Finnish companies located in Beijing and Shanghai, China, and who use English as the shared language with their Finnish colleagues. Three components of cultural identity (i.e., vocation as an international business professional, fairly young age, and the use of English as the business lingua franca) are particularly relevant in the participants' professional communication and stimulated its openness and directness. The study finds that the evolution of English as the business lingua franca can be detected in the signs of convergence identified in Chinese and Finnish professional communication.

Keywords

international professional communication, English as the business lingua franca (BELF), Chinese communication, cultural identity

The business environment in China has experienced fundamental changes since 1978, when China experienced economic reform and began trading globally. Today China plays a key role in the global economy and is one of the world's prime destinations for foreign investment (Child & Tse, 2001; World Bank, 2012). This collaboration with the outside world would have been difficult without a shared language, which is why English has become a crucial resource for international companies in China. For example, Kettunen, Lintunen, Lu, and Kosonen (2008) showed that English is used as the language of internal communication in Finnish companies based in China, and consequently, proficiency in English has become an important recruitment criterion. In short, shared business interests require a shared language.

The use of English as a lingua franca (ELF), a shared language, by speakers with different mother tongues has been a topic of increasing interest over the past few years (e.g., Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011; Meierkord, 2002; Seidlhofer, Jenkins, & Mauranen, 2012). When ELF is used in the business domain by business professionals, it has been labeled BELF (English as the business lingua franca; Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005). Research has shown that BELF discourse is a hybrid that is influenced by both English and the discourse practices of the speakers' native language (see e.g., Jung & Louhiala-Salminen, 2012; Kankaanranta, 2006), which suggests that the BELF communication of Chinese business professionals would also reflect some native Chinese characteristics.

Traditionally, Chinese oral communication has been described as indirect, implicit, and circular (e.g., Ding, 2006; Du-Babcock, 1999, 2006; Li & Liu, 2006; Vihakara, 2006; Worm & Frankenstein, 2000; see also Kaplan, 1987). For example, Worm and Frankenstein (2000) argued that the importance of face and the associated values of respect and hierarchy call for indirectness in communication. Indeed, Vihakara's (2006) study on managerial communication in a Sino-Finnish joint venture shows that Chinese managers tended to talk "around the topic" when reporting negative news to avoid disrespect and shame. And Ding

(2006; see also Trimarchi & Liesch, 2006) showed how Chinese business people used an indirect style of communication to create a strong personal relationship before discussing pertinent business issues. The indirect communication style has also been attributed to high power distance and collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; but see McSweeney, 2002). For example, Li and Liu (2006) pointed out how hierarchy in organizations is typically manifested as obedience to one's superior, which means that subordinates execute instructions without questioning and avoid challenging the superior's power.

Research into written business communication (see, e.g., Cardon, 2008), however, has shown dissimilar results from those typical characterizations of Chinese as indirect. For example, Beamer's (2003) investigation of English-language business letters originating in the 19th century demonstrated that the business correspondence of Chinese writers was predominantly direct even though, at that time, Western culture had little influence on Chinese communication. Beamer (2003) argued that directness implied a long-standing business relationship. Further, in an experimental study comparing directness and indirectness in claim letters written by Chinese and American students, Wang (2010) showed that both groups equally used both styles, and the converging rhetorical patterns were primarily due to the globalized environment.

Although conventional characterizations of indirect Chinese communication suggest that the Chinese represent a homogeneous cultural group with identical identities and communicative characteristics (e.g., Hofstede, 1980), we might question whether such a characterization can apply to the internationally operating Chinese professionals who use English as the shared language with their international colleagues and business partners. Indeed, Du-Babcock (1999; see also Zhu, 1999, 2005) argued that such exposure to the English language affects the knowledge and behavior of Chinese professionals. Since research on Chinese cultural identity and its effect on communication is scant, we address this gap here

and explore the characteristics of the communication between Chinese and Finnish business professionals in internationally operating Finnish companies. More specifically, we investigate how Chinese business professionals and their Finnish colleagues perceive Chinese BELF communication in relation to its directness. In doing so, we use an alternative theoretical approach, which is more relevant than the homogeneous national identity approach (e.g., Gudykunst & Kim, 1992; Hofstede, 1980) to explain how Chinese cultural identity may change when playing a role in English professional communication. Applying Jameson's (2007) framework of cultural identity, we contribute to knowledge of the effect of cultural identity on the English communication of Chinese business professionals. Jameson's (2007) view of cultural identity as multidimensional and embedded in a broad dynamic context is a useful perspective from which to examine the inherently intercultural BELF communication. Jameson (2007) viewed cultural identity as consisting of six components: vocation, class, geography, philosophy, language, and biological traits with cultural aspects (see Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

As Table 1 shows, the traditional dimension of culture – nationality – is only a subcomponent of the third component, geography. Although all the components are important, Jameson (2007) pointed out some may be more relevant in a particular context than are others. For instance, two of the components – vocation and language – are tightly intertwined in the work context of internationally operating business professionals. We argue that the use of English, or rather BELF, as a shared language in international business can have some homogenizing effects on its users' cultural identities. Although BELF speakers' communication is differentiated by the discourse practices of their mother tongue, it is homogenized by their shared language (English), their overall strive for clear and direct communication in the business context, and their shared business knowledge (see Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011).

Jameson (2007) argued that cultural identity is not only affected by the six components depicted in Table 1, it is also affected by close relationships, and it changes over time.

Although she referred to the close relationships between family members and friends, such relationships could also include workplace colleagues, with whom interaction takes place frequently throughout the workday. The change of cultural identity over time is particularly pertinent in this study because of the huge economic and societal changes that have taken place in China.

In the following sections, first, we briefly review the literature on BELF; next, we describe our method and present our findings and a discussion of these findings; and finally, we discuss the managerial implications and limitations of our study and suggest avenues for further research.

English as the Business Lingua Franca (BELF)

The concept of BELF addresses the shared language facility used in professional communication in global business (see e.g., Du-Babcock, 2009; Ehrenreich, 2010; Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2009). In other words, business is the purpose and domain of the use of BELF; it is a neutral resource that is shared with the members of the international business community in order to conduct business and work in multinational companies. In BELF, as in ELF, the vocabulary, structures, and discourse practices of English serve as the “lingua franca core” (Jenkins, 2000). And finally, the lingua franca aspect of BELF implies that the speakers have different mother tongues that suggest different “cultural identities” (Jameson, 2007). In other words, in lingua franca interactions variation and hybridity are primary because of the different linguistic backgrounds of the various BELF speakers. These linguistic backgrounds are reflected in the discourse practices of the speakers’ respective versions of BELF. Thus,

there are no fixed norms that determine the proper usage of BELF; that is, BELF cannot be owned by anyone nor can it be linked to one particular cultural context.

In spite of the variation in BELF usage, the global business community seems to largely agree on the characteristics of successful BELF discourse. For example, based on a study including almost 1,000 survey responses from and 27 semistructured interviews with internationally operating business professionals, Kankaanranta and Planken (2010; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011) argued that successful BELF communication calls for (a) directness and clarity rather than grammatical accuracy, (b) the use of business-specific vocabulary and genres rather than just general English, and (c) expressions that are oriented toward building rapport and relationships rather than merely explaining the factual content of the message. Indeed, as these success factors suggest, the international business professionals perceived communication know-how an integral component of business know-how. Although the native tongues of most of the study participants were European (e.g., Finnish, Swedish, German), the first language of 13 % of the participants was non-European, and 7 % of participants spoke Chinese as their first language. The researchers found no major differences between Europeans and non-Europeans concerning how they perceived successful BELF discourse.

Although research into different BELF variants is still limited, some explorative research exists. For example, investigating two major, recently merged Finnish–Swedish companies, Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) found that both Finns and Swedes perceived Finnish communication as direct and Swedish communication as indirect, with directness meaning using fewer words and going immediately to the point of the message (see also Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009), and indirectness meaning the opposite. This dichotomy in the communication style between the two groups (native Finnish speakers and native Swedish speakers) could also be identified in their authentic meeting and e-mail discourse. But

Louhiala-Salminen et al. suggested that over time and after many close contacts between the two parties the differences may weaken. For example, in Kankaanranta and Planken's study (2010) some of their Finnish informants felt that when they used BELF, they were not quite as direct as when they used their native tongue (see also Vihakara, 2006). In other words, they seemed to adapt their communication when interacting with non-Finnish (and not as direct) speakers (see Giles & Coupland, 1991). Also, Jung and Louhiala-Salminen's (2012) exploratory study showed signs of convergence over time in the BELF communication between Finnish and Korean colleagues.

Method

Because our study is largely explorative a qualitative research approach seemed justified (Patton, 2002), and we used semistructured interviewing as the method for three principal reasons. First, interviewing is particularly well suited to explorative studies of subjects on which there is little research available (Daniels & Cannice, 2004), as was the case with this study on Chinese BELF communication. Second, interviewing allows the researcher to view the subject from the participant's perspective and make it meaningful, knowable, and explicit (Patton, 2002). This fit the aim of our study: to gain knowledge about how both Finnish and Chinese business professionals perceive Chinese BELF communication. Third, interviewing offers higher accessibility to data and is also less complicated to arrange than, for example, videotaping authentic meetings, which typically requires lengthy negotiations with companies due to the various confidentiality issues involved. The collection of data complied with Finland's national-level guidelines for human-subject research (<http://www.tenk.fi/en>).

Interview Data

In line with the objective of this study, we considered three criteria appropriate for selecting our participants: (a) they had to work for Finnish companies that had established themselves

in China, (b) the Finnish business professionals had to have regular work interactions with their Chinese colleagues and vice versa, which enabled them to have a view on each other's communication, and (c) their working language had to be English. A total of 11 business professionals met these criteria from among the 42 Finnish and Chinese professionals whom we interviewed for related research projects (our first set of data); we also interviewed six additional Chinese professionals for the purposes of this study alone (our second set of data). Thus, we interviewed a total of 17 participants (see Table 2).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The common denominator for the 17 participants was the nature of their work: They could be described as internationally operating business professionals whose work involved regular contacts with colleagues who did not speak their respective native tongues (i.e., Chinese and Finnish). Most of them held managerial-level jobs (e.g., project manager, HR manager), and only two were specialists. Their education was also similar: All but one had a university level degree, either a BS or an MS, which suggests a comparable social class. The distribution of the participants' sex and nationality was practically equal: Eight males and nine females and eight Finns and nine Chinese. Finally, most of the participants (12 of 17) were below 40 years of age. For reporting purposes, the participants were identified by numbers: Participants 1 to 8 were Finns and 9 to 17 were Chinese.

The interviews were held in the mother tongue of the respective participants – those in Finnish by Kankaanranta (the first author) and those in Chinese by Lu (the second author) – to ensure a high degree of validity and accuracy (Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004). We recorded and transcribed the interviews within a few days and translated the data into English.

Interview Questions

The interview questions were open-ended because this allowed the participants to freely express their experiences, opinions, and feelings (Patton, 2002). As Table 2 shows, the focus of the two data sets was different: the first data set focused on the participants' perceptions of their communication partner's communication, and the second data set focused on the participants' perceptions of their own communication. For example, we used questions such as How would you describe the Chinese communication style in your company or How do you discuss things at meetings? in order to elicit information from the participants.

One challenge that we encountered in the Chinese interviews was in trying to translate the phrase indirect communication because indirect' in Chinese can be either 间接 or 不直接. Thus, we translated indirect communication into either 间接沟通, which means that communication takes place via a third person, or 不直接沟通, which means talking around the topic. Both contain somewhat negative or unfavorable connotations, so we had to pay special attention to using neutral words in the interview questions. This type of challenge did not surface in the Finnish interviews. Those participants did not have any special reaction to either of the concepts of directness or indirectness.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the interview data followed the two foci of the data sets: The Finnish participants' perceptions of Chinese communication and the Chinese participants' perceptions of their own communication. We coded the interview transcripts using Jameson's (2007) categorization of cultural identity (see Table 1) but focused on identifying the components of vocation and language. Meanwhile we were open to the other four components: class, geography, philosophy, and biological traits. First, each of us coded the transcripts separately. Then, we cross-checked each other's coding and discussed any discrepancies so that we could achieve unanimous agreement and a shared understanding of the issues.

Findings

In this section, first, we report on the findings from our interviews with eight Finnish business professionals on their perceptions of Chinese BELF communication, and second, we report on the findings from our interviews with Chinese business professionals on their perceptions of their own BELF communication.

Finnish Perceptions of Chinese BELF Communication

In our interviews with the Finnish professionals, Chinese BELF communication emerged as a BELF that was fairly unfamiliar to them; they were more familiar with European BELFs because they had longer business relationships, more frequent contact, and a greater knowledge of the cultures of the respective European countries. Although some commented on the unfamiliar intonation, fast tempo, or different business customs, most of their comments focused on the indirectness of Chinese communication. Their perceptions of indirectness seemed to result from their difficulty of interpreting what their Chinese partner's communication and reactions meant.

First, the Finnish participants' difficulty interpreting what the Chinese partner's communication meant is exemplified by the following two quotations: "It's challenging because it is so different; you have to read between the lines" (Participant 5), and "It's difficult to catch what they mean" (Participant 6). The quotations as such may refer to a number of characteristics, but given their context, the common denominator seemed to be the feeling of uncertainty, not being able to interpret the Chinese speaker's message. In other words, the participants perceived the communication as somehow indirect and implicit. But two of them pointed out that their Chinese colleagues could also be very direct and what they described as aggressive. Such communication occurred when there was a problem and things

did not proceed according to plan. Although those were the only comments to this effect, they suggest a diverging view from the otherwise fairly unanimous image of indirect Chinese communication and emphasize the significance of the context of communication.

Second, their difficulty interpreting what their Chinese partner's reactions meant can be seen in the following quotations: "You never know if the matter is clear" (Participant 4), "They don't admit that they do not understand – have to check and recheck many times" (Participant 2), and "When I ask if they've had any problems, they say 'no' because they don't want me to lose face" (Participant 5). In other words, the way of acknowledging the communication partner's message was not a practice that the Finns and Chinese shared; the Finnish participants expected a more direct and explicit acknowledgment. For Finnish BELF speakers, whose communication has been described as direct and open and who describe their own communication that way (see Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005), this type of indirectness was unfamiliar, even when difficult issues were discussed. As one of the Finnish participants explained, "Finns accept the fact that they may make mistakes and they are willing to admit it" (Participant 8).

In spite of our Finnish participants' comments about the differences in communication they had experienced with their Chinese colleagues, they also pointed out that their shared corporate culture, which was described as open and nonhierarchical, had a unifying influence.

Chinese Perceptions of Their Own BELF Communication

Our findings from the Chinese interviews suggested that Chinese professionals noted a difference between Chinese communication conducted in English and that in Chinese. We found that three components of cultural identity – vocation, language, and the biological trait of age (Jameson, 2007) – were particularly relevant in accounting for the difference.

Vocation. The Chinese participants' vocation as internationally operating business professionals contributed to their perception of their own communication as direct. In the work context, their general managers seemed to play a crucial role in influencing company culture in general and the communication climate in particular; consequently they influenced the directness of communication. If employees perceived the culture as open, they followed it in their own communication too, as the following quotation shows: "When you work in a flat organization, there is less hierarchy, and communication is not restricted by hierarchical considerations" (Participant 15).

The Chinese participants generally characterized their Finnish general managers as democratic with an open and direct communication style. For example, they made decisions through discussions, as the following quotation shows: "Our [Finnish] general manager is equal [to us] and uses a consultative style. He respects our opinions even if we are his subordinates" (Participant 14). In contrast to their democratic view of Finnish general managers, the Chinese participants perceived some Finns as – what could be interpreted as – too direct and economical with words. Interestingly, when discussing the role of the general manager, some participants explicitly addressed the Chinese tradition of implicitness: "Chinese are not as straight as Westerners. Often we do not say things directly. Implicitness used to be a merit advocated by traditional Chinese culture" (Participant 12).

Overall, English communication in the Finnish subsidiaries was characterized as direct, open, and clear and it was motivated by the shared value of efficiency, as the following quotation aptly illustrates: "You have to be able to explain things clearly with as few sentences as possible. If you cannot explain the point in three sentences [meaning briefly], nobody will listen to you. People have to be direct, and if they are not, they have to learn to challenge themselves in this respect" (Participant 15). One of the participants took business meetings as an example: "We talk a lot and openly in the management meetings. We have a

meeting every month, in which each manager gives a short review of the operations and explains what is going to happen in the near future. Then, we discuss the issues together” (Participant 10).

Language. Many of our Chinese participants considered that inadequate language skills were a reason for the indirectness of Chinese communication. The participants, especially the older ones, were in a disadvantaged position compared with their international colleagues in using English as the working language. Because it was challenging to explain things clearly with a limited vocabulary, Chinese participants had to restate their messages and turn the messages round and round. One of them put it like this: “When we work and communicate with our foreign colleagues, the official language is English. It is not our mother tongue and people like us, above 35, are not used to it. We feel that we are not able to say what we want or explain things clearly” (Participant 15).

We also found that the shared language and its conventions affected typical communication practices. For example, Chinese employees addressed their Finnish managers or colleagues by using their first name, regardless of their relative hierarchical positions. One participant put it like this, “When I speak English, it feels natural to address my Finnish bosses by using their first name. But when I use Chinese, I could not address my Chinese superior in the same way because it would be disrespectful” (Participant 9). In the Chinese speaking context, a nonmanagerial employee would typically address a Chinese manager by a title followed by the surname, for instance, Chief Wang or Manager Li.

Age. Finally, the age of the people involved influenced the perceived degree of directness in BELF communication. The employees in the Finnish subsidiaries were fairly young; their average age was 33. In general, young employees were considered individualistic and less

influenced by Chinese traditions, so hierarchical positions were less important in their communication with superiors than they were for their senior colleagues. As a senior manager commented, “They are not afraid to speak up and say what they think. They have fewer reservations than those who were born in the 1960s like me” (Participant 16).

Discussion

In this article, we have used Jameson’s (2007) concept of cultural identity in investigating how Chinese and Finnish business professionals perceive Chinese BELF communication in relation to its directness, a characteristic not traditionally related to Chinese oral communication. Our findings are consistent with Jameson’s (2007) framework of cultural identity in that three of its components – vocation, the biological trait of age, and language – seem to be relevant for Chinese BELF communication.

Internationally Operating Business Professionals Appreciate Clear and Direct Communication

The role of vocation is integral to the language use and communication of Chinese business professionals who work with international colleagues. We argue that internationally operating professionals share inherent Western management practices such as being goal oriented, striving to use time and money efficiently, and aiming to achieve a win-win outcome (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011). Indeed, in certain aspects, the Chinese business philosophy has probably become even more economy driven than that of the Western culture. For example, a famous nation wide slogan in China is 时间就是金钱, 效率就是生命 [Time is money and efficiency is life.] (Guangming Daily, 2008).

Our findings provide support for Kankaanranta and Planken’s (2010) argument that communication know-how is an integral part of the shared business know-how of the international business community (see also Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011). In

other words, Chinese and Finnish business professionals seem to agree that clarity and directness contribute to the effectiveness of the communication needed in business to get the work done. Also Jameson (2007) argued that people's cultural identity is affected by their close relationships, which – in our view – might include colleagues and superiors with whom they have regular interaction. For example, the influence of the Finnish general managers on the Chinese participants' perceptions of the quality of communication was evident. The open and direct communication climate was seemingly developed through close and intensive work relationships and became integral for the particular organizational culture, a shared code of behavior. Similarly, Vihakara (2006) found that in the early stages of the Sino-Finnish joint venture, Chinese managers used a more indirect communication style than did their Finnish colleagues, but over a few years' daily interaction, the Chinese style became more direct. Further, our findings are consistent with those focusing on written communication. For example, Beamer (2003) concluded that directness in the 19th century business letters was stimulated by long-standing close business relationships, and Wang (2010) argued that directness in Chinese students' claim letters was contextually sensitive rather than culturally bound.

Age of the Professional Affects Communication

Our Chinese participants perceived clear differences in communication styles between age groups; such perceptions did not surface in our interviews with the Finnish participants.

Jameson's (2007) argument that age creates cultural groups through historical generations is of particular relevance to this study because of the huge social and economic changes in China since 1978. As Lu (forthcoming) points out, the terms used for the postreform generations – that is, 70 后 (the post 1970s'), 80 后 (the post 1980s') and 90 后 (the post 1990s') generations – carry a strong cultural identity for the Chinese. For example, the work

values and career attitudes (i.e., a strong desire for fast career development and high economic goals) are quite different from those of the prereform generations. Overall, the younger generations are less constrained by tradition because they have been exposed their whole life to the multicultural global environment and Western influences. Having English names and using first names are examples of how they have adapted to Western cultures.

The Shared Language – BELF – Stimulates Convergence

Our findings suggest that Chinese professionals perceive their communication and identity somewhat differently depending on the language that they use, thus giving support to the language component in Jameson's (2007) framework of cultural identity. On the one hand, our Chinese participants perceived their own communication as more open and direct when they used BELF than when they used Chinese for work purposes. This finding seems to confirm the findings of extant literature on the importance of directness in BELF communication (e.g., Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). But Finnish business professionals, whose communication in their native tongue is considered to be direct (see, e.g., Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009), have pointed out that their BELF communication with non-Finns is not quite as direct because they have learned that in some situations indirectness may work better, particularly with their less direct partners. Thus, they adapt their communication to fit the context (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). This finding suggests that Chinese and Finnish BELF communication may be converging: the former becoming more direct and the latter becoming less direct, reflecting their speakers' attempts to adjust.

On the other hand, our Finnish participants tended to agree about the indirectness of Chinese BELF communication, which suggests that Chinese BELF bears characteristics of its speakers' mother tongue and culture (e.g., Ding, 2006; Vihakara, 2006; Worm &

Frankenstein, 2000) and is different from, for example, Finnish BELF. This finding complies with previous research on the effect of mother-tongue discourse practices on BELF communication (e.g., Jung & Louhiala-Salminen, 2012; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). In other words, we can argue that a concept of Chinese BELF exists that is separate from, for example, Finnish or Swedish BELF – at least for Finnish business professionals who work internationally and have experience with different BELF varieties.

Figure 1 displays a graph of our findings about the evolution of BELF and the converging trend of Chinese and Finnish professional communication in the shared work context. The horizontal axis depicts a continuum from directness to indirectness, and the vertical axis a continuum from high hierarchy to low hierarchy. Native professional communication in Finnish (FC) and Chinese (CC) and Finnish BELF (FBELF) and Chinese BELF (CBELF) are located on this graph.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

As the graph shows, Finnish BELF is located within the directness–low hierarchy quadrant of the graph whereas Chinese BELF resides within the indirectness–high hierarchy quadrant; however, the arrows reflect their movement toward each other. Thus, based on our findings on Chinese BELF communication and those of earlier studies focusing on Finnish BELF communication (e.g., Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010), we would argue that the lingua franca used in the business context, BELF, is evolving and that the two BELF varieties in focus here are converging. This type of evolution is consistent with communication accommodation theory (Giles & Coupland, 1991), which asserts that communication partners tend to adjust their communication to that of their partner. This evolution naturally affects the notion of BELF as a whole. Perhaps at some point in the future, then, the use of BELF will reflect qualities that have proven effective for international professional communication.

Conclusions

The implication of our study for practitioners working with Chinese business professionals is simple: Chinese BELF communication is a dynamic hybrid that is highly context dependent, as are the other BELF varieties. It is not a monolithic entity but a resource that is negotiable in situ. A number of factors affect the communication style of internationally operating Chinese professionals, whose working language is English, or rather, BELF. The age of the professionals seems to be particularly important to their communication style; similarly, company culture is influential. Indeed, we would argue that, over time, we expect increasingly direct professional communication from internationally operating business professionals who represent younger generations, have university degrees, use English as their working language, and are employed by companies (located in big international cities) with a nonhierarchical organizational culture. For Chinese business professionals, the implications of our study also are simple: They need to be aware that international business professionals tend to appreciate direct and clear BELF communication. Simultaneously, they should remember that no one variety of BELF exists but that BELF is inherently multicultural and multilingual, calling for flexibility above all else.

The implication of our study for communication researchers is that culture in the business context should be viewed as a highly dynamic concept and investigated at multiple levels, including the professional, organizational, and industrial levels (e.g., Leung et al., 2005). In particular, when the language used in intercultural communication is not the native language of many or any of the speakers, as is typically the case with BELF, the rules of the game have to be negotiated anew in every new encounter. In such a situation, Baker's (2011) emphasis on the opportunities offered by the complexity theory for the conceptualization of a lingua franca culture seems welcome.

The main limitations of this study are closely related to the avenues for future research. First, our number of participants was small although for this type of exploratory study, the number seemed sufficient because we were able to provide some new insights about Chinese professional communication. But a higher number of participants representing different linguistic backgrounds would provide a deeper and more versatile view on the phenomenon under scrutiny. Second, our Chinese participants came from Beijing and Shanghai, so our findings are primarily valid for internationally operating Chinese professionals in large international cities in China. Also, the companies that our participants worked at were subsidiaries of Finland-based parent companies, where hierarchical power tends to be fairly equally distributed between management and employees. Further research should be devoted to BELF communication in other contexts to obtain a fuller picture of the evolution of BELF; for example, workplaces with more hierarchical cultures, possibly based in more hierarchically oriented countries, could be investigated. Third, we did not question the concept of directness but instead reported our participants' perceptions although the concept can be interpreted in various ways (e.g., Ding, 2006; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010) and requires more thorough investigation. Possible research questions could be (a) How does directness show in BELF discourse? (b) What makes BELF communication feel too direct or indirect? or (c) What strategies do speakers use to manage communication in the inherently multicultural BELF?

Finally, we only used one qualitative method in our study: interviewing. But employing triangulation and, for example, the mixed-methods approach to data collection – using questionnaire surveys, videotaping authentic meetings, and collecting corporate texts – could increase the trustworthiness of the inquiry and reveal different perspectives on the use and evolution of BELF. Also, with multiple sources of data, the whole potential of Jameson's (2007) insightful framework of cultural identity could be more rigorously exploited.

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Bio

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Table 1

Components of Cultural Identity

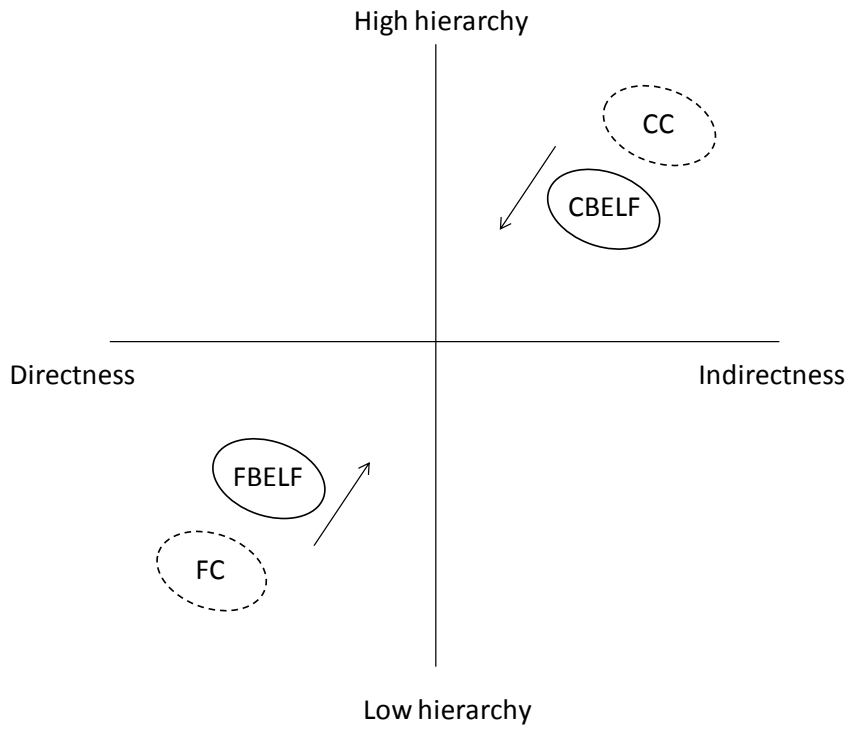
Components	Subcomponents
Vocation	Occupational field, profession, employing organization, subunit of organization
Class	Economic, social, and educational
Geography	Nationality, region, state, province, or city; urban or rural; residence
Philosophy	Religious and political identity, other philosophies
Language	First language, dialect, other languages
Biological traits with cultural aspects	Race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, health, age

Source: Jameson (2007, p. 211)

Table 2

Summary of the Interview Data

Data set	Participants	No of companies	Venue	Year	Focus
1	8 Finns 3 Chinese	3	Helsinki, Finland Shanghai, China	2008	Perceptions of communication partner's communication
2	6 Chinese	5	Shanghai and Beijing, China	2010	Perceptions of own communication
Total	17	8			



CC: Chinese communication

CBELF: Chinese BELF

FBELF: Finnish BELF

FC: Finnish communication

Figure 1. The convergent tendency of Chinese BELF and Finnish BELF communication.