I. Introduction

With business becoming increasingly global, people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are coming into contact more frequently and in a greater variety of settings. The international business arena today is growing in complexity as a result of multiple factors, including the spread of information technology, regional trade agreements, rising numbers of mergers and acquisitions, the growth of global markets and increasing interdependencies among firms. As a result, business encounters often bring together professionals from several cultures, and a multicultural staff is a reality in enterprises of various sizes. In this scenario, intercultural communication in business, already the object of attention in applied linguistics, management and related disciplines, takes on greater importance.

1. Studies on intercultural business communication: which language, which culture?

Despite the greater involvement of people from a range of cultures, much of the research on intercultural business communication has been limited to communication between members of two different cultures, one of which is often English-speaking (e.g. Yamada 1990; Halmari 1993; Murata 1994; Wilson et al. 1996; Lim 1997; Spencer-Oatey / Xing 1998). Yet in many international business situations, none of the interactants using English to conduct business belongs to an ‘English-speaking culture’. The importance of investigating business interactions in which English is used as a lingua franca is recognized by Firth (1990, 1995b, 1996), who has investigated trading negotiations between Danish export managers and their international clients. He uses lingua franca when non-native speakers (NNSs) of
English use English with each other (see Vandermeeren 1999: 274-277 for a discussion of lingua franca use); the present volume uses ‘common language’ to expand this definition to allow for the possible presence of native speakers (NSs) of English. More recently, there have been further studies on NNS-NNS negotiations in English (e.g. Gimenez 2001), as well as on normally less studied languages as they are used in business (e.g. Neumann 1997 on German-Norwegian business discourse; Grindsted 1997 on simulations of Spanish and Danish negotiations).

Not only research on spoken discourse but also research on written business communication suggests the growing importance of English as a common language. For example, Connor (1999) has performed exploratory research on written communication in a small international company in Finland, where a non-native English-speaking business person communicates in English with NSs and NNSs of English. In addition, Louhiala-Salminen (1997: 317) discusses the implications of English being used as the common language in her investigation of business faxes sent by one small Finnish company for its international operations. Although the primary focus of her study was not English as a lingua franca, she discusses changing attitudes about writing in foreign languages and in particular English when faxes are involved, suggesting that the language used could be characterized as “Euro English” or “International English”. These studies suggest that lingua franca interactions – whether spoken or written – are likely to take on increasing importance as a subject of research, parallel to their growing use in conducting business.

Although more attention is now being given to this area, which is also reflected by the recent growth in interest in English as a global language (e.g. Crystal 1997; Swales 1997) and language choice in business (e.g. Nickerson 1999, 2000; Vandermeeren 1999), there is still relatively little work on analyzing spoken interactions in which business people from different cultures use English as a common
Furthermore, very little of it involves the multiparty interactions typical of business meetings. Even when business meetings are the subject of investigation, they are often ‘internal’, with participants from the same company (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini / Harris 1997a), or they involve buyers and sellers from two different companies (e.g. Spencer-Oatey / Xing 1998 on meetings of delegations from two companies, and Charles 1994 on negotiations involving a small number of participants from two companies).

2. (Mis)communication and (mis)understanding: success or failure in intercultural interactions

Another aspect of much of the research on intercultural communication, regardless of whether the parties studied are from ‘English-speaking cultures’ or not, relates to the way cultural differences and miscommunications are portrayed. Numerous studies focus on differences in discourse or communicative strategies (Ulijn / Li 1995 refer to many such studies, see also e.g. Yamada 1990) and present cultural differences as the cause of difficulty in the business relationship or within the corporation (see e.g. Trompenaars 1993). Indeed, many studies seem intent on identifying problems in intercultural business settings and then attributing these problems to cultural differences, with individual interactants seen as representatives of an entire national cultural group. In addition, popular business literature (e.g.

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1 In addition to Vandermeeren’s 1999 study on language choice among French, German and Dutch companies, recent work on language choice in business has also involved interactants from different cultures (e.g. Charles 2002 on internal communication in recently merged Finnish and Swedish banks; Charles / Marschan-Piekkari 2002 on a multinational based in Finland) and considers the use of a ‘shared language’ to recognize the fact that interactants with the same linguistic background may on occasion use a foreign language with each other, which may include English (see Nickerson 1999, 2000, and Louhiala-Salminen 2002). See Poncini 2003 for a discussion.
Lewis 1996; Hill 1994) highlights national cultural differences to the extent there is a risk of creating or perpetrating national stereotypes.

Although it can be useful to analyze problems (e.g. Spencer-Oatey / Xing 2000 discuss a problematic intercultural business visit), focusing only on problematic situations in intercultural communication research is limiting. The need to look at other aspects of intercultural interaction is confirmed by intercultural scholars Triandis and Albert (1987: 283), who do not limit their discussion of research on intercultural communication to problematic situations but rather comment on the need to understand the patterns, processes and problems of intercultural interaction both within and between organizations.

Some researchers have recognized the limits of focusing on linguistic and cultural differences as causes of difficulties without considering the possibility that other factors may be involved. For example, Sarangi (1994: 411) argues that more emphasis needs to be placed on participants’ societal and institutional roles in analyzing intercultural interactions. In his view, too much emphasis has been placed on cultural differences as a cause of miscommunication, and he refers to this as “analytical stereotyping”. Similarly, Meeuwis (1994: 393) points out that in most interactionist research on intercultural communication, studies on the influence of extra-situational parameters on conversational structure are missing. In his view, criticisms of cultural background to explain intercultural communicative difficulties are overgeneralized and unproductive. Other researchers raising related issues include Shi-xu (1994) and Shea (1994).

Researchers comparing data cross-culturally have also recognized the need for caution in attributing differences to culture and whether or not these differences may lead to difficulty. Charles (1994) compares sets of British and Finnish negotiations and suggests that although certain differences may have confusing implications for British negotiators negotiating with Finns, this might be the case only if the Finnish speakers organize their English discourse according to Finnish patterns (281-282). She (1994: 258-259) argues that “caution should be exercised in attributing causality to cultural factors, as the differences and similarities identified may well be due to the conventions prevailing in the discourse communities concerned”. This also highlights the importance of recognizing that the behavior
observed in intracultural settings, noted for example in cross-cultural comparative research, is not necessarily the behavior the same interactants would display in an intercultural setting.

Moreover, it is also necessary to exercise caution in interpreting certain research results. Asante and Gudykunst (1989: 178-179) observe that it can be problematic when researchers use cultural categories to differentiate groups without measuring the individual participants on the relative cultural variable. For instance, if individualistic and collectivistic cultures are chosen, the participants’ individualism/collectivism would have to be assessed. Individualism describes a cultural tendency and not the individual, and a cultural tendency does not predict the individual’s behavior. As Fant and Grindsted (1995: 563) point out in introducing their study on simulated negotiations between Hispanic – Scandinavian parties, “there are aspects of intercultural as well as any type of interaction that are attributable to (intracultural) interindividual rather than cultural variation”.

In some cases, researchers seem to expect miscommunications in encounters between people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but such problems may not necessarily occur. For example, Ulichny (1997) studied NS – NNS interviews in English involving Italian university students and a British interviewer. She (1997: 234) states the small number of conversational breakdowns was a “surprise”. She notes there were very few apparent instances of “communication failure” and that most of the hundreds of instances of repair were initiated by the eleven NNSs. She (1997: 242) provides an example in which the NS interviewer “ascribes a reduced personality” to the NNS interviewee by asking him whether he (the interviewee) can use a tape recorder when, in fact, the interviewee is a radio announcer. In the case she examines, the NS is not aware of the NNS’s problem concerning informational exchange or the need for repair, and thus he puts off the NNS’s other-initiated repair. The NNS may re-establish competence but in returning to the misunderstood element, breakdown occurs and the NS interviewer ascribes a reduced personality to the NNS.

Although an analysis of a problematic interview may focus on the performance of the NNS interviewee and differing discourse
strategies, it is important to note that the NS interviewer’s performance is also open to questioning. In the cases examined by Ulichny (1997) and discussed above, for example, one could also question the level of sophistication of the interviewer. More generally, a skilled interviewer is normally more capable than a poor interviewer of obtaining responses that allow interview goals to be met. That NS status does not necessarily translate into good interviewing skills is supported by the availability of business communication textbooks (e.g. Timm / DeTienne 1995) that assume techniques can be improved. Such material provides guidelines for improving the interviewer’s performance, such as getting the candidate to talk by asking open-ended questions, pausing, repeating key phrases and so on. Similarly, other material aims to help (NS) interviewees improve their performance (e.g. Bovée / Thill 2000). While some advice might seem prescriptive, what is significant is that the availability of such guidelines in U.S. textbooks and in popular business literature suggests that interviews between NS-NS vary in terms of effectiveness and that the skills of interviewers – and interviewees – can be improved.

Two points emerging from the above discussion can be extended to many kinds of intercultural settings, even though they concern an interviewer’s skill in interviews with participants from two different cultures, where the interviewee is not a native speaker of the language used by the NS interviewer. First, people assume conflict in these intercultural encounters. Thus more attention is given to identifying ‘problems’ that are not necessarily ‘problems’ i.e., many “trouble spots” (Ulichny 1997: 234) can be overcome, as Ulichny’s (1997) study suggests. Second, where an actual breakdown does occur, what is ascribed to culture or differing discourse strategies is open to debate. Indeed, breakdowns can also occur in NS-NS or intracultural interactions. This is supported by Sarangi (1994: 419), who points out that “interview talk can go wrong, whether or not participants are culturally different”. Furthermore, even if some difficulties occur, the communication can ultimately succeed in achieving social and task-related goals.

In sum, although it is sometimes justified to look at breakdowns in communication, focusing on miscommunication in intercultural settings is limiting because this approach assumes intercultural
interactions are problematic and consequently tends to ignore factors possibly contributing to successful intercultural communication. In addition, when a breakdown does occur, it tends to be ascribed to cultural differences even when this is open to debate. Furthermore, this approach often does not even consider how such breakdowns are resolved.

This raises doubts about approaches to intercultural data that focus on problematic interactions and then attribute difficulties to cultural and linguistic difficulties without considering other factors. This is not to say that cultural differences do not exist. Cultural differences have been reported by researchers, as discussed earlier, and it is also important to be aware of possible differing discourse strategies, as discussed in work by Gumperz (1982a, 1982b). In today’s business world, however, it can be pointed out that despite differences in their national cultures and competence in using English, many interactants from different cultures successfully establish, maintain or enhance their business relationships.

3. Investigating contributions to successful communication

The importance of investigating how business interlocutors manage to communicate successfully in intercultural interaction is supported by Firth (1990: 278). He calls for more research into how “orderliness” in interaction is achieved by lingua franca speakers who would not seem to share either linguistic knowledge or sociocultural norms of interaction. In his study, Firth (1996: 237) concludes that participants in lingua franca interactions “do interactional and discursive work to imbue talk with an orderly and ‘normal’ appearance, in the face of extraordinary, deviant, and sometimes ‘abnormal’ linguistic behavior” (italics in original). His analysis shows that despite the different linguistic and cultural backgrounds characterizing interactants in the corpus, in a large majority of cases they take the position that their talk is “understandable and ‘normal’ – even in the face of misunderstandings” (1996: 256). He points out that interactants were very
motivated to focus on the content of their interaction and thus to minimize and/or overcome potential problems related to the form of the interaction; this does not mean, however, that there is no local management and assessment of linguistic problems.\(^2\)

Firth’s (1996: 243-244) examination demonstrates that in the data, participants in NNS-NNS interactions are able to achieve their practical goals through assumed mutual understanding: interactants act as if they understand each other even if they do not, unless techniques are used to challenge the assumption of mutual understanding. He (1996: 246) observes that interactants may incorporate into their own turns marked lexical and grammatical items previously contributed by the other party. By focusing on what seems to work in intercultural settings, then, Firth is able to identify how interactants manage their interaction to meet their business and task-related goals.

Additional support for looking at what might contribute to successful intercultural encounters comes from Lim (1997), who analyzes simulated intercultural negotiations. The author explains how in one case two different rhetorical strategies combine to form a new dynamic with elements of both intracultural strategies. Pointing out that many studies focus on establishing causes for communication breakdown, Lim notes that in the data highly successful encounters took place despite cultural differences and despite one “unhappy encounter”. Lim (1997) suggests this outcome has more to do with the attitudes the participants bring into the encounter than with their familiarity with alternative strategies, and cites Johnstone (1989: 154 cited in Lim 1997): “[p]roblems like this are not simply the result of intercultural differences. At root, I think, they are the result of failures of goodwill, the will to adapt and understand elements of both intracultural strategies”. Instead of focusing on difficulties, then, Lim (1997) was able to identify how participants combined intracultural strategies to facilitate the interaction.

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\(^2\) In describing features of the data from *lingua franca* interactions, Firth (1996: 245) specifies that he does not want to be perceived as making evaluative judgments of the data and he is not implying “that *all* non-native speaker interactions are characterizable in this way”.

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The issue of success in intercultural business encounters also surfaces when Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (1999b: 26) point out that “the construction of meaning taken from two sets of intercultural data (Firth 1995[a] and Loos 1997) appears to happen despite the different cultural backgrounds (and languages) of the actors. However, business values can on occasion, override cultural norms and expectations” (original emphasis). These points provide an indication of the role that the business relationship, values and practices can play in intracultural as well as intercultural settings. They also reaffirm the question of which cultural differences might matter in a multicultural setting.

Clearly, then, it would be of interest to attempt to examine features of interactants’ language and discourse during multiparty talk in a multicultural business setting that could possibly contribute to overcoming or at least diminishing the difficulties often associated with intercultural communication. In examining naturally occurring talk in real-life business settings, it is important to take into consideration contextual factors not necessarily linked to cultural differences or membership in a particular national culture. This in turn could allow a greater understanding of the characteristics of successful business communication in multicultural settings and the role of other situational factors besides different cultural backgrounds (e.g. the business relationship).

In summary, interactants from non-English speaking cultures often use English as a common language to successfully establish and maintain business relationships, despite the difficulties often reported to be associated with intercultural communication. Although more attention is now being given to this area, there is still relatively little research on such lingua franca interactions. Existing research often focuses on difficulties and misunderstandings as opposed to determining what might facilitate communication. Furthermore, very little of this work involves the multiparty interactions typical of business meetings, particularly those involving different business organizations and individuals from different functional areas within a company. In the business world today, where not only large multinational corporations but also increasing numbers of small- to medium-sized firms participate in the international marketplace, multicultural business
meetings, particularly those with participants from different business organizations, represent an important and interesting area of investigation.

4. The study

The present volume reports on a study that aims to fill the gaps described above by examining data from business meetings held in Italy by an Italian company for its international distributors from approximately 12-14 countries in Europe, Asia and North America. Meeting participants come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and use mainly English during these twice-annual meetings. In examining these meetings, the study also attempts to gain further insights into discourse and language in business settings by taking into consideration specific aspects of the extra-linguistic context and in particular the business relationship. Therefore the study considers business and management research pertinent to these meetings, which focus on marketing and sales. Awareness of the business context may in turn increase understanding of discourse in business (Swales / Rogers 1995; see also Charles 1994 and Bargiela-Chiappini / Harris 1997a) and in intercultural business communication (Varner 2000), especially when multicultural groups are involved.

4.1. The company, distributors, meetings, data

The company, which will be given the pseudonym Alta in this volume, is based in Italy. It was founded in 1984 with a single product, ski wax, by friends involved in the world of competitive ski racing. The company subsequently expanded its product lines to include ‘high performance’ eyewear (1988) and helmets (1989) for skiing and cycling, and technical sportswear (1993) for outdoor sports. The company’s brand is well-known in its niche market around the world, and the company itself is considered small- to medium-sized in terms of
number of employees. In July 1994, an Italian producer of eyewear, one of the largest in the world, purchased a 51% share of *Alta*. The parent, given the pseudonym *Diamante* in this volume, was not involved in sports eyewear prior to purchasing a majority share in *Alta*, and at the time of the meetings recorded for this study (1996-1998), it did not play a major role in *Alta*’s sales and marketing activities. For example, personal relationships, sponsorships and business contacts within the world of skiing continued to be followed by the same company members, and one of the founders continued in his position as CEO (Chief Executive Officer).

In the early 1990s, *Alta* started to organize a meeting of its international distributors twice a year in Italy, to present and discuss the next season’s product collection, sales strategy and other business issues. In some cases, at the meetings the distributors decide as a group which product models or product model versions are to be included in the international collection. These meetings normally last two to three days and are attended by approximately 25 distributors from 12-14 different countries located in Europe, Asia and North America, by some of the company’s Italian staff and management (usually at least eight to ten individuals; also called ‘company members’ in the study), and by a few other participants such as consultants or suppliers. Most distributors own their own companies, but some may be employed by large distributors. Some distribute only *Alta* products, while others also distribute products from other companies for similar markets, for example skis or hiking equipment. Distributors have their own sales force in their respective countries (i.e. distributors do not directly compete with each other), which in turn sell to dealers (shops) in their countries.

*Alta* products can be grouped into two seasons, winter and summer, with winter business more important. They can be used for a range of outdoor sports, especially alpine and cross-country skiing, cycling, ski-mountaineering, training and kayaking. The development of *Alta* products includes incorporating feedback from a range of collaborators, for example, sponsored athletes and distributors. Many distributors are former athletes and/or coaches; almost all have connections to sports. In addition, many *Alta* employees in Italy practice sports and use *Alta* products.
Based on the products they view and discussions at the meeting, distributors decide which product models in the new international collection to include in the ‘sample kit’ their sales representatives will use in the distributor’s respective country; practically speaking, while at the meeting or shortly thereafter they decide which of the product models will be available for sale in their respective markets. Accordingly, individual distributors place their orders for the season in question and may decide how much of each product model to stock. In this sense the distributors are customers of Alta, and they keep an inventory of Alta’s products in their respective markets. This contrasts with a direct distribution arrangement involving an agent, who would be considered a representative rather than a customer, with Alta handling inventory issues. It is important to note that the relationship between the company and its distributors should not be viewed as limited to buying and selling transactions; for example, some distributors are involved in product development (Chapter 2 discusses relevant features of business relationships).

A country’s distributorship is usually represented by one or two distributors attending the meeting; occasionally three participants represent one country market. A minority of the countries represented, usually two or three, are predominantly English-speaking; i.e. the U.S., represented by an employee of the U.S. subsidiary of the parent company, and occasionally the U.K. and Canada. The company’s geographical area managers and other company members present generally have contact with distributors in their geographical area during the year. Participation may change, both on the part of company members and distributors: some may attend the meetings for both seasons, some may not. The main language is English, although other languages are occasionally used.

Audio recordings were made at the November 1996, June 1997 and June 1998 meetings. I was present for a total of eight calendar days, resulting in five full days and three partial days of recordings for

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3 This is in line with the definition by Miracle and Albaum (1970: 356 cited in Ford and Rosson 1997: 68/1992): “a distributor is a merchant middleman and as such, he is the customer of the exporter. An agent, on the other hand, is a representative who acts on behalf of the exporter; he is not a customer.”
a total of approximately 41 hours excluding breaks. Transcribed data total six hours and 57 minutes and come from two half-day segments selected for transcription and analysis, one in June 1997 and one in June 1998. I also collected supplementary data (e.g. interviews with company members, field notes), described more fully in Chapter 3 on methodology.

Concerning my presence, I was briefly introduced to the group at the end of the first morning session at the first meeting I attended, in November 1996. I explained to the group I was doing research for a Ph.D. and that as agreed with the marketing director, any identifying features such as names or strategic information in the parts of the meeting chosen for transcription would be changed or deleted to maintain confidentiality. Other aspects of my presence, including seating arrangements and contact with meeting participants, are described in Chapter 3.

It is possible to view each meeting as a series of identifiable speech events. The most frequent speech events consist of monologues/presentations and group discussions, in particular regarding the product collection. At times the distributors speak in small groups, interacting among themselves or speaking with someone from the company as they examine or try on circulating samples. In some cases the distributors as a group must decide at the meeting which product model versions to include in the international collection. Distributors place their orders before or during the season based on the international collection. Shortly before the June 1998 meeting, colors and models were pre-selected by a smaller group of the major distributors, so fewer choices had to be made at the June 1998 meeting compared to June 1997. Coffee breaks, lunch and dinner also represent a further moment of contact between distributors and company members.

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4 *Speech event* is used in a general sense in this volume and is not intended to be used the same way it is used by Hymes (1972: 56-57, cited in Schiffrin 1994: 142), with Hymes’ use following the adoption of Jakobson’s notion of the speech event (Gumperz 1999: 454-455; see also Goodwin / Duranti 1992: 25).
4.2. Research focus

This study investigates language at multicultural business meetings where participants come from a variety of cultures. Research in this area is relevant because of the increasingly global nature of business and the increasing contact members of different cultures have in conducting business, whether between organizations (e.g. customer-supplier interactions) or within an organization (e.g. international participation at internal corporate meetings, including those following mergers). Although the meetings of distributors may differ in some respects from encounters resulting from such developments in the business world, examining these meetings can provide insights into interactions between members of different cultures in business settings.

The present study has the following aims:

1. To investigate how language use at meetings with multicultural participation relates to business activities, roles and relationships, and goals of the group at the meeting.
2. To provide insights into how selected meeting participants use language to participate in international business meetings, exploring issues of individual differences and levels of culture (e.g. group, professional).
3. To develop a series of analytical approaches to investigating multiparty talk in multicultural business meetings, which provides insights into the relationship between language and discourse and contextual aspects such as business activities and the business relationship.
4. To investigate the role of common ground and the nature of the multicultural group at the meetings and how ‘groupness’ comes about, in particular in terms of commonality, shared knowledge and shared culture.
5. To investigate whether conflict can be noted at the meetings.
6. To provide a greater understanding of whether aspects of the meeting organization in general and the use of language in particular can help overcome:
(a) the difficulties often reported to be associated with intercultural communication, and
(b) participants’ differences in level of skill and comfort in using English.

5. Organization of the volume

Chapter 1 of this volume provides an introduction and background to the study. Chapter 2 reviews selected literature in business and in applied linguistics that focuses on discourse in workplace contexts, including studies involving intercultural settings. Chapters 1 and 2 show that much of the literature on discourse in intercultural business settings is limited to NS-NNS settings and to dyadic interactions, and that it tends to focus on miscommunications and difficulties, often attributing communication breakdowns to differing cultural backgrounds when this is open to debate. The first two chapters thus lead up to the series of analytical approaches used for the study, supporting the purposeful decision not to apply a ‘traditional’ approach that examines the speech of two speakers, each seen to represent a specific national culture, with the aim of identifying miscommunications possibly due to cultural differences. Rather, the aim is to identify what seems to ‘work’ at the meetings. Chapter 3 then presents the study methodology, briefly describing the rationale behind the choice to examine selected linguistic and interactional features. Chapters 4-7 present the analysis of pronouns, specialized lexis, and evaluation at the meetings after having reviewed literature supporting the interest in investigating these areas. The insights gained by separately analyzing these features are drawn into a discussion of frames in Chapter 8. Chapter 9 presents conclusions, summarizing and assessing the study and its methodology, and then discussing implications for research and teaching.