

# **LANGUAGE AS POWER IN POST-MERGER INTEGRATION: THE CASE OF MERITA-NORDBANKEN**

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## **LANGUAGE AS POWER IN POST-MERGER INTEGRATION: THE CASE OF MERITA-NORDBANKEN**

This paper examines the choice of an “official corporate language” in a multilingual merger setting and its implications for power relationships. Our ethnographic analysis of the merger between the Finnish Merita and the Swedish Nordbanken challenges the common assumption in the relevant literature that language is a mere practical problem hampering communication in mergers. In our analysis, we identify three perspectives that capture the power implications of the “official corporate language”. First, language skills can be seen as power resources in organizational practice. In various ways, the Finnish-speaking members of the new post-merger organization found themselves in disadvantageous positions vis-à-vis their Swedish counterparts. Second, language can be considered an essential element in the construction of professional identity and competence. Finnish banking professional had to operate in a foreign language which produced perceptions of inferiority. These were, however, often suppressed in official organizational discourse. Third, language can be seen as a symbol of (re)colonization. The Finnish side of the post-merger organization and the Finnish media associated - explicitly or implicitly - the choice of Swedish with the commonly held belief of a ‘superior-inferior’ relationship between the Finns and the Swedes.

**Key words: merger, language, power**

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we have witnessed a wave of mergers and acquisitions across a number of industries and national boundaries. These mergers and acquisitions are reshaping national economic, industrial and organizational structures. They also transform the ‘cultures’ and identities of the organizations in question – and create new identities.

During the last two decades, researchers have become increasingly interested in organizational consequences of mergers and acquisitions [see e.g. Buono and Bowditch 1989; Haspeslagh and Jemison 1991; Greenwood, Hinings and Brown 1994]. Many have specifically adopted a ‘cultural approach’ to post-merger integration, especially in cross-cultural contexts [see e.g. Olie, 1994; Gertsen, Søderberg and Torp 1998]. These studies have often also touched upon the issue of language.

Particularly in Europe, where ‘cultures’ and national and regional languages are highly diverse, language differences between employees of merging companies tend to come forth as a major issue. However, most prior studies on cross-border mergers and acquisitions examine language only in passing [see e.g. Olie 1994; Gertsen, Søderberg and Torp 1998]. It is seldom regarded as an issue with broader management and power implications.

In a multilingual setting, however, the choice of corporate language is likely to have important practical and symbolic ramifications. For example, a particular language is likely to put pressure on those managers and staff, whose native tongue is not chosen, to improve their competence in the selected idiom. It also sends an implicit message regarding, for example, career progression within the merged company [cf. Marschan-Piekkari, Welch and Welch 1999a], and may also reflect the (perceived) division of power between the merging parties. Despite top management’s intentions for the reverse, an official corporate language may not necessarily remove integration problems but instead escalate them and introduce a number of issues to be dealt with.

It is thus apparent that there is a need to examine the role of language in the context of post-merger integration. In this paper, we argue that the choice of the “official corporate language” should not merely be treated as a matter of practical choice to solve inevitable communication problems in integration processes; rather, it should be viewed as an issue of power.

To illustrate our argument, we present rich ethnographic material on the merger between the Finnish Merita Bank and the Swedish Nordbanken. Our analysis concentrates on the Finnish viewpoint concerning the choice of Swedish as the “official corporate language.” The period of analysis extends itself from the announcement of the MeritaNordbanken (MNB) merger in October 1997 to the announcement of a subsequent merger between MNB and the Danish financial services group Unidanmark in March 2000.

We identify three perspectives that seem to capture the power implications of the "official corporate language" in multilingual post-merger settings. First, language skills can be seen as power resources in organizational practice. In various ways, the Finnish-speaking members of the new post-merger organization found themselves in disadvantageous positions in relation to their Swedish counterparts. Second, language can be regarded as an essential element in the construction of professional identity and competence. Finnish banking professionals had to operate in a foreign language which produced perceptions of inferiority. These were, however, often suppressed in official organizational discourse. Third, language can be considered a symbol of (re)colonization. The Finnish side of the post-merger organization and the Finnish media associated - explicitly or implicitly - the choice of Swedish with the commonly held belief of a 'superior-inferior' relationship between the Finns and the Swedes.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We first review the relevant literature on mergers and acquisitions and establish the relationship between language, culture and power. Thereafter, we describe the methodology, an ethnographic case study, and the multiple sources of empirical data. Third, the case study provides some background information about the merger and discusses the three perspectives emerging from the

data. The concluding section summarizes the findings and proposes some directions of future research.

## **POST-MERGER INTEGRATION: THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE**

### **A Cultural Perspective on Post-Merger Integration**

Mergers and acquisitions have increasingly been studied from a ‘cultural’ perspective [Sales and Mirvis 1984; Walter 1985; Datta 1991; Cartwright and Cooper 1992; Chatterjee, Lubatkin, Schweiger and Weber 1992; Weber 1996]. In brief, researchers have found the ‘culture’ metaphor as a fruitful tool to understand problems associated with integration of previously separate organizations. This is the case in cross-border mergers and acquisitions where (perceived) ‘national cultural’ differences are often highlighted as causes of post-merger problems [Calori, Lubatkin and Very 1994; Morosini and Singh 1994; Olie 1994; Weber, Shenkar and Raveh 1996; Gertsen, Söderberg and Torp 1998; Vaara 2000; Vaara and Tienari 2000]. Previous studies illustrate how these differences create particularly strong impediments to integration and thus more cumbersome problems compared to domestic merger settings [Kogut and Singh 1988; Olie 1994; Salk, 1997; Gertsen, Söderberg and Torp 1998; Morosini, Shane and Singh 1998]. Representatives of different nationalities have been socialized into different skills, rules, norms, and habits, which cause practical problems and misunderstandings in social interaction between staff of merging parties.

Previous studies in the area have often described post-merger integration as a process where representatives of previously separate ‘national cultures’ are seen as two opposing camps [see e.g. Nahavandi and Malekzadeh 1988; Olie 1994]. From this perspective, post-merger change processes are particularly problematic if they create cultural juxtaposition where actors strongly identify themselves with particular ‘national cultures’. Many case studies provide illustrations of such processes where traces of cultural confrontation last for long periods of time [see e.g. Olie 1994].

Earlier work also points out how cultural integration processes involve both cultural adaptation between the previously separate ‘cultures,’ and creation of a new ‘culture’ and identity. Most of the previous studies, however, concentrate on cultural adaptation processes when dealing with organizational problems associated with post-merger situations [Vaara 1999]. Yet construction of new common values and practices is likely to be particularly important when trying to understand long-term integration processes that create strong corporate ‘cultures’ with which organizational members of various cultural backgrounds can identify.

It should be noted that some researchers have heavily criticized the epistemological and theoretical starting points of the ‘cultural’ literature on mergers and acquisitions [Vaara 1999; Söderberg, Gertsen and Vaara 2000]. These authors point out that an objectification of cultural differences according to a ‘realist’ epistemology leads to an inability to understand the *processes* of cultural adaptation, transformation and construction of new conceptions [Kleppetø 1993; Vaara 1999; Söderberg et al. 2000]. It has therefore been suggested that cultures should rather be seen as ‘constructions’ following the constructionist tradition in sociology [see e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1966]. According to this perspective, cultural conceptions are an inherent part of identity building and thus always relationship and context specific. Among other things, this perspective helps to understand why Finns and Swedes sometimes see each other as culturally similar – and in other occasions very different.

Language is an issue that has often been touched upon in prior studies of cross-border mergers and acquisitions, but it is typically by-passed as a practical problem creating communication challenges [see e.g. Olie 1996; Gertsen, Söderberg and Torp 1998]. In fact, management and organization researchers often simply bundle language as a variable under the broad umbrella of culture.

This lack of attention devoted to the role of language in post-merger integration is, however, problematic. On the one hand, association of language with other cultural phenomena easily leads to an inability to understand the scope and nature of the practical

interaction and communication challenges in cross-border mergers and acquisitions. Yet the practical problems are often fundamental and extremely difficult to solve [see e.g. Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999a]. On the other hand, and even more importantly, framing language merely as one aspect of cultural differences easily results in a lack of appreciation of its role as a constitutive element of organizational and national identity, which has important power implications.

### **Towards a Linkage of Power and Language**

Although prior research of organizational change in general and post-merger integration in particular often refers to juxtaposition and confrontation between different parties at group, organizational and national levels, few studies adopt an explicit socio-political perspective on these processes [see, however, Hambrick and Cannella 1993; Tienari 2000; Vaara forthcoming]. This can be seen as a major deficiency, because political processes and internal power games seem to play an important role in post-merger organizations.

In social studies, ‘power’ is conceptualized in many different ways [see e.g. Clegg 1989]. To put it crudely, one can distinguish two approaches: power as a resource and power as an inherent part of social relationships. The first and traditional approach is to associate power with resources. According to this view, those who have specific resources have power, while others do not possess it. The second approach suggesting that power is an inherent part of social relations has gained increasing popularity. It associates power with identity building. From this perspective, a power relationship between two social actors is necessarily two-way. Thus usually both parties have specific power vis-à-vis the other [see e.g. Foucault 1977; Clegg 1989]. Power can also be associated with discourse and practices as a constitutive element in social relations. This suggests that it is not the social actors who ‘possess’ power. Rather, it is the social structures, traditions, conventions and the respective ways of behavior and expression where the power lies. Set against this background, one can also understand how particular social actors are controlled by “faceless” social practices and discourses rather than vice versa. Our perspective here is

to see these conceptions as compatible and interrelated which highlight different aspects of power relations in organizational life. Consequently, one can understand ‘power’ as a configuration of several layers.

In organizational context, ‘legitimate’ power is used to refer to positions of those who exercise power over their subordinates due to their hierarchical position. However, the organizational literature also identifies the role of ‘illegitimate power’ in social networks and actor relationships [Thompson 1956, p. 290; Mintzberg 1983]. In fact, some have argued that it is precisely these ‘informal’ relationships that are the most interesting and important power mechanisms in organizations [Mintzberg 1983; Clegg, 1989].

Following this line of thought, language skills may function as a source of informal power, and facilitate understanding and communication in a specific language (i.e. the selected idiom). It can also contribute to the creation of language-based networks for accessing information and knowledge. For example, Pettigrew [1972, p. 190] argues that “gatekeepers, those who sit at the junction of a number of communication channels, are in a position to regulate” the information flows and potentially control decisions. Managers and staff with right language skills may easily occupy such gatekeeping positions and channel information between merging organizations. In this way, their status may increase far beyond the formal, hierarchical position [see e.g. Marschan, Welch and Welch 1997].

From a more long term perspective, language skills can also be linked with organizational career structures and individual career progression; in order to reach the top echelons of the organization, fluency in a particular language can become a prerequisite [Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999a]. Specific language skills may thus promote the careers and positions of those who know the language. A lack of these skills may, in turn, contribute to staff departures. This is the case particularly when the selected language requires considerable investments in training and learning.



At a deeper level, language is a central element in (re)constructing the “new corporate culture” and identity of the post-merger organization. From a symbolic perspective, the selected corporate language is likely to reflect the power relationships and status between the merging organizations. In mergers across national borders, the choice of language also reflects the balance of power between ‘nations’ represented by those organizations.

It makes intuitive sense to assume that the more influential party of the merger would nominate its preferred idiom as the common corporate language. However, the reality may be far more complex. There is empirical evidence suggesting that because of the role of English as the ‘lingua franca’ and its dominance as the world language in conducting international business, it tends to become the common corporate language by default. For example, in DaimlerChrysler, the merger between the German and US automotive manufacturers, English – instead of German – was chosen as the common language. In the business press, this piece of news was received with surprise, as the German party was commonly considered the more dominant and powerful in this merger [The Economist July 29 1999: 107]: “Indeed, language may be the only victory that the Americans have scored. Mostly, they feel that they have been taken over by a German company.” English may also be chosen as a neutral language to emphasize equality between merging parties of non-English origin, and in this way balance power relationships within the organization. For example, in January 2000, the German Hoechst and the French Rhone-Poulenc merged creating the fifth largest pharmaceutical company in the world. The new organization called Aventis adopted English for internal communication to avoid favouring neither the German nor the French speaking group within the corporation [Boxberg 2000].

## **AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY**

It can be argued that investigating organizational cultures, micro-processes of cultural change and internal politics involved in mergers requires intimate knowledge of and contact with the focal organization and its members. Such a close contact is difficult to

achieve with traditional positivistic research methods, although management scholars in general and international business scholars in particular often apply these methods in cultural and cross-cultural analyses [see e.g. Cavusgil and Das 1997; Hofstede 1980].

This study is based on an ethnographic research approach [see e.g. Van Maanen 1988]. We have gathered rich ethnographic material on the integration process following the merger between the Finnish Merita Bank and the Swedish Nordbanken. In brief, this material has been collected from three sources: (1) participant observation, (2) thematic interviews with current and former employees of MeritaNordbanken, and (3) analysis of media texts.

First, one of the authors of this article works for Merita and the new MeritaNordbanken organization (MNB). As manager for Personnel Development in Finland, he has had a unique opportunity to observe how Finnish and Swedish managers and staff have reacted to the merger news, and the planned and unanticipated changes caused by the merger. He has also been able to examine how the Finns and the Swedes have viewed each other and themselves in the new MNB organization. More specifically, he has been intimately involved in developing a language training policy for the Finnish organization within MNB. This work has produced a great deal of material concerning the problems caused by operating in a foreign language, and having to translate various material into several languages. It has also generated insights into Finnish staff's attitudes towards the Swedish language and their learning efforts. He has also been the leader and facilitator of a "corporate culture development project" including "cultural seminars" for some 350 middle managers and experts in units actively involved in cross-national communication within MNB. The seminars, taking place from October 1998 to January 2000, focused on developing the corporate culture within MNB. The choice and use of Swedish as the common corporate language, the necessary level of fluency to be attained among staff, and the need to change this corporate language into English were thoroughly debated in these seminars. Since these seminars were held in Swedish, they clearly revealed problems among the Finnish participants such as inability to express oneself fluently and fatigue caused by efforts to operate in a foreign language. These observational data form

the core of the research material. Moreover, another author of the paper has been involved in executive training of MNB and consulting the organization. This has provided an additional research avenue to examine the role of language in the merged organization and compare the situation in different parts of the post-merger organization.

Second, our empirical material also comprises in-depth thematic interviews. Nine semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals in several units of MeritaNordbanken were conducted in January-March 2000. Most interviewees were middle managers and experts who responded to questions based on the following thematic structure: views on the 'corporate culture', the role and choice of the "official corporate language", 'corporate culture development' seminars and activities. Moreover, an in-depth interview was conducted with Pertti Voutilainen, the former CEO of Merita Bank, on 'culture' and 'culture development activities' in MeritaNordbanken. All ten interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. An additional round of nine structured interviews through e-mail and phone was conducted with former employees of MeritaNordbanken during September and October 2000 to assess the impact of Swedish as the corporate language on their departure. These interviewees were identified and located by using informal, personal relationships and a so called snowballing technique [Patton 1990: 176]. This technique encourages interviewees themselves to suggest appropriate key informants. As a result, two of the nine interviewees represented top management, while the remaining seven occupied middle management and expert positions. They had an average tenure of eight years with MNB and had left the bank soon after the merger during 1998-2000. The interview data were analyzed based on transcripts or written responses returned by e-mail and categorized into meaningful themes.

Third, our empirical material includes articles published in leading Finnish and Swedish printed media on the MeritaNordbanken merger. This material covers the merger during its first full year (October 1997 – October 1998), with an emphasis on the two-week period following the announcement of the merger. The analysis of Finnish and Swedish media comprised the coverage in the following newspapers:

Table 1. Analysis of Finnish and Swedish media coverage

<i>Finnish media</i>	<i>Swedish media</i>
Helsingin Sanomat (leading daily newspaper)	Dagens Nyheter (the leading daily newspaper)
Ilta-Sanomat (the leading tabloid)	Aftonbladet (the leading tabloid)
Kauppalehti (the leading daily business newspaper)	Dagens Industri (the leading daily business newspaper)
Talouselämä (the leading weekly business magazine)	Veckans Affärer (the leading weekly business magazine)
	Affärsvärlden (the leading monthly business magazine)

By drawing on our earlier analyses [see Vaara and Tienari 2000; Risberg, Tienari and Vaara 2000] based on critical discourse analysis [Fairclough 1997], we concentrated on the texts that touched upon the ‘language issue’. The choice of language was one of the most important themes in the Finnish media, producing a great deal of material for research purposes. Interestingly, this issue was largely by-passed in the Swedish media coverage [see also Risberg, Tienari and Vaara 2000].

## **THE CASE OF MERITA-NORDBANKEN**

### **Sweden, Finland and Language**

Sweden and Finland are neighboring countries in northern Europe and they share a common social history. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century until 1809, Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden. Finland adopted its judicial system, governmental administration and basic political structure from its Western neighbor.

Due to this long common history, there is still today a Swedish-speaking minority in Finland, amounting to approximately six percent of the population. Alongside with Finnish, Swedish occupies the status of the second official language in the country. Therefore, all Finnish-speaking Finns must learn a certain amount of Swedish at school. In practice, English is by far the most popular and widely mastered foreign language. From time to time, a public debate has surfaced about the obligatory status of the Swedish language in the school system.

There is also a Finnish-speaking minority in Sweden, the status and position of which is, however, very different from that of the Swedish-speaking Finns. The Finnish-speaking minority accumulated in Sweden predominantly in the 1950s, late 1960s and early 1970s, when the difficult labor market situation in Finland forced a large number of unskilled workers to emigrate abroad. The Swedish society, in contrast, was in constant need for industrial labor. Despite appeals, the Swedish governments have constantly refused to acknowledge Finnish as an official minority language in Sweden.

### **The Roots of Merita and Nordbanken**

In their respective banking sectors, the recent histories of Nordbanken and Merita Bank reveal both similarities and differences. Both banks are outcomes of earlier mergers, the most recent of which found its underlying rationale in severe financial crises of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The most apparent differences between Nordbanken and Merita stem from the position and status that these banks occupied in the respective national markets. While Nordbanken was a middle-sized player in the Swedish market, Merita Bank was clearly the dominant bank in the Finnish market at the time of the merger in October 1997 [Tienari and Tuunainen 1998; Tienari 2000; Risberg et al. 2000]. Its domestic market share in Finland was approximately 40 percent in retail and 60 percent in business banking. Moreover, Merita was considerably more international than Nordbanken.

In the *Swedish banking sector*, regulation turned into deregulation in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Especially the 1990s was a period of industry consolidation through mergers and acquisitions. Swedish banking has traditionally been dominated by large nationally operating commercial banks such as Skandinaviska Enskilda Banken (SE-Banken) and Svenska Handelsbanken which still account for a large share of the domestic market [Engwall 1997]. The banking crisis peaked in 1992 when all Swedish banks showed deficits, and Nordbanken was a part of this crisis. It was acquired by PKbanken, another

state-owned bank, in 1990. The newly formed Nordbanken was a distinctly private, customer oriented bank.

The *Finnish banking sector* was deregulated from the early 1980s onwards. By the early 1990s, however, Finnish banks were confronted with a serious financial crisis and the financial services sector was fundamentally restructured [Tainio et al. 1997; Tienari 2000]. In February 1995, the two most influential commercial banks in Finland, the Union Bank of Finland (UBF) and Kansallis Banking Group, announced their decision to merge. The new name Merita Bank was launched some three months later [Tienari 2000].

It is illustrative to describe the roots of UBF and Kansallis [see e.g. Tainio and Virtanen 1996]. UBF was established in 1862 as the first commercial bank in Finland. During the early decades of its operation it was labeled the bank of the ‘Swedish-speaking money’ in Finland. Kansallis, established in 1889, was the Finnish countermove to the concentration of bank financing. The remnants of the diverse corporate roots were cherished throughout the years and, arguably, lived on in the banks’ profiles and later within the merged Merita Bank [Tienari and Tuunainen 1998; Tienari 2000].

### **Choice of Language as Drama**

In October 1997, the Swedish Nordbanken and the Finnish Merita Bank announced their decision to merge. At the time, it was the largest merger ever to take place between Sweden and Finland measured in terms of personnel and turnover. The major objective of the merger was to build “a regional bank of international size.” The owners and senior managers of the new bank also explicitly indicated that further geographical expansion in the Nordic and Baltic regions was part of the bank’s future strategy.

Hans Dalborg, a Swede and the CEO of Nordbanken since 1991, was appointed CEO of MeritaNordbanken and based in Stockholm. Vesa Vainio, a Finn (CEO of UBF in 1993-1995 and Merita Bank in 1995-1997) was appointed chairman of the board of directors. Vainio was, however, only to hold this position for the first full year following the

merger. The position was then to be handed over to Jacob Palmstierna, a Swede, and Vainio was to become vice chairman.

Some weeks after the merger announcement, the owners and top management of MeritaNordbanken made public their decision to introduce Swedish as the “official corporate language” of the bank. Viewed socio-historically, this was an interesting, and arguably also a controversial decision. In public debate concerning Finnish industry and banking, the language question had historically played a controversial role as UBF had been associated with the Swedish speaking and Kansallis with the Finnish speaking power bloc.

Initially, the decision to introduce Swedish as the corporate language seemed to be a practical issue among others for the new corporate management. Pertti Voutilainen (ex-CEO of Kansallis in 1992-1995, ex-managing director of Merita in 1995-1997, managing director of the Finnish side of MeritaNordbanken at the time) described the choice of corporate language as follows:

“Perhaps it just sort of happened by accident. There are good reasons – and were at the time [i.e. when the choice was made]. You really save a lot in, for example, documentation costs because documentation on one side, at least, is already in Swedish, and also part of the documentation on the Finnish side is in Swedish. If we had chosen English, we would have had all the documentation in a language foreign to both sides.”

The language issue became a major internal topic within the new organization of MeritaNordbanken and attracted considerable media coverage, especially in Finland. In addition to costs, former MNB employees explained the language choice by referring to the poor English skills of Nordbanken staff, corporate image and political considerations. Since Swedish was the second official language in Finland, outsiders may have perceived the decision to use English as the corporate language in a Finnish-Swedish bank as “odd.” In the corporate culture seminars, the role of Swedish as the “common official language” or a “practical choice for communication at the corporate level” was vividly

debated. Formally, corporate management was of the opinion that Swedish would be used as an effective means for communication at the corporate level and within units that most interacted with their foreign counterparts. Pertti Voutilainen put it as follows:

“Of course, this only concerns part of the bank; it concerns the senior management and those units where the people are in daily contact. ... In Utsjoki or Rovaniemi [Finnish-speaking cities in northern Finland], the language doesn't play a role.”

There were also different views as to the future expansion of the bank. In addition to official plans, there were constant speculations and rumors concerning further mergers or acquisitions with Nordic and Baltic partners. These speculations and discussions about the common corporate language being a temporary solution continued until MeritaNordbanken made public its decision to merge with the Danish financial services group Unidanmark in March 2000. At this point, the corporate management announced English as the new “official corporate language”.

### **Language Skills as Power Resources in Organizational Praxis**

The first perspective emerging from our findings suggests that language skills contribute to staff's power base and resources in multilingual merger settings [see e.g. Clegg 1989}. Staff of the MNB organization can be divided into four broad groups based on their mother tongue: (1) Finnish, (2) Swedish, (3) Swedish-speaking Finns, and (4) Finnish-speaking Swedes. Since our analysis focuses on the Finnish perspective and the Finnish side of the MNB organization, it is important to note that 94% of the staff had Finnish as their mother tongue and only six percent had Swedish. This corresponds with the aggregate figures at national level in Finland.

Indeed, the number of “fluent” Swedish speakers among Finns was insufficient for the new organization. Moreover, after the merger it gradually became clear that top



management had only a very vague idea of the “aggregate level of skills” in Swedish among Finnish MNB staff. One of the reasons for this was the high average age among the employees. During the recession years in the early- and mid-1990s, the bank had hardly recruited any new staff. In addition, most personal evaluations of language skills had been made years ago, and their validity was dubious.

Our observational data and interviews with present and former MNB employees clearly demonstrate how Finnish managers and members of staff felt handicapped because of the limited skills in Swedish. They became quickly aware of the power imbalance and psychologically inferior position. One former MNB employee commented:

I was often told about situations where Swedish lower level employees "forced" their Finnish counterparts to speak Swedish, probably because of their own limited knowledge of English.

The specific cultural seminars also confirmed the existence of language problems. Towards the end of the seminar series, senior managers instructed seminar participants to tune down the questions about language. The complaints presented by the Finns were gradually taken for granted.

In this situation, the Finnish-speaking members of the organization developed different “coping strategies” to deal with the language issues as the merger unfolded. First, some employees sought to “escape” the Swedish language through internal mobility. Such “Finnish-speaking havens” could be found, for example, within the domestic Finnish branch network. These employees were typically not in direct contact with their counterparts in Sweden.

Second, others took the position of “hard-boiled, speakers of bad Swedish” and decided to express their views with the language skills at hand – and thus to continue “working as before”. These persons sometimes turned the language disadvantage into an advantage:

“With Finnish as your native tongue ... you are, in a debate or negotiation situation, in a weaker position ... Whether or not this is the case, it feels like it when the other person speaks his/her native tongue... But, turning it the other way around, we have this secret language [i.e. Finnish] in which we can speak pretty freely to each other – in the middle of the negotiation. The majority of the Swedes don’t understand one single bit of it.” (Middle manager)

Third, a somewhat more subtle form of resistance was evident among a large majority of the Finns within MeritaNordbanken. This was a coping strategy marked by efforts to reach an adequate level of Swedish to handle everyday communication with the Swedes. Those responsible for MNB’s language policy could soon recite that “learning Swedish quickly became very popular” – to the extent that, due to cost reasons, those not in daily contact with the Swedes could not be provided with intensive training. Perhaps even more significantly, however, there was a tendency among Finns to insist on using English whenever the business at hand would justify it.

“In general, the Swedes assume that the Swedish language is mastered and spoken in Finland, and that quite a few [Finns] get along in Swedish. But in terms of communication and culture it’s not the best possible [choice] because the spoken Swedish is...different. In Sweden, they speak Swedish so fluently [that] at times you miss some of the nuances and don’t understand. And Finns can’t express themselves in such a way. Therefore, it has been put forth in the culture seminar that English would be an appropriate language. (Middle manager)

A comment by an interviewee in an expert position demonstrates a subtle, resistant attitude and pragmatic stance to the language issue:

“When it was first officially announced that the corporate language would be Swedish, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up! But on the other hand, with Finnish *sisu*, you decide that as you have studied the language [at school] in the past, you will start speaking it. But, in our unit, the main language is English

anyway. So it is a bit inconvenient at times when you must switch between three languages.”

It is interesting to note that these problems were, to a large extent, a surprise to the corporate management. In retrospect, however, the Finnish members of the corporate management could foresee the choice of the corporate language as a mistake. For example, Pertti Voutilainen, a former top manager, described the experience as follows:

I'd say it [the choice of Swedish] was a mistake. This...might be a bit difficult for the Swedes to admit. For us [Finns], it is perhaps a little easier.

Turning to the other side of the coin, those whose mother tongue was Swedish or who were bilingual and comfortable to operate in Swedish, were privileged particularly in verbal communication and network building. Two of the former MNB employees had been on foreign assignments in London and Singapore. As some of the corporate communication was distributed in Swedish to foreign branches, they sometimes acted as translators and intermediaries for their local, English-speaking colleagues because of their competence in Swedish. Their access to corporate information was far better than that of their local colleagues. In this context, the Swedish speaking Finns<sup>i</sup>, a minority group in MeritaNordbanken, need to be considered. They benefited considerably from the new language policy, finding themselves in influential positions within the new, post-merger organization. Given their language skills, they had the opportunity to become important gatekeepers and liaisons between the Finnish and Swedish organizations and use language as a source of informal power.

### **Language and the Construction of Professional Identity**

Our second perspective suggests that at a deeper level, language is firmly related to conceptions of professional competence. Being a banking professional requires ability to conceptualize organizational issues in sharp and persuasive ways, argumentation skills, and fluency in negotiations. However, in many cases, “deep substance matter knowledge”

and “language competence” (i.e. capability to communicate adequately in both Finnish and Swedish) do not meet. At times, top Finnish experts had considerable difficulties in communicating their views and expertise in meetings where Swedish was used. Particular problems were manifested when producing written reports in Swedish. Obviously, this created a sense of professional incompetence. As a case in point, a secretary to senior management commented on language as power:

“In the beginning it was, of course, a terrible shock. ... It was really horrible. It felt like... half of our professional competence had been taken away when we had to use a language that was not our own native tongue. You felt like an idiot. ... The decisive thing was to get over the feeling of inferiority....At some stage I sort of turned it around; hey, I can at least talk to those people in Swedish, but they can’t say a word of Finnish.”

Similarly, in a meeting between academics and representatives of the Finnish MNB organization, a Finnish senior manager spontaneously remarked how the Swedish language caused major problems for the Finns. She illustrated the type of Swedish spoken by Finns as the “me Tarzan, you Jane” talk, and confirmed the influential role of language in building and maintaining professional competence.

It should be noted, however, that English has become “the professional language” of the banking industry. The standard practice of using English in banking provided the Finnish-speaking Finns with an additional reason to revert to English as often as possible. It is important to note that for the Finns using English was a sign of “equality” vis-à-vis Swedes. In this way, they had professionally the same starting point as their Swedish counterparts. For example, a middle manager shared his personal experiences:

“There is this professional slang...in English. I have noticed that I get by with my ‘pub Swedish’ in all [situations] but when we start talking strictly business ... English is really easier ...I stick to English when we talk business, because I think it’s more fair.”

Moreover, because of English-speaking customers English became the “natural choice” for communication in several MNB units and situations. For example, a manager in an expert position explained that in her unit English had been “chosen as the working language”. Consequently, while the daily oral communication was in Swedish, all written material was produced in English. When asked whether she had heard of any problems in the bank related to language and cross-national co-operation, she laughed:

“Yes, a lot! Really a lot. We do have lots of people in the bank who don’t master Swedish or hardly do so. It does cause problems to those people who belong to organizations where – unlike us who have English – Swedish is spoken. In meetings and the like, Finns remain silent if they are not capable [of speaking the language].”

The last sentence above brings to the fore a key question concerning the role of language in the construction of professional identity. One is forced to remain silent in situations where professionalism would require active participation.

In this context, the specific position of the Swedish-speaking Finns in MeritaNordbanken deserves attention. Although their language skills provided them with new opportunities, ironically some of them suffered professionally. In fact, a number of Swedish-speaking Finns down the hierarchy had eventually to be “protected” from being overloaded by work as “translation machines”. Our empirical evidence suggests that knowledge of Swedish may sometimes lead to a more restricted professional role.

None of the former MNB employees mentioned the Swedish language as a factor affecting their career plans or decision to leave the bank. A large majority of them had worked in international positions within MNB and primarily used English in their everyday communication. In addition, based on self-assessment of their skills in Swedish, most of them regarded themselves as rather or very fluent speakers of Swedish and were eager to use their skills. However, one interviewee commented:

Indirectly, language might have influenced [my decision to change jobs], because MNB seemed to lose some of its international appeal to Swedishness.

At a more general level, the corporate language is likely to affect the organization's ability to retain professionals and provide them with meaningful career opportunities.

### **Language as a Symbol of (Re)colonization**

Our third perspective views the choice of the "official corporate language" as a question of national identity involving explicit or implicit confrontation at national level. This often means construction of superior-inferior relationships and respective power positions. Set against the historical background between Finland and Sweden, the language question is indeed an issue of (re)colonization, resembling a postcolonialist setting [see e.g. Said 1979; Prasad 1997].

In the Finnish media, the language question emerged as part of a broader debate about the Swedes assuming – or taking over – power in MeritaNordbanken [see also Risberg, Tienari and Vaara, 2000]. This discussion centering around language raised strong emotional reactions among the Finnish public towards the MeritaNordbanken merger. For example, The Swedish CEO, Hans Dalborg, was interviewed in Kauppalehti, the leading daily business newspaper in Finland, immediately after the merger had been announced. One of the subtitles of the article was *“Does the Spirit of International Match Live on?”* Among other themes, the journalist brought up the issue of language. Dalborg commented, referring to the merger negotiations:

“Creating a joint corporate culture is extremely important, Dalborg emphasizes. He says that creating mutual understanding is made easier by the fact that Merita is a completely bilingual bank. According to him, language used in negotiations has all the time been Swedish.” [Kauppalehti, October 15, 1997]

Evidently, after his talks in Swedish with the top bankers and representatives of the owners in Merita, Hans Dalborg made it sound natural that the Swedes and the Finns

(from “a completely bilingual bank”) in general communicate in Swedish and should continue to do so. Following his line of thought, the “joint corporate culture” was to be built using the Swedish language. As indicated earlier, Merita was anything but a “completely bilingual bank”. From a Finnish perspective, Dalborg’s comment (if he really did use these words) aptly exemplifies the common ignorance among Swedes about the contemporary Finnish society and the role of Swedish language in Finland.

Some two weeks after Dalborg’s interview, the decision to introduce Swedish as the “official corporate language” in MeritaNordbanken was made public. In an interview with Ilta-Sanomat, the leading tabloid in Finland, the Finnish chairman of the board Vesa Vainio defended this choice:

When the Finnish Merita and the Swedish Nordbanken merge, the official language of the new bank will be Swedish, the chairman of the board in the new big bank, Vesa Vainio assured yesterday. According to Vainio, the decisive issue is that the Swedes' skills in Finnish are considerably weaker than those of the Finns' in Swedish.

Merita top managers have been wishfully thinking that English, the only international banking language, would become the final official language of the bank. Such dreams will now not come true.

Vainio said that, in daily routines, the local language of both countries can be used. However, dreaming about climbing up the corporate ladder to top positions of the bank is not possible without fluency in Swedish. Skills in the Finnish language have, however, not been set as a requirement for reaching the board level.

An intensive training program in Swedish has been offered in Merita since the Kansallis-UBF merger in 1995. According to Vainio, the development has been natural as Kansallis, with a Finnish label, and UBF, with a Finnish-Swedish label, were integrated [Ilta-Sanomat, October 23, 1997]

The journalist's choice of words is interesting. English and Finnish as corporate languages are unattainable “dreams”. Reference to the two Finnish banks and their different linguistic roots as a 'fact' is also noteworthy.

The Finnish press mirrored a specific form of ‘nationalism’ [see also Vaara and Tienari 2000]. This nationalism was often manifested through sport analogies such as international matches between Finland and Sweden.<sup>ii</sup> To illustrate, the following text was published in *Talouselämä*, the leading weekly business magazine in Finland, almost a year after the above interviews appeared in *Kauppalehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat*:

“The chairman of the board in MeritaNordbanken, Vesa Vainio, is surprised over the extent of emotional turmoil that Sweden and the Swedish language still provokes among Finns. Nordic mergers and acquisitions are persistently *commented upon in the spirit of sports internationals between Finland and Sweden*. ...‘The issue of language has been more significant than we initially imagined.’ [italics added; *Talouselämä*, 27,1998]

It can also be observed that the Finns within the MNB organization often interpreted the language issue as a sign of Swedish dominance. As two former MNB employees put it:

A message from MNB top management was associated with the choice of the corporate language, i.e. the bank is more Swedish than Finnish.

There was one voice, one till...in Stockholm.

This was the case especially in situations where the Finns felt they had suffered from injustice or had been placed in disadvantageous positions vis-à-vis their Swedish counterparts. The cultural seminars, in particular, pointed to a superior-inferior relationship between the Finns and the Swedes. Clearly, it could be observed that the Swedes regarded the choice of language as “self-evident” and/or a “relief”. In contrast, for the Finns, the corporate language had been imposed by the Swedes and was the formal language to be used in the cultural seminars.



The particular position of the Swedish-speaking Finns in MeritaNordbanken deserves further attention. On the one hand, the Swedish-speaking Finns were often associated with the legacy of UBF, the Swedish speaking part of the original Merita Bank. This meant that they were often viewed as the “winners” by the Finnish-speaking Finns identifying with the former Kansallis. For example, a Finnish middle manager brought this power-related symbolism associated with language to the fore. Representing the Finnish-speaking party, this may be interpreted as the voice of the ‘inferior’ counterpart in post-merger integration:

“The fact that the corporate language is Swedish really did ... intuitively give them [the Swedes] a power position ... right from the beginning. Perhaps for the top management it wasn’t a problem, because practically speaking all Merita top managers were from the UBF side [the Swedish speaking part of Merita].”

On the other hand, the Swedish-speaking Finns were sometimes regarded as inferior in relation to their Swedish counterparts and far closer to their Finnish-speaking countrymen. The Swedish language spoken by the Swedish-speaking Finns is a case in point. The Swedes frequently viewed this 'dialect' as “awkward” and “old-fashioned”. In a number of instances texts already checked by a Swedish-speaking Finn had to be “re-corrected” by a Swedish colleague to match *rikssvenska*, the “real” Swedish spoken by “real” Swedes. Such a procedure was humiliating for a number of Swedish-speaking Finns, although differences between *rikssvenska* and Finnish-Swedish are widely recognized.<sup>iiiiv</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Previous cultural research on mergers and acquisitions has rarely focused on political aspects of post-merger integration. Instead, research efforts have centred around generic and often superficial ‘cultural difference’ and ‘distance’ discourse between merging parties. The traditional treatment of language in multilingual mergers is a good example of this.

The analysis of the merger between the Finnish Merita Bank and the Swedish Nordbanken illustrates how the choice of an “official corporate language” is not a neutral issue in post-merger situations. Rather, the choice of a particular language has important practical and symbolic consequences for those involved, and we examine the case from the Finnish perspective. The rich ethnographic material covers observational data, interviews with present and former employees, and articles published in Finnish and Swedish media. It seems that the choice of the corporate language created a strong emotional reaction within the bank which was further reinforced in newspaper articles, particularly in Finnish media. The interviews with former and present employees of the bank show similar patterns of behaviour.

Our findings show that the choice of the corporate language has multiple power implications: (1) language skills can be part of an individual’s resource base that empower or restrict communication and interaction, (2) language is inherently related to building and developing professional identity and competence, and (3) language may operate as a symbol of (re)colonization. The first perspective demonstrates how operating in a foreign language places particular organizational members in disadvantageous positions compared to those who can express themselves in their mother tongue. The second perspective illustrates the close relationship between language and the construction of professional identity and perceptions of superiority and inferiority. The third perspective examines language as an element of national identity and an issue of (re)colonization. In international mergers, historical issues – especially injustices and wrongdoings – often come into the picture.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, many rewarding research avenues can be followed. At present, the study is largely limited to the Finnish perspective and it would clearly benefit from incorporating more Swedish material. Another potential research issue is code switching. Future research could examine how and under what circumstances native and non-native speakers switch from one language to another. This analysis could, for example, shed new light on the role of proficient but not totally fluent speakers.

Furthermore, a particularly interesting question is to examine the role of English as a seemingly neutral language. In the globalizing world, English seems to be the natural choice for international corporations. In the Merita-Nordbanken case, English was a specific remedy for the apparent power imbalance between Finns and Swedes. However, the choice of English also creates particular problems. On the one hand, adopting English as “the official language” places native English speakers in privileged positions. On the other, English as a ‘lingua franca’ tends to replace local discourses and practices by ‘universal’ or ‘global’ models. Such cultural standardization may ironically imply that organizations and organizational members become less powerful than before to resist universal managerial and organizational practices or to seek alternatives to the dominant discourses.

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<sup>i</sup> Almost all of them were in practice bilingual.

<sup>ii</sup> Since the declaration of independence in 1917, sports have played an important role in the construction of 'national identity' in Finland. Matching up against the Swedes in sports has traditionally been especially important for Finns. Articles in the media on the Merita-Nordbanken merger often drew from the social arena of sports: "*Finland loses 6-5 in the organization game*" (title in Kauppalehti addressing the line-up in the board of directors, Oct 14, 1997), "*Nordbanken – Merita 1-0*" (title in Ilta-Sanomat, Nov 5, 1997), "*Business Units: Sweden 3, Finland 2*" (sub-title in Ilta-Sanomat addressing the new organization structure of the bank, Dec 19, 1997), and "*The Score in the International Seems to be 0-1 for the Swedes*" (a title in Helsingin Sanomat, the leading Finnish daily newspaper, Oct 28, 1998).

<sup>iii</sup> The pronunciation, for example, is markedly different.

<sup>iv</sup> Needless to say, the lengthy paths and multiple rounds of translation were time-consuming. Set against this background, one can also speculate whether cost savings were a valid rationale for the choice of official corporate language. If cost was indeed important, Swedes could have settled for a somewhat "awkward", but sufficiently accurate translation.