

**LEARNING TO “WALK THE TALK”:  
Language socialization in an MBA classroom  
and the production of marginality**

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## Abstract

This thesis is about the ways in which language socialization is intimately tied not only to ways of talking, but also to ways of knowing and being. The empirical material is drawn from a Masters of Business Administration classroom in Oslo, Norway. The analysis presented here draws primarily on anthropological theories of language use, but is also inspired by globalization studies. The coupling of these two approaches is intended to show the ways in which language use, when treated as social activity, can lead to an understanding of social organizational forces as well as the ways in which global processes may impinge on local social organization and structures of power and authority.

I present what I call "MBA talk" as a discursive activity that privileges words and individual intentionality while simultaneously providing the basis for group identity. MBA talk is further discussed in terms of processes of standardization and translation that link talk with global and expert ways of knowing. While students were taught that MBA talk represented a decontextualized and universally applicable business language, I direct attention to the ways in which language use may both sustain and create context, but also create an acute awareness of context. I do so through an analysis of student conceptions of the symbolic and economic resources two aspects of MBA talk, the use of business terminology known as "buzzwords" and the fact that MBA talk was synonymous with English, were seen as providing. These understandings are contrasted with student perceptions that MBA competence was undervalued in the Norwegian market. I ultimately argue that student rationalizations of this perception, as well as their understandings of the role of buzzwords as opposed to English in the Norwegian context, served to reinscribe a divide in which Norway, Norwegian and Norwegian social values became opposed to the rest of the world, English and meritocratic values. As such, this thesis illustrates the ways in which global processes may contribute to the production of marginality at a very local level.



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This thesis is for Eirik, who has lived with it almost as long as he has lived with me, and for Ida, who asks good questions. Questions usually just lead to more questions, but trying to answer them can be awfully fun.





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# Introduction and Scope of the Research Problem

## Introduction

This thesis explores the “domino effect” set in motion by what has been termed “the Americanization of professional practices” (Dezalay 1990 281) within the context of an international, English-language Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program at a Norwegian graduate school of business. Studies have shown that such business schools, and the academic model of recruitment which they tender, have impacted both the behaviour and ideology of European business executives (Sklair 2001 20; Dezalay 1990 287). My objective is to trace what I claim is a central element in this process – a notion of competence – and the path it takes as it ramifies in light of the MBA students’ professional expectations. I do so through a study of the role language plays as people are socialized into being competent members of a social group. This is therefore a study of the ways in which these students are socialized to use language in particular ways, and the role language plays in their studies and professional aspirations. As such, this thesis looks at the links between language and professional identity as well as beyond the classroom.

The analysis presented here draws on contemporary understandings in the anthropological literature on language use to present speaking as an act on par with other social activities (Gal 1989). Like other social activities, some forms of speaking are more privileged than others and may represent one possible point of departure for a study of particular socio-political hierarchies and structures of power. Working under the assumption that a study based on language provides the means to study both language use in practice and the conceptions informing such practices, I seek to explore the ways in which a certain discursive practice – the institutionalized use of busi-

ness English in an educational setting – may impinge on local social organization and people's understanding of such. Within such a perspective, English must be understood not primarily as the official language of Great Britain or the United States, but as a professional and technical language regarded as necessary for successful communication within an increasingly global market. The challenge is thus to mediate between a micro-study of face-to-face discursive encounters in which English is the operative language and the ways in which such interactions may be said to index, reproduce, challenge or sustain larger macro-historical processes (Gal 1989).

This thesis is premised upon the idea that the MBA students belong to a growing, new class of professionals, technologists, and managers within Western capitalist and socialist societies (Gal 1989). The anthropologist Susan Gal has suggested that one avenue of success for such groups has been a claim to a mastery of particular discursive practices: "It is exactly on the basis of its own supposedly special and superior forms of talking and knowing – which it defines as decontextualized, autonomous, rational, and therefore universal and value-free – that this new class justifies its claim to power" (Gal 1989 352). In examining the role that business English, as well as ideas about language in general, may play in the educational and professional aspirations of the MBA students, I therefore ask whether their discursive practices can be said to provide an adequate base from which to claim power within a Norwegian context.

My goal is thus to study "the transformative potential" (Lien 2003 117) of the Norwegian MBA program within global educational trends. I argue that the Norwegian MBA program represents a local-level arena where global educational trends and their entailments for professional cultures can be studied as specific and nuanced instantiations rather than as general trends. Rather than taking for granted claims that increasing complexity demands new types of competence attainable through educational endeavours (Danielson 1998b), I examine some of the processes by which "competence" came to be established as a key concept among the MBA students as part of a larger "domino effect" set in motion by a global, professional business culture. My objective is to suggest that the trends within education described by Danielson and others, while indicative of Americanizing or globalizing processes, may also carry within them unexpected contradictions at the local level.

# Scope of the research problem

## Theoretical approaches

In approaching these questions I draw mainly on theories from the anthropology of language but also globalization theories, though more loosely so. Though this thesis is a study of language practices, it is also necessarily a study of a particular language. The rise of English as a dominant language of commerce has been traced to the growth of industrial capitalism, with England and the United States at the forefront, in the 19th century, yet the English language can hardly be addressed as a singular phenomenon and the business English that was spoken among the MBA students is treated as one of many new varieties and uses that appear as English is differentially incorporated into varying contexts of use (Bhatt 2001 528). I make no general theoretical claim, in other words, about the English language per se, but seek to identify processes at play among the MBA students that established locally normative and regular communicative activity particular to this group of people (Silverstein 1998a 406).

## The Anthropology of language

Anthropologists have contributed to an established body of work that explores the social nature of communication, whether called the ethnography of communication, sociolinguistics, or discourse analysis (Jaworski 1999; Hymes 1996; Duranti 1992; Gal 1989; Gumperz 1971). Common to this literature is a preference for replacing speaker-hearer/sender-receiver models of communication with discourse models based on ideas of participation (Duranti 1997 21). Such work on the sociality of language reject a monological model that leaves each participant isolated on either side of the communicative encounter (Wadensjö 1992 44).

In contrast, a dialogic approach opens for the possibility of foregrounding the social interaction taking place. One noted advantage of a dialogic approach is the shift it entails from an appraisal of the content of an exchange to a consideration of those doing the talking, the setting for such talk, and its reception. This move from talk as text to talk as activity expands the parameters of situated talk to its greater social context (Hymes 1972 54). In studying the norms of the everyday use of language it is useful to recognize that the capacity to communicate is not reducible to the individual, but created and reproduced within a community of speakers. This premise informs my thesis in three, interrelated ways:

First, anthropological work that has highlighted the fact that language use is socialized. Far

from learning to speak naturally, children are gradually inculcated into community norms for proper and fitting speech patterns (Duranti 1992; Kulick 1992; Abrahams 1977). Socialization practices are not only limited to children, however. Bauman's work on tall tales and practical jokes in the United States demonstrates the way in which storytellers have to accommodate audiences unfamiliar with such tales. While practical jokes have a common structure that does not need to be explained to those familiar with the practical joke genre, narrators must modify their stories with explanatory elements in order to accommodate the uninitiated. (Bauman 1986)

The ways in which members of a group know what is being talked about, and when, refers to their communicative competence, and Bauman defines performance as a mode of verbal communication in which the performer assumes responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence (Bauman 1986). In turn, a speaker's performative effectiveness is constrained by and understood in terms of general norms of language use and everyday meta-communicative frameworks (Lucy 1993 17; Parmentier 1993 263; Gossen 1977 82). The evaluation of communicative competence involves listeners who draw on community norms of language use when judging the appropriateness and skill of both the performer and the expressive act. (Bauman 1992 183; Hymes 1972 60) As a result, an audience may collaborate and consent with the performer or react negatively and challenge a performance (Duranti 1997 15-16; Bauman and Briggs 1990 66; Bauman 1977 11).

Second, it has been recognized that the ability to express oneself is not shared equally within any given community. It is therefore important to ask about the premises upon which participants are permitted to partake in or are excluded from communicative exchanges. Lindstrom formulates the dynamics of this equation by suggesting that the question "whose voice is heard?" can be understood as asking "whose voice counts?" (Lindstrom 1992). The usefulness of this approach lies in the assumption that speakers continually modify their contributions based on on-going evaluations of their conversation partners and the situation at hand (Duranti 1997 299). In other words, the social order as seen at the interactional level may often be an indicator of a macro-level, institutional order. Based on her own work on interpreting, Cecilia Wadensjö supports the possibility that face-to-face talk may tell us about society at large (Wadensjö 1992 13-14). Further, differential access to and control over discursive resources often constitute and sustain social hierarchies (Ochs and Capps 1996 35; Bourdieu 1991).

While an existing social hierarchy may be reflected in local speech patterns, the latter is



not without the potential to effect change in structures of social relations. Working within what he calls ethnopragmatics, Alessandro Duranti suggests that all talk, all acts of speaking, must be considered as social acts capable of both challenging and reproducing the local social order and ideas of the person integral to that order (Duranti 1997 228; Irvine 1996; Duranti 1992a 25; Lindstrom 1992 103). While language can create context at the same time that context limits language's potential, the claim is that there is no determinate relationship in either direction. Rather, there is a growing consensus that communicative contexts are negotiated and emergent. Performance and narrative studies have turned to examining the metacommunicative and metapragmatic devices used by participants to creatively influence the contexts within which they are speaking with others (Bauman and Briggs 1990 68). Duranti suggests that those who study the social uses of language should focus their attention on language use which does this specifically (Duranti 1997 203).

Third, the belief that particular ways of speaking are socially efficacious or deleterious can be described in terms of linguistic ideologies (Schieffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity 1998). By identifying linguistic ideologies at play in a given setting, local theories of agency, authorship, responsibility, and authority may also come to light. One way of identifying linguistic ideologies is to investigate the ways in which certain ways of speaking are employed as interactive resources. Anthropologists and other social scientists have pointed out that language skills, and specific languages themselves, can be understood as both symbolic capital that can be invested in social relations, and as a resource that can be capitalized upon in a more material sense (I. Lien 1997; Bourdieu 1991; Thuen 1989). As a result, Gal suggests that some forms of speaking are more privileged than others, and she challenges the researcher to investigate the ways in which discursive practices achieve such status. Gal writes: "Patterns of choice among linguistic variants can be interpreted to reveal aspects of speakers' 'consciousness' – how they respond symbolically to class relations within the state, how they understand their historic position and identity within regional economic systems" (Gal 1987 637).

### **Globalization studies**

While the empirical focus of this thesis draws on observations of language use within a small group of MBA students, the analysis of the empirical data is informed by an attention to larger processes as discussed within theories of globalization. While the importance of locality within

the discipline of anthropology was previously associated with a preoccupation with culture as bounded, limited and essentially locatable to a specific geographical site, this is no longer the case. A focus on the mapping of local cultures gave way to an understanding of the need to elucidate the relationship between what were often small-scale localities and the larger socio-economic and cultural-political structures, whether institutional, national, transnational or otherwise, with which they articulated. Globalization theories retain an interest in these relationships but also problematize them through a fundamental re-evaluation of some of the original units of study, alternately conceptualized as the local and global, the universal and the particular, small-scale and large-scale, text and context, micro-order and macro-order, center and periphery, etc., and the relationships between these (Schwartzman 1993 45).

Globalization is used in this thesis in terms of what Kearney refers to as: “social, economic, cultural and demographic processes that take place within nations but also transcend them, such that attention limited to local processes, identities, and units of analysis yields incomplete understanding of the local” (Kearney 1995 548). In recognition of these processes, theorists have accordingly innovated new theories of culture, social organization and identity in order to adequately describe a world in which “culture is becoming deterritorialized” and whose constituents are no longer understood solely as local, but also as global and transnational (Kearney 1995 557, 551).

These processes may be addressed in structural terms and call for subtlety in understanding the means of the production and reproduction of culture, the differences that are based on them and their resulting effect on modes of social organization (Friedman 1995; Pieterse 1995 50; Robertson 1995 29). This thesis focuses on the standardization of social organizational and cultural forms, the conditions for such standardization, the rise of global discourses of what it means to be a professional business person (as well as to speak as one) and the interconnectivity of these discourses (Robertson 1995 31), and the ways in which these processes are operationalized (Friedman 1995 72). This approach privileges a study of processes over questions of who or what motivate and are thus responsible for global processes, whether this might be nation states or markets, as well as over questions regarding the end result, whether this is addressed in terms of hybridity, homogeneity or singularity (Auge 2000 40; Friedman 1995 80; Pieterse 1995 46).

# Norway in the literature

## Linguistic diversity in Norway

Language researcher Einar Haugen writes that language issues have been intimately tied to Norway's political and social life since 1900 (Haugen 1993/1959). According to Haugen, language planning in Norway can be distinguished from language planning in other countries in that it is fairly recent and has taken place on a national scale. Writing in 1959, he suggests that elsewhere language planning has been the domain of the elite and has taken place over long periods of time. The Norwegian case is also unique in that there are two officially sanctioned languages. For a non-Norwegian, the history and politics of *bokmål*, *nynorsk*, *riksmål*, *sammorsk*, together with a seemingly endless variety of local and regional dialects, represent a bewildering concatenation that refuses to yield to orderly mapping. Yet one suspects that the reason why Norwegians can never really seem to be able to help you categorize the varieties on a stable and continuous scale is that the meaning of the varieties varies with context.

Language debates in Norway, also before 1900, have historically reflected socio-political and economic alliances with Sweden and Denmark, as well as disavowals of such alliances (Sørensen 1997 128). Throughout the 1800s, debates raged as to what to call the written and spoken languages in use in Norway, and political affiliations gave rise to arguments that Danish, when used in Norway, was Norwegian, while others posited the existence of an independent Norwegian language and yet others suggested solutions using the term "mother tongue." (Sørensen 1997 127) Progressive debates shifted focus from the Danish-Norwegian dichotomy to questions of what to call the two written forms in use and after 1900 the terms *riksmål* and *landsmål* replaced the original dichotomy (Sørensen 1997 135). The question was finally settled after parliamentary debate in 1930, in which neither the supporters of the Danish-Norwegian camp nor the *riksmål-landsmål* supporters could achieve a majority; as a result, earlier pairs of names were supplanted by a new pair – *bokmål* and *nynorsk* (Sørensen 1997 135).

The heated nature of these debates was not simply fueled by political predilections for Denmark or Sweden or independence, however, and discussions about what to call the linguistic forms in use, as well as which form was most appropriate, were intimately tied to other questions. Language debates in pre-1905 Norway (when Norway achieved formal independence from Sweden), were loaded with meaning and one's stance could be read as an alignment in discussions of allegiance along an urban-rural axis, as reflected in the *riksmål-landsmål* divide (Sø-

rensen 1997 130). Furthermore, questions of which form was to be Norway's official language, as well as what it was to be called, were understood as related to cultural development and modernization; while some proponents of the Danish-inspired *riksmål* suggested that only this form signaled commitment to participation in European development, others were of the opinion that such a choice would favor a Danish-dominated elite over Norwegian popular culture (Sørensen 1997 132, 134).

75 years after the Norwegian Parliament declared that Norway has two official languages, *bokmål* is the form used by the majority of Norwegians, and *nynorsk* has become a minority language, used by 10-15 percent of the population (Sørensen 1997 136). Contemporary Norway is a diverse community, however, and this is reflected in a diversity of languages and linguistic forms that reach beyond the two state-sponsored official forms. Sami, the language of Norway's indigenous population, has also achieved some status after centuries of state repression and is prevalent in some parts of Northern Norway, as seen in official county signs and Sami-language broadcasting. While not a new phenomenon, increased immigration to Norway has multiplied the languages that are used in daily communicative interactions in Norway today. Anthropologists working in Norway such as Eidheim (1971), Thuen (1989) and Vike (1996) have studied various asymmetric relationships in Norway such as Sami-Norwegian, dialect-standard, rural-urban, traditional-cosmopolitan, North-South and center-periphery. Both the historical material from Norway, as well as more contemporary ethnography, highlight the ways in which language use continues to be a salient marker of identity as shaped by such relationships. In one such study, Eidheim (1971) identified a process in which, despite the comfortable "backstagedness" of Sami social circles, values from public life filtered into daily practices and self-evaluation. Eidheim suggests that Samis believed that Norwegians believed them to be stupid, and that this affected self-esteem, particularly among 16-50 year olds with aspirations. In turn, despite their own use of the Sami language, Eidheim suggests that Sami parents took Norwegian perceptions into consideration by speaking only Norwegian with their children as a necessary and correct matter of course.

A similar dynamic, though informed by different allegiances, is described in Inger-Lise Lien's (1997) discussion of language acquisition among the children of immigrants. In exploring this dynamic, she applies Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" to the languages that a Pakistani child might be exposed to. By treating language as "cultural capital that can be ultimately invested in a country, a social position, a social class" (I. Lien 1997 147, my translation),

Lien is able to rank the languages found in Pakistani milieus in Norway. Lien suggests that Arabic's regard as a sacred language makes it particularly prestigious. Urdu takes second place as it is the language of greatest opportunity in Pakistan. Third place is occupied by English. Lien suggests that the importance of English is tied to its association with the Pakistani upper class and its practices. Plans of emigration to England or the United States also make English desirable. Norwegian and the language of everyday use, Punjabi, are both ranked last. Lien cites common conceptions that Punjabi gets you nowhere, and she suggests that if the Norwegian public school system were to offer mother-tongue instruction in Punjabi, parents would refuse.

As to Norwegian, Lien quotes a young man of Pakistani background as saying: "Det snakkes bare i Norge"/"It's only spoken in Norway" (I. Lien 1997 147, my translation). She points, however, to recent changes in such attitudes as the result of two factors in particular. On the one hand, the importance of Norwegian is growing as immigrants and their children recognize that they will not move on to an English-speaking country or return to Pakistan, but remain in Norway for good. As employers on the Norwegian market have begun demanding that employees grasp a solid command of Norwegian, parents have begun associating Norwegian with new importance as well as economic incentive.

Such economic incentive has also been tied to the mastery of English among Norwegians, as demonstrated in Naguib's (1989) thesis on top Norwegian business executives. While Naguib refers to the Anglicization of Norwegian executive language in a purely descriptive way, language use is understood as tied to the executives' belief that they are a group apart from the Norwegian mainstream. These ethnographic references are not meant as an initial evaluation of the value of different linguistic forms in contemporary Norway, but are meant to demonstrate that language remains a subject loaded with meaning that needs to be explored.

### **Equality in the Norwegian context**

Equality is perhaps the most dominant theme uniting the anthropological literature on Norway, and equality understood as *likhet* or "sameness" has been described as a gate-keeping concept in studies of Norway (Lien, Lidén, and Vike 2001). Marianne Gullestad points to egalitarian individualism as a general feature of the Western world, but also claims that special tendencies may exist in Norway (Gullestad 2001 34). She writes that equality as sameness is not necessarily reflected in observable similarities, but rather a "style" that enhances what is understood as alike

and calls this “imagined sameness” (Gullestad 2001 35, my translation).

Such an approach tempers arguments that simply posit equality and conformity as a historical and political fact, as read in the claim that: “In Nordic countries individuals were citizens *because* people were similar to each other socially, ethnically, and religiously” (Stenius 1997 167, my emphasis), and further: “The elements that shaped Nordic patterns of conformity each continue to exist in modern Nordic societies,” where a Lutheran legacy is understood as one such factor (Stenius 1997 167-168). Such arguments are extended to claims such as: “crass show-offs offend the ideal of simplicity” (Stenius 1997 165). Such arguments find resonance in the historically weak position elites have occupied in power relations in Norway (Henningsen 2001 126; Vike 1996), but a more complex approach to equality and understandings of equality may provide more explanatory power in a Norwegian context.

Earlier ethnographic work in a Norwegian community led the English anthropologist John Barnes to describe Norwegian thought in the post-war years as emphasizing equality. This led him to suggest that established economic inequality among the residents of Bremnes led to less recognition of social inequality than in Great Britain during the same period (Barnes 1990 74). What Stenius calls a “credo of conformism that grows out of distrust and envy,” also known as the literary creation “the Law of Jante” (Stenius 1997 169), was described by Barnes in the following manner: “An idea strongly expressed in Norwegian thought was that no man should have more privileges than his fellows” (Barnes 1990 69). The importance of Barnes’ ethnography in this context, however, was that he also collected material illustrating the existence of hierarchies of authority. Through a comparison of consensus reaching forums such industrial enterprises and town meetings, Barnes reached the conclusion that autocratic decision-making was understood as highly appropriate in some contexts but not in others (Barnes 1990 80). This attention to context can be seen in more contemporary studies in which public displays of talent and competition, such as sporting events, as well as drinking, have been identified as arenas in which the Law of Jante, or *Janteloven*<sup>1</sup>, need not apply and the extraordinary individual may be celebrated (Henningsen 2001 111; Gullestad 1997; A. K. Larsen 1984), leading Vike, Lidén and Lien to write that: “being subjectively unique does not stand in opposition to the principle of equality” (Lien, Lidén, and Vike 2001 19, my translation).

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<sup>1</sup> Janteloven, or the “Law of Jante”, is the literary creation of Axel Sandemose that has come to resonate in Norwegian popular imagination. Kiel explains Janteloven as the idea “that you must not think that you are something, nor, more importantly, that you are better than someone else” (Kiel 1993: 60).

Vike, Lidén and Lien thus claim that while Norwegians may be concerned with equality, this does not need to be read as an expression of cultural homogeneity but can rather be understood as: “the product of nation building and politics of distribution” (Lien, Lidén, and Vike 2001 16, my translation). They direct attention to the ways in which ideas about equality organize different social and cultural processes, the ways in which ideas about equality may serve to create difference, and the ways in which people experience these processes as well as their strategies for managing them (Lien, Lidén, and Vike 2001 11-12). What they find interesting is the fact that the idea that Norwegians are more alike than people living in other places is rarely challenged (Lien, Lidén, and Vike 2001 18).

Barnes’ 1959 (1990) study pointed to the fact that economic difference allowed some parents to buy more expensive education for their children. Writing several decades later, Lidén has suggested that contemporary Norwegian public schools are a forum in which attempts are made to make differences irrelevant (Lidén 2001). I suggest that this study of the Norwegian MBA program revisits the tension between Barnes’ and Lidén’s ethnographic material regarding the role of education in Norway today. This is not to suggest that the goals and means of public grade school education and private business education are one and the same, but directs attention to the fact that education may be an important arena in which individual performance may be evaluated. As a result, education may be an important arena in which tensions related to equality may become manifest and even negotiated. Lien, Lidén, and Vike (2001) write that equality is an ambiguous concept and that this ambiguity may contribute to the paradoxes within it as well as fuelling its rhetorical power (Lien, Lidén, and Vike 2001 16).

### **Justification and scope of the research problem**

Continuing media coverage suggests that language is a highly salient topic of debate in contemporary Norway. Recent media and political debates have directed attention to the acquisition of Norwegian among immigrants, as well as the use of welfare subsidies and educational arenas such as kindergartens to simulate increased proficiency. This debate has not been limited to immigrants, however, as the role of Norway’s two official languages, *bokmål* and *nynorsk* in secondary schooling has inflamed the opponents and proponents of the necessity and desirability of *sidemålsundervisning*, the established practice of schooling children in both forms.

The advance of English within the Norwegian workplace, not to mention within Norwe-

gian popular culture in general, has also attracted attention. A 1993 newspaper article positions English as the language of choice when Statoil employees interact with non-Norwegians; Statoil's publicity officer is quick to point out that Norwegian is still the language of choice when only Norwegians are present. The Minister of Culture at the time, Åse Kleveland, resignedly described such practices as necessary: "It's sad, but we have to admit that Norwegian is no world language – at least not yet" (*Aftenposten*, 1993-02-06).

Yet are such choices purely practical? A central anthropological tenet, exemplified in recent studies of gender roles, challenges the researcher to explore those categories that are taken for granted, or viewed as natural, practical or necessary. I therefore ask whether the empirical material presented in this thesis conforms with other studies of the spread of English that show conflicting trends: "English is increasingly required for high-skill jobs everywhere in the world, it is the most widely studied foreign language, it dominates satellite TV and yet its functions in youth culture are more symbolic than communicative; its share of Internet traffic is declining, and its economic significance in many countries is challenged by regional economics." (Bhatt 2001 541) While my own study is not about youth culture, the material presented here raises questions about the practical necessity of English, as understood by a small group of people.

I argue that this small group of people can be studied as representatives of a greater global process within the field of education and the role that language use may play in such processes. In the Norwegian context, education has been one of the largest growth sectors since the 1960s and the MBA students are thus treated as part of a larger trend in which educational resources – including language acquisition – are understood as bridging the transition to an increasingly complex post-industrial society which necessitates increased competence (Danielson 1998 96; Marceau 1989; Collins 1979). Furthermore, to the extent that the MBA program can be said to illustrate global educational or professional trends, such trends present generalized and unwieldy research objects; I argue therefore that focus on a delimited field may prove more rewarding (Rugkåsa and Thorsen 2003 15, 22). This study does so by looking at the language of professional socialization under the assumption that the: "language of professional socialization is at once a key part of the process whereby social identities are forged and changed and an expression of the epistemology of professional cultures that have important connections with the power structures of our society" (Mertz 1998 149).

In taking language use as my main analytical object I also argue for the importance of such



studies and the insights they provide given an understanding of talk as “one of the most pervasive social activities humans engage in” (Schegloff 1987). I also hope to avoid the paradox Ingjerd Höem has described in which anthropologists have applied linguistic models “but have tried to avoid *de facto* linguistic manifestations” (Höem 2001 52-53).

Lastly, this thesis is directed at the Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad’s claim that the modern Western world remains poorly right theorized, and addresses her call for the importance of studying majority groups in their own right (Gullestad 1997). In studying a group of people who already have access to the social and financial resources necessary to take a graduate business education in the hopes of advancing their professional careers, I hope this study contributes to understandings of cultures of affluence and as well as more “mainstream people” (Longva 2001; Schwartzman 1993 4). Rugkåsa and Thorsen further write that:

Any anthropological study in Norway, in addition to saying something about the particular group, institution or phenomenon, will also say something about Norwegian society in a broader sense. Taking this approach as a point of departure, studies of cultural variation *in* one’s own society also be studies *of* one’s own society (Rugkåsa and Thorsen 2003 17, my translation)

My hope is therefore that this thesis will contribute to rectifying Gullestad’s claim in a small way as well as adding comparative depth to understandings of the cultural variation present in contemporary Norway (Rugkåsa and Thorsen 2003 15).

### **Outline of the thesis**

The thesis is cumulative and each chapter builds on both the theoretical arguments and empirical material presented in previous chapters. That many of the same themes reappear in several of the chapters is due to the fact that I approach several themes from different theoretical angles. Chapter Two is devoted to a presentation of the field and a discussion of methods employed. The chapter includes a brief overview of the setting in which I carried out fieldwork, a description of the main traits of the MBA program and an introduction to my informants. The second half of this chapter addresses the methods employed in data collection and in my write-up.

Theories of linguistic ideology, their history and their role in the contemporary field of linguistic anthropology are outlined in the first half of Chapter Three. In the second half of this chapter I turn to empirical material gathered through interviews. I present student conceptions

of the nature of communication, and I highlight their implicit references to a conduit model of communication. The entailments of this model, discussed as understandings of the referentiality, intentionality and responsibility implicit in language use, are touched upon throughout later chapters.

Chapter Four directs attention to the very local lessons learned in the MBA classroom. I discuss the classroom activities that taught students to talk and know in particular ways through a focus on processes of standardization and translation. Both classroom talk and the production of MBA knowledge are further linked to a notion of MBA group identity. The chapter thus also points to some of the social organizational processes in play in the classroom. As such, this chapter is about the links between talking, knowing and ways of being.

In Chapter Five I focus exclusively on the notion of MBA talk as introduced in Chapter Four by reframing it as a professional register indexing group membership. My goal in this chapter is to highlight the resources this register made available to students, focusing in particular on business terminology and the fact that MBA talk was always in English. While business terminology and English are discussed as linguistic resources when used within the group, I also ask whether these same resources had any material value outside of the classroom. This leads me to a discussion of the ways in which language use attuned the MBAs to questions of context and potential conflicts. I show that these conflicts were resolved differently, indicating at the same time that student responses to such boundary conflicts may have had important consequences.

In Chapter Six I revisit the production of MBA knowledge as presented in Chapter Four. I discuss MBA knowledge in terms of the emic term “competence”, and I trace both the origins of and the ways in which this concept was operationalized by the students. MBA knowledge is again linked up to group identity, and I show the ways in which the MBA program structurally produced a distinct category of people. Student understandings of MBA competence, as well as their rationalizations of their perception that such competence was not appreciated in Norway, attuned them to questions of locality versus universality. I discuss the ways in which students resolved these conflicts by problematizing the mobility of MBA competence.

In Chapter Seven MBA talk and MBA knowledge are reunited. I look beyond the MBA classroom and the Norwegian context in arguing that the students participated in an imagined community (Anderson 1991) of experts. I bring the discussion back to Norway through presenting student reflections on the role of education. I treat these reflections as social commentary

about contemporary Norway and I ask what role they may have in producing marginality.

The conclusion serves as a brief summary of the questions raised in Chapter One in light of the empirical material presented throughout the thesis, and I make some tentative claims about the MBAs' experiences as well as what these may tell us about social processes of differentiation, structures of power and the production of marginality.



## The Field and Method

Searching for a suitable arena for my proposed research project on the use of English in Norwegian business life, I had originally intended to carry out fieldwork in an Oslo-based Norwegian or international company which had English as its corporate language. Three months of letters of intent, telephone calls, emails and personal interviews had resulted in a lukewarm show of interest but no concrete offers<sup>1</sup>. Decidedly, the most positive responses came from contacts established through a network of friends and acquaintances, though the people I was put in touch with were seldom in a position to do more than suggest more names higher up within their respective organization. While highly demoralizing, this general (lack of) response only strengthened my sense of the project. The people I spoke with did not seem to see the point of studying *why* people think English is important in Norwegian business life. They already knew the answer: *it just is*. While they could agree to the potential benefits of my project for their organization – presented as insight into the challenges and successes of communicating in English in an international setting – this did not warrant granting me access to their organization.

### The Field

#### Initial encounters

I ultimately found myself standing in a classroom of 26 Masters of Business Administration students (hereafter MBAs) at a well-known school of business. I had been given the opportunity to

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<sup>1</sup> Norsk Hydro, Telenor, Findexa, McKinsey Consulting, Accenture, Norges eksportråd and Etera Consulting, to name just those companies I actually secured meetings with.

present my project to the students after a series of meetings with their dean. I had contacted the dean just before the Christmas holidays after coming across a brochure for the MBA program. The dean had immediately expressed an interest in my project, and expressed a familiarity with anthropology as a field of enquiry. The dean's response also differed from my earlier contacts in other ways as well. Most significantly, she was highly concerned about the challenges her students faced given the fact that the program language was English. Second, she was interested in my own background and academic credentials as a researcher. Third, she was in no way concerned about the anonymity of the project. The only point on which her response paralleled that of the other people I had spoken with was a concern about the demands my project would make on her staff and students.

Standing in front of her students one afternoon in early January my challenge was to present my project to a group of students without knowing what they knew about anthropology. The dean introduced me to the class, emphasizing my credentials and the administration's support of my project. She repeated information that I had carefully included in my proposal: I had been awarded a stipend by a research group from my home department funded by the National Research Council of Norway and I had a Masters degree from the University of Chicago – an institution presumably well-known to the students because of its own competitive MBA program. This approach was directly informed by an idea that these credentials would speak for me, anchoring my project and person to these respected institutions.

I had carefully chosen what to wear wanting to appear professional but not overdressed. I had spent the hours before the meeting rehearsing a painstakingly scripted presentation until I had it memorized. I was determined to appear confident, yet easy-going. I was concerned that it was not enough that my project might seem interesting, I felt I had to make it potentially useful *for them* as well. I was after all, asking to participate in their activities and asking for their time. I had chosen to say something about anthropology but decided to focus on the end result – a study of the communicative and interactive forms developed among a group of international business students – and its importance to their future endeavors in the international business world. I used a metaphor currently in use in Norwegian business life that I hoped would create a link between anthropology and business – the notion of tribe. I borrowed the term from a successful figure in Norwegian advertising, Ingebrigt Steen Jensen, hoping to signal at the same time an awareness of current names and trends. I specified what I thought was unique about this

cohort of students and asked that they include me, with minimal demands on their time, as an observer in their everyday activities.

The group sat before me in a small but modern lecture auditorium with six rows of fixed desks radiating in a semi-circle from the natural focus point, the lecturer's desk and podium. Viewing the students from this vantage point provided an immediate overview of the women and men I had carefully studied in the face book provided by the administration. The face book presented a student in the form of their picture, CV and personal data. I recognized many of the faces in the room from the face book, and was also aided by a chart in front of the first row. The chart mapped each student's placement in the room; in addition to this, laminated name cards were attached to each student's desk. As the rows rose towards the back of the auditorium, it was easy enough to see each face and read the names printed on the cards.

Only one student seemed to be familiar with the discipline of anthropology, but most of them had laughed humorously when I called them a tribe. There were few questions from the group, and the majority of these were questions about my level of involvement and the demands my project would make on their time. One student, whose face book page indicated previous training in psychology, asked whether I would be using a control group in my study. This gave me the opportunity to describe anthropology using the more well-known discipline of psychology as a foil.

A few days later I received an email from one of the class representatives letting me know that the students had decided to let me carry out my fieldwork among them. The dean immediately helped me secure permission to attend classes from the majority of the lecturers, and I began what would ultimately be six months of fieldwork among 26 strangers.

### **The academic program**

Despite the availability (for Norwegian residents) of a free, state-sponsored education, the MBA students invested around 190,000 NOK in tuition money alone to attend this program of study. The institution that hosts the MBA program boasts branches throughout Norway and prides itself in being one of the largest business schools in all of Europe. Enrollment rates were growing at this private business school during my time there, something one high-level administrator associated with the fact that the school had recently ranked 15th in a recent poll on brand name recognition in Norway.

Acceptance to the program was based on a list of six selection criteria: A university degree or equivalent professional qualification, three or more years of work experience, GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test) scores<sup>2</sup>, three letters of recommendation (“at least one should be from a business source attesting to the applicant’s performance in a work situation, and one from an academic attesting to the applicant’s academic achievement”), a statement of purpose describing why the applicant wants to take an MBA at the school at this point in their career, and an interview. Interestingly, the school did not require that students document proficiency in English through TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) scores. English language skills were rather evaluated during the course of the interview.

Seeking a highly competitive and international student body, the school actively recruited students from Norway and around the world through participation in educational fairs and the distribution of a glossy and detailed brochure. The brochure was an A4-size catalogue packed with information about the MBA program and presented the most salient aspects of what was at that time “the only accredited full-time MBA program in Norway.” The brochure thus highlighted the fact that the school is accredited in Europe and the United States. The European Foundation for Management Development’s evaluation of the school was also cited in the brochure: “(The school) is clearly above the standards of quality of not one but many other European business schools which have been granted accreditation.” The MBA program’s claim to quality was repeated later in the brochure: “The (program) is listed...as being amongst the top schools of Europe in the current edition of *Which MBA?*, the most widely used European guide to top MBA schools, produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit.”

Another central feature of the brochure was a letter of welcome from the school’s president, complete with his photograph and signature. The president’s first paragraph reads:

Dear prospective MBA participants: The MBA program at (our school) prepares highly qualified candidates for careers in consulting, finance, marketing and international management. In these fields you face the dynamism of demanding international customers, aggressive global competitors and rapidly changing technology. The international business arena is multi-cultural, and it challenges traditional organization and management practice. International managers should be able to communicate and work across functional and cultural boundaries, creating effective international teams in knowledge intensive environments.

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<sup>2</sup> The GMAT is a standardized test that measures “basic verbal, quantitative and analytical skills that are developed over a long period of time.” Also see <http://www.uio.no/iss/test/gmat.html>.



The challenges presented by the president were addressed by the MBA program's structure and design, and "its distinctive feature" was described as "its strong leadership, strategy and group orientation." These "distinctive features" figured centrally in the academic program, which began in early August and ended with graduation in the end of June. The 11-month academic year was divided into four terms and I followed the students through their third and fourth term. The courses which the students followed were distributed as follows:

Term 1 (August - October): Leadership 1, Management Accounting, Marketing Management, Applied Microeconomics, Management of IT  
Term 2 (October - December): Leadership 2, Corporate Finance 1, Applied Decision Analysis, Strategy 1, Business Macroeconomics  
Term 3 (January - March): Corporate Finance 2, E-business, Ethics in Management, Strategy Project  
Term 4 (march - June): Strategy 2, Strategy Project

Tuition included a study tour abroad, access to the school's facilities, all photocopying and printing, as well as a daily lunch, fresh fruit and unlimited access to coffee and tea. Housing, transportation, meals other than lunch and other personal expenses were estimated to cost each student an additional NOK 87,500, bringing the calculated standard budget for paying students to NOK 277,500 the year I carried out fieldwork.

### **The MBA cohort**

The MBA class represented a diverse group of students, yet they were representative of the program's general profile. At a recruitment meeting I attended for prospective students, the typical MBA class was presented as having an average age of 32 years and seven years of working experience. 38% percent of the class was made up of women, 62% men. Of these, just under half of the typical cohort was made up of Norwegian nationals.

The 26 students who were enrolled in the program at the time of my fieldwork came from 11 different countries: Norway, Belarus, Russia, Turkey, France, Australia, Venezuela, China, The United States, Malaysia and Iceland. They ranged in age from 26 to just over 50, with a solid majority of the students in their early to mid-30s. Slightly more than half the group were foreign nationals, and well over half of the students were men. 11 of the students, both Norwegian nationals and foreign students, had moved to Oslo for the year in order to enroll at the school. Half of the foreign students had come to Norway solely to pursue their MBA degree. The other half

were either already living in Norway because of jobs or their family or had come to Norway for family or romantic reasons but were influenced in their choice to do so because of the possibility of attending the MBA program. While some of the students who were not from Oslo commuted home when possible during weekends and holidays, others left their spouses and children in order to spend a year in Oslo in rented rooms or apartments.

A significant entry requirement was that students have a minimum of three years work experience, and the students came from many different educational and professional backgrounds including medicine, psychology, law, pharmacy, engineering, computer science, marketing, economics, aquaculture, conflict management and telecommunications. Over twenty of the students were married or in committed relationships, and half of these had children. The students were, in other words, established with jobs and families when they decided to join the MBA program.

The students financed their MBA degree in a variety of ways. While a few of the foreign students had received scholarships, the remaining students had secured their own financing. This was done in several ways: Some students were financed by employers while others had either taken an unpaid leave of absence or quit their jobs entirely and financed their studies with a combination of loans and personal savings.

The MBA class thus represented a diverse group of students. What they shared was a commitment to continuing education and the skills they believed an MBA degree would provide them with. The students also shared a common language – English. As described above, admission to the program was not contingent upon formal documentation of English-language skills; language skills were rather assumed and controlled only informally during personal or telephone interviews and other correspondence. All of the students can thus be described as bilingual, if not trilingual, and spoke English well enough to be admitted to the program. Only two of the students spoke English as their first language, while one student had only been speaking English for a few years. Exposure to English varied among the remaining students; while some students had lived in English-speaking countries, others had worked in English-language environments in their home countries or abroad.

### **The setting**

The building where I carried out my fieldwork has a long history as a school. As a field site, it can be divided into four main areas. I have already described the MBA auditorium, where the major-

ity of classes, as well as scheduled class meetings, were held. This was the MBA “homeroom”, and was reserved solely for the MBA cohort. A second area was the second-floor lounge and reception area, a large and airy room that could easily accommodate 40-50 people without feeling crowded. The main drawing point of this room was the free coffee and hot water dispenser. For students looking for the most up-to-date financial news, a computer monitor in the hallway outside provided constant updates of the world financial markets.

A third area, in which the students spent the least amount of time, was the first-floor cafeteria. This was one of the largest rooms in the building, and one of the few places other than the second-floor lounge where the MBA students mingled with other students. While the building played host to a number of other courses and short-term workshops, the MBA students had little to do with visiting students when not standing in line with them at the cafeteria’s salad bar or the lounge’s coffee dispenser. This division was reinforced by the fact that a section of the cafeteria was reserved for the MBA students. The division made it easier for the cafeteria’s personnel to distinguish between the non-paying MBA students and paying visitors.

The fourth area, where students spent the majority of their time, was the basement. Two floors below the warmth and buzz of the second-floor lounge, a horseshoe-shaped corridor snaked through a maze of group rooms, bathrooms, a computer room, a lounge reserved for the MBA students and various rooms belonging to the maintenance crew. The back entrance was located at the one end of this corridor, and was used by the MBA students in the evenings and weekends when the main entrance was locked.

The basement lounge sported dark paneling, heavy wooden tables and dark leather sofas. A telephone with an open line allowed students to make free calls within Norway, and a rack of magazines and newspapers provided the latest news from *Aftenposten*, *Dagens Næringsliv*, *Kapital*, *The Economist* and the *Harvard Business Review*, among others. A refrigerator allowed students to store food or drinks that they brought to school and the administration regularly stocked a fruit basket. The MBA lounge was often used as a work room, though this was largely restricted to independent work such as reading. While the room was often fraught with tension as students tried to catch up on assignments, this could often give way to bouts of joking and silliness as well as cuddling and other displays of affection. The lounge was otherwise used for reading newspapers and magazines, preparing and eating food, chatting socially or napping.

The six smallest rooms in the basement were where the students worked in their appointed

groups. While the innermost group rooms had no windows, the rooms at the outer periphery were lit by small, high windows just above ground-level. The basement rooms presented a stark contrast to the rest of the building. Sparsely furnished with tables, desks, chairs, industrial carpeting and a few bookcases, these rooms were less than inspiring. The walls were hung with drywall and painted in light, institutional colors, a feeling exacerbated by the fact that all of the doors were set with glass, allowing passer byers to look in without having to enter. The small confines of these airless spaces seemed justification enough for the fact that the students called the basement area “the dungeon”.

The rooms were cramped, to say the least. Computers, briefcases, flip-over charts, coffee cups and wastepaper baskets filled with crumpled papers and empty Coca-Cola bottles attested to their purpose. Despite the work-oriented atmosphere, there were surprisingly few books in any of the rooms. What distinguished one room from another, in addition to their size, shape, and whether or not they had a window, was the degree to which the students had added to their room’s interior. This consisted in large part of tremendously long sheets of paper taped to the walls. The sheets seemed to serve for the most part one of two purposes: some sketched a current task, its components and the division of responsibility within the group, while others stretched these tasks out in time in the form of a hand-drawn calendar. The format and duration of the calendars varied from group room to group room, but all of the calendars made an urgent sense of time immediately accessible. While some groups seemed to relish crossing off or even ripping days and weeks off of their calendar, the calendars were a vivid reminder of tasks waiting to be completed as deadlines approached. The calendars often included reminders of graduation, the carrot awaiting them at the end of these visualized stretches of time. Some rooms also displayed a contract of sorts entered into by the group, defining their goals with words like “cooperation”, “commitment”, “creativity,” and “high-quality work”.

### **A typical day**

A usual day started around eight o’clock when students began arriving. After depositing coats and bags in their respective group rooms, students often headed up to the lounge for their first cup of coffee or tea. The students also congregated in the second-floor lounge during breaks from classes and after lunch just long enough to drink a cup of coffee and/or glance through the selection of Norwegian and international newspapers and magazines. These fifteen to twenty

minute breaks were usually spent socializing. Those who wanted to discuss work withdrew to the back of the room. Conversations were otherwise marked by small talk, and topics ranged from the weather, events in the news, how tired the students were and how much work they had to do.

A majority of the students' curriculum was made up of mandatory courses and attendance was obligatory; the students could also choose from a short list of electives. This arrangement meant that the students often moved as a large group as they shared the same schedule. The teaching staff were punctual and expected the students to be so as well. Latecomers inevitably received comments. More than once students entered red-faced and puffing, having run from the tram or the parking lot in an effort to reach class on time. Lecturers' comments were often joking in tone, but nonetheless directed everyone's attention to the latecomer: "We're so glad you had the time to join us today."

The students usually ate together at midday. Meals were consumed perfunctorily, and the food was rarely commented on or a topic of conversation. While some constellations were more regular than others, students seemed to sit where there was available space, or with their group members if discussing a task. While the students engaged in social talk during meals, such talk was rarely a reason to remain in the cafeteria once a meal was finished. Students often ate quickly and left once finished.

When students did not have a scheduled class to attend they spent their time in the basement. The group rooms were never empty, but were rarely quiet work spaces. Students who wanted peace and quiet had to retreat to the MBA lounge or the computer room. While students often worked individually within the group rooms, they were more often the site of meetings and work sessions. When a group convened a meeting they shut their door and visitors knocked carefully or came back later if they saw that a meeting was in progress.

Once they had retreated to the basement for the day, students only ventured into the rest of the building in order to get a cup of coffee from the second floor lounge. Students who had ordered an evening meal from the cafeteria picked their plates up in the late afternoon but returned to the basement to eat. Students with cars might also leave campus occasionally to pick up a bite to eat in downtown Oslo. It was not until a spell of exceptionally good weather during the fourth term that the students left the building to go outside for their breaks.

I left for the most part in the late afternoon, and was often the first to leave. Students usually

worked late into the evening and were more often than not at school during weekends as well. While students with cars were able to come and go as they pleased, others were restricted by the tram schedule and had to leave by midnight. On more than one occasion during my fieldwork, however, students spent the night in the basement, whether they had been working or sleeping.

## **Method**

### **Participant observation**

Participant observation has been heralded as the anthropologist's trademark and main method in collecting qualitative data. While Bronislaw Malinowski's isolation among the island Trobrianders facilitated the development of this method, other types of studies present limitations which favor observation over participation (Lien 1995). My own fieldwork among the MBA students was such a study, and one which offered more opportunities to observe than to participate directly in student activities. Yet my fieldwork cannot be construed as one in which I solely observed. "Observation" as applied to fieldwork with a focus on communicative behavior has been distinguished from "participant observation" when the anthropologist's role is defined as limited to the reception of communication, and in this sense I cannot be said to have simply observed (Phillips 1982: 202). When I write that I did not participate directly in the students' activities, this is to distinguish between general social interaction and participation in the planning of work schedules, the solving of equations, writing of reports and other school-related tasks.

When I had presented my project to the class for their approval I had, in response to their questions, downplayed the demands my presence would make on their time. Yet my study was premised upon an interest in face-to-face interaction and the ways in which language use developed within their chosen field of business studies (Phillips 1982: 179). My mode of participation, however, varied depending on whether the context of the moment was a class in session, a break between classes or study sessions and activity in the group rooms.

I had been granted permission by every lecturer but one to follow classes. The one course I was not admitted to was Ethics in Management, as the lecturer cited concern for the effect an observer might have on what he considered to be sensitive discussions. With this one exception, I attended the majority of scheduled lectures, taking what came to be my permanent seat at the back of the MBA homeroom. From this vantage point I was usually in a position to observe all of the students as well as the lecturer. I participated in a class discussion only once, when a visit-

ing lecturer called on me as he had warned he might when I had presented myself prior to the class.

My direct involvement with the students was greatest during breaks or when in transition between activities, when we were in the hallways, in the second-floor lounge, or in the cafeteria. It was during these moments that I often asked students about their plans for the rest of the day or week, and asked to observe such planned activities. Though students often protested that these activities could hardly be of interest, I was denied access by only one group. While I spent time with this group on other occasions, they asked that I not be present when they worked on their strategy project, as they were bound by a confidentiality agreement.

As described earlier, the group rooms were small in size. When present during planning and work sessions, I was often seated around the main work table together with the group. They often interrupted formal discussions with exclamations of type: "She's taking notes now!"; drawing me into their conversations with real or joking questions about what I was jotting down or what I thought of the problem at hand. While this describes a scenario that repeated itself frequently when I was with a group, it was also possible to divide the students into three categories based on their response to my presence.

The smallest group was made up of those few students who were more reserved and, for whatever reason, rarely directed their attention at me. I chose polite formality as my medium of communication, included them socially and showed an active interest in their person and activities without expecting anything in return. In contrast, the majority of the students were open and friendly and always had a few minutes to spare. Within this group again were those students who became my key informants. These were the students who I never hesitated to contact and who quickly included me in their activities, often taking the initiative.

My participation in the different arenas described above, and their associated activities, was highly regulated by information the students provided about their plans. Any given day began early and often stretched late into the night, rarely following a set schedule. A class schedule provided a rough outline, but one subject to change. Schedule changes were usually announced on an internal electronic posting system. As the administration had not given me access to this message system, I was dependent on the students for updates and I arrived more than once at an empty auditorium during the early stages of my fieldwork.

Daily activities within and across the groups were also subject to change. While planned

activities, such as solving economic problems or working on their strategy project, took up significant chunks of time, most days were marked by the contingencies of who could meet when, what assignment was due when and so forth. The calendars in many of the group rooms were often obsolete a short time after they had been created and activities planned in advance rarely occurred at the originally scheduled time. As a fieldworker I found myself in a constant flux of activity, often trying to discern what was going on where and I was extremely dependent upon my informants for information. In this regard I was vulnerable to the vagaries of fieldwork and to what Runar Døving has called the coincidences of fieldwork (Døving 2003 345).

### **My role**

Given the small size of the group, my objective was to establish a relationship with the majority of the students. Ideally, I would speak with and spend equal amounts of time with everyone, an ideal I soon understood was unrealizable. Despite taking care to be polite and equally interested in all, I experienced disinterest on the part of some students and open acceptance on the part of others. It did not take long to realize the difficulty of trying to remain neutral in a field of interpersonal relationships. As a result, my fieldwork fostered genuine friendships, many pleasant acquaintances and even mutual dislike. In other words, if I had originally conflated being a researcher with being everyone's friend, my informants defined my role in part, pulling me into a web of social relationships that had existed before my arrival.

As regards my presence among the students, one student commented that it would not have been possible for me to carry out the same project at the beginning of the year. In response to my regret that I had not followed the students throughout the entire year, he replied confidently that they never would have approved my request to do fieldwork among them at the beginning of the year. He attributed this to the fact that the students had been unsure of themselves and each other at the beginning of the year. This comment can be contrasted with another I received at the end of the year as graduation was drawing close, when another student said that my presence had made the program a better experience for her. Both reflections direct attention to my role in the field.

Phillips writes that: "(i)n the strictest sense of its meaning, participant observation refers to the simultaneous occupation of a structural position within a social system and study of that system" (Phillips 1982 202). In this sense, my fieldwork was certainly characterized by partici-



pant observation. I had several “hunches” about the MBA program and what role I might come to occupy, and these guided my participation (Schwartzman 1993 48). An example of this was described in my first encounter with the MBA students, when I had already made certain assumptions in choosing my style of self-presentation during this meeting. These hunches were informed by personal experiences, my earlier efforts to find a place to do fieldwork, and my anthropological training. I therefore constantly used these experiences to establish relationships, and a presence for myself, within the field.

One aspect of my role in the field that I am not able to explore fully enough was my acceptance into the fellowship of the women in the program. I was invited to join a birthday party for several of the girls after my first week in the field. The gathering turned out to be one of the very few occasions in which all of the “value girls,” as they called themselves, met socially. I was explicitly asked to keep that evening, and the subject of conversation, off the record. I attended as a guest and formed the basis of my acquaintanceship with the MBA women that night. This initial inclusion, coupled with the expressed wish that I not participate as the anthropologist, may have blinded me to gender issues later as I often stopped listening as an anthropologist when talking to the women.

My upbringing in the United States provided me with other perspectives in the field. The notion of a private educational market, actively recruiting paying students from near and far on the basis of reputation, was a familiar concept. This perspective was a help when speaking to the Norwegian students who felt that they were taking the road less traveled in the Norwegian context. The disadvantage of my familiarity with many of the generic aspects of the MBA program was that this lack of strangeness may have led to oversight.

My relationships with the non-Norwegian students were additionally informed by my own experience of living in Norway as a foreigner. I was at times able to provide information about life in Oslo, and was actively interested in their experiences of living in Oslo. I could commiserate with the students about high prices, the challenge of finding products from home and the difficulty of getting to know Norwegians. As a result, the foreign students were more aware of my personal background than the Norwegian students who rarely questioned me about myself.

Other aspects of my background proved to be relevant in the field. I had a considerable advantage in the field given my fluency in English; I rarely had problems understanding my informants, could make myself understood, and was rarely tired out by having to speak a foreign

language. Additionally, years of teaching English to adults had provided me with valuable lessons that included simple, though easy to forget, principles like speaking slowly, listening carefully and not interrupting the speaker. Having taught students from many of the same countries my informants were from, I was used to the ways in which their languages influenced their use of English and was able to focus on what was being said rather than how it was being said.

When alone with a Norwegian informant, or a foreign student who spoke Norwegian, I switched to Norwegian if they spoke in Norwegian first. The fact that I spoke Norwegian with some of the students did not go unnoticed and I was surprised to find that some of the foreign students thought I was Norwegian. This made me realize that I had undercommunicated my own identity, focusing on my project rather than my person when asked about myself.

The fact that I may have undercommunicated my role in the field was illustrated in a claim that had been in circulation from the start of my fieldwork. This claim was brought to the fore the one time I was called on in class. Having given what I thought was a rather commonsense answer to a question about Apple Computer's entry into the personal computer market in the early 1980s, I was surprised when the class broke out in approving applause. As a result, the number of jokes about my getting my MBA "for free" or at the very least, of my being an "honorary MBA" increased from that point onwards. While such comments were usually framed as jokes, I also detected real tension from certain students regarding my access to what they had paid so dearly for. Such tension was most noticeable among the same students who I had least contact with, and the subject of my funding, particularly in the case of my participation on a class trip abroad, proved to be one of the few points on which these students questioned me directly.

While jokes about my "free" MBA degree may have represented feigned or real resentment, they also pointed to questions of relative material standing. In contrast to many anthropological studies in which the anthropologist experiences a disparity between her own access to resources and that of her informant's – the result of which may be material demands made on the anthropologist – I was acutely aware of the fact that this was *not* my experience in the field (Chagnon 1983; Wikan 1976). Whether or not the students noticed themselves, I struggled to make the most out of my wardrobe in order to avoid wearing jeans and t-shirts and worn out clothes. I was most aware of a material difference, however, on the rare occasion that some of the students gathered socially to drink or eat out. Joining these students at a restaurant or bar often made

sizeable dents in my limited budget, as they more often than not chose high-end restaurants or nightclubs with exorbitant cover charges. While other anthropologists have struggled with demands made on their cash or other material stores, I struggled just to keep up with my informants.

### **Anthropology “at home”**

My move to Norway prior to fieldwork was a permanent move, and though Oslo was and continues to be my home, I share Anh Nga Longva’s and others’ critique of the insider-outsider dichotomy (Longva 2001 86; Narayan 1993). I am not a strict outsider, but neither do I expect that socialization into Norwegian culture as an adult will ever equip me with the same understanding and knowledge of Norwegian culture that Norwegians possess. As such, Longva’s own claim that the term “home” remains ambiguous for her resonates with my own experience. Rather than answering questions of whether or not I carried out my fieldwork “at home”, I view my own position in the field in terms of what Kirin Narayan has called “shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations” (Narayan 1993 671). In the context of my own fieldwork, I found myself constantly subject to such shifts depending on which phase of fieldwork I was in and whether or not I was together with a Norwegian student, a non-Norwegian, or a mixed group.

This notion of shifting identifications displaces a more dichotomous distinction between anthropology at home and away, but there is also the question of the field itself. Signe Howell has raised concerns that anthropologists doing fieldwork “at home” are not among their informants 24 hours a day, making holistic analysis difficult as the anthropologist cannot possibly participate in all of her informants’ daily activities all of the time (Howell 2001). Yet Howell also writes: “If one had a project that focused on *one* of these areas of life, it would probably be possible to participate in the same type of arena with a number of different informants, but hardly with the same people in all of the arenas they participate in over an extended period of time” (Howell 2001 21, my translation). I argue that the MBA program represented a significant arena in the lives of my informants at the time of fieldwork. In this my fieldwork conforms to Barnes’ prediction that fieldwork within a Western community will only provide insight into small sectors of society (Barnes 1990 68).

The challenges of doing fieldwork in one’s own society has been addressed by other Nor-

wegian anthropologists as well, but they are far more optimistic (Døving 2003; Rugkåsa and Thorsen 2003). In line with these approaches, I made an effort to see the strange in the familiar, and the unknown in the known. As I was aware of this challenge before starting fieldwork, I countered complacency by observing similar activities in different ways by writing down everything I observed over short stretches of time, writing down nothing but what I remembered *after* the fact, focusing on body language at some times or just what was being said at other times, by asking informants to explain what *they* thought was going on, by eliciting responses to what I thought was going on, and by talking with other anthropology students while I was in the field. I sometimes prepared for lectures by reading the case at hand, and tried to follow the lecture in terms of content, though this proved to be the most difficult of my approaches. I was aided in all these efforts by the fact that many aspects of my fieldwork *did* seem strange in contrast to my time in Norway. The strangeness was due in part to what I would call objective differences – the experience of attending a public Norwegian university versus the setting of a private business school – and personal differences as neither I nor any of my friends had the same professional ambitions and interests as my informants.

### **Data collection**

Schieffelin and Ochs write that: “The relation between language behavior and cultural ideologies is not explicit or obvious but must be constructed from a range of ethnographic data – interviews, observation, transcripts...” (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986 168). As described above, my fieldwork was based upon a combination of observation and participant observation, with the latter outweighing the former. Classroom observations were the easiest to record, and during classes I could freely switch between taking verbatim notes of what was being said, jotting down observations of classroom behavior and noting my own thoughts and questions as they arose. Observations made outside of the classroom were furtively jotted down in the presence of my informants or as soon as I was alone. When with the students I limited myself to noting main points, as my experience was that extended note-writing generally interrupted conversations at hand. In these cases I made an effort to expand on my notes later.

My field journals were supplemented by individual interviews, and these proved to be a rich source of data unavailable through observation (Schwartzman 1993 63; Pelto and Pelto 1978). Interviews played an important part in my data collection as my interest was not only in lan-

guage in use as observed, but also in explicit attitudes towards, and theories of, language use. Interviews allowed me to take advantage of what Agha has called: “the metalinguistic ability of native speakers to discriminate between linguistic forms, and to make evaluative judgments about variants” (Agha 2004 26). The fact that my informants were not necessarily “native” speakers does not diminish the importance of this insight, and it underlines an important assumption I made when interviewing my informants – not only were they able to reflect on their own language use, these reflections would prove to be an important source of information and object of analysis.

I interviewed 23 of the 26 students at the very end of their fourth term. The interviews lasted from one to two hours, and all were taped. Unfortunately, several tapes turned out to be incomplete due to a technical failure. All of the interviews with the exception of two were conducted at the school. While I posed most of the questions in my interview guide during all of the interviews, the order and length of each question and subsequent exchange were determined by the flow of the conversation. As with other activities, scheduled interviews were often postponed and new times suggested spontaneously. During this period I began to carry my tape recorder with me at all times, as students suddenly and unexpectedly found time to do an interview.

Interviews began by agreeing on a time frame; after that I reminded them of the anonymous nature of the interview, and asked them to let me know if they wanted anything they said kept out of my thesis. My general experience was that the students were open, engaged and reflected in their comments and assessments. The interviews were relatively formal exchanges, though also given to anecdotes and joking. The students answered my questions directly and generally without pause, and only two or three students used the opportunity to ask me questions in return. Once an interview was finished students rarely lingered, but moved swiftly to their next task.

As this thesis has developed I have become aware of issues that did not inform my data collection in the field. In hindsight I see that more formalized contact with the staff and the administration at the school, including interviews, may have supplemented questions I began to consider only after my fieldwork ended. I recognize that this also applies to questions that I have today about gender and the ways in which participation in the MBA program may have been gendered. On these two points I can only present information collected through observation as I did not interview staff and as my interview guide did not address students’ experiences of gender issues and relations in the group.

## **Anonymity**

As discussed earlier, I met what might be described as an unusual response when applying to carry out my fieldwork. Far from being concerned with the anonymity of the school in my eventual write-up, the dean dismissed my assurances that my study would be anonymous. Rather than securing promises of anonymity, the dean deemed a contract of confidentiality as unnecessary and my proposed study was enthusiastically welcomed as a means to map and promote the merits of the MBA program. I have nevertheless kept the school's identity anonymous. I have kept anonymous the identity of my informants by altering information about the composition of the class. In particular, I have changed some nationalities (though I have retained the general geographical distribution of the class) and I have omitted references to time that would identify the students as a particular class.

The risk of recognition therefore lies primarily within the group, marking my study as one carried out within a context where informants both expressed an interest in, and will have access to, my thesis. The possibility of such in-group recognition was addressed at the start of each interview. While each interview included a reminder of the anonymous nature of my study, only a few students expressed concern. Four students expressed a wish that certain information divulged during an interview, primarily opinions about fellow students or the MBAs as a group, not be included in my write-up. Accordingly, this information, as well as other potentially recognizable data collected both through observation and interviews, has not been included in the thesis.

The MBA students spent an inordinate amount of time together, working closely in cramped spaces as well as within the tight confines of deadlines. As a result, any detailed description of an informant, her background or career path, would make her immediately recognizable to fellow students. I have therefore resisted the temptation to sketch individual informants as complete personalities identifiable by personal traits, abilities or achievements, and have focused rather on presenting the students as a group. In terms of method, this has been achieved by distributing verbal exchanges, observed behavior and interview material across the group. In some cases, comments made by one student are attributed to several students, while other data may represent a synthesis of several viewpoints. All of the names have been changed despite the fact that my informants, like the administrators and teaching staff I spoke with, seemed unconcerned about their anonymity.

## **Transcriptions**

Excerpts from interviews and from my fieldnotes are presented as transcribed, and I have made every effort to render verbal statements as directly as possible. All of the interviews were carried out in English, but I do not evaluate, correct or otherwise discuss the quality of the students' English. Transcriptions presented here should allow the reader interested in such questions to judge for herself. I have, however, eliminated certain turns of phrases or traits that might identify a particular student. Text presented within (parentheses) substitutes an original utterance that was either unclear or revealed information as to the identity of a person, a place or the MBA program itself. A question mark within parentheses (?) indicates text that has been omitted because undecipherable. When exchanges between two or more people are presented each person is introduced by their first initial. My own statements and questions are indicated with the initials IL.

## **Conclusion**

Runar Døving writes that the results of social science research are never what was written in the proposal, and this has been the case in my project as well (Døving 2003 351-352). I have at times recognized expectations sketched in my proposal, but I also find myself pleased by the strangeness of my own research and the infinite number of turns that this thesis could have taken. While Døving details what he terms a hermeneutical, abductive method for the field, I found this same concept useful in writing my thesis. Without doing proper justice to his explanation, abduction as a method can be said to take its point of departure from the facts rather than searching for facts with which to illustrate the theory. Abduction offers possibilities – “qualified guessing.” (Døving 2003 342). Such “qualified guessing” during fieldwork and while writing built on an attention to detail but also a selective process inspired by the theoretical frameworks I have been exposed to during my education (Phillips 1982 201), so that what is presented here is the result of a long process indeed.





# Theoretical Frameworks and Empirical Material

In this chapter I present the MBAs' ideas about, and understandings of, language. I approach the empirical material – conversations about their definitions of “good communication” – through theories about language ideologies. My aim in presenting this material is to illustrate the way in which language ideologies, as described here, can be tied to actual practices, as described in later chapters. I lay the groundwork for subsequent chapters on language socialization in the classroom (Chapter Four), the relationship between a professional register and professional identity (Chapter Five), the relationship between notions of competence and language skills (Chapter Six) and the idea of an “imagined community” of professional experts (Chapter Seven).

## Theoretical frameworks

### Language ideology – a brief overview

In the literature reviewed for this chapter, language ideology, linguistic ideology and ideologies of language are for the most part used interchangeably, a practice I follow. In her own review of the topic, Kathryn Woolard presents three definitions as formulated by other authors: 1. “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979 193); 2. “self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experiences of members as they contribute to the expression of the group” (Heath 1989 53); and 3. “the cultural systems of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (Irvine

1989 255) (all in Woolard 1998 2). These definitions address different but interrelated issues and the chapters that follow are informed by the usefulness of each definition to the topic at hand. While definitions may vary in their focus, studies of language ideology represent a growing acknowledgement within the field of linguistic anthropology that what people think about language and communication, as well as what they take for granted, deserves special attention. Language ideology, as presented here, represents a fairly new field of thought given earlier resistance within the social sciences to what has been considered an “indeterminate area of investigation with no apparent bounds” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994 56). I have explicitly chosen to focus on a body of theory that addresses the social contingencies of language use and interactive contexts. In so doing I have chosen not to approach my research object from more cognitively oriented (and perhaps more static) studies (Pelissier 1991 80).

Studies of language ideology spring from an interest in language within anthropology, and can be tied to the discipline’s general attention to culture. Joel Sherzer writes that: “language is cultural because it is one form of symbolic organization of the world, social because it reflects and expresses group membership and relationships” (Sherzer 1987 296). An approach that combines both the symbolic and social aspects of language use represents a departure from traditional linguistics grounded in Ferdinand de Saussure’s separation of the denotational sign from the material world, as seen in the distinction between *langue* and *parole*. This separation privileged the formal structural aspects of *langue* and led to an emphasis on language’s ability to denote or represent the world, downplaying language in use (*parole*). (Hanks 1996; Gal 1989 346; Sherzer 1987 296)

This separation can also be seen in the Boasian school of cultural anthropology. The Boasian school incorporated language studies as an integral part of their efforts to map rapidly vanishing cultural groups, but they did so by insisting upon the independence of linguistic form from culture. While theories were put forth on the relationship between language and culture, culture was defined in terms of knowledge and ideas. Language was treated as an isolable artifact to be categorized and cataloged independent of its use, much as de Saussure’s *langue* (Briggs and Bauman 1992; Irvine 1989 248).

In contrast, early proponents of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis pointed to the integral role language plays in social life. Benjamin Whorf, and later Edward Sapir, like Boas, built their analyses on Native American Indian groups but with entirely different goals. The Sapir-Whorf hypoth-

esis has been described as the idea that: “language (that is, grammar) constitutes the means with which individuals think and therefore, especially as stated in its strongest forms, language (grammar) conditions or determines cultural thought, perception and world-view” (Sherzer 1987 295). While much maligned and detracted by its critics as overly deterministic, some contemporary scholars have returned to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as increasing attention has been paid to the intricate connections between language and culture and the ways in which language use structures social life. (Lee 1997; Hanks 1996; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986 169)

To the extent that attention has been paid to language use in the study of social life, Susan Gal suggests that early studies suffered from a more widespread conceptual-material divide that existed within anthropology in general. However, Gal points to two approaches which attempt to bridge the dichotomies produced by this divide as students of political economy have become interested in cultural and symbolic issues and as theorists previously identified with the conceptual-ideational camp become attuned to matters of economy and power. (Gal 1989 346-347) Summed of briefly, both approaches represent an integration of language studies with political economic concerns, seeking to study the links between language and the material world, though placing emphasis on different aspects of language use. One approach shifted attention from language’s denotational aspect, that is, its ability to refer to the world, to other functions. This line of thought is inspired by what Gal suggests is the fundamental insight of philosophers of language and linguists, in particular John Austin, Kenneth Burke and Roman Jakobson – that speaking is an act which does not simply reflect or comment on other activities but is a social act itself. As a result, context was no longer viewed as a structural constraint on talk, but as also partially produced by talk. (Gal 1989 346) Put another way, what came to be known through the early work of Dell Hymes and John Gumperz as the “ethnography of speaking,” represented an attempt to unite structure and agency with the material and conceptual (Gal 1989 346; Irvine 1989 249).

A second, related approach broke radically with structural linguistics and its focus on homogenous languages and speaker competence. Note that “competence” as used here does not refer to a Chomskyian definition that models abstract grammars and mental ability as divorced from contexts of use (Levinson 1983). Communicative competence is rather defined as: “the ability to use language in socially appropriate manners” (Hymes 1996/1974 433). This approach to competence drew attention to the diverse ways of speaking that are possible within a speech community where speakers shared interpretive norms but not linguistic forms (Urciouli 1998;

Gal 1989 349). A focus on the diverse ways of speaking within a speech community insisted that language use depended not only on knowledge of code, but also on discourse management in settings where linguistic norms diverged (Irvine 1989 256). So, though speakers may lack referential-denotational competence (“the ability to speak English”), they may share norms of language use. A child growing up in a Spanish-speaking community in the United States may only master a minimal amount of Spanish, but they understand when, where and with whom to employ their limited Spanish skills in order to show respect to elders or demonstrate group solidarity, for example (Urcioli 1998).

Current work within the field of language ideology builds upon these original insights by addressing the mutual interaction of language in use and language ideologies; that is, it is assumed that as speakers interact through language use they both draw on what they know and think about language at the same time that they adopt new views that may influence future language-based interaction (Mertz 1998 151). The power of political economy and symbolic interaction have been merged in the assumption that: “talk is not just a reflection of social organization, talk is a practice that is one of social organization’s central parts” (Gal 1989 346). Such an approach is central to this thesis. In choosing to approach the MBA cohort through a study of their language use, as well as their conceptions about language and language use, I argue that language represents a crucial “mediating link between social structure and forms of talk” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994 55). I thus argue that a description of the MBA way of talking is integral to an empirical description of this group of people and any structural position they can be said to occupy. The presentation of empirical detail may also be said to give the MBAs a sense of “analytic reality” as both their ways of speaking and their ways of speaking about speaking, are described (Abrahams 1996/1974 241).

### **The operationalization of linguistic ideology**

My interest is greater than simply “mapping” ways of speaking onto the MBAs. Gal reformulates the question at hand as one of rather investigating *how* such links are formed in the minds of speakers themselves, and she points to linguistic ideology as the conceptual tool with which to do so. Returning to the political economic considerations raised above, linguistic ideology is understood as a means to integrate the work of linguistics with the concerns of social theorists. Linguistic ideology is thus proposed as a means of tying daily communicative interaction among

the MBAs into larger macrosocial questions of power and social inequality, as well as a means to study their mutual influence (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994 72). The importance of language ideologies is thus not just that they tell us something about talk “on the ground” but that they offer a means to study the ways in which the MBAs reflect upon and build upon real and imagined connections between language use and social institutions, as well as the ways in which the MBA program as an institution contributed to such links (Gal 1998 323). Any analysis of these links must take as its object the how’s and why’s of these linkages, that is, how such links are established and why they make socially acceptable sense to the MBAs. This thesis therefore draws its inspiration from studies that combine the semiotic and social processes previously studied by linguists and social scientists as isolated areas. A major premise of this approach is a recognition of the multifunctionality of language in both its semiotic and social aspects. (Woolard 1998 19; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994 62; Gal 1989 346) Gal writes that it is:

by now a commonplace of sociolinguistics that linguistic forms become indexes of the social groups that regularly use them. Such connections between speakers and linguistic forms often enough arise out of contingent circumstances, historical accidents. But, however they have arisen we have observed that both the system of linguistic contrasts and the system of social categories are usually noticed by speakers and are elaborated, systematized and rationalized. (Gal 1998 327)

This returns us to the questions posed by Gal above about how it is that certain linguistic forms become markers of recognized groups of people, in this case the MBAs, and their activities (Gal 1998 326).

This question is addressed through the application of Michael Silverstein’s notion of “indexical order,” which in turn draws on the work of the US philosopher and semiotician Charles Saunders Peirce. Peircean semiotics build on a trichotomy of the sign in which icon, index and symbol represent three ways of relating the sign to the signified. Peirce’s insight is that: “language as a sign system has the property of being both unmotivated (purely symbolic in semiotic terms)...and motivated (iconic and indexical in semiotic terms) from the point of view of meaningfulness and appropriateness that individuals feel about their language” (Sherzer 1987 296). While iconic signs are understood as a “transparent depiction” (Woolard 1998 19) of that which they represent – smoke signals fire or the slowness of Southern speech in the United States is understood as mirroring slowness of mind, indexical signs work through contiguity, or pointing to that which they represent – a weathervane indicates wind direction and dialect points

to regional origin. Signs may also be simultaneously iconic and indexical, such that a Southern accent is both heard as slowness of mental ability *and* as an indication of regional belonging (see Lee 1997 and Parmentier 1994 for more on Peircean semiotics). In contrast, symbols stand for the signified through established convention.

Peirce's notion of the icon and the index has been particularly profitable in studies of linguistic ideology. Silverstein claims that the very fact that people have ideologies of language is a result of the fact that language is always irreducibly indexical (Silverstein 1998b 130). Silverstein's concept of the indexical order takes as its point of departure those speech forms and habits which are associated with a particular group of people, so-called first order indexicality, and seeks to explain the ways in which such first-order indexicality becomes transformed into second-order indexicality, that is, in which the ways of speaking identified with certain groups of people also come to stand for certain types of people. (Woolard 1998 18) People often associate ways of speaking with a certain type of person, groups of people or activity, and my task is to describe the ways in which language use among the MBAs was explicitly ideologized in metalinguistic discourse as representative of MBA identity (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994 61).

Ideologies of language thus present a way of studying the associations people make between language and group and personal identity, but also links that are made between language and aesthetics, morality and epistemology. Bauman has written on the way silence and refraining from speech was a Quaker aesthetic but also an outward sign of inner morality and inner state of silence (Bauman 1996 146). The belief that one language represents one people/nation as well as the Western belief that one's mother tongue bears moral significance because it is more "authentic" than other languages are other examples. (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994 55-6, 61) Further, some of the most well-known rationalizations of links between language and social life can be seen in the ways nineteenth-century philosophers successfully presented the categories "language" and "nation" as naturally and necessarily linked. Beliefs about the natural and moral superiority of English were exercised in colonial times as claims that language revealed the capacities of the mind and distinguished civilizations hierarchically. The case has also been made that ideas about the "transparency" of language has been connected to evaluations of personal honesty in contemporary middle-class America. (Gal 1998 318, 324; Woolard 1998 24). I look for such links in the MBAs' rationalizations of why a mastery of business English was understood as setting them apart.

## **The siting of ideology**

The term “ideology” takes on many different meanings, both neutral and critical, but Woolard and Schieffelin suggest that most writers share an understanding of ideology “as rooted in or responsive to the experience of a particular social position” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994 58; see Woolard 1998 58 for four different understandings of ideology). Theorists differ also in regard to the degree to which ideologies may be elicited; while many take ideology to be explicitly discursive, others locate ideology in the realm of the “commonsense” and lived relations, complicating the idea of eliciting explicit ideologies from informants. The explicitness or implicitness of ideologies can also be tied to questions of distortion and mystification, which can in turn be discussed in terms of power relations. (Gal 1998 326; Mertz 1998 151; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994 57)

I now turn to the empirical material elicited through interviews and conversations about the nature of language. This approach was informed by the idea that an initial description of the ideas at play about language among the MBAs could be based on the explicit collection and description of a certain kind of data – explicit metadiscursive material (talk about talk) (Philips 1998 223; Silverstein 1998b 137).

## **Empirical material**

### **Good communication and the sender-receiver or conduit model**

This section builds on interview excerpts framed primarily by the question: “what does good communication mean to you?” “Good communication” was put forward as a way of eliciting information about those elements students thought to be central in communicative encounters. Like Keith Basso who asked his Apache informant: “What is wisdom?” (Basso 1996 121) and Runar Døving who asked a farmer: “What is a carrot?” (Lien 2001 171), my question about the seemingly obvious felt risky and earned me some funny looks. Most of my informants nevertheless had answers to this question and on the basis of the answers they provided, I argue below that the MBAs operated with an ideal-type “sender-receiver” or “conduit” model of communication.

At two outer extremes were Sigurd, quoted below, who, for the first time since I had become acquainted with him was at a loss for words, and Jørgen, whose sophisticated and detailed personal theory of communication is presented after Sigurd’s.

- IL: Very good. Let's move on to communicating in English.  
 (Sigurd laughs)  
 This is a set of questions about communication in general. The first question is, just generally, what do you think contributes to good communication, here, in discussions, in group work, in the classroom, what for you defines good communication?
- S: (laughs) Results.
- IL: (laughs) Results?
- S: Ah...  
 (pause)  
 I'm struggling with what you're getting at with this "good communication".
- IL: Well, that's for you to decide. I don't have any, It's just a, is it when people are communicating clearly, when they understand each other? To put it another way, if there are communication problems, how are they identified and solved. Is that another way of looking at the same thing?
- S: Yeah...  
 (pause)  
 Uhm....
- IL: It could be everything from openness, willingness to include, willingness to explain, being prepared, I mean....
- S: Uh...I'm struggling with that... (laughs)
- IL: We can just hop over that, that's fine.
- S: No, I...good communication...  
 (pause)  
 No, I'm... (laughs)

While the only reply Sigurd could muster was "results", Jørgen easily launched into a description of what good communication was. He suggested that it is difficult to define what good communication is and built on his own insights, nevertheless concluding with a definition of communication as a "two-way thing":

- IL: Before I ask you about communicating at (this school), I wonder if you have your own definition of what good communication is. How would you describe good communication? Whether it's in Norwegian or French or whatever language.
- J: Well, what I regard as good communication is actually very, very hard to define. But when we have had some guest lecturers from different companies in Norway, in top leader positions, for example, Christian Thommesen and a guy from Norsk Hydro, Statoil gave a lecture once. It's the wording, or how you actually, It's very much concrete, it's very much to the point, it's very clear. Maybe you use metaphors and analogies and, it's more the kind of (?) thing, which makes the message come through very clearly. But it is hard for me to define exactly what it is.

And then of course, communication I feel is much more, it's also about body language, the tone of voice, the expression in face, it's about how you use the hands, you know, if you really want to underline the message then I think it's about using communication tools like that also is very useful. And to me communication is a little bit about, it's a little bit about empathy. Because when I tell you something, then, you know we're all different and we all perceive things differently, and when I say something to you, then you might react differently than another person. So to me, when I say something to you, it's very important to me also to see how do you react, how do you interpret, how do I get the feeling that you understand or do not understand, agree, get happy, get sad or mad. Because that also influences my communication. I will put more emphasis on that



point, or say, “Well, I didn’t mean it exactly that way.” To me that’s also communication. To me it’s a two-way thing and one has to be good at listening and also be good at observing to see how the message comes through.

I have called these two answers “extremes” due to their contrasting levels of reflection and qualitative content. While Sigurd struggled to provide a definition, Jørgen easily began discussing his views on “good communication”. I point out this distinction in order to highlight a claim that while “communication” is something most people engage in on a daily basis, the degree to which they have reflected over such activity varies greatly.

Most of the students had opinions in response to my question about good communication, though few had as much to say on the subject as Jørgen. More importantly, comparison of the interview material revealed that Jørgen’s idea of communication as a “two-way thing”, as well as Sigurd’s idea of communication being about “results”, found resonance in many of the student answers. This model was elaborated on by Kjartan when I asked him to define good communication:

K: (pause)

Well, there’s something which I think is good communication and I... First, you have to have, what to call it in English? You have to have a receiver, some kind of coming out of the message, or there’s the messenger and the receiver. Both play an equal role. So communication is not information. Information is that I am telling you something and you can decide whether you want to listen or not, and if you have understood it or not, I don’t care, or I don’t change it. I think that good communication is that first you speak very clear, you, I have to make sure that I use a language that you understand. I have to talk, I think have to use quite bold, to speak very clearly, and I have to ask you whether you have understood. So you have to confirm if, has the message come through? And I have to ask you about that. That is what good communication is. That I actually check that you actually have, that my message has come through. Good communication is to ask you what you want to hear, or to go around, and check what is the communication need in this group, or with the MBA class.

For Kjartan, “good” communication required empathy, the ability to listen and willingness to confirm. This filled out Sigurd’s pithy answer that good communication is about “results”.

As indicated by Anders below, the similarity in answers may be partially attributed to the fact that communication had clearly figured as an explicit topic of discussion in coursework:

IL: Great. Uhm...I’m going to start asking you some questions about speaking in English here at (this school), but before I do that, I want to ask if you have your own personal definition of what good communication is. No matter if you’re speaking in Norwegian or English, or if you speak any other languages.

A: Good communication?

IL: Yeah.

A: I like, yeah, it was one of the professors, I don't remember the name, but he said it as "creating the same mental picture the other person's head."

You have a picture which you want to communicate or express, and the communications process is about creating that picture, the same picture, or as similar as possible, in the other person's head. And if you manage that it has been a successful communications procedure.

When I asked Anders how one was to know whether or not they had communicated successfully he answered:

A: Uhm, either you watch how the other person responds to, if he responds as you have, uhm, as you are expecting, or you can ask for feedback. "Please reply or restate what I've just said," and he should correlate.

As defined by Anders and many of his classmates, communication is a goal-oriented process that takes place between minimally two parties within a relatively closed circuit and as a relatively isolated event that does not stretch beyond the interactive moment during which the "message" is passed back and forth. The sender-receiver or conduit model of communication shared by students describes language as transferring thoughts and feelings between people. This conforms to the claim that at least 70% of the resources in the English language which allow one to speak about language are "directly, visibly and graphically based on the conduit metaphor" (Wadensjö 1992; Reddy 1979 287). This model is therefore not particular to my informants but has been described as grounded in Western thinking about the nature of communication.

Debra Spitulnik writes that a linear model – such as the conduit or sender-receiver model made up of three discrete stages: message production, message transmission, and message reception – represents the most pervasive paradigm within mass communication studies. (Hanks 1993; Spitulnik 1993 295; Reddy 1979) Spitulnik reasons that the popularity of this three-part model within mass media studies can be attributed to the usefulness of "isolatable media messages" which are both easily quantifiable and unproblematically transmitted and received (Spitulnik 1993 296). Among my own informants, an overarching focus on words, vocabulary and terminology suggests that these units were understood as the "natural containers" for the message (Reddy 1979 287). The advantage of such a closed system is that it is amenable to a system

of checks and balances, here synonymous with “successful” communication. Success is achieved once each party possesses near-identical and correlating images of the same “message”.

### **Extrapolating from the conduit model: three entailments**

In this section I discuss three of the entailments of the conduit model in light of my informants’ statements, taking a comment from Torstein as my point of departure. In the following exchange I asked Torstein whether the fact that the program was carried out in a foreign language (for all but two of the students) was an advantage or disadvantage:

IL: Do you think it’s easier or harder here, where everybody is speaking a foreign language, speaking English, except for two or three people?

T: Definitely, in some sense it’s definitely, yeah... In some sense it’s harder in English, of course. I don’t have the vocabulary, they don’t have the vocabulary. And in the first couple of months I felt that I wasn’t able to communicate as well as I should. But I think that we developed some sort of efficient English. You get your words out and you get your point across, and uh, I actually don’t feel that it’s a problem anymore. You get your (?) on the table and sort of not very nice English and then of course you have Russian-English, you have Norwegian-English, you have it all the way. And it’s definitely more exaggerated by the way that we don’t care about anything else than getting the point across. Everybody is able to do that now. I had some trouble in the first couple of months, to do it well. But now I think I get every point across that I want to get across.

We see the sender-receiver model in play here as Torstein employs the spatial metaphor of shuttling words “out into” and “across” the space that separates two speakers. Words are further substantiated as something that you can put “on the table” and Torstein also identifies a lack of words as the main problem in this setting. Given the conduit model posited above, if a speaker or receiver lacks certain words, successful communication may be jeopardized as it will be difficult to establish “correlating” pictures. The sense that the crux of a communicative encounter lies in the message bearing units is closely tied to an understanding of language as primarily referential or propositional, that is, pointing to the world. This study thus correlates with studies from a number of European language communities, as well as studies from the United States, that reveal tendencies to see referentiality as the essence of language (Woolard 1998 13; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994 70; Spitulnik 1993; Irvine 1989 250; Reddy 1979).

My first claim is that this understanding was shared by the MBA students. As referentiality was understood as dependent upon words, a derivative claim is that the ability to refer was seen

as subject to improvement through the acquisition of more words. In Torstein's statement above improvement in communication skills was directly tied to acquiring new words. While Torstein "didn't have the vocabulary" in the beginning, he *did now*. This highlighted a belief that communicative skills represented a developmental process in which progress could be made. These ideas are echoed in the following excerpt as Bjørnar returned again and again to the importance of words. While he at one point seemed to discount the importance of words, and later discounted the importance of how many words he knew, he nevertheless reframed my question about his communicative skills in terms of quantities of words:

- B: I think, first of all I sort of think that I sort of moved my English from the back of my head to sort of the front of my head where it's in the access box so I don't really have to concentrate that much anymore. But I have been thinking about, have I really learned some ...? Do I have more words? And I'm slightly concerned that I'm maybe not learning anything, just pushing it sort of closer to more accessible. But... (laughs) I feel so. I feel that it is extremely much more easy to speak English now. Or than it was before I started. And now I don't really even have to think about it, when I have to change from Norwegian to English, which is new. So it's much easier to speak English, but I don't know if I have more words. But apart from a few obvious ones because of what we're doing. I'm more comfortable.
- IL: And you're comfortable talking about material and talking in class? And making jokes and speaking in English all of the time?
- B: Yeah, I mean, now I feel completely comfortable and I don't even think about it, or it comes natural. But, I mean, like now I'm still lacking words and I could spend more time on that, but I really don't, it doesn't concern me.

The second claim drawn from the conduit model is the implicit notion that communication externalizes personal thoughts, feelings and perceptions. Michelle Rosaldo's cross-cultural ethnographic work among the Ilongot of the Philippines suggests that in addition to a focus on referentiality, Western notions of how language works build on a highly privatized view of language (Rosaldo 1982). Rosaldo levels her critique at Western philosophers of language in general, and John Searle in particular, but also claims that lay understandings of language are based on a privatized view of language in which intentionality plays an important role (Hanks 1993; Verschueren 1985; Rosaldo 1982). This has also been called a monological model, based as it is on the point of view of the speaker and speaker intentions (Wadensjö 1992: 9). That language may be understood otherwise is illustrated in Rosaldo's material that demonstrates that "good communication" was understood differently by the Ilongot. Among the Ilongot, the reaffirmation of existing social relationships and relationships of rank and privilege was in focus, rather

than establishing similar “mental pictures” (Rosaldo 1982 214).

Arve was clear that a speaker can communicate his feelings directly with the help of the right words:

- A: (Sighs and then laughs). Uh, I mean, I like when we are sort of pretty direct and say what we are actually thinking and directly, and not sort of speaking in terms where you have to interpret much to get (?). That has more to do when we cooperate, or get sort of going, are open about how we are feeling and when we are pissed off we say that we are pissed off. That's uh... And that sort of makes it more efficient or effective.

By suggesting that words can express what one is *actually* thinking, Arve expressed faith in the idea that words may convey to the outside world his inner state of being (“pissed off”). However, Charles complicated this approach through his concern that the interpersonal aspect of communication complicated successful communication as one must be sensitive to the fact that one's intentions may not be understood, or may be even be misunderstood:

- C: As on the communication part, I think what I, I regard communication as two-part. One part is the foundation. It's to build the trust that whatever the other person speaks the person is speaking out of, uhm, there's no prejudice and stuff. So, but sometimes, if you don't maintain the foundation part, people get pretty sensitive when you say something. Like if I say: “Norwegian is small.” You know!? If you really, if you cannot believe that I am such, if you cannot believe that I am such a person whereby I'm, whatever I say is without prejudice, then you will read that differently. Maybe because I say: “Norwegian is small” instead, maybe it has its advantage, or maybe I'm talking about business market-wise. But when you do take me as a foreigner and tell you: “Norwegian is small”, some people get really pissed off. And at times I really don't understand, then if someone get angry, I would have to move back to my foundation level and readjust it and say: “If you want to talk to this person I have to be careful, there are some things I can't talk about.” There's nothing wrong about that, but what I, my preferred level is the second level. Then things will flow much easier.

Charles suggested that intentionality may be hard to convey as a message runs the risk of being open to many interpretations and should therefore be tailored to its audience in order to secure understanding. A foreigner in Norway, Charles suggested that a comment on his part such as: “Norway is small” may be read by a Norwegian as an insulting comment whereas he meant only to point out a positive aspect as regards, say, market possibilities in Norway. However, he maintained the idea of a communicative level where it is actually possible to communicate unadulterated intent.

A third entailment following the referentiality and intentionality implicit in the conduit model directs attention to questions of how responsibility is distributed within communicative

interaction. Communication as described by the MBAs originated in a single person who had responsibility not only for what was said and *how* it was said, but also for ensuring that the intended message had been received. I therefore suggest that a sense of responsibility is expressed in both Torstein's acute sense of how well he "should" have been able to communicate in English and Charles' description of having to "readjust" original statements. While Bjørnar asserted that he was not *really* worried about the fact that he *could* spend more time on improving his vocabulary, all of these students indicated an awareness that they were constantly being scrutinized and evaluated in light of their ability to express themselves. The conduit model can thus be described as putting the burden of responsibility for failed communication on the person who is unable to adequately express herself (Reddy 1979 288-9).

The idea of personal responsibility for successful communication was touched upon by Ela when I asked her about communication problems I had observed in her group:

IL: What do you think the problems are?

E: There were no problems at the beginning.<sup>1</sup> Everybody, and to be honest, I am sort of lucky at the very beginning of the MBA because my group was very good at not, like, subjective evaluations. It's all accepted by other members of the class as well. We were four people, and especially two of them are Norwegians, are the most brilliant ones in the class. And they are very easygoing people. And it was very easy and very enjoyable to work with them. And, you know, our group, the levels of the people were more or less equal, I mean they were a little bit better but we were not worse, actually. So it was really fun, though there was lots of pressure and stress, still most of the time it was very fun. They were sort of quite experienced people and I didn't really have any communication problems at all. But with the second group, I'm realizing it more. Maybe it's because of the personalities, actually. But I realize that some people don't know, and doesn't know, how to listen.

Ela's answer was two-fold: she described a situation in which her first group members were equally experienced and competent. Given such a level playing field communication was successful. The corresponding *lack* of experience among group members in her second group was blamed for poor communication. Communication problems were further blamed on personal characteristics, and a lacking ability on the part of the individual to listen. I argue that while Bjørnar's comments (above) supported the idea that communicative responsibility was understood as lying with the speaker, Ela's understanding of communication problems also suggested that one is responsible for *listening* in the right way. Frank echoed this same idea:

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<sup>1</sup> Ela referred here to the group she was in the first half of the year.

- F: ...I think it's very important to try to be open and listen to what's being said and not what's being perceived. Because it could be a very big difference. So my sort of recipe to that would be to try to listen to (?) language of communication and take it from there, and if you don't understand or are sure of what this really means, ask.

### **Communicating the self, communicating humor**

In this last section I turn away from the discussion of “good” communication as expressed in the conduit model and look at particularly difficult aspects of communication. While students inevitably brought multiple issues to bear on the subject of language use and communication, I present the two concerns most often discussed by students when asked about problems they had expressing themselves in English: their ability to express their “real” selves and the ability to express themselves humorously

Nikolai was perhaps the student who had the least experience with English, having learned English only a few years prior to joining the program. In the following quote he contrasted his persona when speaking his native language with the person he felt he was when speaking English:

- A: English is for me, of course now it is, I am not completely 100% comfortable because I am much more talkative than I usually am in the program; my friends sometimes shame on me (laughs).

But not here. So it's a little bit for me more difficult to explain what exactly I explain... It bothers me a little sometimes.

Describing himself as a very engaged and talkative person when speaking his own language among his friends, he found himself unable to do so in the MBA program. Outside of the interview he had previously expressed his frustration that he felt people in the program did not know the “real” him, something he attributed to the fact that he operated with a certain time lag, as his replies never came quickly enough. This aspect of a time lag also proved to be a central element when students spoke generally about joking in English.

The ability to joke and provide humorous commentary represented a central feature for students when evaluating their ability to express themselves, and to understand others, in English. For Grace these issues were so central that she used them to respond to my general questions about how she defined good communication. Rather than defining good communication, Grace talked about the experiences she had making and understanding jokes in English:

G: Sometimes still I find that if I can maybe tell a joke, it may ...it may be difficult to make it laugh in English. And also, the same way if people sometimes people talk and they laugh, I sometimes don't know why they laugh! (laughs)

And uh, I think, native language is best really to express the feelings.

IL: You said that it's easier to express your feelings in (your own language)?

G: Yeah, in (my own language), more easy! (laughs)

In her reply, Grace implicated the ability to express one's feelings, humorous or otherwise, as the essence of good communication and a goal best served in one's own language. Her comments thus reinforced the idea that a central feature of language use is expressing one's feelings. I suggest that this belief is the source of her own surprise when talking about the use of English in her professional life, as expressed in her answer to the following question:

IL: What about professional language? Because now you've spent a year here studying business in English, do you feel you can express yourself like you need to?

G: Yeah. For professional language I think I cannot sometimes find the (?) word (in my language)! (laughs)

Sometimes, even in (my home country), where we were in the workplace, we would talk (our language) but we would mix a lot of English. And we...it's quite strange we cannot find the words in (my language). You always think, "what's X? How do you translate it?"

Grace here expressed a belief shared by many of her fellow students, namely that industry terminology lacks equivalents in their own languages. What is interesting about her comment at this juncture, however, is the fact that she seemed to express some surprise and disbelief over her discovery that she could not always resort to her own language when expressing herself. The fact that she could not always find the right words in her own language can be explained in other terms, but this struck her as oddly funny, prompting nervous laughter on her part. I suggest that her laughter had its source in the sense that something was out of place due to a discrepancy between her experiences and the idea that some things are better said in one's own language (Hymes 1996/1974 451).



## **Conclusion**

I have argued that the conduit model of communication and its entailing focus on referentiality, intentionality and responsibility informed the linguistic ideologies that guided students in their understanding of the role of language in communication. The conduit model as presented here informs subsequent discussions of the importance of business terminology, the ways in which a mastery of this terminology was understood as defining the MBA students as a group and the claims they ventured on the basis of such mastery.



## **Socialization in the classroom: MBA talk and social organization**

In this chapter I address the ways in which classroom practices and activities are organized so as to teach the MBA students to speak in particular ways. Anthropology has long studied the ways in which societies socialize individuals into being fully competent group members through a variety of means. While some studies take as their object clearly delineated rites of passage from one state of life to another (Turner 1967) others look at the more subtle and informal day-to-day activities that incorporate young individuals into the ways of being – and speaking like – a proper person (Kulick 1992; Pelissier 1991 88; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). In complex societies such as modern industrial societies, such transitions can often be identified in formal educational processes like the MBA program (Heath 1984 251). I argue that the professional training the MBA program provided taught students not only the theoretical and quantitative skills they would need in order to work as executives or consultants, but also the discursive practices associated with these future careers (Goodwin 1994 627; Pelissier 1991 89; Heath 1984 262).

This chapter is therefore about the processes by which the MBA students learned how to use language in particular “MBA” ways, but it is also about the ways in which language use can contribute to role differentiation (Mertz 1998; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986 163). Mertz writes that: “Hidden behind the apparent content of any lesson are deeper messages about how the world operates, about what kind of knowledge is socially valued, and about who may speak and in what manner... and that this is quietly conveyed through classroom language” (Mertz 1998 150). In light of this, it may be said that students were learning more than just “MBA talk”, they were learning a way of speaking that was understood as correlating with certain types of people, and

therefore, also learning about being certain types of people.

As I argue that a key aspect of the MBA program lay in the very teaching methods employed, I focus on the interaction between the MBA teaching staff and the students within the classroom. The chapter begins with a presentation of the teaching material on which lessons were based. In Fredrik Barth's work on what he calls "informational economies", he has suggested that different forms of knowledge can be understood in light of their mode of transmission (Barth 1987, 1990). As will be demonstrated, teaching in the MBA program was highly verbalized and information was conveyed primarily through lectures and class participation. I examine both the content of verbal exchanges that took place as well as their structural organization in order to highlight the deeper lessons the MBA program was teaching (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986 165, 170).

### **The case method**

The MBA program of study was made up a series of core, obligatory courses and a few electives. While the variety of subjects denoted a number of different skills deemed necessary to become business managers, they shared a common format as the majority of the MBA courses built primarily on what has been called the "case method". While supplemented by readings from central works in business management with titles like *Strategy* and *Competitive Advantage*, many assignments were based on case studies presented in pamphlets licensed and produced by the Harvard School of Business. The case method itself was developed at Harvard University's law school in 1870 and has since been disseminated to other fields such as business studies (Philips 1982 190).

This method of teaching challenged students to apply business theory and economics to real-life business scenarios. A majority of the cases built on critical junctures in the history of well-known US giants such as Pepsi-Cola or Apple Computers, but could also describe lesser-known or European companies such as the French automaker Renault. The usual format of a case included a brief history of the company as well as the particulars of a specific dilemma faced by the organization such as declining markets shares, the question of whether or not to acquire another company or whether or not to expand into a new market. This combination of chronological background and specific details spanned on average 15-20 pages and was more often than not presented from the viewpoint of the executive in charge of making the ultimate decision. The information was real in that the actual names, dates and financial figures were used. What

the cases withheld, however, were the decisions made and their final outcomes.

The challenge posed to students was to resolve the management problem as though they were the responsible executive themselves. Cases were “solved” in short, often one-page, papers in which students were expected to identify the key issues at play, analyze the market situation and make recommendations as to a proper course of action. Depending on the class and the assignment, these papers were either written by the students individually or in groups. Class discussions were devoted to reaching a solution on the basis of the recommendations students had made.

A significant feature of the ways in which cases were taught was the demand that students master the material and at all times be prepared. Case readings were supplemented by textbooks, and the students had large amounts of reading to do at times, as the day when I followed Josefine to class and she told me they had had 200 pages of reading for the day’s class. While the professor called on students to present this combination of case and text book information, he or she often supplemented the case itself and the students’ comments with useful information that had not been included in the original case material.

### **Cold calls**

The case method formed the basis of the MBA curriculum, and was paired with a distinct teaching method. Striking similarities are evident between what I observed in the MBA classroom and descriptions of law school classrooms in the United States in their common use of what has been called the “Socratic method”, or teaching through leading students through a series of questions and answers which they answered themselves (Mertz 1998 154; Philips 1982 182). While none of the professors or lecturers I spoke with used this term, they described their methods in other ways. One guest lecturer made his own approach explicit in his opening remarks to the class:

What happens is not the answer, you all know that. I’ll leave the case to you. If you won’t talk, I won’t. One important implication is that you not try to convince me. It may seem that I’m particularly for or against a solution. I’ll challenge you. I reserve the right to continue dialogue with one person as long as I please, so that little one liners: “Isn’t this about X?” and then that’s it aren’t acceptable. This is your game, not mine. Whatever we learn from this session will have to come out of you, OK?

In this description the lecturer established himself in a position of control over the students and

made demands on the qualitative content of their participation. When the visiting lecturer said: “This is your game, not mine. Whatever we learn from this session will have to come out of you,” he was referring to the fact that students played an integral part in classroom learning and that they were not to expect that he was going to give them all the answers – just ask the right questions.

Student participation was regulated through voluntary comments or through randomly choosing a student to provide information, an activity known as a “cold call”. Cold calls were facilitated by the nametags posted on every desk, allowing even a visiting lecturer to call on students by name. A lecturer could use cold calls to focus his unwavering attention on a single individual as he drilled the chosen student on the facts of a case or on their suggestions for the resolution of a task, a “right” the visiting lecturer cited above had explicitly claimed. As attendance was mandatory for all classes, cold calls tested preparedness as unprepared students risked being caught out in an uncomfortable and potentially embarrassing situation. This was illustrated when a student indicated that she was unprepared to participate in the discussion and that she needed help in understanding the issue being discussed. She formulated her request with: “I need this with a teaspoon,” to which the professor responded wryly: “I don’t have a teaspoon,” and turned to the class to ask if anyone could help their fellow student.

I argue that cold calls were part of a larger strategy that tested not only students’ preparedness, but their ability to formulate their answers in particular ways. Whether a student was chosen to speak because they had indicated willingness or because they had been cold-called, the exchange that followed repeated a basic format in which the student was led through a series of questions. Questions might initially explore a student’s grasp of the case at hand, testing whether or not they had prepared for class, but quickly moved to issues framed by questions like: “But what do *you* think?”, which tested a student’s knowledge and wits. These open-ended questions were the basis of all discussions, which were again shaped by the answers elicited from students. As described by both students and staff, the use of cold calls had been a significant classroom tool during the first half of the year; one student described this as a time when: “nothing you said was right”. By the second half of the year and the time of my fieldwork, I rarely observed extended questioning of a single student. The most typical exchange observed between a professor and student can be illustrated in the following excerpt from my field notes:

Professor asks Michelle about the nature of bonds, and asks her to formulate her previous answer more concisely: “What’s this instrument for all practical purposes?” Michelle: “A bond that’s traded as equity.” Professor: “Does it help us (in solving the problem at hand)?” Michelle: “It could be a prediction.” Professor: “Which would you use to make a prediction?” and so on for several minutes.

Once the facts of the case had been presented, the professor took the class to the next step by asking them for their recommendations. At this point, students could stay with their original assessment or choose another option. In some cases the professor would ask the class to raise their hands in a vote to determine which recommendations were most favored. The professor then revealed what the executive(s) in the case had chosen to do. Aided by hindsight, the professor was also able to detail the results of this decision. Students were then led in a discussion of what factors had contributed to the outcome. As mentioned earlier, the professor often presented information that played a central part in the outcome, but that had not been included in the case material. The focus was thus not so much at arriving at any “right” answer, but in establishing the interrelationship of contributing factors.

The professor’s job was to tease information out of students in a way that provided a stepping-stone for further discussions, ultimately leading to solutions or recommendations based on collective and cumulative knowledge. A lecturer told me during a break: “The MBA cohorts are designed to have heterogeneity so that they can learn from each other. Heterogeneity provides for greater learning.” This technique of building on student insight was confirmed by a second professor who summed up classroom practices in this way: “The idea is to pick on a student, and then have another student challenge or agree with them. The idea is not that the professor talks but ‘collective wisdom.’” The focus on group work and collective effort, both in the classroom and in the preparatory work done by students before class, was considered so central to the program that group work was cited in the program’s brochure as the very reason for the importance placed on the case method of teaching.

### **The informational economy of the MBA classroom**

This emphasis on “collective wisdom” led me to look in particular at the ways MBA knowledge was communicated within the classroom and against the backdrop of group work. In what follows I describe the “informational economy” that was at play, and I identify verbal exchanges as

the most significant mode of transmission (Barth 1990, 1987).

MBA teaching practices, with the case method as their cornerstone, were highly verbalized, and this oral mode of communication was a significant parameter of classroom learning. Indeed, I rarely saw students take notes in class as their full attention was directed to the ongoing discussion or presentation. Class discussions, as well as the extra information provided by the professor, were vital to the case method. Philips argues that such verbal interaction in law school classroom holds together what she calls the “fragmented” literature (Philips 1982 196). The idea that classroom discussions also provided the glue, as it were, within the context of the MBA program was confirmed on my first day of fieldwork when I met one of the students in the restroom. She was patting her face down with cold water and clearly not feeling well. I asked why she was at school when she was ill, and she answered as though from experience: “I don’t dare miss class, otherwise it’s too hard,” suggesting that the most valuable information was provided during classes. Ela’s comment gave evidence to a defining feature of the MBA program, namely the fact that the emphasis placed on class discussions significantly restricted the ability to learn by simply reading the material (Philips 1982 196).

While the discussions took the case material as their point of departure, they also drew on four other main sources of information. As already indicated, the teaching staff facilitated discussions not only by leading students in the right direction through questioning but by supplementing discussions with relevant information that had not been included in the case material. The three other sources of information, however, came from the students themselves.

First, students were expected to draw on career experiences in meaningful ways, as when Antony qualified his contribution to a discussion in this way: “I’ve been through a restructuring process so I know a little about this. There are two types of employees: those who have sense, who have seen the light and know where you are going and those who don’t understand. So the question is how to organize so that everyone knows what is going on.”

A second source of information was what one professor called “industry awareness”. “Industry awareness” referred to knowledge of current and past market news. Professors often opened discussions by asking students if they had been following the latest market news about certain industries or particular companies. Print and Internet sources such as the *University of Miami’s Readiness Index*, Reuters, *The Economist*, *Fortune Magazine* and *Harvard Business Review* were often referred to.



The third source was represented by previous cases and the general body of knowledge that students had built up through the course of the year. As all students had gained the same insights and learned the same lessons, at least in theory, they were equally responsible for managing this information. Professors and students alike often built on earlier cases with phrases like: “There are a lot of similarities between Glamox (the case at hand) and Dell Computers (a case previously discussed),” reinforcing the idea that decision making could be based on experience and cumulative knowledge.

These aspects of the MBA program complicate studies of Western educational settings that have focused on the effects of literacy and the effects of a transition from oral to written forms. While it has been suggested that the written form represents a shift to decontextualized information, and a concomitant decrease in the role other people may play in teaching new information (Heath 1984 268), the MBA program demonstrates that certain types of texts and learning environments may actually increase the dependence on others.

### **Structural segregation**

The emphasis on group work and collective wisdom can also be linked to the structural segregation of the MBA students. As described in Chapter 2, the MBA students represented a number of professions, and the spread in age meant that some students had more work experience than others. The students had been divided into groups at the start of the school year that ensured a mix of formal qualifications, years of work experience and gender. At mid-year the staff had created new work groups that would also form the basis for the different strategy projects. This was no easy task, and the dean reported that the staff had allocated two days to this process. While much consideration was given to the division of the class into formal work groups, I argue that the program was also structured in a way that segregated the MBAs as a group unto themselves.

As described in Chapter Two, the MBA program was located in a building shared by other students, but there was limited contact between the two groups. They might meet in the lounge during a coffee break, but the use of the MBA homeroom as well as the basement with its separate MBA lounge and group rooms, effectively kept the MBA students relatively isolated from the other activities in the building. Though the fact that the MBA students were relegated to their own section of the cafeteria at lunch was explained as a way of keeping track of who had to pay for their lunch and who did not, this practice further assured that the MBAs were really only in contact with each other.

This brings to mind ethnographic material about rites of passage and the change that is effected by removing novices their surroundings (Turner 1967). In the case of the MBAs, physical separation was not complete but was enhanced by the demands made on their time, which, in conjunction with the focus on group work, further forced them into close physical proximity for extended periods of time. The students reported that they spent an inordinate amount of time at school, and they worked, or were at least on the premises, until late evening and many weekends. As a result, the students not only spent an incredible amount of time away from their families and friends, but with each other as the only way they could get through the workload was to work together. They formed study groups across their assigned work groups for smaller and larger assignments, they worked on their recommendations for cases together, they helped each other with calculations and sometimes they divided a task between themselves, each making their own contribution.

A staff member explained that one of the objectives of the first two terms had been to teach the students to pool their resources and work together to share the burden of the workload, a fact the students were all too aware of. Watching two students trying to coordinate the week's workload, I once commented that they needed an eighth day to get all of their work done. To this a haggard student replied emphatically: "No! We already work seven days a week! I think they do it on purpose, to teach us logistics."

While the workload had relaxed significantly by the end of the year, the first half of the year was still referred to as "boot camp" by the students. During this initial period Ela claimed that: "nothing you ever said was right." A second student claimed that he had had no self-esteem in class after the first half of the year due to tactics in which professors "cut down" on students because of insufficient answers. These first months provided a common reference point for students to which they could point to as a time they had "survived" with help from each other. This common group experience was central in leading Josefine to further the military analogy and refer to her cohorts as "a military platoon" and I suggest that an equally important result of these harrowing introductory months was to build group unity.

I would like to suggest that such structural segregation was reinforced by the informational economy of the classroom. It has been suggested that the case method not only makes student learning dependent on class discussions, but makes class discussions, as well as in-house humor and jokes, inaccessible for non-students. As described here, class discussions were

saturated with a great deal of both individual and shared background information, making my experience of class discussions highly disjunctive (Gal 1989 351; Philips 1982 192). This can be illustrated by the way in which a professor summed up the day's discussion: "I've been talking about this in a very concrete way, but there are theoretical reasons which you can see. I wanted you to use the theory so you can understand other alliances (the discussion had been about air-line alliances) in terms of cost structures and learning advantages." The professor's emphasis was on the fact that a general lesson had been drawn from the day's case that was applicable to other cases. The general lesson, however, was predicated upon the extent to which the discussion had in fact been "concrete" for the audience. In order for this to be the case, the audience had to be familiar with the "theoretical reasons" the professor referred to as well as be able to apply insight to other situations. As the ability to do so hinged on classroom participation, this skill was implicitly understood as located within the group.

In short, the professor's claim that the discussion had been very concrete was only applicable to a qualified MBA audience, leading me to describe his summary, as well as most talk within the MBA classroom, as a highly contextualized way of speaking. "Contextualized ways of speaking" are here referred to the ability: "to draw upon or refer cryptically to both shared information and the shared meaning of (...) terminology" (Philips 1982 185). As with the closing summary described above, we see that MBA students necessarily drew on a host of shared information sources in order to both understand and respond to questions such as the following: "Does Star Media's performance warrant its \$40 per share reevaluation as of January 2000? Let's say the lower end of the range of EBITDA multiples for calculating terminal value are – say 20 times or 25 times – and the discount rates are 14%."

My point is that the highly contextualized nature of the MBA classroom further delimited the MBAs as a group. Answers were to be found within the group, further making their particular forms of knowledge inaccessible to outsiders or at least non-business people.

## **Performance**

Having described general classroom teaching practices and activities, and the predominance of a highly contextualized way of speaking, I now take a closer look at the way these practices served not only to mold what was being said, but *how* it was said. The arguments made here are expanded upon again in the next section, where I look at what these lessons may tell us about the

type of knowledge that was valued in the MBA program.

In addressing the emphasis on how things were said in the classroom I apply Richard Bauman's concept of "performance." Bauman understands performance as: "a metacommunicative frame, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence" (Bauman 1993 182-3). Competence is here understood as the ability to speak in socially appropriate and understandable ways (Hymes 1972), such that successful performance is measured in terms of audience reception and evaluation based on community norms.

Commentary by teaching staff contributed to the development of such norms through directly evaluative statements addressed both to the content of student input, as in: "Don't tell me what he did wrong, tell me what he should have done!"; and to its form, as in: "I think that answer is biting itself in the tail – 'it's correct because it's better!'" The teaching staff did not only evaluate answers, however, but facilitated student performance through careful coaching in how to formulate answers, as seen in the following excerpt from my field notes:

The visiting lecturer turned to the case for the day by asking for a synopsis, cold-calling a student in the room. After the synopsis was presented he asked the class whether or not they would choose to invest in the company described in the case, to which no one responded. His terse response was: "OK. I'll be nice, I'll take my arms down and smile" (his arms had been crossed across his chest). One of the women volunteered an answer: "Yes, I would invest. I like the fact that it's family built" and continued by referring to the lecturer's article that had accompanied the case. The lecturer asked her to elaborate and the student expanded on her previous answer. Once she had finished arguing her point, the lecturer recast her answer in the following sentence: "What you're saying is that they've decided to make their products incompatible."

We see that the professor ultimately summed up the student's lengthy answer in one short sentence. This technique was manifest in almost every classroom discussion, and lengthy, imprecise or incorrect answers were more often than not reformulated in short phrases such as: "What you're talking about is 'branding.'" While students were not asked to repeat the terminology introduced, this pedagogical approach mirrored the socializing power everyday talk holds over young children who are asked to repeat what they have just heard. Such repetition teaches novices to associate certain ways of talking with particular social contexts, effectively asking: "can you say 'branding'? – that's the proper thing to say right now, right here" (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986 172).

The reformulation of lengthy answers into concise terminology served to create parallels between the content of what students had said and MBA terminology. Equally important, the use of parallelism focused student attention on the act of speaking and the importance of speaking in the correct way (Bauman 1993). While these reformulations may have served a secondary lesson in teaching the non-native English speakers new vocabulary, they were also effectively lessons about translating lengthy lay answers into concise, professional terminology. Phrases such as “what you’re saying” and “what you’re talking about” served as pedagogical cues, indicating the importance of what was being said, as well as the importance of how it was being said.

At this point I would like to return to the visiting professor who was quoted as warning the class about the unsuitability of: “little one liners (like): ‘Isn’t this about X?’” I argue that this warning should not be read as contradicting efforts to teach students the use of concise terminology, but as integral to these efforts. For while students were introduced to new terminology, they were also tested in their substantive understanding of these terms. In other words, while a student may have learned what to say when, professors were quick to confirm whether or not usage was founded upon genuine understanding. In a discussion regarding airline alliances, a lecturer asked the class to present arguments for and against a particular alliance. He cold-called Erik who quickly answered: “Synergy.” The lecturer mockingly responded: “That’s a big word. Walk the talk. What kind of synergy?” Having been caught out by this exchange and unable to answer what was meant by “synergy”, Erik was passed over in favor of a student who had raised his hand and who “unpacked” the term “synergy” as referring to a list of strengths the airline in question had demonstrated.

Student awareness of the expectation that they speak in a correct manner was also reflected in what Bauman calls “disclaimers”, or “a statement of unwillingness to assume responsibility to (an) audience for a display of skills and effectiveness in story-telling” (Bauman 1993 194). This was evident when students fumbled for the right term, sheepishly apologizing for their inability to translate their answer into the appropriate terminology. A significant exception to this was when students asked for clarification of words and terms that were unfamiliar to them; such questions received immediate answers if they were framed so as to indicate that the student was unfamiliar with the word as an *English* word or phrase, as when a student asked: “What means ‘red herring’?” or “how do you call the opposite of an advantage?” Allowances were thus made when it came to introducing or explaining terminology that the professor did not think the stu-

dents knew, as when one professor explained: “‘buoyancy’, that means the floating properties”, or when a student had used the non-existent word “lesseer”, to which the response was: “Who? No. You have the ‘lessee’ and the ‘lessor’. If you want to be safe, say ‘the one who rents out.’”

### **The mobility of MBA talk in an uncertain world**

I have up until now described the methods and goals of the case method and provided a description of the lessons learned regarding the proper way to talk as an MBA. In the following section I look at what sort of knowledge was being produced.

The objective of the case method was to develop the students’ ability to see similarities across a range of issues and indeed, industries, in order to apply these insights to future issues. This was expressed when a professor summed up a case about a product called the PalmPilot that involved Donna Dubinsky of Apple Computer-fame: “Looking back, not we, not even Donna Dubinsky can say what they should have done. It could have been better or worse. But it gives us the opportunity to look into and maybe learn a little, and on the basis of that perform as executives later.”

The expressed goal then, was to extrapolate solutions from local knowledge – as generated in the group – in order to enhance future performance as business executives (Lien 2006). While the case method provided the training ground for this activity, I argue that the explicit translation of these experiences into appropriate forms of talk was crucial in the process of rendering knowledge gained from a particular case generally applicable to future cases. In light of this, classroom practices can be described as contributing to a process of “translating” local knowledge into a “universal vocabulary” – what I refer to as “MBA talk” (Lien 2006; Harvey 2006).

MBA talk can be described as making different experiences commensurable (Danielson 1998b 101). In a study of the French business school INSEAD, established in 1959 and the first European school based on an American model, Jane Marceau has suggested that what is taught at such institutions – and what I argue was taught at the MBA school in Oslo – is a language that is a “universal” language of “management.” Marceau suggests that the universal nature of MBA talk endows it with the ability to cross national frontiers, “allowing its user to participate sensibly in decision-making processes in a wide variety of countries, sectors, and companies” (Marceau 1989 23, 29, 154). Indeed, the dean of the MBA program promised participants at a recruitment meeting that they would graduate from the MBA program “prepared with a technical language, a metalanguage.”

The importance of such a universal metalanguage was enhanced by the fact that the MBA program educated executives and consultants with general rather than specific training. As generalists rather than specialists, the students were being prepared for a wide array of challenges that transcended specific fields and industries but where the common denominator was always the factor of uncertainty. This was the key lesson learned as framed by a student I talked with during a break one day: “It’s about uncertainty. That’s what they teach us.” The professor who taught the finance classes confirmed this in the following comment made to his class: “This is why real-life leasing is not as obvious as the chapter in the book. There are uncertain elements here.”

Students were expected to make informed decisions based on their cumulative knowledge, but they were also reminded that what they had learned was often based on hindsight and idealized situations. In working out a financial calculation, the finance professor illustrated this by describing “lowest capital expenses” as “some idealized situation. It’s like the Loch Ness Monster. You know it’s out there, and some have claimed to see it.” The same professor hedged another financial calculation by saying “assuming we had perfect foresight” as a way of underscoring that this was never the case. This was framed in another way by a second professor, who claimed that what he was teaching the students was the “ability to deal with ambiguity.” That students were aware of this was clear in Nikolai’s description of the courses: “At (this school) you’re taught to question everything, you can’t trust anything.”

The following two examples point to the intricate way in which students negotiated the interplay between the facts of a case and the certainty of uncertainty. The examples are drawn from the Corporate Finance class, which was different from the other classes in that the white board was frequently used in order to work out calculations. On one of these occasions, a student disagreed with the professor’s prediction and the professor countered by “doing the numbers”, as making calculations was often referred to. He concluded by saying: “Elizabeth was right,” and a short burst of applause followed. The professor responded to the applause by smiling and saying: “Good guess,” to which Elizabeth responded with irony: “No, it was completely based on my knowledge.” This retort elicited as much laughter as when the professor, while writing down Markus’ suggested numbers on the board, turned to Markus and said: “Remember, we don’t have to convert.” To which Markus’ cool and collected reply was: “We assume (the actors) are rational.”

I suggest that these examples elicited laughter for the same reasons. Moreover, they illustrate

the type of knowledge being taught. The professor's own calculations had proven Elizabeth to be correct, which he jokingly tried to undermine by suggesting that this was due to a good guess. Elizabeth played with this by firmly stating, though with humorous undertones, that the reason the calculation had proven her point was solely due to her intelligence. In the second quote, when the professor had tried to simplify the task Markus was working on by telling him that he did not need to convert the numbers, Markus played a critical assumption in finance back on the professor – the idea that economic actors are, and operate in, rational and predictable manners. Elizabeth and Markus were both playing on two assumptions central to the MBA program, namely that management decisions are informed by intelligence and that the models used assume rational actors.

In Elizabeth's example she seemed to contradict the professor by arguing that it was *not* a good guess but her own intellectual ability that was the source of her answer. In Markus' exchange, Markus seemingly agreed with the professor by expanding on the professor's comment that he did not need to convert because one could assume that the actors in question were rational. While Elizabeth disagreed, and Markus concurred, they both employed irony. I suggest that this use of irony served to negate the semantic content of their comments, such that Elizabeth was actually *agreeing* with the professor while Markus was *disagreeing*. The fact that guessing was an appropriate and indeed necessary tool, and the fact that financial actors contribute to the uncertainty of a situation by the very fact that they are *not* rational, were therefore two tools that could be employed when making management decisions in pressing situations colored by ambiguity and uncertainty. As will be shown later, the mobility of MBA talk and the knowledge it indexed may have been more problematic than the dean's euphemistic claim that it was a universal metalanguage. For the time being, however, I suggest that the reason her claim was not challenged within the classroom lies precisely in the uncertain nature of doing business rather than in any inherent applicability of MBA talk.

### **Role differentiation**

I now turn to a different sort of learning that classroom practices facilitated and explore Mertz' claim, presented in the introduction, that classroom learning is also often about "who may speak and in what manner" (Mertz 1998 150). These lessons are not entirely divorced, however, from MBA knowledge in general, and Philips emphasizes that the function of such classroom



exercises is to make students “think” like lawyers, or in the case of the MBA students, like executives and management consultants, in the belief that “acting like lawyers involves demonstrating through talk that one can think like a lawyer” (Philips 1982 190).

Students therefore not only learned to speak like MBAs, but to organize the way they spoke in what Philips calls “role-differentiated manner(s)” (Philips 1982 182-3). Returning to the law classroom again, a strength of Philips’ argument is her claim that studies of classroom activity elucidate important aspects of what she calls a “Western model of formal education”: namely that what happens in a classroom introduces and trains people “for the assumption of bureaucratic roles in our society” (Philips 1982 191). She identifies the ways classroom interaction underscores an idea of hierarchy, as one person is in a position of control while others assume inferior positions. That the right to ask questions, or questions of a certain type, can be correlated with social hierarchy and social roles can be seen in the somewhat outdated adage that: “Children are to be seen and not heard.” The right to ask and answer questions may be linked further to understandings of who possesses knowledge (Lidén 2001). Cross-cultural data also supports this idea, and we see that in Samoan societies low-status people such as children do not occupy positions which allow them to question others – they are supposed to listen (Pelissier 1991 87).

I argue that such unidirectional questioning helped maintain the professor’s position of control within the classroom. Philips argues that this is extremely important in a law classroom as it prepares students for future roles as lawyers in a US courtroom controlled by a judge who is at liberty to question the lawyers as much as she wants. Philips is simultaneously careful to point out that courtroom litigation is in no way the most common activity for future lawyers. However, she argues that the courtroom is the most influential and prestigious of arenas that lawyers can participate in (Philips 1982 187, 194). While law school classrooms may train students to master courtroom interaction, I argue that the MBA classroom, with its similar focus on concise answers, the case method and task resolution in the form of recommendations, modeled executive and boardroom activity. And while it is the case that not all MBAs will one day be board members, or even present to a board, the boardroom nevertheless provided a model of the most prestigious arena to work in as an MBA.

In addition to having to make formal presentations to the class, as described above, there were several occasions during which the nature of these presentations was explicitly defined such that the students were told that they were management consultants making presentations

to an executive board. As described in the section on the case method, the majority of the cases took the perspective of a manager or an executive faced with making a decision. One professor surprised the class by giving this an interesting twist. On this day, the professor had invited a “real-life” consultant to join the class. The professor appointed himself as the CEO of the company and announced that the class represented the board. As board members, they were challenged to approach the case from a new perspective. Rather than making the recommendations themselves, they were to evaluate the recommendations made by the visiting consultant.

These sorts of exercises were familiar to the students by the end of the year and they easily made the transition from playing the person charged with fixing a problem to the persons who could authorize the implementation of the proposed solution. Kjartan described these exercises in a very practical manner: “We have to identify roles and people have to play them. It’s not personal or anything. To identify roles and appropriate these makes the process more efficient.” I argue that such role play was not simply about efficiency, however, but served to groom students for future roles. Professors often reminded students of this fact, as when one summed up a day’s discussion in this way: “I’ve been trying to get across to you the management perspective, the perspective of a CEO. (I am) assuming and praying that one or two of you will be in that position one day.”

Students responded to these exercises by discussing cases as though they were directly involved themselves. In one such case Elizabeth had stated that she would not expand Officenet (the company being discussed that day) into Brazil. Jakob responded: “I think that’s too defensive for a CEO” while another shot in: “I would go to Brazil and get out of Argentina.” Instead of speaking of the company indirectly (as in “I don’t think *they* should expand into Brazil”), Elizabeth spoke as though the decision was up to her. While disagreeing with her decision, Jakob nevertheless confirmed her role – criticizing her decision as a CEO. At other times, students made more far-reaching comments about this role, as when Josefine introduced a comment in this way: “As leaders we need to realize that we can’t control all the variables...”

Studies of pronoun use and greeting rituals have demonstrated the potential language holds to establish conversational roles, and in the examples above we see the students participating in discussions not only as MBAs, but as executives, if only for the moment (Irvine 1996; Brown and Levinson 1978). The effect of such naming practices was seen when Olav expressed his support of a suggestion Arve had made: “I support my junior colleague, Arve.” The result of this posi-

tioning was immediately noticeable, as Olav instantly elevated himself to a superior position, which he maintained through the rest of the discussion.

While classroom practices prepared students to be MBAs through such activities as group work, this is not to say that the class remained undifferentiated as a group. In much the same way that the people described in the cases succeeded or failed in their endeavors, students had the opportunity to distinguish themselves. Staff not only commented student performance, but reminded them of what it meant to be an MBA and gave them advice for filling this role in the future: “Rock the customer, that’s what makes you stand out from the crowd. That’s all we want, to stand out from the crowd.” Future success was important: “If you leave this classroom and don’t understand what I have been saying (about customer retention rates), I have failed. And you will not prevail!” However, the choice was the student’s: “Do you want to sell soda pop the rest of your life? Or do you want to revolutionize the world?” One effect of these practices was that some students came to be seen as possessing more valuable qualities than others (Philips 1982 191-192). Performance, in turn, was understood by students as closely connected with verbal participation, and I registered frustration in Erling’s resigned comment that: “Anyways, no one remembers your name unless you talk a lot (in class).”

The perception that students had to talk a lot in order to be noticed may not have been wholly true, however, as one professor told me that the student he held in highest regard was a student who figures in my field notes as a particularly reticent student. Further, my field notes reveal that talk could also go unnoticed. This was a clearly gendered phenomenon and applied exclusively to the women in the group. The women were no less and no more vociferous than their male classmates in class discussions and group work. A few of the women were also highly regarded by both their female and male classmates. Nevertheless, contributions made by women in class were often glossed over. I was often confused when a woman’s answer was not expanded on or otherwise commented with more than a nod when a seemingly similar statement made by a male student a short time later was commended. After one such incident I asked the woman in question why her answer had been “wrong.” I assumed that this was the case, based on an assumption that my own mastery of the discussion at hand was too shallow to grasp the difference between her answer and the obviously “correct” answer of her male counterpart, as judged by the professor’s positive response.

I broached this subject during a break which several of the women and I were enjoying on

the school's balcony. My question elicited a volley of commentary from the women who supported my observation. In their estimation, however, there had been no qualitative difference in the two comments. The women poignantly exclaimed that they felt this happened often, leaving them thinking: "Didn't I just say that?" This brief example demonstrates that while talk was promoted as a way to distinguish oneself in the classroom, discursive activity was also informed by structures of power, hierarchy and difference so subtle as almost to escape attention.

## **Conclusion**

I have looked at two parallel processes in which the MBA students were slowly formed as a group by both a particular informational economy and through what I have argued was a form of structural separation. Conditions eventually improved after "boot camp" was over and as students began thinking, and talking, like MBAs. This was noted by students, who attributed the change to their shared use of MBA talk. MBA talk was understood as facilitating communication but also group identity and belonging. Torstein reflected on the nature of MBA talk in this way, saying that it:

...created some sort of a common base for everybody. You always have something to talk about, you always have a home base. And definitely you, we're becoming more homogenous in how we behave and what we laugh about and sort of all those things.

While students were earlier peppered with comments such as: "You're sticking your head in the sand, you don't have the balls, you don't have the guts (to make a firm decision in the case at hand)!", these were gradually superseded by more positive feedback. This was noted in comments on classroom performance such as: "But this is childhood learning for you." The transition from novices seemed complete by year-end when one professor said: "We cracked nine cases pretty good. We can't just be lucky, we're pretty smart." This subtle pronominal shift was also reflected in other staff comments in which the students were no longer solely addressed as "you" but occasionally included in "we", confirming the students' emergence on the other side. Finally, although the students would not formally be MBAs until graduation conferred this title upon them, staff nevertheless exhorted their students with the rousing: "Come on! You guys are MBAs!" as though reminding the students of the knowledge they possessed. The MBA title was thus not only used as a term of address, but was loaded with meaning. The students willingly

took on this role, and when a professor called out to the class at the end of the year: “Who are you going to trust? Not lawyers, not engineers...” the class resoundingly responded: “MBAs!”

In the next chapter I look beyond the classroom in examining what resources MBA talk, as a professional skill, made available to the students in their new-found roles as MBAs.



## The resources and marketability of MBA talk

The idea that “a repertoire of ways of speaking” can be identified in any society harks back to the work of Dell Hymes, who claimed that: “(c)ommunities differ in the number and variety of significant speech styles and the principle bases of their delimitation. This is one of the important and interesting things about communities, needing to be described” (Hymes 1996/1974 440). In this chapter I argue that MBA talk represents a potentially significant speech style in the Norwegian context and I reframe MBA talk as presented in Chapter Four as a professional register, the resources of which the MBA students used in constructing and understanding social interaction (Gumperz 1982). I discuss the resources, both symbolic and economic, that this register represented for the students as well as its limits. I discuss MBA talk both in terms of a specific terminology – so-called “buzzwords” – and a language – English.

The discussion of MBA talk as a resource is joined to a discussion of linguistic markets as developed by Pierre Bourdieu and elaborated on by subsequent authors (Agha 2004; Collins 1993; Bourdieu 1991; Irvine 1989; Lamont and Lareau 1988). The concept of linguistic markets directs attention the institutionalized dissemination of specialized linguistic forms, as well as of particular languages, and the “value” of some forms in contrast to others. An inherent feature of linguistic markets is the fact that access to such forms is differentially spread across a population. In Chapter Four I presented some of the ways in which students were socialized in the use of MBA talk within a formal institutional setting. Furthermore, as the only MBA program in Norway at the time of my fieldwork, and considering the high tuition fees, it is not difficult to argue that access to such training was highly restricted in the Norwegian context. I therefore conclude by looking at the boundaries, and conflicts

surrounding these boundaries, that discussions of MBA talk evoked (Lamont and Lareau 1988 164).

## **Register**

Michael Silverstein defines register as: “a minimally binary paradigm of ways of ‘saying the same thing’ distinctly indexically appropriate to two (or more) contexts of usage, however defined” (Silverstein 1998b 130) and in Chapter Four I described the ways in which MBA talk came to be understood as the appropriate manner of speaking or “performing” within the MBA program. MBA talk took shape through classroom teaching over the course of the year, and became a metalinguistic label on par with other register labels such as “polite language”, “women’s language”, “scientific term”, “slang” and “Standard English” (Agha 2004 23-24).

Registers help participants organize context as well as recognize which context (of the minimally two possible in Silverstein’s definition) is being evoked. The concept of register is therefore used in answering questions of how participants know what is going on in a communicative exchange. While some analytical frameworks might look for the ways in which MBA talk was “framed” (Goffman 1974), “keyed” (Hymes 1972) or otherwise signaled by “contextualization cues” (Gumperz 1992), theorists who appropriate Peircean semiotics (see Chapter Three) in their analyses approach the relationship between linguistic signals and discursive interaction in terms of pragmatics.<sup>1</sup> “Coherence” in discourse is further described as being achieved through “metapragmatic structuring” (Mertz 1998 152). Metapragmatics are understood as structuring talk through both explicit and implicit signaling and provide information within a stretch of talk about how what is said is to be interpreted (Woolard 1998 9). “I promise you I’ll be home for dinner”, and utterances which indicate that interlocutors view speech as a contest are two different examples of explicit linguistic signaling which indicate how what is being said should be interpreted, and therefore and responded to (Mertz 1998 151). Importantly, metapragmatics can also be understood as sitings of linguistic ideology (Woolard 1998; Silverstein 1998). My argument is that the MBA register can be treated as a link between the linguistic ideology at play and the discursive practices, as well as rationalizations of these, that students participated in.

I argue that MBA terminology, discussed below as “buzzwords”, and the use of English were

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<sup>1</sup> Levinson refers to pragmatics as one of three branches of inquiry within semiotics: 1) syntax as: “the formal relation of signs to one another”; 2) semantics as: “the study of relation of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable”; and 3) pragmatics as: “the study of the relation of signs to interpreters” (Levinson 1983 1). Levinson notes further that pragmaticists are: “specifically interested in the inter-relation of language structure and principles of language use” (Levinson 1983 9).



particularly salient metapragmatic markers that signaled the use of the MBA register. I base this on Asif Agha's definition of registers, in which he points out that a register's defining features may take many forms:

A register is a linguistic repertoire that is associated, culture-internally, with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices. The repertoires of a register are generally linked to systems of speech style of which they are the most easily reportable fragments. From the standpoint of language structure, registers differ in the type of repertoire involved, eg lexemes, prosody, sentence collocations, and many registers involve repertoires of more than one kind. (Agha 2004 24).

Given Agha's definition, I present MBA buzzwords and the use of English as the most reportable aspects of the MBA register.

### **Buzzwords as professional markers**

Curious about the aim of my study and my progress, many of the MBA students questioned me in the following manner: "So, have you noticed that we're all brainwashed yet?" A term used by many, "brainwashed" was used to suggest that they had all begun to think and act alike, as evidenced by the subjective experience that they had begun to speak in the same way. This can be tied to the discussion in Chapter Three about the conduit model. The idea that they were "brainwashed" suggested that a group of people will speak in the same way if they think in the same way, and points back to the discussion of a particularly Western understanding of language as expressing private thoughts, opinions and intentionality.

The analogy made to being brainwashed highlights the force of the connection they made between language and thought, but also points in another direction. The students had been promised that they would learn "a metalanguage," and I have argued that a common language was one of the educational goals of the MBA program. The MBA register was not just understood as a positive affirmation of MBA identity, however; it also served to distinguish the MBA students from *other* professions. The students came from diverse fields of expertise and the fact that they already mastered industry specific jargon was described as a problem when compounded by a heavy workload and time constraints. Anders said this:

...the main problem is probably the different languages here. That we don't speak the same professional language and we are talking to each other and the time constraints refrain from getting us the feedback, to check if it's properly understood. So the mistakes are more frequent.

“Language” referred not to English or Norwegian, but a shared professional language, what I have been calling a “register”. This was also seen in Rune’s answer to a question about his communication skills at the beginning of the year versus at year-end, in which he made a distinction between the professional language he had brought with him to the MBA program and MBA talk:

I guess I have increased my vocabulary. I guess my, previously my vocabulary was strong especially on the engineering side. I don’t still have the...I mean, we spoke in fact, here at school...about business. So you don’t get the everyday language maybe. Which would have been nice to get as well. The main focus here is on all the buzzwords you find in business.

An engineer by profession, Rune took for granted the fact that any profession will operate in terms of a shared vocabulary and reflected on his own knowledge of engineering terminology. That he had picked up a great deal of business terminology in the course of the MBA program therefore came as no surprise to him. In addition to distinguishing MBA talk from engineering talk, Rune also distinguished MBA talk from what he called “the everyday language,” suggesting that MBA talk would not be appropriate in non-professional settings.

### **Buzzwords as tools of efficiency**

While business terminology distinguished the MBA register from other forms of talk, they were also rationalized as tools of efficiency. This was seen in the following question-answer set from Jakob’s interview in which I asked him to clarify what he had been saying about his own evaluation of his communicative ability within the MBA group:

IL: But are you generally happy with... You feel limited but are you generally happy with the way you can communicate?

J: I’m sort of satisfied with my ability to communicate. Sometimes I stop and I think, I’m not really annoyed by it, but I would of course rather have a greater vocabulary. You get into the same words often, you don’t really use other words and you would like to expand your vocabulary. But then of course you expand your vocabulary, and you go to the Web and use the same language, and that makes us more homogenous as well. It gets more of the same language, the harder the language.

Jakob’s answer revisits the discussion in Chapter Three about the importance students placed on vocabulary in measuring communicative ability and group belonging. While he did not elabo-

rate on what he meant by “harder” language, I understand Jakob as suggesting that the more the MBA students learned, the more he felt they were expected to use a narrower range of standardized classroom language. As their business acumen grew, this was inversely reflected in a decrease in the proportional number of ways a correct answer could be formulated.

The process Jakob referred to was discussed in Chapter Four as leading to a cryptic and highly contextualized form of speech, inaccessible to the uninitiated. I re-approach the same process in light of student rationalizations of MBA talk in an effort to illustrate what they thought “was going” when they used buzzwords. I present the ways in which students reflected over the prevalence of business terminology in terms of efficiency and functionality, as when Olav said:

In class you have, you raise your hand and you want to make an argument, you have basically just a couple of seconds and you have to make your argument as quickly as you can. Quite efficiently, and that pressures your vocabulary quite hard.

Olav continued by contrasting a notion of efficient functionality with prettiness or aesthetics, saying: “we have developed some sort of efficient English” in which “we don’t care about anything else than getting the point across.” “Functional”, “efficient” and “effective” when used in this way by Olav and other students attributed buzzwords with a power that lay in their perceived ability to provide concise and accurate information when time or space was short. As the students were constantly pressed for time, buzzwords were understood as playing an important role in a daily regime focused on productivity. Buzzwords were seen as extremely useful when students had to write one-page case summaries and recommendations: “you have to be able to get all the info in. Buzzwords are a way to do this” (Anders).

The functional nature of buzzwords also rested on the implicit confidence that authorized listeners – presumably other MBAs and business people – would be able to “unpack” and understand these highly compact words. This was illustrated by Michelle who explained that she had had problems understanding a fellow student in the beginning of the year. Communication was eventually improved through the use of MBA talk:

First of all, language is extremely important, but if you have a point... Like I have difficulties understanding (a fellow student) in the first semester. I was dying. And I saw nobody understood. So I was trying to...so that was obviously a language problem. But then I understood, I started to, if you know what you are talking about, just one word sometimes can solve the problem.

In referring to the fact that understanding “just one word” could solve otherwise serious communication problems, Michelle’s comment suggested that understanding was not only contingent upon the other student’s use of the right words, but also on her own recognition of such words. Rune’s comment that: “People within industry know these terms and when working has to be effective and efficient. It’s purely functional and gets the job done” pointed to his own expectation that successful communication was premised upon just such a joint recognition. Buzzwords, then, were naturalized as particularly useful tools.

That communicative resources can be understood otherwise is illustrated in Keith Basso’s ethnographic work in a Western Apache community (1996). I briefly touch upon his work in order to present a counter-example to the importance students attributed to efficiency. Basso studies the use of place names, which can be compared to buzzwords in several ways: both are cryptic yet carry a lot of information, both must be learned and are only appropriate in certain settings, and the mastery of both is unevenly distributed throughout the group of speakers employing these forms. Furthermore, the greater the number of place names a Western Apache speaker masters, the more regarded is her ability to communicate.

In short, Basso’s ethnographic work details the ways in which the cryptic use of place names refers to locations in the Apache landscape that are associated with morally pregnant stories and events. Basso describes the ways in which Western Apache speakers, particularly elders, respond to social and personal situations with unelaborated comments such as a simple reference to a place, such as: “Trail Goes Down Between Two Hills.” In contrast to buzzwords, however, the brevity of such references is in no way intended as a time-saving device. Place names rather direct the addressee to reflect over a fixed spot in the landscape. The use of place names is meant to suggest that current events can be understood in light of past stories, and that reflection over past stories may provide guidance in solving current dilemmas. The communicative work that is done here differs from the use of buzzwords in that intended meaning is not seen as immediately accessible, but something to be reflected over in private contemplation.

Buzzwords are fleeting and change much the same way trends do, according to one of the lecturers I spoke with, while place names endure, and only occasionally are new place names added to an established repertoire. Furthermore, while buzzwords were understood as facilitating direct communication between for example consultants and executive board members, place names are a careful way of giving advice without passing judgment or infringing upon someone else’s autonomy.

### Evoking context through jokes

In this section I address the metapragmatic work buzzwords could perform in evoking context. I do so through an analysis of two types of jokes I noted during my fieldwork. These jokes were made possible by the fact that the MBA register evoked not only particular contexts, but: “ma(de) certain personae recognizable through speech” (Agha 2004 30). This was due to the fact that the MBA register, like other registers, lent itself to stereotypic use outside of its appropriate contexts. Asif Agha’s description of registers as “open cultural systems” suggest that they are susceptible to cultural reanalysis; that is, registers are recognizable forms that can be manipulated interactionally, also outside of their context of original use (Agha 2004 30; Hymes 1996/1974 440). All of the following exchanges were observed outside of classroom or group room activities, and took place during lulls in scheduled activities. All of the examples elicited smiles if not laughter from people who were within earshot, indicating that these comments were “heard” as jokes.

The first type of joke introduced business buzzwords and turns of phrases into settings which were not business related. The first joke was elicited when I paid a French student a compliment for the good-looking sweater he was wearing one morning. A second student was the first to respond, pointing out in all seriousness that: “One thing about the French, they know quality.” The joke was rounded off by the French student who added dryly: “It’s our competitive advantage.”

A second example of this first type of joke was also the result of my own comments. I was in the cafeteria with a group of students and I had commented on the fact that one of the students sat down with everything he needed for his lunch, rather than helping himself to dessert and coffee later. To this the student simply shrugged: “It’s resource management.” In the third and fourth examples the joke was enacted in an exchange between a professor and a student. On his way out of the classroom for a scheduled break, Sigurd commented that: “You would increase efficiency if you had a coffee machine here.” This same student was challenged by another professor when he arrived to class wearing shorts: Professor: “What’s this? We have a dress code here!” Sigurd: “Hey! I’m an agent of change – I see shorts (in the future)!”

I argue that students were engaging in reflexive processes in which they introduced classroom terminology – “quality,” “competitive advantage,” “resource management,” “efficiency” and “agent of change” – and analyses to completely unrelated settings (Agha 2004 23), and I

suggest that it was the contrast created that made students laugh. If “competitive advantage” and “resource management” were generally used in discussions of large scale organizations like automakers or airlines, the suggestion that these strategies could be applied on such a small and private scale as sweater choice and food selection became immediately comical. This use conjured up the image of a top executive summing up all of her business acuity in the act of getting dressed in the morning or serving herself from the salad bar.

The ability to play with context in this way presupposed an understanding of the right as opposed to wrong context of usage but also illustrated the fact that register usage cannot be predicted or mechanically tied to a specific settings or situation (Hymes 1996/1974 434; Duranti 1992 82-83, 88). The jokes worked because they evoked the wrong context, a fact listeners appreciated as a literal interpretation of the jokes above would have been mildly absurd.

The second type of joking event observed during my fieldwork can be said to be playful in a very different way and highlighted a very different sense of context. Roger Abrahams writes that: “play is difficult to describe in any culture”, but that it often relies on a distinction, but nonetheless a very real relationship, between play and the “real” or “serious” (Abrahams 1996/1974 245). In the following examples I argue that a very tangible sense of the real versus the pretend was present. In all of these examples, jokes were made which played on employment status. The first of these examples comes from a hallway observation as two group members were walking to class together. They were talking about a group project and reporting how far they had come with their own assigned tasks. When the female student finished by saying that she was actually ahead of schedule, her male group member responded by lauding her as his “employee of the month.” In response she issued a celebratory shout of: “Hurray! I’m employee of the month!” During the rest of this short conversation she consistently called her group member “boss”.

The remaining two examples are taken from observations made prior to a group role play exercise about negotiations. Students had been divided up into several groups for this exercise and assigned roles as executives, consultants and customers. The objective was to act out their roles given the task and parameters set by the lecturer. Each group was videotaped and their performance was later analyzed by the lecturer. While the exercise was designed to challenge students to put to use what they had learned about negotiations, they played with these roles before the sessions began. In one case a student predicted the outcome of the yet-to-be-taped session in this way: “I pay out the bonuses, I’m the boss – I decide,” as though trying his charac-

ter on for size. Waiting outside the room where the session was to be taped a student in another group brought a classmate a cup of coffee. Evoking the negotiations that had not yet begun, a third student insinuated that the person who had brought the coffee was trying to bribe their counterpart: "Are you trying to gain some power here? What about the long term?" The accused executive, as it were, responded with: "I don't care. I'm going to retire early," much to the amusement of onlookers.

In all of the examples of the second type of joke students evoked not only the world of employment but the very real hierarchies of the business world. I suggest that the fact that these exchanges were found to be funny can be explained by Abraham's insight that:

...for play to operate successfully, there must be a sense of threat from the 'real' and 'serious' world of behavior. The threat of incursions from the real world must be constant...the most constant message must be the deeply ambivalent one – that this is play – this is NOT play (Abrahams 1996/1974 245).

As MBA students, my informants were in a state of suspension as it were from the "real" and "serious" business world in that they were either not employed for the time being or on temporary leave in order to pursue their studies. They had taken leave of employment situations in order to improve their opportunities by supplementing their skill bases with an MBA education, yet they had no guarantee that this would be the case. If Abrahams is right, the ambivalence of the MBAs' situation lay in the chance most of the students were taking in spending both time and money in order to improve their future employment chances. While all of the students hoped to return to the business world as managers or executives and to retire early after successful careers, there were concerns that their MBA degree would not necessarily secure these dreams, a worry I return to in Chapter Six.

While the examples above illustrated an awareness of delimited contexts existing side by side, I suggest that jokes were also important because of their ability to create a sense of group rapport. That such rapport can be created through the use of humor has been illustrated in other professional settings as well, as in Gordon's (1983) study of slang among hospital employees. Gordon points out that hospital slang, like men talking about cars, creates rapport at the group level without drawing on the private emotions or experiences of individuals (Gordon 1983 182). The MBA students were rarely observed talking about their private lives and the majority of

them knew surprisingly little about even their group mates. The idea that MBA talk gave the students both a shared way of speaking and a shared sense of humor adds depth to Torstein's comment, quoted in Chapter Four, that: "...And definitely you, we're becoming more homogenous in how we behave and what we laugh about and sort of all those things."

### **English and the exchange value of the MBA register**

I now turn from a discussion of buzzwords as linguistic resources to another facet of MBA talk, the fact that the buzzwords were always in English. I discuss this aspect of MBA talk as a very different sort of resource and one characterized by potential material value. Before continuing, it is important to note that this separation of buzzwords and English represents an analytic strategy and not a substantive claim that the one was a linguistic resource while the other was a material resource.

Judith Irvine writes that Peircean semiotics limit analysis to relations between the sign and what it stands for without telling us anything about what the sign may be exchanged for (Irvine 1989 261). Susan Gal expands upon this insight: "because linguistic practices provide access to material resources they become resources in their own right," and she points to the importance of oratory skills in settings ranging from local-level politics among the Ilongot to the professions of advanced capitalism (Gal 1989 353). Gal therefore suggests that linguistic skills may become a marketable commodity in and of themselves, a phenomenon illustrated in Irvine's work among griots in Western Africa. Irvine's ethnographic work illustrates the ways in which griots are paid for their verbal contributions on ceremonious occasions like weddings, as well as the fact that they are sometimes paid *not* to speak (Irvine 1989).

I argue that the students valued MBA talk not only for its ability to index their membership in a particular category of person, but for its perceived economic value. This was expressed by many student declarations that the fact that the MBA program was run in English was an important factor in choosing the program from among other courses of study. In addition to this, many students *expected* any proper MBA program to be in English. When I asked Anders what he had thought about the fact that the program was run in English when he had initially applied to different MBA programs, he answered:

I took it for granted. It would not have been a proper MBA if it would have been in uh, Norwegian or a local language. English is the international business language of the world and I expected all serious programs to be held in English. All the way.



English was here contrasted with all “local” languages, Norwegian or otherwise, and was in his eyes as an international language. What is more, English was the natural and right choice for any serious endeavor in the business world. That the staff also supported this doctrine was implicitly communicated to prospective students even before they enrolled in the MBA program. At all informational meetings for interested candidates, the dean started her presentation in English, without qualifying this fact in any way to her mainly Norwegian audience.

The expectation among students that any “proper” MBA program would be run in English can again be tied to the fact that the acquisition of the MBA register was understood as an important outcome of their education. As an extension of this, students linked their mastery of MBA talk (implicitly understood as being in English) not only to future jobs, but to jobs with relative prestige and economic compensation. Agha writes: “In some professions, especially technical professions, a display of register competence is a criterion of employment. Differences of register competence are thus often linked to asymmetries of power, socioeconomic class, position within hierarchies, and the like” (Agha 2004 24), and we see Markus making such a link when he said:

...if you are working among top management and a few other management positions where you maybe go to other countries, you know, to discuss things, or maybe technical solutions and then go back. They are becoming more and more used to it and more and more a necessity to communicate in English.

While Markus presented English as a practical necessity in international business practices, he also expressed the implicit assumption that the ability to express oneself in English was a skill that designated “top management”, as well as “industry leaders” and “people in our circles”, in the words of other students. This leads me to suggest that students believed that speaking business English both identified them as, but also entitled them to, positions of relative privilege in the business community. By stressing their own skills in this area, the MBAs aligned themselves with these groups.

This necessary link between mastering the proper way of speaking and future success was perhaps most obvious when Erling discussed the consequences of failure in this area:

Most likely I will travel abroad, visit other countries and make deals, or whatever. And (if) I should struggle with the language, that would be a problem. Sort of, what did that “operating

margin” mean, and “I don’t remember that word”. So those things would be highly unprofessional and would decrease the likelihood of doing business.

Knowing industry terminology – keeping in mind that industry terminology was always in English – was seen an important criterion in maintaining a professional appearance; a professional appearance was necessary in order to carry out successful business transactions. Erling imagined a causal chain in which lack of knowledge of important terminology led to failure in negotiations and economic difficulty if not failure.

The belief that the ability to speak in a certain way could be translated into economic capital (Bourdieu 1991) opened for the strategic exploitation of MBA talk. Bjørnar told me that: “In general I think English has some status to related to it...as in my company, when I say I do everything in English, then it seems that I have a more important job.” In saying that the use of English made a job “seem” more important, Bjørn suggested that expectations tied to language skills could be manipulated for one’s own benefit, though he was not insinuating that he did this himself. However, the strategic use of MBA talk was played upon more openly in the following sequence observed in a group room. The exchange took place between three students who were working together on writing up their recommendation for a case:

Charles: I’m realizing I’m writing a paper that means nothing with a lot of buzzwords and it will be really good.

Jostein: You would have to be an MBA to understand it.

Josefine: It’s like a secret language.

Charles: (*As though speaking with a potential employer*) “If you can’t understand this, you can’t afford me!”  
(laughter)

I argue that the humor observed in this sequence arose from the fact that the students explicitly expressed the assumption discussed above – that their newly acquired discursive ability would be recognized with material rewards. Charles opened by suggesting that the paper being written would be “really good” because of the inclusion of buzzwords like “net present value”, “differentiation” and “strategy”. Jostein and Josefine concurred with Charles’s assessment by adding that the paper was so internal in its language use that “it’s like a secret language” and that a reader would have to be an MBA in order to be able to interpret it. Anyone else, concluded Charles, would not be able to afford the services he could provide. I read Charles’s closing remark as

separating MBAs from non-MBAs, but also as suggesting that his services were so valuable as to be unaffordable for many. This joking exchange otherwise illustrates a student's claim that the language the group used upon completion of the MBA education was "totally different from what we used in August when we joined the program" (Kjartan, below) – and set a price tag on it. I return to Charles' negative claim that the buzzwords meant nothing below.

### **Boundaries within the Norwegian linguistic market**

The first half of this chapter built on arguments made in Chapter four and was devoted to an exploration of MBA talk as an in-group linguistic resource. In the second half of this chapter I look at the ways these context-specific resources articulated with other contexts. Said differently, I now look at the extent to which MBA talk was a form of capital that could be successfully invested in a Norwegian market.

For Lamont and Lareau the importance of different forms of capital described by Bourdieu lies in the help they provide in identifying processes through which social stratification systems are maintained (Lamont and Lareau 1988 153-154). The material presented up to this point suggests that MBA talk was understood as providing a certain degree of both social and economic capital, though these terms were not used by the students. The question of whether or not MBA talk can be understood as cultural or symbolic capital however, raises an important issue. Both these forms of capital represent institutionalized forms that are widely agreed upon; as such, they may be used for social inclusion or exclusion from high status groups (Lamont and Lareau 1988 156). That is, the worth of MBA talk in the Norwegian market was not contingent upon the MBAs' understanding of the register alone.

This insight is shared by authors who critique Bourdieu for what they claim is an oversimplified association of certain language skills with certain social roles, as well as what they have identified as an assumption on Bourdieu's part that linguistic markets are integrated wholes. They argue rather that linguistic markets are rarely integrated if "integrated" is taken to mean that all participants have the same understanding and evaluation of different forms of speech. In short, the critique leveled at Bourdieu is that not all participants within a linguistic market always agree to the "worth" of a language or what its mastery "means." (Agha 2004; J. Collins 1993; Gal 1989; Irvine 1989; Lamont and Lareau 1988).

This critique has been aptly illustrated in Gal's studies of codeswitching between minority

and majority languages in Germany, Hungary and Romania. She describes a variety of possible relationships between these languages and the social status of their speakers, demonstrating that dominated or minority groups may have their own standards and sets of norms that can be relatively autonomous from those of the dominant majority (Gal 1987). These examples lead her to write that: “codeswitching in conversation is always a systematically and socially meaningful use of contrasting linguistic resources” (Gal 1987 648). Codeswitching practices, in which words or phrases from one language or form of speech are incorporated into or mixed with another, bring into use at least two different codes and highlight the usefulness of one as opposed to the other given the communicative objective at hand.

Such ethnographic studies support Lamont and Lareau’s claim that the value of such cultural practices is not necessarily defined relationally (Lamont and Lareau 1988 158). These approaches are also in line with John Gumperz’ early work on codeswitching which shifted focus from the technical linguistic aspects of codeswitching to the social framework within which codeswitching takes place. A significant argument posed by Gumperz was that alternation between two or more languages or dialects often involve an “us/them” contrast. (Gumperz 1982; Blom and Gumperz 1972) That codeswitching practices can be understood as a socially meaningful way of establishing boundaries between an “us” and a “them” directs attention to the boundaries, if any, that students believed existed between MBA talk and non-MBA talk (Lamont and Lareau 1988 164).

### **Boundaries as elicited by buzzwords**

The first example is taken from an interview with Frank. I had asked him if he found himself using English MBA words when otherwise speaking Norwegian. Frank responded that he tried not to do this, effecting a claim that he did not codeswitch:

If you’re in an environment where people maybe don’t have that strong academic background, and maybe are carpenters or whatever, then this could be perceived pretty negative and arrogant. And that would obviously not lead to good communication, I think.

Despite Frank’s otherwise positive assessment of MBA talk, his comment pointed to a concern that the use of MBA talk outside of the appropriate contexts would be interpreted by other people as “pretty negative and arrogant.” This reminds us of the multivocal nature of symbolic

forms, and their openness to a proliferation of interpretations (Lamont and Lareau 1988 153; Turner 1967). A comparative example can be drawn from a study of slang among hospital staff. While non-staff may react with revulsion to the use of slang to refer to patients as “vegetables” and worse, such slang does not indicate cold and derogatory treatment, nor does it merely represent personal reactions to suffering. Rather, hospital slang has been analyzed in terms of creating an appearance of efficiency and competence as the use of such slang – as understood by the user – demonstrates that the speaker is in control, and fully capable of administering the medical care hospital staff not only are charged with providing, but are genuinely concerned with providing (Gordon 1983 183).

What is important about Frank’s quote is that he attributed his concern that non-MBAs would consider him arrogant to a general division between academics and non-academics. This rationalization established a clear boundary between people who were somehow in-the-know and would not take offense at the use of buzzwords, and people without similar training such as carpenters.

Kjartan, on the other hand, was highly aware of his own codeswitching:

IL: I’m just interested to know, if I hear you speaking in Norwegian to another Norwegian student, will I hear you using Norwegian and then the English word? Does the English word sneak into the Norwegian?

K: Yeah, I, definitely... We get somewhat, we get closer together during this year. We become kind of like a platoon in the military. You get your own language, you develop your own sets of behavior, and I see that now. That when we speak together, etc., the phrases that we use, the language that we use, are totally different from what we used in August when we joined the program. And somehow it’s quite scary, because you feel that you are something special, you’re an MBA. So how we communicate by the surroundings will probably be reflected by that, and I would use, I would not be able... When I talk to friends or whatever, I would use, I would talk English. I could not translate from this language into Norwegian. So there will be problems at work and such, if you talk Norwegian and you want to use some of the language, the MBA words, I would immediately translate to, change to English and then I would change back again. So your language will be kind of totally corrupted.

Kjartan underscored the power of MBA language by calling “scary” the way MBA talk made him feel like “something special.” More important to this discussion, however, is the emphasis he placed on MBA talk as being in English. He posited his own inability to translate between English and Norwegian when talking to friends as a challenge he projected would also arise at work. This led him to sum up as a general rule that “your language will be kind of totally corrupted”

as a result. The idea of corruption carried a negative connotation and suggested that language, particularly one's own mother tongue, was otherwise "pure."

I argue that the "problems" Kjartan foresaw were not necessarily grounded in a concern that his colleagues would not understand him. As illustrated earlier, the MBAs expected that the people they would work with in the future would by definition understand MBA talk. The "problem" with MBA talk, rather, was the same as one of its defining features – it was limited to, and indexed, a "special" group of people. It was assumed that MBA talk would be recognized by a larger group of people than MBAs (despite their inability to speak it), but that these other people would not necessarily share their own positive evaluation (Agha 2004 27, 35).

Kjartan associated codeswitching with the mixing of languages that should otherwise be kept separate. Arve also pointed to boundaries between languages – as well as the boundaries that languages could create between people – but ultimately turned his assessment back on MBA talk rather than on Norwegian or the difference in educational status. His answer to a question I posed about the usefulness of buzzwords took this form:

I guess it's sort of expected that you know them (buzzwords), because they are used. But on the other hand, it's a very effective way of shutting people out of conversation if you use them too much. And, there's some of them which are downright ridiculous in the end because you see the class is now using some phrases over and over again.

Arve pointed to an expectation that he be able to speak in a particular way. Yet he was caught between this expectation and an awareness that the (over)use of buzzwords when speaking to non-MBAs would have the effect of excluding people from a conversation. This led him from a concern with the potentially negative social effects of MBA talk to a negative evaluation of MBA talk itself. He called the use of some buzzwords "downright ridiculous" due to their repetitive use, as though repetition had emptied them of meaning.

Charles' assessment that the buzzwords used in the paper he was working on with Josefine and Jostein meant nothing came up in several other interviews. This was most telling in statements where buzzwords were described as high on form and low on content, as when Henry said: "Just to add 'network externalities,' that's a term in the industry. It's a good theoretical term. Probably (laughing). But does it say anything?" For his part, Rune was openly critical of MBA buzzwords. Rune imitated MBA talk in this way: "To 'leverage on' blah blah blah 'expert analy-

sis' and, uh, I'm not sure how much those phrases actually mean, but if you come out (of here) and use those, I think you will see that people really don't take you that seriously." I argue that Rune attributed an emptiness to buzzwords by setting them side-by-side the nonsensical "blah blah blah", as though the latter could easily stand in for the former without effecting a change of meaning.

Frank and Kjartan were concerned that they would be considered arrogant if they used MBA talk among non-MBAs and Rune was quite clear in his assessment that people in general would not take the use of MBA buzzwords seriously. All of these reactions, as elicited in conversations about codeswitching between MBA talk and non-MBA talk, pointed to the ways in which language use was understood as a potential source of social conflict.

### **English as a boundary marker**

The ambivalence students expressed regarding buzzwords was also reflected in their thoughts on English. While a mastery of English, like a mastery of industry terms, was seen as inextricable from MBA group identity, students were also attuned to what the use of English might mean to others. Importantly, however, while ambivalence towards buzzwords led students to critical reflection on the nature and worth of buzzwords, their ambivalence to the use of English took a very different turn.

In his discussion of register, Agha claims that different groups of people operate with different "schemes of valorization" in attributing various forms of talk with different value. The fact that people may disagree with or resist other people's schemes of value may lead to what he calls "sociological fractionation" (Agha 2004 27). I suggest that such schemes of value, as elicited in the MBA material, were motivated by language loyalties that pitted one language against another (Silverstein 1998 409).

For Bjørnar the appropriateness/non-appropriateness of English was clearest in discussing a division between his private and non-private life. He separated his professional use of English from his private life, saying that he had a family and a private life in which English had no role:

In business, when it's at work, I think (the use of English) is OK. But officially, and outside, on signs and company names...I'm happy when I see some Norwegian. There's not that much there, and definitely commercials are turning English.

He continued:

I'm actually a person who's pretty annoyed when I see all the fancy English, I see no reason. I think it has to do with the confidence that people don't dare to put words into Norwegian. And all the commercials, even obvious Norwegian commercials are in English. I think...in these kinds of settings I would definitely like it translated to Norwegian as much as possible. Because I don't think Norwegians should start using English when we have perfectly good Norwegian words in general.

Here, Bjørnar further positioned himself by identifying himself as a certain type of person in relation to language politics. He created a sharp contrast between “fancy English” and “perfectly good Norwegian” and picked his side. The private/not-private dichotomy was projected onto a second dichotomy: Norwegian/English. I argue that Bjørnar's defensive use of these dichotomies was motivated by a loyalty to Norwegian when comparing the relative worth of Norwegian and English. Threatened by the incursion of English into his daily and home life, he reacted by reinforcing a clear boundary between these two languages.

If a loyalty to Norwegian can be said to have led to a conflict of allegiance (Silverstein 1998a 409), however, not all of the students were as defiant as Bjørnar. Frank's position was less firm:

Well, it has been said a number of times that the Norwegian language is not very rich, which is true. And (with) which I agree. At the same time, I think there is a lot of Norwegians being Americanized in terms of using a lot of foreign words. I myself try not to, because I think that we do have a language and we can use it. And there are often perfectly good Norwegian words which we can use. But of course, sometimes, we don't really have any words which fit, and speaking with MBAs it's so easy to use those other terms, because they are really good often. They really point at something which we would like to point to, or which I would like to point to. So it's obviously very, very, very easy and convenient to use some of those words sometimes and I don't say that I never use them.

Frank justified the use of English using arguments we have seen before. What is interesting in this discussion is the way in which he oscillated between justifying this use and trying to maintain an allegiance to Norwegian. As a result, and despite his reasoning that “there are often perfectly good Norwegian words”, he ended up defending the use of English. That the subject was a touchy one was evidenced in his apologetic admittance that he, too, fell into a trap where he chose to use English words when not otherwise necessary.



## **Conclusion**

The MBA register represented a number of resources that could be exploited within the MBA group. The belief that access to these resources was limited to a small group of people, to which the MBAs belonged, directed their attention to the fact that language use could evoke boundaries between them and other people. We saw that while the social problems associated with the use of buzzwords led to a negative evaluation of this facet of the register, this was not necessarily true of English. Rather, boundary conflicts associated with the use of English led to a devaluation of Norwegian, raising important questions that I address in Chapter seven.

In the next chapter I return to the question of MBA knowledge production. I do so because MBA talk cannot be evaluated as an isolated phenomenon. If MBA talk was understood as indexing MBA identity it becomes necessary to explore the links between such talk and that which was understood as setting the MBAs apart as a discrete group in the first place – MBA competence.



## The (im)mobility of MBA competence

In this chapter I argue that the MBA education can be usefully studied in light of a theory of a global flow of concepts and ideas (Lien 2003, 2006), and I explore the concept of “competence” as operationalized within the MBA program. Understanding competence is crucial as I argue it was a key concept informing their educational and professional expectations. Lien (2003) suggests that some concepts travel particularly well as they are understood as having meaning in and of themselves without being identified with certain geopolitical constellations or historical philosophical traditions. The success of these terms is therefore attributed to their seeming neutrality and universal truth value (Lien 2003). I apply this theory to the concept of MBA competence, building on the claim initially presented in Chapter Four and extended to Chapter Five, that the MBA program sought to equip students for future careers with standardized knowledge that was universally applicable.

I begin by placing the MBA program in a larger context and I discuss what competence meant to the MBA students and the ways in which the MBA diploma was thought to signal their skills. I then look at student conceptions of what outside recognition was awarded their diplomas. The discrepancy between their expectations and real time reception is then explored in a renewed discussion which problematizes the claim that MBA competence was highly mobile because universally applicable.

### **The MBA degree program in a larger context**

While the MBA program described in this thesis was not created until 1990, the business school which hosted it was founded in 1943 at the forefront of a wave of European business schools

created during the 1950s and 1960s (Sklair 2001; Marceau 1989). The European schools established at this time were the result of private and semi-private initiatives “to encourage the introduction of American management practices, which (were seen) as both the key to economic success and the symbol of the existence of a new breed of professional manager” (Marceau 1989 22). The new breed of professional managers that resulted were in particular the product of MBA programs modeled after American programs. (Dezalay 1990 281; Marceau 1989). MBAs, as a professional category, and the MBAs described here in particular, may thus be described as belonging to “a new class of service professionals, whether bankers, accountants or consultants” (Dezalay 1990 289). It has been further suggested that a common denominator for this group is a shared commitment to a meritocratic logic in which individuals jockey for position on the basis of their academic credentials and technical competence (Dezalay 1990 287, 289; Neves 2000).

In the case of the MBAs, I understand “technical competence” as encompassing the management practices learned in class as well as mastery of the MBA register. Furthermore, I believe that the MBA program can be said to illustrate the spread of an academic model of recruitment built on a meritocratic logic (Dezalay 1990 287). As outlined below, the students believed that the MBA degree, and the business competence it signaled, would distinguish them from other candidates on the job market as particularly worthy. As such, the school’s role was to produce an exclusive group of people, “human material” (my translation), that could meet the challenges of a changing employment market (Danielson 1998b 94).

## **Competence**

Lien (2003) identifies concepts such as “identity”, “market”, and “culture” as ideas that travel well given assumptions made about their inherent meaning, and in this section I look at the inherent meaning of “competence” as understood by the MBA students.

When asked to look back at their initial motivations for enrolling in the MBA program, students retrospectively referred to increased competence as their main objective, and a graduate business degree as the outward symbol of such. Competence itself was understood as a general increase in business knowledge applicable to current and future careers. They referred to their ultimate goals as: “get(ing) my competences up”, “reload(ing) with new stuff”, and “filling up with theory.” By year-end the students were nearly unanimous in agreeing that they had achieved “more competence”. Jakob expressed his satisfaction in the following way: “Everything

that we did through last year is sort of...I know it so well now, it's sort of under my fingertips. It's very professional now... This year has been worth every cent I paid to do it." Competence, in other words, was described as a concrete, yet expensive resource acquired through hard work and the willingness to invest financially in one's own future.

While it might be tempting to break MBA competence into categories matching course descriptions, MBA competence was never discussed as a simple grasp of leadership or finance theory. Rather, competence designated received knowledge falling within the parameters of a style of management education characterized by its own "informational economy" (Barth 1990 642). As described in Chapter Four, students learned more than theory as they also learned by doing, and logistics, teamwork, time management and the ability to argue one's position were some of the lessons that could not be learned through books but could only be acquired through active participation. The encompassing nature of MBA competence was described by a former student whose testimony was included in the school's marketing brochure:

The program not only provided me with the necessary "technical tools" and the knowledge base for my job, it also improved my ability to work successfully in international project teams. The ability to quickly understand complex problems, select approaches and implement new concepts successfully has become increasingly important in business life. Without the knowledge and experience acquired during my year at (the school), I simply would not be able to do my job.

In this statement competence is identified as the link between education and professional aspirations.

### **Harvard-light**

The use of the Harvard case method is highly significant in a discussion of MBA competence. The school had adopted the Harvard case method and relied heavily on material licensed from Harvard, a source that was tapped in other ways as well.

Many of the staff and administrators had received their own education at this prestigious business school. This fact was often mentioned during classes and was also prominent in written material profiling staff vitae, such as the program brochure. When mentioned, Harvard was always extolled as a sign of quality. This could be seen in the following comment made by a professor in reference to the teaching materials: "I don't want books from the Heathrow School of Business, I want the *real* stuff!" In this analogy legitimate MBA programs were contrasted

with second or third tier schools. While the Heathrow School of Business was most likely a fictional creation (I have not been able to find such an institution), the use of a name that evoked an airport rather than a business school underscored the immediate association of the Harvard name with a prominent business school. Furthermore, as only the “*real stuff*” was used in the Oslo MBA program, the program was implicitly placed in the category of legitimate schools. As a result of these associations through staff and curriculum with the prestige and privilege of Harvard, the Harvard name reappeared self-referentially in the application of the term “Harvard Light” and “Harvard Baby” to their own program.

In an interesting twist, one guest lecturer played on the association between the Oslo program and Harvard when he referred to Mr. Hakuta, the central figure in the day’s case, as someone without the willingness or competence to cash out from the enterprise he had co-founded: “Remember, he has an MBA, not an MBA from (this school), but like a second tier MBA from Harvard.” This joke was only mildly successful, for reasons which I return to below, but I understood it as an effort to boost the MBA students’ confidence in their own education, as though they could beat Harvard at their own game. While Harvard was elevated as the *de facto* premier business school, the suggestion that the Oslo MBA students could out-rank a Harvard MBA was a direct appeal to the quality of their own education.

Parallels between the Oslo MBA program and the Harvard Business School were also played on in recruitment meetings for prospective students. At one such meeting, Torstein presented the program from a student’s perspective. Torstein’s pitch to the audience focused mainly on the fact that the Oslo MBA program was an accelerated program pressed into the course of one year. His advice to prospective students was: “They want us to work in a Harvard pace, and with Harvard quality... Think this through, speak to your family and make sure you have the personal drive to do it... The amount of work is insurpassable.” Torstein spoke from experience, but he was doing more than telling prospective students that they could expect a heavy workload. His reference to Harvard quality was presumably “heard” by the audience as a demand for *high-quality* work. When someone in the audience asked a professor at the meeting what he expected of students he answered: “The ability to withstand pain. Hard workers, opinionated, a variety of backgrounds, curiosity and the willingness to prepare.” He continued by describing the students as working 70-75 hours a week. “And those are the lazy ones,” he concluded without a trace of irony.

### **Professional and self-realization**

MBA competence was understood as belonging to a very particular tradition inspired by the Harvard Business School but localized on the MBA campus in Oslo. The program's ultimate objective was to impart unto each student a body of teachings that they could take with them upon graduation. As such, the MBA degree designated a group of individuals understood as the bearers of a repertoire of business skills. MBA competence was more than a skill set, however, as it formed the very core of an institutionally produced identity. I argue that the power of "competence" as a concept lay in the way the MBA program conflated competence with individual and group MBA identity, often making it difficult to disentangle the one from the other. I have shown that a belief in the greater good of competence had directed students to considering an MBA degree in the first place. The experience of taking an MBA built on this belief and further ingrained a notion of the MBAs as collectively designated by their accumulated competence.

I base this discussion on an implicit contrast I detected in student descriptions of their initial commitment to taking an MBA and the total commitment to the MBA degree I observed at year-end. Most of the Norwegians in the group had chosen to attend this particular institution because of its location in Oslo as much as for its good reputation; however, many had applied without particular familiarity with the MBA degree itself, learning about it while they had made enquires about post-graduate courses. In other words, very few of the students interviewed said that they had been interested in an MBA degree, or an MBA degree from this particular institution, when they had first decided to return to school.

The contrast between their initial lack of familiarity with the MBA degree and what I call their total commitment to the degree at year-end can be explained through an application of Pierre Bourdieu's work on the logic of institutions. Bourdieu sheds light on the year-long process that ultimately instilled students with a sense of MBA identity. If we look at the MBA program in terms of the efficacy of institutional acts of categorization, as Bourdieu suggests we do, we see that such efficacy is dependent on the authority of the institution itself. This is reflected in Bourdieu's claim that: "people's adherence to an institution is directly proportional to the severity and the painfulness of the rites of initiation" (Bourdieu 1991 123). In light of this, the MBA program can be described as an institutional process which categorized the students as MBA degree holders. The success of that process was tied to its very severity and in Chapter Four I described the stringent demands made on student performance in and outside of the classroom.

These demands, in addition to the sheer workload, pushed students to their limits and led to what students described as a process of self-discovery.

Barth (1990) has suggested that teaching methods which verbally transmit information from teachers to individual students lead to the individualization of knowledge. This was compounded in the case of the MBAs by an awareness among students that in taking possession of this competence they had also developed as individuals. This was expressed in student comments that they had had no idea of the demands the program would make on them when they enrolled in the program; some students suggested that had they known, they might have reconsidered taking an MBA. Kjartan remembered asking himself early in the program whether it was worth it and others were unsure whether they would have done it all again knowing what they knew at year-end about the demands the program had placed on them. Having successfully completed the program, however, students treated their academic hardship as something that had “changed” them and this was a matter of pride. In Henry’s words:

What I have learned most from the program, I think it’s two-part. One, it’s academic training. You know, how to find out “net present value” and stuff... I also think I know more about myself.

Kjartan described his own journey from the beginning of the year to successful completion by saying that it was: “scary, too, but then after a while you get used to it and you start to feel good. You think the learning experience is valuable and you get it under the skin.” Like Henry and Kjartan, many of the students pointed both to the knowledge they had gained and the personal transformation they had gone through as a result of their education. Competence was thus understood not only as the factual information they possessed but also as a way of being. In turn, this dual understanding of competence informed discussions about career strategy and personal development but also often served to collapse the distinction between these two. This conflation came to expression in the use of the word “professional”, which sometimes described business practices and knowledge, sometimes designated individual behavior and sometimes encompassed both these attributes.

As presented in Chapter Five, this new found identity also found expression in a relatively standardized mode of communication. The MBA register, in turn, lent itself to self-reference, such that talk about MBA talk was also talk about the MBA group. Students thus referred to



MBA talk in stories and comments that illustrated a growing sense of alienation from the non-MBA world. They suggested that after a year in the MBA program no one in their private circles understood the way they talked or the jokes they made. This was attributed to talk rife with industry buzzwords and English terminology as well as an overly argumentative style. In response to their real and imagined woes, students made jokes about creating handbooks that would help non-MBAs to understand them better. Frequent jokes were also made in which they claimed the need for recovery programs along the lines of self-help groups that would gently guide them back into greater society.

### **Graduation**

While the institutional production of both individual and group MBA identity spanned the entire academic year, its ultimate manifestation took place in mid-June during graduation ceremonies in which students were awarded their diplomas and celebrated over the course of a day. In order to highlight the significance that I attribute to the graduation ceremony and its demarcation of a new identity for the students, I draw on Bourdieu's suggestion that parallels can be drawn between such contemporary ceremonies of investiture, in this case the pronouncement of each student as an MBA, and ceremonies otherwise understood as belonging to pre-capitalist societies. Asserting that such a parallel exists, Bourdieu proceeds to suggest that analytical focus should be directed at what he calls "the symbolic efficacy of rites of institution" (Bourdieu 1991 122). Bourdieu draws attention to the ability of such rites to change the ways individuals are represented and perceived.

Graduation was a day marked on the calendars of all the student workrooms and in elaborate countdown systems. Here I describe the ways in which students experienced graduation and what effect it had on them. In describing her expectations for graduation, Grace compared graduation to the Noble Peace Prize ceremony and the formal recognition of accomplishment that such a ceremony marks. The graduation ceremony itself was presided over by the school's president who bore the school's full regalia of medals and distinctions. Before the ceremony students donned burgundy sashes that they wore slung across their shoulder and tied at the waist. Students were called up on stage one at a time by the president and a professional photographer captured the moment as each student received their diploma. After a ceremony filled with speeches, music and the presentation of individual awards, students posed with the school's

president for group photos in front of the building.

A banquet was held the same evening in an old Masonic lodge in Oslo where graduates and their families were served a three-course meal while listening to speeches held by guests invited as representatives of Norwegian business life. Foreign dignitaries representing some of the countries of origin of the foreign students were also in attendance. In all the speeches, the MBAs were addressed as people with the ability to make a mark on society. The fanfare of graduation was relished by most of the students and they proudly accepted congratulatory remarks made by teachers, administrative staff and their own families. Having spent a year referring to the basement that housed their workspace as “the dungeon”, students celebrated their own graduation as the beginning of a new era in which they could now continue with their normal lives. I expect most students shared Ela’s sentiments in describing graduation and the diploma she received as making her: “feel that you are something special – you’re an MBA.”

### **The MBA diploma**

Ela’s comment that her MBA diploma made her feel like she was something “special” pointed to her individual capacities as an MBA as well as her membership in a group of people distinguished by their business competence. As MBAs, Ela and her fellow students expected to be able to capitalize on their MBA diploma as both a symbolic and material resource in order to reap the rewards of their educational efforts. In the present section I briefly describe these expectations in order to create a contrast with the disappointment that met students on the job market, the subject of the next section.

I opened this chapter suggesting that the decision to enroll in the MBA program reflected general educational trends in Norway and elsewhere. By taking an MBA students were hoping to keep abreast of, if not ahead of, other job seekers by adding a graduate business education to their CVs. This approach was expressed by Arve, who said:

I definitely think that there is a trend at the education level now, that almost everyone has *vide-regående* (a high school diploma), has university level. Now that everybody has that, there’s the issue, the good ones should go further. And where to go further is the question.

For Arve’s part, taking an MBA was understood as a way to differentiate himself as “one of the good ones” in a job market where university degrees were becoming the norm and not the

exception. This leads me to suggest that students sought not only increased competence but an outward symbol of this. This was expressed by several of the MBAs as a hope that the MBA diploma would have the power to communicate in a valuable way to the rest of the world. Nikolai speculated as to why his cohorts had decided to take an MBA in the following way: “I think the driving force is to have something like a flag you can wave. (This says) ‘I have an MBA’ (so) you know I have the necessary knowledge.”

The diploma was seen as a symbol of their business know-how, but, as discussed earlier, MBA competence was not viewed as knowledge alone, it also designated a type of person and a way of being. I argue that this way of being correlated with what has been described as a “desirable personal style in the American context” (Lamont and Lareau 1988 163). As the program, and the students, so strongly identified with the Harvard Business School, an American business school, I think this analogy is appropriate. This style suggests “...aggressiveness, competence, entrepreneurship, self-reliance, self-directiveness” as well as “problem-solving activism” and “adaptability” (Lamont and Lareau 1988 163). In Rune’s words, the diploma stood for a type of person equipped to deal with any future challenge and could be capitalized on in the job market (Danielson 1998 96):

(The MBA) is...a paper that says, “OK, you are at this level, you are... You have done more.” And actually the signal effect...you signal (something) making this. It’s not what you learn, but it’s what you signal doing this...that communicates that you are a person (that taking an MBA) was easy for, and therefore you are a person that (they) should hire, even though you are never going to work on any of those issues that you learn about (here) in the future.

Josefine translated her own expectations into her claim that while her classmates might deny that their motivations in taking an MBA had been financial “we all appreciate material things,” and spoke openly of her own hope that her degree would eventually lead to a well-paying job. Grace expressed the same sentiment a bit more subtly: “I think (the other MBA students) are thinking to have at least more negotiating power on their salary and to have higher salary after completing the program.”

### **The MBA dilemma**

The MBA graduation ceremony initiated 26 candidates into the ranks of MBA degree-holders and this fact, represented by the MBA diploma, made the students feel, like Ela, that they were

“something special.” In this section, however, I present a contrast to the material outlined above through a discussion of what I call the MBA dilemma. The framework of expectations that the MBA degree entailed contrasted sharply with the perception that many employers on the Norwegian market did not recognize the MBA graduates as a special group of people distinguished by their degree qualifications.

While the host school itself represented a well-known and trusted brand name in the Norwegian market, this was not immediately true of the MBA degree as divorced from its authorizing institution. Students were disappointed to discover that potential employers did not necessarily acknowledge the MBAs as “special.” This complicates the application of Bourdieu’s (1991) claim that institutional rites of initiation, as I claim the graduation ceremony was the ultimate expression of, also change the way the initiated are perceived *by others*. For Bourdieu such rites are in essence acts of categorization relevant for both the people partaking in the rite and for the rest of society, but while the MBAs clearly saw themselves as taking their places among a select group of people, this was foiled by the fact that their new MBA identity elicited little change in the way others behaved towards them (Bourdieu 1991 122, 199).

This was illustrated in a story told by a Norwegian student. Hans and his partner had contacted a Norwegian company in order to discuss the possibility of doing a study of this company. Presenting themselves as MBA students, they were taken aback when their contact person responded dismissively. The contact person commented that there were thousands of business students from this particular school and that the company could not be expected to accommodate everyone who approached them. Hans explained this response as a lack of knowledge on the part of their contact person. The contact person knew about the host institution but had clearly confused the MBA program with all of the other degree programs at this school. This led Hans to comment that: “the MBA is undervalued in Norway and not very recognized.”

Many of the students had had similar experiences and their dismay peaked during a class run by the school’s president. The assignment for the day had been to treat the entire business school as a case and discuss the school’s market position, among other things. Despite valiant efforts on the part of the president to stay focused on the entire school, students used the opportunity as a forum to discuss the MBA program itself as an isolated topic, demanding that the president address their concerns. The students’ position was twofold: firstly, they directed a critique at the administration for not having sufficiently marketed the degree in Norwegian

business circles and increasing “brand name awareness”; secondly, they raised concerns that the MBA was not international enough as almost half of the students were Norwegians and as the program had relied almost exclusively on North American course material.

The president sympathized with students by telling them that even though he himself was an MBA, he was consistently presented in terms of the Norwegian degree *siviløkonom* as Norwegians often did not grasp the difference. His main piece of advice in response to student lobbying was to encourage the students to create a network among themselves and with those who had graduated before them. He talked optimistically of the global reach such a network could achieve as students returned to their homes and the MBA class spread out across Norway and the world.

The president’s advice was hardly cheering for the students, however, as they grappled with the fact that only about half of the class had employment opportunities to return to immediately after graduation. A Norwegian woman noted with resignation that had the MBA program been in the United States, the students would all have been headhunted to jobs prior to graduation. Having spent a year reading international business journals and studying textbooks and cases where MBAs played a central and natural role, students were accordingly dismayed by their perception that the status accorded MBAs in the international business world was not reflected in Norway.

Bourdieu has suggested that: “(t)he distinctions which are most efficacious socially are those which give the appearance of being based on objective difference” (Bourdieu 1991 120) and the crux of the MBA dilemma seemed to lie in the fact that while MBA competence was considered an objective difference by the students themselves, they found that this claim was not shared by others. As a result, their MBA degree did not open doors for them as they had expected. I look more closely at their rationalizations of this fact in the next chapter. For the remainder of this chapter, however, I examine some of the reasons why the MBA diploma may not have represented an “objective difference” for others.

Bourdieu provides a possible explanation in his concept of “misrecognition.” Misrecognition, as applied in studies of language use, is the belief that the key to accessing the power and benefits of a group of people lies in mastering their way of speaking (Bourdieu 1991; Gal 1989 353). The students believed that mastery of MBA talk indexed their membership in the wider category of “top management” and business executives in general. While the students never

claimed that their mastery of this way of speaking would alone grant them access to the sorts of jobs they wanted, they were clear that a failure to be able to speak appropriately would have a negative result. I repeat Erling's claim from Chapter Five that:

Most likely I will travel abroad, visit other countries and make deals, or whatever. And (if) I should struggle with the language, that would be a problem. Sort of, what did that "operating margin" mean, and "I don't remember that word". So those things would be highly unprofessional and would decrease the likelihood of doing business.

I therefore suggest that the misrecognition at play among the MBA students may have lain not in the faith they placed in this form of talk, but in the privilege they attributed to the business education MBA talk signaled.

Hans described an encounter, above, in which the MBA degree had meant little to an outside contact person. The irony of the MBA case may therefore have been that it was precisely because of the trend described by Arve, that "everyone" in Norway had a university degree, that others viewed the MBA degree as just another business degree, no better, and no worse. As such, the MBAs' bid for market recognition can be understood as contributing to what the sociologist Randal Collins has termed "credential inflation". His thesis is in essence that increased educational levels lead to "credential inflation" rather than real-time social mobility (Danielson 1998 97; Collins 1979).

I suggest that the students' drive to get an MBA degree and their consequent claim to just reward for their efforts were informed by a conviction that education was one way of getting ahead in a competitive system. I argue further that this conviction found resonance in the meritocratic ideology inherent in the American material the students had studied (Danielson 1998a 103; Dezalay 1990 287). This can be identified in particular as located in the case method, which almost consistently profiled a talented individual whose insight and business prowess had triumphed, and at times failed, in the face of market challenges.

Neves writes that: "in the context of equality, individualism and the ideal of meritocracy have become 'globalized ideologies' in that their main categories have become significant and acquired a reasonable degree of autonomy in relation to particular social and historical contexts, besides exerting considerable political appeal all over the world" (Neves 2000 334). I have shown that MBA competence can be treated as one such main category within the context of the MBA program. The MBA dilemma suggests that the concept of competence did not travel as well

beyond the context of the school. This directs attention to why the concept was perceived as not appealing in a wider Norwegian context.

In addressing this question I devote this last section to a more critical investigation of the “universal” management practices that the students had learned. Chapters Four and Five, as well as the first half of this chapter, have outlined what the MBAs can be said, and what they themselves said, to have learned. In a study of another kind of expert knowledge, Marianne Lien argues that in order for local knowledge, understood as idiosyncratic experience, to become relevant outside of local contexts there must be a “systematic translation of a variety of particular experiences in a way that renders them relevant, and hence mobile, in relation to a universal vocabulary of ‘knowing salmon’” (Lien 2006 20). Standardization, Lien points out, is one way of doing this (Lien 2006 18), and I suggested in Chapter Four that a key aspect of the Harvard method was its espousal of “the universality of management techniques” (Marceau 1989 29), as illustrated in part through a decontextualized and standardized terminology.

In her study of Tasmanian aquaculture, Lien further writes that: “locally contingent dimensions of salmon remained local and largely unarticulated, while its universal dimensions allowed expertise to travel” (Lien 2006 24), leading me to ask what might have hindered MBA knowledge from traveling. I argue that the answer may have lain in the same mechanisms described in salmon expertise. That is, the localness of the businesses cases studied remained too strong a factor to allow a general lesson to be extracted and applied elsewhere. I became aware of this possibility after the discussion between the students and the school’s president, described above, in which the students complained that the MBA program was not international enough, in part because of the North American origin of the case material.

When I started asking questions about their complaints that the school was not international enough, I got answers like this one from Bjørnar:

It’s OK to have the American thinking at the basis and then you change it. And I think that’s the way it works, too... It’s OK to use an American way, because it’s like a standard in a way, and you can always change it. It’s OK as a standard. I’m just guessing. It could be done differently.

Bjørnar retains the emphasis on a standard, understood as applicable in other contexts, but clarifies that the standard is not a universal standard, but is drawn from American thinking. His

understanding of the MBA way of thinking then, was to take an inherently American model or blueprint and modify it according to needs.

The ambivalence in Bjørnar's quote was shared by many of his fellow students. In suggesting that "it could be done differently", Bjørnar referred to the fact that most of the cases were produced by the Harvard Business School. A second argument among the students was the fact that not only was the Harvard method an American method, but the majority of cases were also about large American companies such as PepsiCo and Apple Computers. In contrast, many students expressed a desire to read cases about smaller companies as well as cases from other countries, including Norway. These sentiments were expressed in an exchange between a foreign student and the dean of the program, who was present during the class discussion led by the school president. In this exchange, the student complained that the MBA program profiled itself as an international program, but that it failed to meet this claim:

Charles:            There's a certain promise, given to the client, the student, but the delivery isn't... they will be disappointed. As for a student, can't call yourself international. Go regional first, then Sweden. I can do the academic part anywhere but let me leave knowing about Europe.  
Dean:                Are the cases too Anglo?  
class (in choir):   Uh-huh!  
Charles:            Too Harvard.

Charles suggested that the MBA program failed in its promise to students, as well as their future employers, that their education would prepare them for international business. He provided a corrective by suggesting that the program should build up students' local or regional competence before modeling larger, international markets. This conviction on the part of the students contrasted starkly with an exchange I noted between a prospective student and a professor:

A prospective student presented his doubts about attending business school in Norway in this way: "I'm Latin, I travel a lot. Norway is a small place, more like a firm. This makes me wonder..." The professor attending the meeting was quick to point out that the school operated beyond the confines of Norway and he joked when he referred to his own teaching practices: "We're a Norwegian school, but most of my cases are international. The students complain that there are not enough Norwegian cases, but I say 'Norwegian companies aren't doing anything interesting.'"



## Conclusion

Upon graduation the MBA students commented that their MBA diploma, and the universal management competence it was thought to designate, did not have much currency in the Norwegian employment market. Penelope Harvey argues that while the mobility of expert knowledge often appears to be related to the promise of “revolutionary change” –modified in the case of the MBAs to career advancement – expertise can never be detached from the experts themselves. She also suggests that the mobility of expert knowledge is contingent on “relationships of authority, persuasion and/or speculation” (Harvey 2006 27). While the MBA program sought to associate itself with the prestigious Harvard Business School, and the students claimed membership in top management circles, these attempts to propel their MBA degree into circulation were clearly insufficient.

Charles had claimed that he could “do the academic part anywhere.” In this sense, Charles supported the notion of a blueprint MBA education that could be taken “anywhere.” While the education might be the same, however, he was highly interested in regional markets. His choice of the program in Oslo had been informed by its location in Europe, a market he was interested in familiarizing himself with. Charles had actually been searching for local knowledge as a desirable and necessary good. This leads me to suggest that what can be described as truly mobile in this material is rather the idea of personal improvement through management education. The program in Oslo can therefore be described as a token of a philosophy of management education successfully exported from a particular institution – the Harvard Business School. The product of this idea on Norwegian soil, referred to here as MBA competence, did not travel as well, however. While my objective is not to explain this fact in the Norwegian context, a partial explanation may have rested in the idea of general credential inflation. Of greater interest, however, are the rationalizations and social entailments of this seeming immobility, the subject of the next and last chapter.



## The production of marginality

This final chapter is about a “tension between universalism and particularity” and continues discussions begun in Chapters Four and Five about the mobility, and sometimes immobility, of certain forms of talk and the types of expertise they index (Lien 2006 3). I look more closely at the (im)mobility of MBA talk and competence and the social entailments of the tensions that lie therein. The MBA students were the product of their institutional background and education, but while their schooling had transformed them in the way they thought and spoke and in what they knew, this had had seemingly little effect on Norwegian society. Yet this does not exclude the idea that the MBA education carried within it transformative potential (Lien 2003).

### **An imagined community of business experts**

In her study of salmon farming in Tasmania, Lien emphasizes that while expert practices are always localized, salmon farmers “enroll in transnational networks” when participating in what she calls a “transnational field of expertise” defined by its translation of local experience into a discourse in which salmon are understood as universal artifacts (Lien 2006 24, 3). Although Lien does not apply the analogy herself, I would like to argue that these transnational networks can be usefully described as imagined communities (Anderson 1991) and I extend this argument to the MBAs.

While the concept of “imagined communities” had its genesis in a discussion of nationalism, the core concept refers to the way in which: “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1991 6). The communion that the MBAs imagined was one of a transnational network of business managers, united not by national belonging or even geographic place,

but membership in another sort of category – one defined precisely by its shared expertise.

As seen in Chapter Two, the program's brochure for prospective students highlighted the fact that the program was accredited in Europe and the United States, as well as the fact that the program was ranked by the European Foundation for Management Development and the MBA program guide *Which MBA?* Lessons learned during the year within the program also always pointed beyond the school. In its use of the Harvard method, as well as the appellation "Harvard-light" and "Harvard baby", the Oslo program was continually linked to another MBA program halfway around the world. The emphasis placed on industry awareness, which again entailed constant immersion in market news as found both on the Internet and in print material, let students participate in an even greater web of business expertise. The president's encouragement that the MBAs actively participate in an alumni network of former and future MBAs from the same school pointed to a narrower understanding of who belonged to this community, but also reminded students that their active participation was necessary. In Chapter Five Jørgen was reported as saying that MBA talk would be necessary in future meetings with "top management" on business trips abroad. This statement again conjures up the image of a community of experts, this time defined as top management, but it also allows me to argue for the importance of MBA talk as a means by which to participate in this imagined community. In line with Anderson's original argument about imagined communities, I would like to underscore that the idea of an imagined community is not used to mean an imaginary community. Rather, the MBA program is understood as an instantiation or token of a greater, global community that took form and was accessed in many different ways.

### **The intertextuality of MBA talk**

Context has been described as a "socially constituted, interactively sustained, time-bound phenomenon" (Goodwin and Duranti 1992 6), and I suggest that MBA talk conjured up but also sustained what I have been calling an imagined community of MBAs. I base this argument on the use of Mikhail Bakhtin's (1991) dialogic approach, as applied in anthropological studies of language. The Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin developed a dialogic approach and the concept of heteroglossia in his work on the novel as a new literary form. The usefulness of a dialogic approach and the importance of heteroglossia build on the idea that: "(t)he word in language is half someone else's." The suggestion is that what we say has been said before, or is at least informed by the previous speech of others. While this approach precludes the possibility of

saying something new that is entirely attributable to a single author or voice, it points to the possibility of the creative use of other voices. While heteroglossia was treated as a literary concept by Bakhtin, Richard Parmentier suggests that it can easily be transferred to the anthropological study of the social life of language (Parmentier 1993 261). This borrowing from literary theory to anthropology is based on the recognition that in social life, as in the novel, a speaker frequently refers to and employs the speech of others.

The implication of dialogism is that a speaker realizes both herself and her relations to others in the act of speaking (Hanks 1996 206-7). Parmentier has illustrated the ways in which the use of indirect and direct reported speech in Belauan political speech (Parmentier 1993) links the speaker to the quoted source. In such political speech, the speaker who employs direct reported speech in conveying the utterances of a high-ranking person accrues some of the authority of the person being quoted. In contrast, the use of indirect reported speech allows the speaker to manipulate the original utterance to their own benefit, but entails a subsequent loss of authority as he distances himself from the authoritative voice.

In using the language of their professors, the Harvard Business School and “industry”, the MBA students can be said to have been borrowing the utterances of others. In light of the comparative material from Belau, a possible reading of the reason MBA talk was so saturated with buzzwords is that they sought to align themselves with these more authoritative figures. But they also drew on these other people and contexts in order to creatively “voice” their own MBA identity, as discussed in Chapter Four and Five (Silverstein 1998a). This led me to describe MBA talk as highly intertextual and capable of drawing on and evoking other (con)texts (Briggs and Bauman 1992; Goodwin and Duranti 1992 6, 11). Perhaps the most important contexts MBA talk could instantiate were the multiple contexts the imagined community of business experts evoked, whether the boardroom or shareholder’s meetings. In using MBA talk, the students thus participated in these contexts.

Agha draws on Edward Sapir in writing that: “the continual existence of a register depends upon mechanisms for replication” and specifies “processes of circulation that depend on interaction between people” as a minimal condition for a register’s existence (Sapir 1949 in Agha 2004 27). He writes that such interaction serves to “link persons to each other in communicative behavior across large spans of space and time.” (Agha 2004 27). MBA talk, or the MBA register, then, like the contexts it evoked, did not lead an independent existence but existed only in so far

as its use was sustained by a community of users. In their use of MBA talk, the MBA students not only participated in an imagined community of business executives, but sustained one of its main features.

### **The transformative potential of the MBA diploma**

Having presented the MBA degree, its associated concepts, the “dilemma” it provoked and its ties to an imagined community of like-minded people, I now reframe these interrelated issues in asking what effects, if any, the MBA education can be said to have initiated. I apply an analysis borrowed from globalization studies in order to consider some possible entailments of the material thus far presented. I find Marianne Lien’s (2003) suggestion that globalizing processes be examined in terms of what she calls their “significance” and “transformative potential” particularly useful.

“Significance” represents a modification of concepts used in globalization studies such as “impact”; the modification lies in a distinction Lien makes between foreign impulses which are routinely incorporated in the local order and those which carry within them transformative potential of another order and may change local understandings in very important ways (Lien 2003 117). The thrust of Lien’s analysis lies in tracing the path global processes take as some trends are quietly incorporated in every day life while others herald change and transformation in local communities.

When comparing the material presented in Chapters Four, Five and Six, we see that MBA competence and the two main aspects of MBA talk “traveled” in very different ways. The MBA program in Oslo can be said to be a local manifestation of an idea of graduate business education that travels well, as illustrated by the fact that the school implemented a standardized, universal theory of management education, as championed by the Harvard Business School. Further, the MBA students were willing to pay for their participation in this program. However, students found that their own diplomas did not travel well in the Norwegian context. MBA talk, understood both in terms of its buzzwords and the use of English, met with a similar fate, and students understood that both buzzwords and business English could not be used outside of their appropriate contexts without meeting resistance. Neither MBA competence nor MBA talk, however, were discarded completely, and we see that students reconciled themselves with the fact that they were still appropriate – as well as expected – within what I have called an imag-

ined community of like-minded business experts. If the (Norwegian) MBAs can be described as being anchored in both their local, Norwegian community and an imagined community of business managers spanning the globe, we see that the notion of MBA competence, as well as the language that indexed this competence, brought these two contexts into sharp contrast. Rather than exploring the truth value of student rationalizations of this fact, I direct attention to the notion of this divide and reflect on the entailments student rationalizations may have represented.

The arguments presented here are inspired by Lien's work in Northern Norway, in which she establishes a contrast between the adoption of international regulations and industry standards in the airport and fishing industries of a Northern Norwegian town and a more intangible concept of "identity" presented by an architect hired to help put the same town "on the map." While both these processes represent the introduction of foreign ideas, Lien traces the ramifications of each to different ends and suggests that the latter may have very different consequences than the first. She reasons that the first set of changes created a sense of belonging and participation in an international community. In contrast, the architect's suggestion that the town lacked an "identity" which would put it "on the map" reaffirmed and thus sustained preexisting ideas of the town as peripheral and existing at the margins of Norwegian society.

### **Producing marginality**

In Chapter Six we saw that students rationalized their perception that their degree did not seem to open doors on the Norwegian employment market as they had hoped. Students put part of the blame on the school, who they said had not branded the Oslo MBA well enough; additionally, students claimed that Norwegian employers simply did not know enough about MBA degrees. Such rationalizations, and Josefine's claim presented earlier that students would have been headhunted to jobs before graduation had they been in another country, pointed to perceived differences regarding attitudes towards education in Norway as opposed to other countries. This opposition between countries and markets that appreciated education and those that did not was mirrored in discursive activity about categories of people as defined by their attitudes towards education and their ensuing status in society. Arve's resolve on this point was explicit:

Except from the business schools in Norway, I think... (Norway is) losing in education, and I feel that the whole society is kind of flattening. You can see it all the way from the political environment down to also education.

Here, business schools such as the one the MBAs attended were presented as dynamic institutions with a vision and values that contrasted with and therefore highlighted a sense of general social stagnation. The “flattening” of society was otherwise described as a combination of limitations placed on industry by a social democratic government as well as an internal lack of innovation. As a student at a business school, Arve implicitly exempted himself from this otherwise general trend.

In the extended quote that follows, we see that Jakob applied this exemption more explicitly and elaborated on the source of this distinction. Jakob described himself and his cohorts as “professionals” belonging to a group of people distinguished by their mutual recognition of the importance of knowledge. Jakob used this self-ascribed distinction to contrast this group of people with Norwegian society and the root of their problem – *Janteloven*. Jakob presented *Janteloven* as a pact that keeps Norwegian society locked into egalitarian thinking and one that promotes distaste for difference. He self-consciously conceded that staking out a claim for difference may have made the MBAs “egoistic”, but regarded this positively. His own resolution of the MBA dilemma lay in suggesting that the MBAs belonged to a new “culture” that would only realize its full potential in the future:

I think *Janteloven* is sort of going opposite of education. I think people will get more and more professional and will get more higher educated, and by being more and more professional, you will sort of value your own knowledge. By valuing your own knowledge you will also value that there are other people’s knowledge as well. So, I think the valuation of knowledge, and that people do have knowledge and should get paid for it... People will be more egoistic by those means. So I think it’s sort of a pact thing with *Janteloven*, it’s part of the culture, it’s a pact for 300 years or whatever, so it might be for the MBA especially, it might be that we are definitely, uhm... a higher grade of people that don’t like *Janteloven*, or egoistic people that think: “Ok, I’m going to better myself, my knowledge”. So, we’re sort of at the high end of that culture, maybe. But I mean, in (this school’s) system, there’s a market for it, and there will be more a market for it in the future.

Intrigued by Jakob’s forceful social commentary, I asked another Norwegian student if *Janteloven* held any meaning for him. Jostein chose to illustrate his response by discussing public criticism of a highly profiled and successful Norwegian business personality, Kjell Inge Røkke<sup>1</sup> :

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<sup>1</sup> Røkke is a well-known figure within Norwegian media and public life. His business pursuits as well as his personal spending habits figure frequently in the media.



You know, just from the feeling you get about, you know, we are a social democracy, you know, if Røkke spends too much on a boat or something like that, then you know, quite a few people like to criticize that. I think that maybe the population in general, they're certainly like that. But, uh, with more educated people, at least that's my perception, then that's not that big of an issue.

As “educated people” Jostein’s fellow students were described as respecting and admiring the personal success of figures like Kjell Inge Røkke – in contradistinction to Norwegian society in general. Instead, they shared the values that were thought to mark what Jakob called: “in (this school’s system)”, and which I take to mean a transnational network or imagined community of not only experts, but educated people. This can be illustrated by the fact that Charles, a foreign student, was less worried about his employment situation than his Norwegian cohorts. Charles simply shrugged when asked to reflect on the value of his MBA degree in Norway. He said that even if it was not recognized in Norway, his MBA degree represented a ticket out of Norway and into countries where the MBA was respected and sought after – and to where he was headed.

Many of the students did not have this option, however, as they did not foresee leaving Norway to work abroad in the immediate future. In rationalizing that their problems were due to particular features of Norwegian society, their only available corrective was a defensive position and hopes for the future. For his part, Øyvind foresaw that international developments would soon catch up to Norway and that the MBAs could then take their rightful place. While Jakob, above, predicted that there would be a future market for the type of individual who took an MBA, Øyvind claimed that MBAs already represented those values which counted in contemporary society, suggesting that contemporary society just had to catch up to Norway:

The only people, now I'm a little drastic, the only people that count in my mind are the finance people. If you are from (the school I attend), or if you have a business education, you can do everything. But if you come from the University of Oslo, and you have studied psychology, anthropology or whatever, you are nothing.

Talking about their MBA education thus elicited critical evaluations of contemporary Norwegian society in which Norway was most often described as a society lagging behind global developments but one in which people like the MBAs played an increasingly important role. This evolutionary vision of things to come led Ela, a foreign student, to describe her Norwegian classmates in this way:

(My Norwegian classmates) are not representative of Norwegian society. I think they will sort of be the leaders to carry the society into the future... So the program is nice because at least a couple of people learns it and then maybe spreads it.

Attitudes towards education were used to distinguish between the rest of the world and contemporary society as distinct from Norway, and the students forcefully aligned themselves with this first category. A similar schism was present in regard to MBA talk. Significantly, this only applied to one of the main facets of MBA talk, namely the fact that MBA talk was always in English. As seen in Chapter Five, the friction caused by the use buzzword outside the program led to a negative devaluation of this aspect of MBA talk. The use of English, on the other hand, was a marker as important as the appreciation of business education and I return to Anders' expectation, presented in Chapter Five, that English would be the language of any "proper" MBA program:

I took it for granted. It would not have been a proper MBA if it would have been in uh, Norwegian or a local language. English is the international business language of the world and I expected all serious programs to be held in English. All the way.

In calling English "the international business language", he supported Torstein's claim that "everybody" spoke it. As their fellow students agreed with this claim, I can only suggest that "everybody" refers again to a transnational network of business experts. As evidence of his participation in this network, Torstein also claimed that English would always be important in his job even if he never left Norway. Returning to Anders' words, we also see that in identifying English as *the* international language, Norwegian was lumped together with all other "local" languages.

While the Norwegian students on the whole agreed with this position, I have also shown that they were sensitive to using English in the right contexts. Bjørnar for one, described this as using English at work and Norwegian at home. Kjartan expressed a similar tactic, but one which he expected he would need at his particular place of work, where only Norwegian was spoken. I had asked him what he would do if he found himself speaking Norwegian but wanting to express an idea or concept learned during the MBA program:

- K: I'll be sort of careful by sounding like I'm the, a...(pause)  
IL: The MBA?  
K: yeah, yeah (laughs).

No, I mean, I'll rather make it sound stupid in Norwegian than use the English, but that probably has to do with the culture of my company.

Bjørnar's definition of his private sphere as an inappropriate place to speak English was thus extended by Rune to his Norwegian company as he would rather sound "stupid in Norwegian" than commit the blunder of using English.

In her study of codeswitching between minority languages and official state languages in Germany, Austria, and Romania, Gal applies what she calls a systemic view to dispel the notion that state-sponsored standard languages will also be the languages of authority and symbolic power for minority groups (Gal 1987). I apply this insight to the material presented here in construing Norwegian as the majority language and the MBAs as a self-defined minority. In upholding the value of English, the MBA case illustrates Gal's larger point that linguistic prestige will be premised upon a group's political and economic position, and not necessarily be aligned along a majority-minority axis. In this way "sociolinguistic studies can provide subtle evidence of local consciousness that challenges political economic theories." (Gal 1989 357) The use of English among the MBAs was understood as forging alliances with an outside, that is, non-Norwegian pole understood as more prestigious among the MBAs – despite the fact that their local economic position was only weakly established.

We saw that the alignment with English also entailed if not a devaluation of Norwegian, then at least a categorical exclusion or isolation of Norwegian to certain spheres. English was understood as "international" and Norwegian as "locally" restricted, contributing to what Silverstein has described as : "a functional cline of types such as public>private, institutional-collective>personal-individual and so forth" (Silverstein 1998a 404). The emergence of an understanding of Norwegian as local can further be said to be predicated upon the "contrastive consciousness of self-other displacement" in student discussions of the importance and necessity of English (Silverstein 1998a 404). The logic and consequences of such functional clines have been illustrated elsewhere and Gal's material from Eastern Europe also illustrates the case of Hungarian speakers in Austria. Here, German is understood as the language of public and economic life, and as a consequence, Hungarian is increasingly restricted to private-sphere use: "By their own actions, the language that they deem only 'local' (Hungarian) and economically 'useless' is increasingly becoming so (in Austria)." (Gal 1987 650)

## **Conclusion**

I have built on initial arguments presented in earlier chapters regarding MBA talk and MBA competence and argued that their importance may have lain in the ways in which both allowed the MBA students to participate in an imagined community of experts. The tensions associated with MBA talk and MBA competence when viewed from outside of the MBA program were rationalized in ways that reproduced two discrete categories. As students aligned themselves with an international, English-speaking business world that championed education as a mark of distinction and difference, their rationalizations of this split invoked a claim that Norway and Norwegian remained parochial, and may have unintentionally contributed to the (re)production of marginality.

## Conclusion

This has been a study of the ways in which socialization through discursive practices in the classroom, as informed by particularly Western ideologies of language use, served to teach a group of business students about talking, knowing and being MBAs. When exhorted to “walk the talk”, the students were encouraged to take their proper place in a community of international business experts. Their claim to membership was predicated upon a form of competence grounded in processes of translation and standardization. In promising the MBA candidates a universal “metalanguage”, the MBA program effectively claimed that MBA competence was decontextualized and generally applicable. I contrasted this ideal with the suggestion that MBA knowledge, as produced in the MBA classroom, was in fact highly contextualized and therefore inaccessible to outsiders.

Significantly, students were highly aware of the ways in which language use invoked different contexts. This led them to reflect on the appropriateness of MBA talk. As a result, MBA talk was defined as an important resource that could – and should – be deployed in the business world. In contrast, MBA talk was simultaneously understood as inappropriate in personal, private and non-business settings.

I have suggested that the coupling of MBA talk, rife with business terminology and always in English, with the international business world was understood as opposed to the local and Norwegian. As students rationalized this relationship, spurred by their dismay that the MBA diploma did not seem to grant them the access to the business world that they had hoped for, I argue that an important shift occurred. As a result of this shift, the presumed values of the international business world, including the use of English, became opposed to Norway, Norwegian and Norwegian social values, which were in turn understood as associated with the private and the local and lagging behind the times.

Penelope Harvey writes that: "...it cannot be argued that abstract (rationalized) knowledge is more mobile, for it still requires convincing social dramas to achieve its scalar effects" (Harvey 2006 27), and I argue that the MBA material was a case in point. The abstract knowledge of the MBAs, understood both as their business competence and the technical language that indexed such competence, can be described as highly mobile, but only within certain contexts. MBA competence was understood as relatively immobile outside the MBA program and beyond the reaches of the imagined community to which the students and the program belonged.

As described by the students, the deployment of MBA competence alienated non-business people and the MBA diploma failed to gain acceptance among the majority of Norwegians as a high-status symbol. The social drama taking place can rather be described in the ways MBA competence and the use of MBA talk were reflected upon as creating an "us/them" contrast. As this contrast created significant social discomfort in a Norwegian context where the idea of equality as sameness is valued, students described themselves as keeping MBA competence and MBA talk separated from certain contexts, paradoxically reinforcing an us/them-divide. Despite their global outlook, then, the MBAs also reinforced a sense of locality (Lien 2006). I argue that in keeping their competence and language separate from the rest of their lives, the MBAs reproduced a sense of localness but also reinscribed Norway, and Norwegian, on the European, and world, periphery.

Shuy writes that: "...many professionals are today charged with keeping their language apart from the public" (Heath in Shuy 1984 421) and Philips points to the distrust that lawyers evoke among lay people because their language is so difficult to understand (Philips 1982 179). It is important to recall that it is not language use alone which is the source of such barriers, but the processes of professional socialization that professional language use indexes. MBA talk, in all its forms, signaled a corpus of business knowledge transmitted in an educational setting only accessible to a small group of people. Philips therefore writes that changing language use in itself would not remedy "who has access to what information" (Philips 1982 199), highlighting the salience of the fact that the "relationship between education and exclusiveness is so basic that it may never be resolved" (Spindler in Philips 1982 178). What I have called the "social discomfort" of the MBA students in identifying appropriate contexts of use for their technical competence as MBAs may thus be reframed as a discomfort with claiming professional exclusivity in a Norwegian context. MBA competence, and MBA talk in particular, may thus be understood

as: “(f)eatures of professional education...(that) are increasingly questioned in modern societies as we become more egalitarian and the social structure of our society more open” (Spindler in Philips 1982:178).

The material discussed in this thesis has presented the MBA students as torn between their own desire to partake in the imagined community of business experts that the MBA program inducted them into and the difficulty, for the Norwegian students, of doing so at home. While they resolved this conflict by asserting the boundedness of their technical expertise, the transformative potential of their competence may not yet have been played out fully. I base this on the emphasis the administration, staff and students placed on the degree’s networking potential. This insight is based on claims that educational degrees can function as a gate-keeping device in creating professional exclusivity (Collins 1979: 189). If students choose to use their degree in this way, appealing to other MBAs and eventually hiring other MBAs once they are in a position to do so, the MBA education may yet prove to be a transformative concept.





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