

## MULTILINGUAL COMMUNICATION WITH GERMAN-SPEAKING BUSINESS PARTNERS

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**Abstract:** *Results of European researches show a link between successful foreign trade and foreign languages, specifically between export and using the language of the export market instead of English as a lingua franca. Knowing the language of the business partner can be a deciding factor for a successful deal. Business partners from German-speaking countries are more open to communication and making personal contacts in business meetings if the person they are talking to shows great interest by knowing and using their native language. They are more likely to build a real relationship with their foreign business partner, which positively reflects on the deals.*

*The problem is that the level of German of most of the foreign business persons is not sufficient to use it for negotiations, so they don't use it at all, and instead they interact in English as a lingua franca. In order to examine the need for knowing German in Macedonian export and its coverage, an empirical research was conducted in small and medium production enterprises in the Republic of Macedonia. Most of the enterprises have unmet needs for knowledge of German so they use only English in contacts with the business partners. The results of the survey and the proof of the directly proportional link between the knowledge of the language of the export market and the export performance, by the theoretical research with documentation analysis from other surveys in Europe, were presented to the companies that participated in the survey. The need for German-language knowledge for overall communication in business meetings cannot be achieved in short period of time, so they were advised to use German whenever appropriate with their current level of German language skills.*

*A complementary research with the same enterprises was conducted on the impact of using German besides English as a lingua franca. The success rate was compared to the percentage of success of the deals when only English was used. The results show that using both German and English, especially in the first contact, increases the percentage. Such multilingual communication has the same impact if compared with the researches of using the native language of the business partner.*

*Foreign business partners should start their meetings in German even though the level of their German is low. The more important issues can further be discussed in English as a lingua franca. It is important to trigger the mental process of motivation of the potential business partner which is performed in his native language – German.*

**Keywords:** *Foreign language use, business meetings, German, English, impact*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

**A**lthough English is the language most commonly used on the international market it is not enough to meet the demands of today's business relations. Not knowing the language of business partners is a factor which can interfere in their mutual relations and enter into conflict with economic interests. Knowing and using the language of the export market is advantageous not only to reduce the possibility of misunderstandings through the use of the English language as a lingua franca, but also because of the positive psychological and psycholinguistic effect of using the language of the business partner. The mental process of motivation takes place in the mother tongue so that the process of transferring needs to decisions can best be influenced through the partner's language. [1] According to research shown in the paper, Germans are more open to communication and making personal contacts in business meetings if the person they are talking to shows great interest by knowing and using their native language. The offer of a globalized market is increasingly balanced in quality and price so that knowledge of the buyer's language can be the deciding factor for choice.

The problem is that the level of German of most of the foreign business persons is not sufficient to use it for negotiations, so they don't use it at all, and instead they interact in English as a lingua franca.

This paper presents results from the following studies: the role of foreign language skills and German language skills for business deals, research of the need and use of German in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Republic of Macedonia (RM), a complementary research with the same enterprises on the impact of using German besides English as a lingua franca on the percentage of success in the deals compared to using only English.

## 2. IMPACT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE USE IN BUSINESS MEETINGS

"In an international competition which is getting harsher and harsher, success can be achieved only by someone who is able to understand and apply culture and the affects of customers, partners and rivals, and to transfer them into his own personal interests." [2]

### 2.1. FOREIGN TRADE AND LANGUAGE USE

Results of European researches show a proportional link between successful foreign trade and use of foreign languages, specifically between export and using the language of the export market (adaptation) instead of English as a lingua franca (standardization). European companies who use linguistic adaptations increased their sales in 2011 as a direct result of using the language of the export market, 41% of the companies for over 25% and another 35% have 16% to 25% increase in sales for the same reason [3]. A total loss of 100 billion euro per year of the European Union economy due to insufficient foreign language skills in SMEs was noted in 2006 [4]. Danish research [5] and results from Reuter and Minkkinen [6] show that the use of German in business contacts with Germany leads to success. A United Kingdom research from 2004 [4] shows that export performance is 77% higher in enterprises which give great importance to using the language of the customer. It is similar in Ireland, according to a research report from 2008, on determining the foreign language skills and needs in 1000 Irish SMEs as part of the subproject 2: "Languages for enhanced opportunities on the European labor market", part of the project TNP3-D [7].

A research called the “PIMLICO Project” conducted in small and medium enterprises from EU member state, on language management strategies and best practice in European SMEs suggests that European enterprises are still losing deals as a result of language and cultural barriers [3].

The German language is second after English in terms of the languages that businesses in Europe consider as most important to be learned [4].

## **2.2. GERMAN VS. ENGLISH**

„If I am selling to you, then I speak your language, aber wenn du mir etwas verkaufst, dann must du Deutsch sprechen!”<sup>324</sup> The one who is master of the language of his business partner is best prepared to pursue his interests.

The attitude of the Germans towards the use of their mother tongue in business contacts with a business partner from abroad is shown by Andersen 1990 who noted the language and cultural barriers in the meetings and tried out measures to overcome them. In his beginnings he tried to communicate in English, but quickly realized that this leads to various problems. He noted that using only English makes it difficult to get to know each other. Presenting yourself, expressing one's own attitudes or conducting a free conversation is very difficult because the mother tongue wasn't used. Despite his sufficient knowledge of English, he concluded that English is the second choice. As a result of language problems, personal relationships were not built before the business conversation started. This led to the problem of not knowing how to talk to a partner because he did not know anything about him and his expectations. After he perfected his knowledge of German and began to use German in deals with Germany it proved to be the simplest and most influential solution for all participants. He claimed that the Germans immediately showed satisfaction that the possible future business partner spoke their language and mostly began to speak a lot about themselves, their experiences with the Danes, and so on. Andersen, after many years of experience with deals in Germany, says he had the feeling that Germans who talk a lot or talk with their partner signal that their partner is sympathetic. They are relaxing, they want to communicate and develop a real relationship with their foreign business partner, and this reflects positively on the deals. According to Andersen, there is a huge difference whether English or German is used in communication and recommends everyone to use the mother tongue of the buyer.

## **3. IMPACT OF MULTILINGUAL COMMUNICATION**

Communication ability in multiple languages is considered as a central qualification, as an opportunity and a precondition of the ability to be prepared for the global labor market. The knowledge level of other languages for overall conversation in international business is mostly not sufficient, especially for presentation of products, professional technical conversation or negotiations, so English as a lingua franca used for all interactions. Multilingual conversation in business meetings is a solution to meet the expectations in nowadays international business deals and market and to express oneself completely.

The effect of the simultaneous use of both languages, the partner's language and English on the success rate of deals, was compared with the effects of using only English through a research conducted in the Republic of Macedonia with SMEs in international business.

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<sup>324</sup> „If I am selling to you, then I speak your language, but if you sell me something, then you have to speak German” -Willy Brandt, former chancellor of Germany

### **3.1. METHODOLOGY**

In order to determine the impact of using German and English in business contacts with Germans results from two researches with questionnaires were compared.

The first research [8] was conducted in 2012 to examine the need for knowing German in Macedonian export and its coverage through an empirical study with SMEs with production. The study refers to SMEs because they make up the largest employment market in RM with 98% of the total number of the active economic sectors. Questionnaires were sent by e-mail in cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce of the RM and only 17.50% were answered. In 2014 [9] additional 400 questionnaires were sent to other SMEs, with a feedback of 16.75%. As 35.7% of the total number of SMEs in RM are registered as wholesalers and retailers, the same questionnaire was sent to 500 of these SMEs. A much lower response rate of 5.4% was recorded. 27 enterprises answered, 21 of which had export business in German-speaking countries and six that wanted to export in the future. The results proved unmet needs and lack of German language skills and the directly proportional link between the knowledge of the language of the export market and the export performance. The enterprises were aware of the unmet needs for knowledge of German, so as a result of the lack of adequate knowledge of the German language they are forced to use English.

The questionnaires also contained questions about the percentage of use of German and English and the conversational situations in which they are used. The results of the survey with the proof of the directly proportional link between the knowledge of the language of the export market and the export performance and recommendation for their future contacts, were presented to all enterprises that participated in both surveys i.e. answered the questionnaire.

The need for German-language knowledge for overall communication in business meetings cannot be achieved in short period of time, so they were advised to use German whenever appropriate with their current level of German language skills, especially for small talk in first contacts and for general conversations.

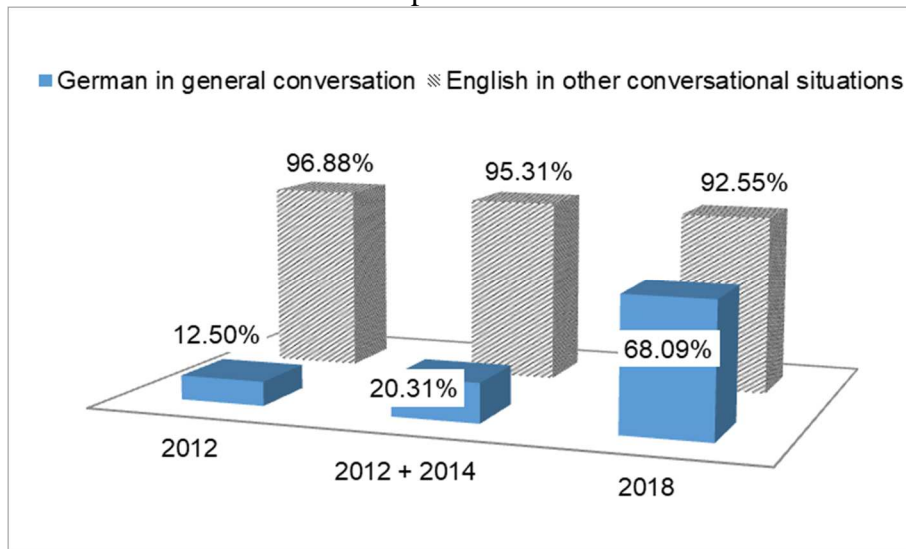
A complementary research in 2018 with the enterprises that had answered 2012 and 2014 and presented the results with and without business contacts with partners from German speaking countries was conducted on the impact of using German besides English as a lingua franca with a high feedback of 76.19%. The use of both German and English was compared in the different conversational situations and the success rate in the first two surveys and the new one from 2018.

### **3.2. RESULTS**

The results show that using both German and English, especially in small talk in the first contact, small talk and general conversation, increases the percentage of success. Such multilingual communication has the same impact if compared with the researches of using the native language of the business partner in other countries.

If the use of German in general conversation is compared, we can see that the enterprises use German much more than years before.

Figure 1: Use of German and English in communication with German-speaking business partners

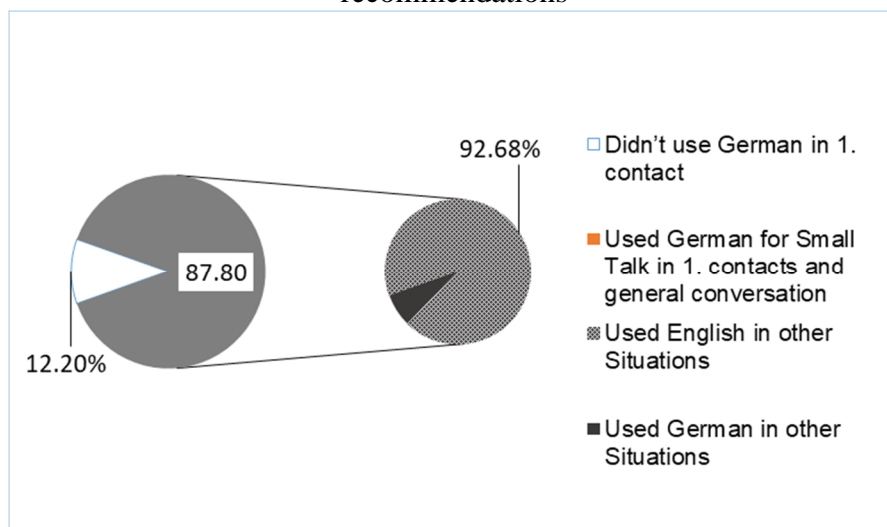


The high percentage of 68.09% in figure 1 can be derived from two circumstances:

1. The enterprises from the first two surveys that had already exported to Germany have increased their use of the German language in general conversational situations by 24.47%.
2. Most of the enterprises 95.35% of 74.14% that answered the questionnaire in 2018 and had no business contacts with Germany from the previous surveys have built one in the meantime.

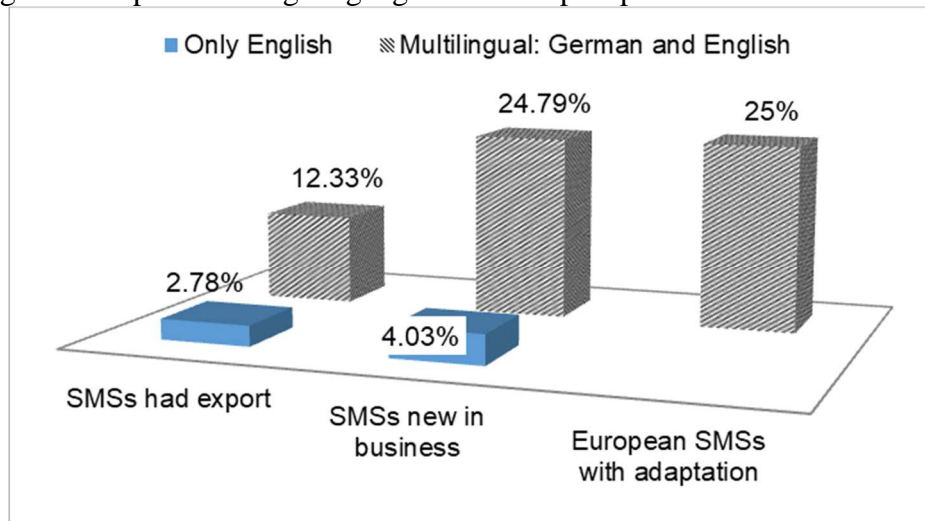
Asked about the language they used in their first contact for small talk 87.80% of the SMEs that reached the German market after 2012 or 2014 answered that they directly started to speak German and 7.32% of them spoke German during the further business discussion, while the others used English in the further conversation, as presented in figure 2. These enterprises showed interest with responding first questionnaire, so it can be assumed that they have taken in account the results and recommendations of the research that have been sent to them, so they adapted themselves linguistically to the German business partners' right at the beginning.

Figure 2: Use of German by SMEs who started export after getting results and recommendations



The positive reflection of the adjustment is evident in percentage of success of 24.79% for these enterprises. There is no difference compared to the results of the European enterprises research on the same topic. There are even no large deviations between the percentage when they use the German language just to make the contact in small talk and general conversation and the use of the language in all situations of business talks, as presented in figure 3.

Figure 3: Impact of using languages on the export performance with Germany



The enterprises that already had export to Germany and increased their use of German mostly in general conversation and small talk also increased their export performance (figure 3). The other SMSs have insignificant increase of sales.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The use of the native language of the business partner and the successful outcome stand in proportional relation, which means they are closely related and condition one another. This also applies even when the native language is only used for small talk and general conversation because the level of knowing the language is low and the conversations are multilingual. English as lingua franca should always be the second choice.

Foreign business partners should start their meetings in German even though the level of their German is low. The more important issues can further be discussed in English as a lingua franca. It is important to trigger the mental process of motivation of the potential business partner which is performed in his native language.

The new dimension of international trade makes a shift from pure export to international cooperation. There is no longer only a movement of products, the willingness to encourage and maintain cooperation with business partners is required, and so is the coordination, the resolution of problems and so on. Communication is not limited only to professional messages, but it is also oriented towards communicative relationships.

Investing in the development of foreign language skills have economic advantages and positively influences the productivity and the success of SMEs and the country's economic development.

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