Preface

This book arose from a meeting with Edward Elgar himself at Melbourne Business School on one of his many visits to Australia. When hearing about our work on language and international business, he immediately said: ‘That’s an interesting topic. Why don’t you write a book about it?’ After demurring and discussing this suggestion among ourselves, we decided to embark on a project that has taken far longer than anticipated. Now that the project has been finalized, we have to agree with Edward. There was a book to be written about how global expansion brings language into focus. We thank Edward for his encouragement and support.

Our interest in language arose from Rebecca’s doctorate on organizational structural changes and inter-unit communication within a single multinational, the Finnish firm KONE. One of the results was the way in which the use of English kept being mentioned by interviewees, at all levels and in various subsidiaries of KONE. As a monolingual supervisor, Denice was struck by this emergent theme. When drawing this to Rebecca’s attention, she was dismissive. How could language be an important issue? For someone fluent in multiple languages (Finnish, Swedish, Russian, English, Spanish and French), she took a little convincing that language was an issue worthy of pursuing. When Lawrence joined our discussion, we started to map out the various implications that arose from the thesis work. These early ideas, published in the *European Management Journal* in 1997, formed the basis of a research agenda that has continued, and remains an important part of our ongoing academic work. Reflecting on how the area of language research covered in this book has developed, we can no longer say that language is the forgotten factor in international business research. It has been gratifying to see the way in which language is now taken so seriously. No longer does language reside in the cultural ‘black box’, or as a peripheral area of cross-cultural management. The growing number of articles, conference papers and panel sessions, and special issues, has raised the profile of language as a topic in its own right.

International business scholars have come surprisingly late to the issue of language. After all, once a firm crosses national boundaries, at some point it tends to be confronted by the multilingual reality. Indeed, we have argued elsewhere that language is the essence of international business.

Scholars in other disciplines with a basic interest in language, such as linguistics and communication studies, have also become involved, placing their work into the context of international business. This is a natural fit for language specialists, reinforcing the value of foreign language research and teaching. As more firms confront the multilingual reality of global expansion, the demand for language-skilled individuals continues to rise.

While the audience for this book is likely to be mainly those working in international business, we recognize that colleagues outside the field may find some of the topics covered of relevance to their work, and it may appeal to a wide range of disciplines and functional specialists. We therefore explicate the core concepts and basics of topics coming under the international business umbrella to provide the setting for the treatment of language issues.

The scope of the book reveals that the issue of language is more than an area of scholarly research. There are practical considerations and consequences for those managing in a global context, and we show that many firms are taking account of language in their operations in creative ways, even developing explicit language strategies. We explore language at various organizational levels, and in areas including marketing, human resource management, and foreign operation modes. Thus we do not treat the internationalizing firm as a monolith. The role of the individual, both as a manager and as an employee, is highlighted throughout the book, recognizing that organizations do not have languages; people do. Our emphasis is on understanding and appreciating the complexity that the multilingual reality presents, rather than seeking to measure factors that magnify or reduce language distance.

This book could not have been accomplished without the support and encouragement of a range of institutions and individuals. First, we would like to thank the managers and staff of the various companies who have contributed time, availability for interviews and many insights that have contributed so much to our work on language. In many respects, this book is for and about them. Special thanks go to KONE, where Rebecca's research began. We appreciate their openness and their permission to use their name in our various publications. This openness is reflected in the attitude of top management. As an example, at the time of the doctoral defence in Helsinki, the foreign opponent, Professor Stuart Macdonald, asked the then KONE chairman: 'Rebecca's thesis contains some criticism of your management processes. How did you feel having this exposed in such a public forum?' The chairman replied: 'This is science. We support the work of the Finnish scientific community.'

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