



Managing Linguistic Diversity within a Corporate Social Responsibility Approach

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Abstract

This paper gives an interpretation of what CSR is and means in the Knowledge Society, and explores the lack of cohesion implied in the limited incorporation of linguistic aspects into this management style and its standards at present.

CSR is not understood as simply going beyond what the law requires but as a means of integrating this increasing complexity that is enveloping organizations and the world. An approach combining legal, marketing and CSR vectors is then proposed. Stakeholders are also asked to develop new ways to progress.

Managing language conflicts or multilingualism through CSR appears to be an innovative way to create value for all stakeholders. A focus on CSR could allow new approaches and new solutions, based on the idea that CSR creates trust. The paper explains some examples for individual and corporate behaviour such as "*I defend your language, not mine*".

1. Introduction

For some years now, some companies have developed policies on Social Responsibility (SR) through which they integrate concerns or sensitivities of society in their management and in their corporate behaviour. Although on paper this may seem an exceptionally appropriate framework in which to include corporate behaviour in reference to language, the reality shows that, for the time being, it has happened only very sporadically. In this paper we shall explain how this innovative approach to management can represent an opportunity for the promotion of the local language and specifically for its use in the socioeconomic context.

As regards the concept of social responsibility, it should be noted that all the definitions broadly encompass the concerns present in society, which must be interpreted with the help of stakeholders; this approach to management gives it a character markedly based on dialogue, accountability, transparency and trust-building with the communities where one is present.

Dialogue, improvement and accountability



To understand how RS works from a methodological point of view, we need to refer to the processes of identifying stakeholders, of identifying what the issues are (materiality) and of accountability (transparency). We wish to highlight three ideas that are key to understanding what RS is, while around it we find the most common confusions.

To put it briefly, it is a matter of ensuring that the commitments and processes for improving an organization that wants to manage RS are based on a correct assessment of the most important aspects that need to be dealt with. Besides the knowledge that the company itself has, its stakeholders can provide complementary points of view about the impacts of its business activity, as well as being able to help identify best practices in order to develop processes of improvement.

Note that we don't limit ourselves to a business ethic defined according to the values of the owners, for we include processes of dialogue with stakeholders, i.e. "those groups, individuals or organizations that have some kind of interest as regards the operations or the existence of a particular organization, especially when the organisation acknowledges that it has a moral obligation towards them.

Another important feature is that RS involves communicating the policies and achievements, because transparency is one of its most important principles. RS reports usually look at five fields for reporting performance: good governance, economic, environmental, labour and social; these are known as a *quintuple account*, which includes the impact of a social nature upon the community.

Linguistic aspects

For any particular business or organization, determining what issues stand out for managing RS is influenced by the views of stakeholders expressed in the framework of processes of dialogue. Thus the elements to be considered may vary according to the sector, the size, the impact caused, the pressures received, etc.

RS is a voluntary practice, and moreover, there is no a priori list of points to be fulfilled. Despite this flexibility, if a company intends to manage RS, it could not do so, strictly speaking, without taking into consideration the issues that have been agreed to form part of its impact, either because they are inherent inside the industrial sector, because they are considered a risk area in a particular country, or because they are important aspects of growing concern that affect all kinds of enterprise. Thus a company that operates in a sector like textiles cannot but consider, for example, that the working conditions inside supplier or subcontractor firms in developing countries are part of their social - though not legal - responsibility.

Similarly, we should take on board the consideration that, apart from the specifics of each company, the fact a firm operates in areas that have languages which are different from those that the respective States have established as their own calls for sensitivity to the interests and concerns of each community, and more so when there have been deliberate historical processes to minorities languages by governments, often in the absence of democratic conditions. Thus, in areas such as that of Catalan, language displays all the features for it to be considered a



striking, and therefore material in methodological terms, with the added value that the recovery of the language has the backing of society and of government.

2. The glass ceiling

However, there is a glass ceiling that, counter to the precepts of the methodology and to the most elementary evidence of the existence of materiality, prevents linguistic issues from surfacing in SR.

If we look at what businesses do manage in the framework of RS or what they communicate through their reports, there is a surprising lack of references to linguistic issues, both from the standpoint of respect for the community where they operate, and even from that of consumer rights. In the case of Catalonia, among the few cases in which the issue of language is explicitly described in the framework of SR management, we find the distribution chain BonPreu, that laid down for its employees that the language in which to welcome the customer has always to be Catalan (the language of the country) and that they are then to continue to use the official language which each customer chooses.

In most cases worldwide in which the linguistic issue appears, it refers to aspects clearly related to understanding on the part of indigenous communities. Thus, despite the existence of international conventions on cultural diversity and linguistic rights, these are not part of the documents commonly used as frameworks in which to formulate SR commitments. Overall, then, we can say that the explicit presence of language issues has been almost nil.

This lack of sensitivity for language issues comes not only from the local salience, or from a purportedly smaller interest on the part of companies to enter this field, but also because of the fact that the guidelines and methodological materials prepared by expert organizations do not make any explicit reference to it; it is left to be developed locally or corporately.

The methodology ought to encourage it

We have noted that SR is not a set of mandatory requirements, but a management style that aims to improve the impact of the company and make it win the trust of society by being sensitive to the concerns of that various interest groups that make legitimate demands.

While we have excellent examples of foreign companies that, on deciding to do business in Catalonia, have included the Catalan language, from a purely market perspective, there are many others that do not behave in the same way. The fact that the State is presented to outsiders as a homogeneous reality makes these companies discover the true state of affairs only much later that they should, and when they do not know the reasons for the minoritisation of the Catalan language. Moreover, it is not easy to understand why one of the major languages of Europe and the 19th on the Internet does not enjoy greater legal protection, for it is left in a position of inferiority vis-à-vis the languages that have the power of States behind them. All this



means that Catalan is erroneously not perceived as a business opportunity or even as a matter for SR.

If the methodology used does not allow the detection of the materiality of language issues by a company subjected to significant pressure by interest groups, by public administration actions, by customer complaints, by fines for non-compliance, etc., then presumably we can conclude that many other 'materialities' may be seeping through the filter.

3. The language, a clear materiality for CSR

The most unique aspect in material or significant issues of corporate social responsibility in Spain is undoubtedly the management of diversity and, specifically, that of a linguistic and cultural nature. All other elements are common to other countries in the European context, if not even the West and the whole world. Instead, diversity based on culture and identity has a unique character, not because it doesn't exist in other places but rather because nowhere is it as central an issue, compared to other countries.

The fact that many companies that manage CSR avoid including language issues in their policies while they still display politicized behaviour that confounds the business logic, respect for customers, and even fulfilment of the legal framework, only reinforces the argument of the central importance that this issue - that is deliberately hidden - takes.

That is why it is difficult to understand why organizations engaged in promoting CSR and even explicitly diversity in Spain refer to all kinds of diversity, gender, ethnic, etc., except for one: the cultural, linguistic and identity diversity that is inseparable from the State itself and is one of the main factors of tension in public opinion.

It is not unusual to see business practices that could be classified as xenophobic in reference to language issues. A few days ago, a major television network said:

What do you think about a film shot in Catalan representing Spain? The film 'Pa Negre', by Majorcan Agustí Villaronga, has been chosen by the Film Academy to represent Spain in the category of best foreign language film at the 84th Academy Awards, becoming the first film shot in Catalan to do so. What do you think?

The very fact that the question was raised seems unworthy of a democratic State and can only be understood in view of the indomitable will to turn Spain into an identity-based

¹ *¿Qué te parece que una película rodada en catalán represente a España? La película 'Pa negre', del mallorquín Agustí Villaronga, ha sido seleccionada por la Academia de Cine para representar a España en la categoría de mejor película de habla no inglesa en la 84 edición de los Óscar, convirtiéndose en la primera película rodada en catalán en lograrlo. ¿Qué te parece?* http://www.antena3.com/se-estrena/noticias/negre-deja-almodovar-fuera-oscar_2011092800080.html

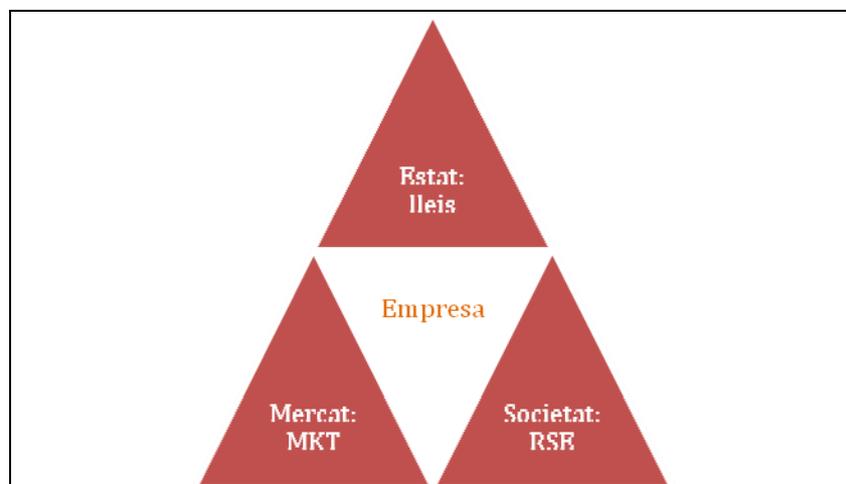
state where only pure members of the dominant nation would have a place. But in language issues such a question - which could hardly be made in regard to other groups - is accepted: Noone would dare to ask people's opinion about a film shot by a woman representing Spain; or about a film directed by a black person, or about a homosexual representing Spain... I myself wrote this to the TV channel.

Surprisingly, the development of CSR in the State leaves out language and identity issues. To obtain a comparative perspective in an equivalent territory, we can look at Quebec:

Differently from USA firms, business ethics in Quebec is primarily cast in terms of social responsibilities. Its primary focus is not the transformation of the values and practices of individual business managers. It is the cooperation of business firms and key decision-makers to the sustainment of one overwhelming goal collectively valued at the societal level, the preservation of Quebec's identity within the North American mosaic (Pasquero 1997).

3. Language, between law, marketing and SR

Given a subject as sensitive as the language, companies should move between three vectors: the legal one (ensure compliance), the commercial one (incorporating market criteria), and the social responsibility one (being sensitive to the concerns of society).



For progress in businesses' development of language and its full normalization, three references to the company need to be considered. Let us take a look at them.

Legal framework

As regards the legal framework, there are a considerable number of breaches in laws on product labelling, establishment signage or customer service by some companies. Undoubtedly, in the



face of breaches of the law there is no need to speak of SR. But let us go one step further in these reflections on the regulatory framework, for socially responsible behaviour should take into account not only the letter of the norm but also the stated intention of the legislator and the preamble.

There are well-known cases of companies that whilst complying with the taxation law, have been able to take advantage of loopholes, and thus defying the aims of the law. We have here an extremely interesting approach in the field of SR, which is applicable to the matter at hand.

Regulations on the Catalan language, sometimes weak, sometimes not completely development, allow many companies to comply with the law without complying with the spirit of the law. A socially responsible company should move from mere legal compliance to a commitment to co-responsibility, which would mean meeting the demands of society and meeting the spirit of the law. It would aim not only to meet but also to take part in making possible for society whatever is the underlying intention of the legislator and by extension of society, whether in environmental, labour, social or economical aspects, all with the shared premise of improving the common good.

Marketing

In regard to the commercial approach, it should be noted that marketing studies tend to leave out linguistic aspects and often suffer from a fundamental mistake, that is, to develop questions for professionals without the stakeholders' involvement. Thus companies do not consider that language is important because marketing studies do not say so, but these have not followed a methodology that allows respondents to determine what is important to them before scoring a closed list of presumably important elements. However, we see that when a market study does incorporate the language factor, it usually provides relevant data for businesses.

And these deficiencies also occur inside companies, such as the working environment surveys, which increasingly ask questions about CSR. But closed questions do not make it easy for disappointment to be expressed because the company where the interviewee works shows insufficient respect for the language of the country. A typical example would be the ranking of the *Best Work Places*, which through internal surveys draws up a list of the best companies to work in, in terms of staff satisfaction. If this survey included a question about respect for language, there might be some variation because not a few people live with the uncomfortable fact of devoting all their professional energy to a company that acts with community values that are contrary to those they personally profess.

4. Integrating complexity

We have just said that companies should consider both the law, the market and society, and now we go a step further in their understanding with a view to pointing out that this triple consideration occurs in a linear way but by exploring in depth a changing society.



The problems and challenges that face society are increasingly complex and require complex solutions, while often in organizations there is a tendency to seek solutions to reduce this complexity until it is killed. For example, in an attempt to simplify management by objectives many companies set purely commercial targets to their sales staff, which meant that certain behaviour damaged the good image of the company or the relationship between salespeople, until more advanced and sensitive models managed to integrate values and ethical criteria into the sales targets.

Returning to our subject, many companies make cut-and-dry decisions on language matters that do not reflect the social situation and strangle complexity, making a bad impact and losing the ability to better understand the environment in which they operate. Thus, when a multinational decides to adopt English as its working language, this does not imply the elimination of others, although some ways of applying and communicating this may lead to that.

5. Noves aproximacions

Managing SR means that a company takes on board the impacts that occur along the value chain and, although it may not have legal responsibility, it seeks to generate improvements to them. Given this extension of SR, we will also have to look at what happens in language issues. Let us do so by looking at several examples (which are real, by the way) applied to both businesses, governments and NGOs:

Case No. 1. An insurance company hires a *call centre* that specializes in market research to undertake some satisfaction surveys, which are made exclusively in Spanish thus breaking the criterion of the relationship that the insurance company has with its customers, which has always been given in Catalan or Spanish according to the language chosen by customers, not just as good business practice but also because it is laid down by law. On top of the failure of the company not having included this requirement in the contract, the call centre does not know the minimum commercial, legal and courtesy standards when making these calls without knowing the language of the country.

Case No. 2. An international NGO respects the different languages spoken in each country where it operates, except in Spain, where not only is there a discrimination of the Catalan language but also an inconsistency compared to its behaviour in other comparable countries. Such is the case of Greenpeace, an organization which in the websites of multilingual countries like Canada, Belgium, Finland and Switzerland, asks users to choose their language. The discrimination of the Catalan language, the inconsistency shown by the organization in its way to proceed in different countries, and the undeserved censorship made in its campaign blog, brought a flood of complaints in connection with some banners it hung in Barcelona.

Case 3. A public authority includes social language clauses in its contracts. It is done mechanically but there is no procedure to ensure compliance or understanding. In fact, the same officials that incorporate such clauses are not sure that they are expected to do anything beyond



including the clauses. The consequence is that the safety posters are not in Catalan. They may seem anecdotal, but they are a clear sign of the lack of thoroughness in the matter inside the supply chain. And as a result they not help providers to develop a culture of improvement in language behaviour. In a SR perspective, it should not be enough to achieve a catalanised outcome, but ways of improving the provider's language adequacy should be studied.

6. New solutions

The action of *language stakeholders* as regards companies that violate expectations lets us bring together some of the forms of action by other sectors within the framework of SR. Here are a couple of examples of actions of language *traction* from within the business logic:

- **Shareholder activism.** Some NGOs have tried to act from inside the company, by acquiring a stock package, when dialogue from outside gave no results. The possible entry of a large company as a shareholder or the coordination of individual shareholders would offer ways of alerting from within about the poor management of risks associated with the lack of SR as regards respect for communities.
- **Socially responsible investment.** It involves taking into account ethical, social and environmental criteria alongside financial objectives, and could be a source of language promotion if the general public and institutional investors incorporated respect for cultural diversity in their SR requirements. For example, the inclusion within the investment portfolio of the ethical bank Triodos Bank as a company like Telecinco which has shown behaviours regarded as Catalanophobic, should make people consider how to incorporate respect for identities alongside respect for the environment.

SR approaches and the integration of the complexity to which we have referred should provide more innovative solutions aimed at creating value for all parties. Let us consider an example of how formulating a verifiable commitment can prevent the presence of conflict.

- a) **Accountability can improve confidence.** When we have to get in touch with a telephone company, the staff that can provide service in Catalan are quite often busy most of the time. This cause an emotional distance with the company, not only because of the lack of proper care but because of the feeling of being let down bearing in mind the firm's commitments or at least its legal obligations. Sometimes long delays ensue before the customer's rights can be exercised, or customers express annoyance in conversation. What can an SR approach allow, by means of transparency? If I as a client are aware of the company's specific commitments I know for sure that, for example, 15% of their staff are trained to serve clients in Catalan, a similar proportion to the number of customers who have told the company that this is their language choice, then I as a customer can be tolerant of the fact that at that very moment there is no technician available and I will readily have a conversation with an operator in any other language we can understand,



without either the relationship between individuals or the firm's corporate reputation being damaged.

- b) **Compensatory commitments make adaptation easier.** There are global companies whose internal operations are based almost exclusively on English and exclude local languages. In the face of this new reality, compensatory measures could be thought up in the framework of its SR. In another aspect, to make it easier for firms to comply with the law of integration of disabled people, they were allowed to introduce alternative compensatory measures. Considering similar solutions would be a way of achieving the same impact but with flexibility for companies that cannot strictly comply with what is legally laid down. In compensation they could collaborate with initiatives to promote the language, both financially and in company volunteer groups, they could require their local suppliers to exercise CSR in the language field, etc.

7. "I defend your language, not mine"

In the public defence of sustainability, be it in environmental, cultural, economic or employment aspects, there is always the risk of entering a political terrain that hinders adhesions or distorts links to global human rights. In the case of linguistic diversity, a good concrete practice is to emphasize not the local language but that of the other, thus ensuring that one's own interests do not precede a fair and balanced model of diversity. This can be specified in the demand that all products be labelled in, not only the languages of wider scope, but also in that of the country where they are produced, even if it is a minority language, so as to promote respect for diversity and the dignity of smaller languages. This is a balanced and sustainable model to defend identities: to actively appreciate and recommend that the products we buy display the language of the place where they were made. This makes it possible to go beyond defending one's own language by placing ourselves in the defence of a global model of linguistic diversity.

And now a real example from the tourist sector, a letter sent to a hotel in Brittany (France):

Dear Sirs,

We thank you for the quality of service and attention received, while we wish to make a consideration that we are sure you will understand.

We chose Brittany as a tourist destination because we were aware of the richness of its culture and the density of its history. That means magnificent castles that everyone can enjoy, beautiful towns we can all stroll through, rich musical traditions and cuisine that everyone can enjoy ... but this also means the intangible heritage of the Breton language.

We noted with sadness that the Breton language, this land's own, is not significantly present in your business. We are from Barcelona (Catalonia) and we know no Breton at all, but we like to visit educated and civilized areas where the cultural heritage, including the language, is respected.



As foreign tourists we need to communicate in a more accessible language. We appreciate it when the directions are in French and English so that we understand them correctly. But we would not like to feel that our presence alongside that of thousands of other tourists plays a disservice to a language that has been spoken for centuries in Brittany and is now at risk of disappearing. Although we can not understand it, we appreciate it when Breton is present in public signage. And if we leave having learned a dozen Breton words we will store them as a souvenir of the greatness and uniqueness of Britain.

As regards your company, we would appreciate it if it incorporated more consistently criteria of corporate social responsibility, of respect both for the environment, the community where you operate, the working conditions or its economic impacts, including the behaviour of your suppliers and subcontractors. Likewise, respecting local identities and linguistic diversity is part of this ethically and socially responsible way of doing business within a community.

Finally, against all the stereotypes that often no one asks us, tourists are not mere users of services that we expect to be specially designed for us. We would like to create a minimal impact on the place we visit, and not alter its natural ecosystems or social, economic and cultural sustainability. When we hear it reasoned that the Breton language is not present in the hotel's information panels because tourists do not understand it, you make us feel bad, you make us feel we share responsibility for the lack of consideration towards your own language. You have given rational form to your lack of self esteem and want to use us to justify it. I wish we could help, given our respect for the uniqueness of your land, to promote a sustainable development that values the assets of your own territory, such as your linguistic heritage.

I therefore state that I shall feel happy to visit lands that have a fully sustainable approach to tourism and that treat us as educated people and sensitive citizens, not as mere consumers or aseptic devourers of resources.

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