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The words leader/líder and their resonances in an Italo-Latin American multinational corporation



The Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, and the AFIN Research Group, Autonomous University of Barcelona, have analysed the semantic resonance of words related to leadership (leader, caudillo, capo, director...) among a group of international directives, all Italian and Spanish speakers, keeping in mind that the word Leader is a lexical loan from English, and in each language the significance and perceptions of those terms are result of cultural construct.

“Duce” and “caudillo” were words used in Italy and Spain to refer to leaders. They were never used in a traditional Anglo-Saxon managerial organizational context before Mussolini and Franco, but were applied mostly to refer to political and nation state authoritarian organizing. Indeed, Italian speakers do not refer to a project leader as a “duce del progetto” or Spanish as a “caudillo del proyecto”; they replace those words by “leader/líder”, a practice that linguistics define as semantic borrowing. However, how these words resonate when organizing?

There is a claim that the field of organizational studies requires an alternative research agenda focussed on language multiplicity. Indeed, practices of organizing are cultural practices,

therefore, multilingual. Research has revealed that indeed the organizational use of English words like “leader” and “leadership” is always diverse and culturally constructed, therefore requires an alternative research agenda focused on language multiplicity, diverse semantics analysis and contextual construction in order to include non-Anglicized understandings of leadership practices. One explanation of this phenomenon is what Linguistic anthropology call negative semantic resonances. Semantic resonances focused on the issue of which meanings can or cannot be expressed by a single word in different cultures.

In this paper, published in a top organizational research journal, the authors analyse the resonances of the words *leader/líder* and *director, direttore, capo, guida, coordinador, caudillo* among a group of expatriates, all Italian, Spanish or multilingual speakers who use English as a second language in their everyday interactions. The paper explains how the different uses contribute to create a meaning of what a leader should and should not be, for example, someone who leads without leading. In their findings, the authors claim that Italian or Spanish speakers not only avoid the words *duce* and *caudillo* (the vernacular vocabulary for leader, not in use due to the political and cultural meaning) but also the word *leader/líder* itself, as it resonate to the other two (violent, authoritarian, autocratic, antidemocratic leadership) but furthermore because the word, a lexical loan from English, failed to encapsulate the complexity of leading multilingual organisations like the organization where the conducted their fieldwork.

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