Language, Culture, and Ethics: Discourse Strategies from The Global South for Shaping Global Business Norms

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Abstract
Language is more than a tool of communication; it is a carrier of culture, values, and ethical worldviews. In the Global South, discourse strategies embedded in local languages and cultural practices provide unique insights into how business ethics can be reframed for global relevance. This paper explores how linguistic choices, such as metaphors of community, narratives of reciprocity, and culturally grounded expressions of responsibility, shape ethical expectations in business interactions. Drawing on examples from African, Asian, and Latin American contexts, the study demonstrates how local discourse practices challenge dominant Western paradigms of individualism and profit maximization, instead foregrounding collective accountability, relational trust, and sustainability. By analyzing these discourse strategies, the paper argues that the Global South contributes not only alternative ethical frameworks but also communicative models that can reshape global business norms. The research calls for a decolonized approach to business ethics that recognizes the power of language and culture in shaping moral economies, and positions the Global South as a vital source of ethical innovation with global impact.

Keywords: *Language and culture; Business ethics; Global South perspectives; Discourse strategies; Cross-cultural communication.*

Introduction

Business ethics has traditionally been framed through Western philosophical traditions, emphasizing individual responsibility, profit maximization, and contractual obligations (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999). While these frameworks have provided useful foundations, they often marginalize alternative ethical perspectives rooted in collective responsibility, relational trust, and cultural values prevalent in the Global South. In recent years, scholars have begun to argue for a decolonized approach to business ethics that incorporates diverse voices and practices from Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Nilsson & Fougère, 2024).

Language and culture play a central role in shaping ethical discourse. As Bechan and Visser (2015) demonstrate in their study of South African corporate communication, employees' linguistic and cultural backgrounds influence how organizational processes are understood and enacted. Similarly, Sultana (2024) argues that applied linguistics from the Global South offers pathways to linguistic equality and social justice, which are essential for rethinking ethical norms in global business. This paper explores how discourse strategies, such as metaphors of community, narratives of reciprocity, and culturally grounded expressions of responsibility, emerging from the Global South can reshape global business ethics. By analyzing case studies from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the study highlights how local linguistic practices challenge dominant Western paradigms and contribute to more inclusive, sustainable, and globally resonant ethical frameworks.

Literature Review

1. Business Ethics: Western Foundations vs. Global South Perspectives

Western business ethics has long been dominated by theories such as utilitarianism, deontology, and stakeholder theory (Crane & Matten, 2016). These frameworks emphasize rational decision-making and universal principles. However, scholars argue that such approaches often fail to account for cultural diversity and local realities (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999).

Recent research highlights the Global South as a source of alternative ethical paradigms. Nilsson and Fougère (2024), in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, show how Global South states challenge corporate partnerships at the UN by foregrounding issues of justice, equity, and sovereignty. Their work demonstrates that ethical discourse is not universal but shaped by geopolitical and cultural contexts.

2. Language and Culture in Ethical Discourse

Language is not neutral; it encodes cultural values and ethical orientations. Bechan and Visser (2015) found that multilingual employees in South Africa interpret corporate ethics differently depending on their linguistic background, with indigenous languages emphasizing communal responsibility over individual gain. This supports the argument that discourse strategies rooted in local languages can reshape organizational ethics.

Sultana (2024) further argues that applied linguistics from the Global South promotes linguistic equality and social justice. Sultana's work in Applied Linguistics Review demonstrates how discourse practices in marginalized communities challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative ethical frameworks.

3. Cross-Cultural Business Communication

Cross-cultural communication theories, such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions, provide useful tools for analyzing how values are expressed linguistically (Zhang, 2024). For example, collectivist cultures often use discourse strategies that emphasize group harmony and reciprocity,

while individualist cultures prioritize autonomy and contractual obligations. These differences have profound implications for business ethics, as they shape expectations of fairness, responsibility, and trust. Joseph, Isoken, and Peter (2023) highlight African cultural values such as *Ubuntu*—the philosophy of "I am because we are"—as central to management practices in Nigeria and South Africa. Their study shows how indigenous discourse strategies foreground collective accountability and relational ethics, challenging Western notions of individual responsibility.

Case Studies and Analysis

1. Africa: Ubuntu and Communal Responsibility

African discourse strategies often emphasize **Ubuntu**, the philosophy of "I am because we are." This worldview foregrounds collective accountability and relational ethics. Joseph, Isoken, and Peter (2023) demonstrate how Ubuntu shapes management practices in Nigeria and South Africa, where proverbs and communal narratives are used to reinforce ethical responsibility. In corporate communication, metaphors of family and community are frequently employed to stress solidarity and mutual care. Bechan and Visser (2015) further show that multilingual employees in South Africa interpret corporate ethics differently depending on their linguistic background. Indigenous languages emphasize communal responsibility, while English discourse often reflects individualist orientations. This linguistic diversity illustrates how language itself encodes ethical frameworks, shaping organizational norms and practices.

2. Asia: Relational Metaphors in Business Negotiations

In many Asian contexts, discourse strategies emphasize relational trust and harmony. Zhang (2024), using Hofstede's cultural dimensions, highlights how collectivist cultures in Asia employ metaphors of kinship and reciprocity in business negotiations. For example, Chinese corporate discourse often frames partnerships as "long-term relationships" rather than transactional exchanges. This linguistic framing reinforces ethical expectations of loyalty, fairness, and sustainability, challenging Western paradigms of short-term profit maximization.

3. Latin America: Narratives of Social Responsibility

Latin American discourse strategies often foreground narratives of social justice and community well-being. Nilsson and Fougère (2024) show how Global South states, including Latin American countries, challenge corporate partnerships at the UN by emphasizing sovereignty and equity. In corporate communication, metaphors of solidarity and resistance are used to frame ethical responsibility as a collective struggle against exploitation. This discourse strategy positions ethics not as compliance with abstract rules but as active engagement with social realities.

4. Comparative Insights

Across these regions, discourse strategies converge on three key themes:

i. Collective accountability (Ubuntu in Africa, kinship metaphors in Asia, solidarity narratives in Latin America).
ii. Relational trust (emphasis on long-term partnerships and reciprocity).
iii. Social justice (foregrounding equity, sovereignty, and sustainability).

These strategies challenge Western paradigms of individualism and profit maximization, offering alternative ethical frameworks that are more inclusive and globally resonant.

Discussion

The case studies reveal that discourse strategies from the Global South challenge the dominance of Western business ethics by foregrounding collective accountability, relational trust, and social justice. These findings align with broader calls for a decolonized approach to ethics that values diverse cultural perspectives (Sultana, 2024).

1. Challenging Individualism

Western business ethics often emphasizes individual responsibility and contractual obligations (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999). In contrast, Global South discourse strategies highlight communal responsibility. Ubuntu in Africa, kinship metaphors in Asia, and solidarity narratives in Latin America all stress that ethical responsibility is shared rather than individualized (Joseph et al., 2023). This challenges the assumption that ethics can be universally defined without regard to cultural context.

2. Relational Trust and Long-Term Orientation

Global South discourse strategies emphasize relationships over transactions**.** Zhang (2024) shows that collectivist cultures frame business partnerships as long-term commitments, reinforcing ethical expectations of loyalty and fairness. This contrasts with Western paradigms that often prioritize short-term profit maximization. By foregrounding relational trust, Global South perspectives contribute to more sustainable business practices.

3. Social Justice and Equity

Nilsson and Fougère (2024) demonstrate how Global South states challenge corporate partnerships at the UN by emphasizing sovereignty and equity. This reflects a broader discourse strategy that positions ethics as active engagement with social realities rather than compliance with abstract rules. Such strategies highlight the importance of justice and inclusivity in global business ethics.

4. Implications for Global Business Norms

The convergence of these discourse strategies suggests that the Global South is not merely a recipient of global norms but an active contributor to shaping them. By incorporating local linguistic practices into global business ethics, organizations can develop frameworks that are more inclusive, sustainable, and globally resonant. This requires moving beyond tokenistic inclusion to genuine recognition of the epistemic value of Global South perspectives (Bechan & Visser, 2015).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that language and culture are central to rethinking business ethics from the Global South. Through discourse strategies such as metaphors of community, narratives of reciprocity, and culturally grounded expressions of responsibility, the Global South offers alternative ethical frameworks that challenge Western paradigms of individualism and profit maximization. The analysis of case studies from Africa, Asia, and Latin America demonstrates that these discourse strategies foreground collective accountability, relational trust, and social justice. By integrating these perspectives into global business ethics, organizations can develop more inclusive and sustainable practices.

Ultimately, rethinking business ethics through the lens of language and culture requires a decolonized approach that values diversity of thought and amplifies voices from the margins. The

Global South should be recognized not as a passive recipient of global norms but as a vital source of ethical innovation with global impact. Future research should continue to explore how discourse strategies across different linguistic and cultural contexts can reshape global business ethics, contributing to a more just and sustainable world.

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