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Bridging the language gap in multinational companies: Language strategies and the notion of company-speak

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ABSTRACT

Despite nascent views that linguistic differences may also have a positive impact on communication, we lack a clear understanding of how these positive outcomes develop. Based on qualitative data we identify two main language strategies through which employees cope with the emotional and cognitive challenges stemming from language diversity and the use of a common corporate language. Our analysis further shows how these strategies can be connected to the development of 'company-speak'. We further unpack its specific functions and suggest that company-speak is crucial for successfully bridging the language gap in the MNC.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the role of language difference in multinational companies (MNCs) has attracted considerable research attention in the international business (IB) literature. The MNC is now understood as a “multilingual community” (Luo & Shenkar, 2006), composed of native speakers of various mother tongues coming from many different cultural backgrounds. This means that in in-house communication, MNC employees must frequently traverse multiple language boundaries, including the home country language, the various host country languages and the common corporate language (e.g. English).

Much of the contemporary literature on language in IB has adopted an exclusively negative view of language differences. This is strongly reflected in the rhetoric of the field. They are variously conceptualized as a “language barrier” (Harzing & Feely, 2008), an “impediment” (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999a), a “disruptive element” (Tenzer, Pudelko, & Harzing, 2014), and an “obstacle” (Henderson, 2005). Research has widely shown that language differences can severely impede communication by production and/or comprehension difficulties in a foreign language, for employees may lack proficiency in the corporate language (Rogerson-Revell, 2007); the difficulty of finding semantic equivalents for some terms (Brannen, 2004); differences

in lingua-cultural communication styles (Scollon & Scollon, 1995); and the discomfort typically experienced in a non-native language (Neeley, Hinds, & Cramton, 2012). Such language-related problems can then lead to information asymmetries, increased mistrust, power contests, dysfunctional conflict, and a complete communication breakdown (Harzing & Feely, 2008). In fact, conceptual and empirical research have purported to show the multifarious negative consequences of language differences for MNC management; e.g. for internationalization (Welch, Welch, & Marschan-Piekkari, 2001); for international M&As (Piekkari, Vaara, Tienari, & Sääntti, 2005; Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, & Sääntti, 2005); for human resource management (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a; Piekkari et al., 2005); for inter-unit knowledge transfer (Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2005, 2007; Buckley, Carter, Clegg, & Tan, 2005; Mäkela, Kalla, & Piekkari, 2007; Welch & Welch, 2008); for interpersonal communication (Neeley et al., 2012; Neeley, 2013); for international teams (Henderson, 2005; Hinds, Neeley, & Cramton, 2014; Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013; Tenzer et al., 2014); and for HQ-subsidiary and inter-subsidiary relations (Harzing & Feely, 2008; Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011; Harzing & Pudelko, 2014; Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999b).

This strong focus on the downside of linguistic differences is, however, somewhat surprising, given that some scholars have indicated, albeit only very briefly, that they can also have some positive effects for communication, cooperation and relationship-building (Goodall & Roberts, 2003; Henderson, 2005; Maclean, 2006). The negative perspective of English as the common corporate language also contrasts with the emergent view in modern applied linguistics studies, particularly with that in the

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literature on Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Poncini, 2004; Rogerson-Revell, 2007, 2008). It tends to show that in spite of the multifaceted challenges associated with language diversity, it can provide a great potential for successful communication in MNCs, if well attended to. In addition, it has been suggested that using a third language, e.g. English, may make people aware of, and prepare them for, the pitfalls of cross-linguistic communication. In this view, “difference is valued as a positive contributor to the achievement of mutual benefit” (Tietze, 2010; p. 92). In contrast, linguistic commonality can give the wrong impression that communication will be easy, unproblematic, accurate and neutral (Henderson, 2005). In this light, it has been concluded that language differences can represent a double-edged sword, and may constitute both an asset and a liability for MNCs (Holden, 2002). However, we know little about the underlying processes on the individual level leading to more positive communication outcomes.

Some studies have further suggested that as people seek to overcome language challenges, it can entail the creation of company-speak. It is a particular variant of the common corporate language, in which the various languages are blended to produce a new, distinct lingo, which serves as a framework for codification and sensemaking, communicating and interacting in multilingual organizations (Buckley et al., 2005; Czerniawska, 1997; Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2007; Janssens, Lambert, & Steyaert, 2004; Janssens & Steyaert, 2014). Following Welch, Welch, and Piekari (2005), we conceptualize company-speak as the vocabulary, terminology, expressions, and communicative norms of spoken and written interaction that are shared by the employees of a specific organization.

The benefits of company-speak for bridging the language gap have been referenced, albeit briefly only, by several authors from different fields. Within linguistics, it has been generally acknowledged that the existence of a shared and specialized language inside a company fosters effective professional communication (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2007; Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005; Meierkord, 2002). In the IB literature, the knowledge transfer literature has long advocated that the existence of a common code in an MNC is essential for knowledge exchanges (Kogut & Zander, 1992). Welch et al. (2005) and Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen and Piekari (2006) speculated that company-speak may streamline communication, facilitate identification with the firm and strengthen cohesion by giving MNC employees a shared sense of a corporate identity. Yet, despite the emerging recognition that company-speak may provide a solution to bridging the language gap, the possible strategies taken by individuals to achieve positive cross-language communicative interactions inside the MNC are not yet well understood, nor do we know much about the facets of company-speak. This represents an important gap in the current literature on language in IB (Henderson, 2005).

In this paper, we hope to contribute to filling those gaps and develop a better understanding of the micro-level dynamics of successful communication within the multilingual MNC. Given the exploratory nature of our research, we used a qualitative case study approach. It was set at two Austrian-headquartered MNCs, and drew on 22 in-depth interviews with top, middle and junior managers, as well as non-managerial staff at headquarters (HQ) and subsidiaries in eight European countries. The respondents spoke a total of nine different native languages. Using inductive reasoning we will present empirical evidence showing that, although linguistic differences may initially cause miscommunication, psychological discomfort and dysfunctional conflict, they can also lead to positive communicative interactions. We further provide evidence that, with the passage of time, employees of an

MNC may craft company-speak. Finally, we suggest that the formation of company-speak may not only neutralize the adverse effects owing to linguistic diversity, but may also create real value in a way that would not appear feasible in a unilingual setting.

Our study makes at least three important contributions to the contemporary theory on language in IB. First, in contrast to existing research, we offer a more nuanced perspective on language differences in the MNC context and highlight their positive and negative impact. Second, we add to existing knowledge and theory on the key language strategies (Harzing et al., 2011) used by international business communicators in everyday work to surmount the language barrier. Based on our findings, we engage in theory-building on how MNC employees reduce the adverse cognitive and emotional impact of language differences through accommodation and active negotiation. We further enrich the current literature by identifying positive, value-adding effects that arise from these strategies. Third, we provide deep insights into the notion of company-speak, how it evolves, and how it functions in international business communication.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. We begin with a brief definition of language and review the literature on how language differences affect communicative processes. Second, we describe the research design of this study and how the respondent selection, data collection and analysis were conducted. Third, we describe respondents' strategies used to cope with cognitive and emotional language barriers, as well as the development of company-speak. Finally, we point out the theoretical and practical implications of our findings, discuss the limitations of our study, and provide suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical background

Inductive case study research is fundamentally concerned with the exploration of new research areas, as it seeks to build *ex-post* middle-range theory and develop hypotheses from the data (Eisenhardt, 1989). In order to frame our research we will first anchor our study in the extant IB and linguistic literature on language differences in the workplace to conceptualize the underlying theoretical constructs and identify the research gap that guides our research enquiry. Following Luo and Shenkar (2006), we view the MNC as a “multilingual community”, whose members come from a wide variety of nationalities, languages and cultures. To downplay the problems of linguistic diversity and facilitate internal communication, coordination, control and cohesion, MNCs introduce explicitly or implicitly a common corporate language (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a). It is usually English (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013). The common corporate language is then employed in multilingual situation, both in oral and written discourse, and serves as a lingua franca between speakers of different mother tongues. In the specific context of the MNC, this means that company-internal communication is supposed to be conducted in English. Written documentation (e.g. email, presentations, company manuals) is supposed to be composed in English only; oral communication (e.g. meetings) is supposed to occur in English, especially when non-natives are present.

When investigating the role of language in MNCs, we fundamentally consider it a human tool that is shared by the members of a speech community. Through language, people articulate their thoughts and ideas, communicate them to others and build social relations. According to de Saussure (1959), language and the meanings it conveys are not fixed and universally shared, but mutually negotiated and co-constructed in and through communication. Moreover, language profoundly affects how individuals see and make sense of the world around them, how they act, and how they relate to others (Sapir, 1921; Whorf,

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