"I just don’t feel comfortable speaking English": Foreign language anxiety as a catalyst for spoken-language barriers in MNCs

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, the impact of language standardization in MNCs has attracted considerable research attention. However, although the current IB literature strongly suggests that the introduction of English can cause a significant barrier, we still have not fully understood the micro-foundations of such barriers. We conducted an inductive study and interpret our findings using an interdisciplinary approach drawing from both IB related research as well as research from the field of linguistics and language studies. We propose that a major challenge for MNC employees is the foreign language anxiety they typically experience in a non-native language. It is manifest in communication avoidance and withdrawal, as well as code-switching. Our findings indicate that such communicative behaviors can have a considerable impact on interpersonal communication, affecting both the content and relationship dimension. Our study contributes to emerging research on the role of anxiety-related factors as micro-foundations of language barriers and provides a so far rather neglected starting point for firms to reduce the language barrier in corporations.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, MNCs are increasingly introducing a common corporate language (e.g. English) in an attempt to manage linguistic diversity and facilitate in-house communication, collaboration, coordination and control (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999). Subsequent research, though, has identified language standardization as a “lightning rod” (Hinds, Neeley, & Cranton, 2014) for problems in cross-border interactions, for MNC employees speak a wide range of different mother tongues and have varying degrees in proficiency in English, ranging from native fluency to rudimentary skills. Indeed, contemporary research has emphasized the numerous challenges encountered by non-native speakers (Harzing & Feely, 2008). First, there are cognitive challenges, which can make it difficult for non-natives to process and produce messages in a foreign language. Second, there are emotional challenges because non-native MNC employees tend to feel uneasy, uncomfortable and tongue-tied in a foreign language; have a low perception of their professional ability; and experience status loss, a lack of belongingness and a sense of job insecurity. Said emotions can hinder effective interpersonal communication (Neeley, 2013; Neeley, Hinds, & Cranton, 2012) destroy teambuilding (Hinds et al., 2014; Lauring & Tange, 2010; Tenzer, Pudelko, & Harzing, 2014; Von Glinow, Shapiro, & Brett, 2004), and impair HQ-subsidiary relations (Harzing & Feely, 2008).

However, while there is strong scholarly agreement among international business scholars that the adoption of English as a corporate language can constitute a severe obstacle in MNCs, they have not yet explicitly and systematically studied the impact of language-induced emotions in the workplace. Thus far, existing research efforts have been devoted to investigate cognitive factors, including a lack of common language, as well as lingua-cultural differences in communication rules and frames of reference as main sources for communication failures (Brannen, 2004; Henderson, 2005; Rogerson-Revell, 2007). Moreover, much of the contemporary research has been conducted in the context of headquarters-subsidiary relations (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio, 2011; Barner-Rasmussen & Bjørkman, 2005; Bjørkman & Piekkari, 2009; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011; Harzing & Pudelko, 2014; Luo & Shenkar, 2006). As a result, we know very little about the emotional impact of English at the individual level, and how non-native employees feel about its usage as a corporate language. This may have prevented researchers from fully capturing the multifaceted nature of language standardization and how its implementation may lead to a language barrier. Yet, “at a base level, language is an issue
concerning individuals and their competence; companies do not have languages, people do” (Marchan-Piekkarl et al., 1999, p. 382). Thus, further language-sensitive research on the micro-foundations and lived perceptions of non-native MNC employees is highly warranted to enhance our understanding of the overt and covert emotional ramifications of using English as a common corporate language.

Hence, the research purpose of this study is to further venture into the micro-foundations of language barriers, and explore the negative emotions associated with the adoption of English as a corporate language. Specifically, we seek to address the following research questions: (1) what are the main emotional challenges of English-language policy for non-natives, (2) what are the reactions of non-native English-speaking employees to such emotions, and (3) and what are their main consequences for interpersonal exchanges between MNC employees?

To shed further light on these issues, we use an interdisciplinary research approach combining knowledge from the field of IB with knowledge from linguistics and language studies. Empirically, we report on an inductive interview study set at two MNCs, which introduced English as a corporate language several years ago. As both companies operated in non-native English-speaking countries and employ a largely non-native workforce, we would argue that they provide a fruitful research context. The study draws upon 22 interviews with top and senior managerial and non-managerial staff at corporate headquarters and subsidiaries, all of whom were engaged in participative work relations across linguistic boundaries. They spoke a total of ten different native languages, and were all non-native speakers of English. Initially, key informants from our two case companies strongly insisted that there was no language barrier because all their employees were sufficiently competent in English owing to their language-sensitive HR policies, which requires that employees, especially those in international positions, have fluency-level English skills. Nevertheless, we found strong evidence of a language barrier in our dataset. Using a grounded theory approach, our in-depth interviews revealed that a key catalyst for language barriers was the foreign language anxiety typically experienced by non-native employees in the designated corporate language. Following Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), we conceptualized it as a situational anxiety reaction specifically related to communication in a non-native tongue. What is more, we found that said anxiety had significant consequences by considerably inhibiting people from engaging in lingua franca communication. It lead to changes in individual’s communication behavior, where it became manifest in communication withdrawal and avoidance as well as code-switching. Grounded in our rich interview data, we developed a model which illustrates how foreign language anxiety can affect both the content and relationship dimensions of communication, effectively disenabling non-natives from engaging in the successful exchange of messages and the creation of social relations with others.

Our study contributes to the IB literature on language barriers in MNC in several important ways. First, in terms of theoretical contributions, we emphasize the role of foreign language anxiety as an important cause of language barriers in the MNC. While we recognize that using English may also carry positive emotional repercussions, our main goal was to improve our understanding of “what exactly it is about language that creates a problem” (Harzing & Feely, 2008 p. 52). This is also in accordance with the language barrier framework developed by Harzing and Feely (2008), which included “anxiety and uncertainty” as a contributing factor, though without venturing deeper into the underlying processes. Further, in response to calls for a better theoretical grounding of language-sensitive IB research (Luo & Shenkar 2006), we employed the construct of foreign language anxiety to study language barriers in MNCs. Originally rooted in the literature of second language acquisition and language learning, we argue that it can be fruitfully applied to IB research to analyze and empirically demonstrate the emotional impact of an English-language mandate in the realm of the international workplace. Second, our study is among the first to systematically explore the consequences of foreign language anxiety in the MNC by tapping into the various cognitive, emotional and behavioral effects of foreign language anxiety in the workplace. We thus complement emerging research on emotional aspects of an English-language mandate (Hinds et al., 2014; Neeley, 2013; Neeley et al., 2012; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015; Tenzer et al., 2014). Third, our study is of practical relevance in that it can help managers and employees to better understand and manage the manifold challenges of operating in English. It further challenges the current reasoning among both scholars and practitioners that once people speak English fluently, the language barrier will somewhat automatically disappear. We present some recommendations on how managers and employees can tackle the issue of anxiety and alleviate language barriers.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. We first review the literature on language barriers in MNCs to anchor our study in the available literature. Theoretically, we synthesize the contemporary literature on language effects in international business, which has studied the impact of English as a corporate language, and applied linguistics literature, in particular research on language learning and second language acquisition. Second, we describe our research design, including data sample, data collection and data analysis. Based on 22 in-depth interviews, we then discuss the theme of foreign language anxiety, how it affects people’s communicative behaviors and how it impacts inter-personal exchanges. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of our study, as well as the limitations of our study and avenues for further research.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

Broadly speaking, language can be conceptualized as a man-made sign system that connects linguistic signs to meaning. This paper adopts a socio-linguistic view of language. Language is a medium of exchange through which individuals articulate their internal thoughts, engage in social interactions and initiate, create and maintain social relations (Duranti, 1997; Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1940). As Thompson (2003, 37 in: Wright 2008: 23) concluded, “language is not simply the ability to use words; it refers to the complex array of interlocking relationships which form the basis of communication and social interaction”.

Conceptually, our study builds on recent views of the MNC as a “multilingual organization” (Luo & Shenkar, 2006). In this view, corporate headquarters (HQ) and subunits are spatially dispersed and located in different linguistic environments. As companies confront multilingualism, MNCs tend to standardize their language usage by introducing a common corporate language. This language standardization constitutes a concerted effort to manage multilingualism, and is intended to facilitate both written and spoken, formal and informal communication whilst minimizing the need for costly and time-consuming translations, and craft a shared organizational culture and build a strong corporate identity, that helps to hold a language-diverse staff together (Marchan-Piekkarl et al., 1999).

In terms of their working language, MNC units have a choice between using the parent company language, their local language or a third language (Luo & Shenkar, 2006). These days, most MNCs select the last option and select English as their common corporate language. In Europe, for instance, most companies use English as their company language (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013). For instance, many MNCs such as Germany’s Daimler, Deutsche Bank, and SAP;
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