

The Role of Socio-Linguistics in the Context of Interpersonal Interaction

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study considers the role of language and socio-linguistic competence in the development of interpersonal relationships between individuals and teams. Globalization is a relatively recent phenomenon supported by the development of telecommunications and IT that has dramatically lowered the cost of doing business, together with the advances in logistics and supply chain management that has facilitated it. Intrinsic in this is the role of inter-personal communication between individuals and teams. Whilst the *lingua franca* of business is increasingly if not universally English, the corollary of this is that many actors communicate as non-native speakers. This poses many challenges for individuals, teams and organizations as they attempt to communicate between cultures, across time zones and often discussing complex and technical issues with an imperative for decision making perhaps in circumstances of ambiguity and complexity and within interdependent networks of relationships.

In discussing the IMP Interaction model Håkansson (1982:10) noted, with reference to an IMP team of researchers that '*several researchers with different backgrounds*' had problems further complicated amongst other factors by '*differences in language, approach and emphasis*' between them. Consequently, the IMP Group interaction model becomes very pertinent in the analysis of the relationships among team members of diverse multi-cultural and multi-lingual background. This paper discusses the effects of sociolinguistics, the interactional-relational dimension of language, on the management of multi-cultural, multi-lingual teams and its influence on the links and relationships, internal and external to these teams, created in the process.

The research was conducted using a questionnaire that respondents completed prior to a semi-structured interview. The respondents were all working in teams in an international context, that is to say outside their country of birth, most were plurilingual and communicating in a language other than their native tongue.

This initial study suggests that socio-linguistic competence is important in developing relationships. Communication depends not just on language competence and performance but on bridging what is colloquially known as the language barrier. This study proposes that this is seen as connectedness at a social level. In which language involves not just communication but the signalling of trust and the consequent reduction of risk and personal insecurity. This suggests that socialisation and adaption take place in order that plurilingual team members develop meaningful interactions.

Keywords: - language, linguistics, socio-linguistics, interaction, culture

INTRODUCTION

The management of teams is based on human interaction. There are various multicultural settings where such interaction could take place in today's globalised economy. Managing such international relationships between parties has been an ongoing focus of scholars.

It has been noted that culture plays an important role in the work-related interaction between people (Hofstede, 1980, 1984). Cavusgil and Das (1997) agree that cross-cultural research is difficult and relative and that certain assumptions and simplifications need to be considered and resolved in the process. There is, however, another interesting component that had attracted some interest amongst academics more recently – the *language*. It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate another culture and a different way of life and work simply by observation or relying on the other four senses. One would need another tool, a *proxy* that can relay the information in a consistent and sustainable way.

In the Chomskian understanding of linguistics, the language is something that belongs to the individual, something innate, an inseparable part of the mind, mentalist (Chomsky, 1965, 1986). In his generative view of linguistics he propagates the idea of isolation. The language is viewed as a system of defined rules and formal structural properties that are reproduced in the mind of individuals away and independent from society. The linguistic knowledge according to Chomsky (1965) is generic, self-contained, pure and un-social. His idealistic concept, often referred to as 'mentalism' in the field of linguistics, is illustrated with what he termed as generative 'universal grammar': a pre-specified, highly orderly set of rules, rigid and reproduced in its purest of forms by individuals fluent in it (Chomsky, 1986).

Despite, the fact that an acknowledgment was made of the difference between *competence* and *performance*, Chomsky (1965) remained on the in-side of the linguistic domain. Chomsky does not acknowledge the social aspect of linguistics proposing that I-language ('internalized' to the mental faculty of an individual) versus the E-language ('externalized' from the mind) is 'considerably more obscure' (1986:25) and 'appears to play no role in the theory of language' (1986:26).

A diametrically opposite view is one that regards language as a social construct, which cannot be taken out of the context of the subject area (Labov 1966, 1987). His argument is that even if an assumption is to be agreed that the language belongs to the mind and is innate to an individual, the individual will use the language system to communicate with another individual and in so doing they form a group (Labov, 1987). The group expands and more individuals use the system of exchange. Therefore Labov (1966, 1987) argues that the language is characteristic to its users; hence it becomes a social instrument of communication. The group that use language as a communication exchange mechanism Labov named a 'speech community' (Labov, 1966, 1972). The 'communication' in that 'community' leads to a network of individuals, and due to its social effect and setting, in actual fact it becomes a type of a social network.

This work explores the effects of sociolinguistics – the interactional-relational dimension of language - on the management of multi-cultural, multi-lingual teams and its influence on the links and relationships, internal and external to these teams, created in the process. Then language becomes a conduit of culture, a channel for faster and better decision-making in business (Harzing, Koeuster and Magner, 2009-2010; Zander, Mockaitis and Harzing, 2010). Berger and Luckmann, and Grace (1966, 1987 cited in Nag, Hambrick and Chen, 2007: 937) consider language as ‘the fundamental medium that makes that social construction possible’.

Parallels are drawn from the organisational management science in terms of management of teams as well as from the area of marketing, more specifically the International Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group’s ‘Interaction Model’ (www.impgroup.org). This construct is based on multiple studies across several European countries and entails a network of relationships between buyers and suppliers and the interaction between them (www.impgroup.org).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language

Although widely accepted by multinational companies (MNC) that effective coordination of global activities is in itself a competitive advantage very few have achieved that desired level, despite investing in and surrounding themselves by such modern tools as video, audio, and electronic communication (Feely and Harzing, 2003; Cohen, 2007). However whilst technology continues to advance rapidly, the language is a barrier to its utilisation. Cohen (2007) highlights that it is in fact the people who slow down the process of interaction as many prefer to remain in their comfort zones nearby, arguing that there is a genuine lack of human connection. Feeley and Harzig (2003) went even further in suggesting that the management across borders, cultures and languages could be ‘daunting’.

Indeed, before any information or cultural exchange can take place it is necessary to establish a connection. A wider form of interaction and a more focused work-related communication will be predictably easier thereafter. This is to say that before any factors, such as cultural differences, that influence the coordination and management processes in MNCs are considered a recognition should be given to ‘the most neglected field in management’ (Reeves & Wright, 1996) – working across international language barriers.

Sociolinguistics

Chomsky elaborated on the ‘fundamental distinction between *competence* (the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of his language) and *performance* (the actual use of language in concrete situations)’ (Chomsky, 1965:4). He proposed a distinction between the ‘internalized’ (I-language) ‘notion of structure’, mentally specified knowledge of language of a native speaker, and the ‘externalized’ (E-language) ‘system of actions or behaviours of some sort’ (Chomsky, 1986:22:20).

The concept of the E-language, although later somewhat rejected by its author (Chomsky, 1986:22-23), indicate a direction of research that regards the language in its materialistic construct as ‘a property of a speech community, an instrument of social communication’ (Labov, 1987). Whether it is a speech community (Labov, 1963), situations of speaking (Hymes, 1962), ‘practice’ of speaking (Bourdieu, 1991), or ‘domains’ of language use (Fishman, 1972) the intrinsic connection between language, social groups and society at large is evident.

Although the term ‘sociolinguistics’ was first introduced in 1952 proposing that ‘social functions and significations of speech factors offer a prolific field of research’ (Chambers, Trudgill and Schilling-Estes, 2006:5), the subject area received the attention of academia only in the early 1960s (Labov, 1963).

Whilst sociolinguistics can be interpreted in different ways (Hymes, 1989) a twofold definition by Malmkjær (2004) will be adopted.

Thus sociolinguistics is defined as:

1. *The study of language in its social contexts.*
2. *The study of social life through linguistics.*

Related understandings of the concept include Hymes (1971), who coined the phrase ‘communicative competence’ to underline the importance of the capacity to use a language to convey information across language boundaries. Kassis Henderson (2010) uses the concept of ‘sociolinguistic competence’ referring to the ability and the level of proficiency of an individual to construe the meaning of language and interact in a particular cultural-linguistic setting.

Thus a sociolinguistic competence in a foreign language (or languages) serves as an introduction into the host culture, and acts as a tool for establishing and maintaining relationships.

Language Barrier

Some of the essential characteristics of a global manager had been identified as the ability to manage people and the aptitude for cultural adaptability (Dalton et al, 2002). Both of these characteristics would be impossible to acquire or practice on a global scale without language considerations.

At the team level relationships are based on interaction, strategic use of language and visual cues (Lencioni, 2002). The extrapolation of those characteristics in the global dimension suggests a geographically dispersed, multilingual, multicultural, and on many occasions virtual teams. It is also present in the HQ-subsidary relationships (Feely and Harzing, 2003). Overcoming the language barrier is important to the establishment of trust (Feely and Harzing, 2003). It is not uncommon to refer to an inconsistent or incoherent discussion between two parties as if they speak two different languages, despite the fact that the argument is conducted in one common language. Feely and Harzing (2003), Harzig, Koeuster and Magner (2009-2010) and Zander, Mockaitis and Harzing (2010) describe multiple organisational, HR, and financial difficulties due the language barrier. It takes more time to pass on instructions or reach a decision; it is more expensive as translation or interpreting might be needed; the bi-lingual team members might be overloaded with mediating (Feely and Harzing, 2003). They might as well filter the information flow and create various other complications (Koeuster and Magner, 2009-2010). Such challenges are more and more frequent for the global managers and require resolution in order to achieve trust.

Sociolinguistic mind-set

Bond and Yang (1980, 1982 cited in Ralston et al., 1995) imply that persons respond differently in different languages to accommodate the culture that is associated with the communicating language. Ralston et al. (1995) refer to this as 'cultural accommodation'. This was first proposed by Bond and Yang (1980), and developed by Ralston et al. (1995) noting that respondents to a questionnaire showed signs of adapting their answers, and even more their 'mind-set' to the culture of the language in which the questions were presented. This would suggest that sociolinguistic competence is an adaptive mind-set with the language and its corresponding culture allowing for interactive communication. The link between language and culture is an integral aspect of communication, trust and relationships. It serves as a 'key to another mentality and a way of thinking' (Lensing cited in Cohen, 2007:107).

Communication

The geographical dispersion of team members requires a clear communication structure and transparent rules (Zander, Mockaitis and Harzing, 2010). Cohen (2007) underlines the importance of human connections and 'nurturing'. Noorderhaven and Harzing (2009) explore the impact of social interaction amongst managers with global exposure. Communication at the inter-departmental level amongst managers facilitates knowledge transfer within the organisation.

Harzing *et al.* (2003, 2008, 2009, 2010) acknowledges the difficulties of multilingual work environments and the inefficiencies and confusion that those create in organisations. The most common solution that managers apply is to use a single, organisational language, a *lingua franca*, aimed at simplifying the information exchange. Overwhelmingly this tends to be English as the most widely used language of commerce. Using this *proxy* language, however, has its consequences for the older employees who might not be fluent, but

particularly for the Anglophone speakers who might be insensitive to subtleties not transmitted by non-native speakers (Harzing *et al.* 2010). Global managers will face challenges in distance communication and virtual team management, as often visual cues are either missing or carefully concealed in front of the camera (Jyrämä, Kauppila, Rajala, 2009). Hence, the growing importance of sociolinguistic training is evident in evolving virtual team management practices.

An alternative option in managing communication in the multilingual work environments is to accept multilingualism (Harzing, 2010), where more than one language is common for an organisation. This approach however, has limited applicability as there are few countries that are bi- or multilingual particularly in a common language(s), and there are additional complications involved in training staff and managing IT and information exchange infrastructure.

The third solution is the use of external resources or internally hired professionals, such as interpreters, or IT tools with similar capability. Nonetheless, it will hardly eliminate language barriers and would therefore fail to improve to a worthwhile extent the communication (Harzing *et al.*, 2010).

Harzing (2010) proposes that one of the two most sustainable options, though demanding the longest time, is the continuous training of staff, made available in a more intensive and widely available format across the organisation. In the longer term, HR recruitment policies could be adapted to hiring professionals that already speak the established corporate language (Harzing, 2010).

IMP and other models of relationships

It is the interaction and socialisation processes that present particular challenges (Langerstrom and Anderson, 2003; Kassis Henderson, 2005; Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000; Schweiger *et al.*, 2003; cited in Kassis Henderson, 2010:362) in the broader sociolinguistic competence.

The 'interaction model', based on dyadic relationships between actors, i.e. buyer and seller, was in contrast with the largely monadic, primarily American influenced marketing concept of 'organisation-environment connection' (Håkansson, 1982:11). The environment being the market becomes a broader network of interacting entities in terms of the Interaction approach (Håkansson, 1982:12).

The subject area, further expanded by Berry (1983) who first proposed the concept of 'relationship marketing', attracted the attention of researchers focussing on the quality and variety of relations (Jackson, 1985; Day, 1990, Grönroos, 1990; Fontenot and Wilson, 1997 cited in Palmer, 2007:440).

Håkansson (1982:10) noted that 'several researchers with different backgrounds' [and origin] working on the IMP project had problems complicated amongst other factors by 'differences in language, approach and emphasis'. Sociolinguistics was no yet on the agenda of management scholars and neither was it used as a tool by management teams. However, 30

years later, these comments can be seen in a new light with respect to multinational team relationship management. Consequently, the IMP model is interesting to consider in the analysis of the relationships among team members of diverse multi-cultural and multi-lingual background.

Breaking down the interaction approach of studying relationships, there is an 'exchange' in all four sub-processes of an episode – the single business transaction that occurs between two entities (Håkansson, 1982). The *information exchange* and *social exchange*, that are responsible for the building of long-term relationships, lead to 'adaptation' of both parties to each other's way of functioning (Håkansson, 1982). The importance of social interaction is that it creates trust during this process. Hence, the more culturally and linguistically distant the parties are, the longer the social exchange will last in an episode before adaptation is optimised. As a result contact patterns and role relationships emerge in the process.

The importance of sociolinguistic competence in the process of building relationships is evident in both the direct reference by Håkansson (1982) to the social interaction in different cultural settings and implied from the 'interaction environment' and 'atmosphere' that organisations operate in and the social interaction or quality of 'experience' that they accumulate. A 'special knowledge' will be required to develop international relationships (Håkansson 1982:20).

The contribution to the marketing view of relationships was the suggested continuum from transactional to relational type of interactions, (Jackson, 1985; Day, 1990, Grönroos, 1990; Fontenot and Wilson, 1997; Anderson and Narus, 1999, cited in Palmer, 2007, p.440). Anderson and Narus (1999) expand Jackson's more 'rudimentary premise' of presenting relationships along the transactional-relational continuum and refer to this as 'industry bandwidth', reflecting a pool of interactions. Both the implicit and explicit nature of such interactions suggests the development of strategic forms of collaborative communication (Anderson and Narus, 1999). Communication in its own right does not take place without the use and help of language. Recognising the importance of language and its reference to culture, Anderson and Narus (1999) underline the sharing and exchange of information and experiences. They refer to 'bridging' as multiple levels of interaction between firms and across functions. These two perspectives (Håkansson, 1982; Anderson and Narus, 1999) both suggest an intermediary period of interactive adaptation between the two polarities of the continuum: the simple links with purely transactional episodes and the highly-complex, collaborative relationships.

Building on the concepts of the transactional-relational continuum, and that of bandwidth proposed by Anderson and Narus (1999), Palmer (2007) proposes a non-linear relationship model. The stages-within-a-state model, is introduced within internal and external contextual boundaries and limitations (Palmer, 2007). This model argues that time is not the only determinant for success in building and sustaining relationships. Other aspects emerge and define new dynamics in the transactional-relational spectrum. Certainly, all actions and activities the companies undertake are time-bound. Equally, Kassis Henderson (2010) reports that team members, especially unacquainted ones, need time to tune in the common language

of the team and develop the ability to ‘read the behaviour’ and understand other team members (Kassis Henderson, 2010:375). Consequently, even though not the sole factor, time is still an element present in the process of adaptation, socialisation and integration. The failure of transacting parties to grasp the dynamics of each other’s activities will result in them becoming contained within the transactional component of the stages-within-a-state model, lacking the sociolinguistic competence to initiate and develop a more fruitful relationship (Kassis Henderson, 2010).

Hence human interaction, cultural eloquence and the conduit of the two provided by language are three fundamental ingredients of trusting relationships developed over time. The role of sociolinguistics in the development of trust and the adaptation of relationships in the context of international teams is the key subject of this research.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodology

The main assumption in the qualitative research is that people make sense of reality through their experiences and perceptions. As Bryman (1988:8) puts it: it is about ‘the way in which people being studied understand and interpret their social reality’. To reveal this a number of options are available for conducting qualitative research including ethnographical studies, case studies, experiments and action research and surveys (Mason, 2002). Taking into account the specific character of the research where personal opinions are expressed and considering the complexity of the context, two approaches were deemed the most appropriate and applicable to collect data for this study. A preliminary survey using a short questionnaire was sent to the participants, followed by a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews (Mason, 2002).

Definitions and analyses of the different applications of linguistic, communication and sociolinguistic competencies have been drawn from a relevant literature review. The most recent and relevant concepts of sociolinguistic applications in the business and organisational contexts of relationship formation and management were elicited. The management applications of sociolinguistics and relationship analysis used were identified as follows:

1. Communication;
2. Negotiation;
3. IMP interaction model – Palmer’s (2007) non-linear concept;
4. Utility of relationships.

Both the initial questionnaire and the subsequent interview were designed using concepts elicited by the literature review. The contextual, situational and interactional characteristics of the sociolinguistic competence and its influence on relationships are explicit considerations in choosing the interview based data collection method (Mason, 2002). Each of the above processes and concepts was further described and analysed through the data

collected and new meanings were added to improve understanding and reduce obscurity and achieve dependability of the findings. Similarities and commonalities elicited contributed to the rigour of the study.

Reliability and Validity

The initial questionnaire-survey was distributed to the participants in the study to acquaint them with the nature of the follow-up interview. The set of the open-ended questions was also aimed at gauging the initial comprehension and possible bias or reluctance to convey relevant information amongst the participants in the study. Appropriate time was given to the participants to accomplish this task. Using the same questionnaire as a plan for the discussions, semi-structured interviews that followed them were recorded. The aim of the follow-up interviews was to confirm or deny the data from the questionnaire and elicit additional details that the participants would have not felt comfortable writing down or had simply not thought about, nor considered relevant or indeed had changed their opinion later. The iterative nature of this process helped to obtain clarity and reliability of meanings.

Although reliability is inherent to quantitative research methodology, it is still necessary to establish what Guba and Guba and Lincoln (1985, 1994 cited in Bryman and Bell, 2007:411) refer to as ‘trustworthiness’ and ‘authenticity’ as alternatives to reliability and validity. At the end of each interview a summary of main ideas, key words and perceptions were confirmed with the interviewee in concordance with confirmability criterion (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Therefore a level of reliability can still be achieved (Mason, 2002). This made it possible to construct a generalised interpretation of events bounded by the context of the study.

Participants Selection, Data Collection and Analysis

The prospective interviewees were selected using personal and professional networks of the researcher. The researcher had worked closely with some of the participants and was aware of some of the specific contexts of their working experience.

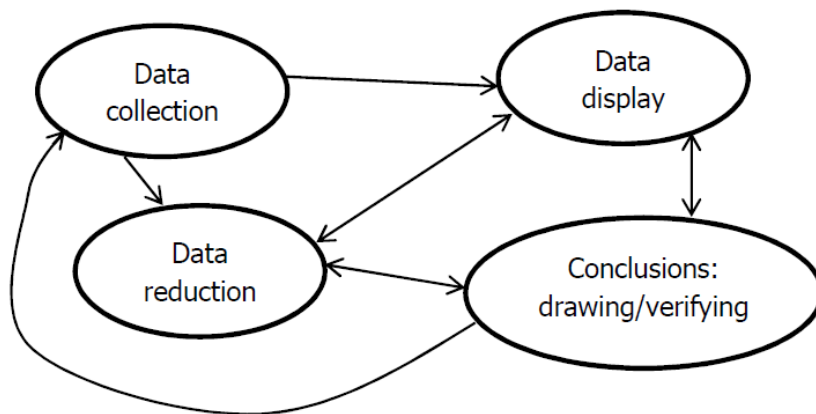
The participants in the research come from a variety of organisations as shown in Appendix 1 below. The contexts and sectors of operation of the organisations range from the private sector – oil industry services, telecommunications, through to consultancies in international development and third sector humanitarian organisations all with extensive multinational networks of operations. All interviewees are involved in managing and participating in multinational and multilingual teams.

The study was carried out in an international context with plurilingual team members. Some of the participants were interviewed during their current assignments in Africa and Asia, while others, the majority based in Europe, and one in North America, manage regularly multinational teams on a global basis.

To facilitate the analyses, additional notes and key points were highlighted during each of the interviews and written down. To verify the relevance and correctness of the ideas and conceptions used by the interviewees during the discussion, these same key notes were summarised and read back to them at the end of the interviews. Subsequently, the contents of the notes were used to compare with or in some cases contrast to the interview recordings and the two together served as the basis for the analysis and discussion.

THE MAIN CONCEPT FOLLOWED IN THE DATA ANALYSIS IS THAT OF THE INTERACTIVE MODEL (MILES AND HUBERMAN, 1994:10-12). THE INTERACTION IS ACHIEVED BY THE INTEGRATION AND COLLATION OF ALL FOUR PROCESSES AS SEEN IN FIGURE 1 BELOW. TO ENABLE AN ACCURATE AND PLAUSIBLE CONCLUSION AND CONFIRMATION OF THE EMPIRICAL FINDINGS WHILE ASSISTING THE ANALYSIS MILES AND HUBERMAN (1994) PROPOSE A SIMPLIFICATION, COMPRESSED ORGANISATION AND DISPLAY OF DATA THAT ALLOW FOR APPROPRIATE ASSUMPTIONS TO BE DRAWN. THE REVOLVING NATURE OF THE INTERACTIVE MODEL WHERE REDUCTION OF DATA IS TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT THROUGHOUT THE STAGES OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS - BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE DATA WAS GATHERED HAS A TWOFOLD EFFECT. IT REDUCES THE COST OF THE DATA GATHERING WHILE KEEPING THE FOCUS OF THE STUDY. THE PROCESS OF DATA REDUCTION HELPS CLARIFY AND EFFECTIVELY DISPLAY THE FINDINGS IN A WAY

INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS ARE DRAWN TO ACHIEVE UTILITY AND MEANINGFUL APPLICABILITY.



Components of Data Analysis: Interactive Model

Figure 1 (Miles and Huberman, 1994)

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

As it was noted in the literature review chapter of this study, communication and negotiation are concurrent topics of research e.g. Dalton *et al.* (2002), Feely and Harzing (2003), Harzing *et al.* (2009-2010), Cohen (2007), Dancieu (2010), Kassis-Henderson (2010), Chevrier and Segal (2011), and others. Through the process of reduction, described above, (Miles and Huberman, 1994) certain traits and characteristics of language as an exchange mechanism have been extracted to ascribe a more credible, conceptual underpinning to the purpose of language in the relational-behavioural realm of human interaction. It is a process of tangibilisation of the less perceptible role of language as a communication and negotiation tool in management.

The Role of Language in Multinational Teams

There are two distinct words in the French language that distinguish the system of exchange of information – ‘*la langue*’ (the language) and the innate, native aptitude to communicate – ‘*la langage*’ (the usage of language). The use of the word *language* in the discussion below will incorporate both of the above nuances with additional explanation where appropriate.

There were eleven prospective participants in this study, nine of which responded to the request for information in the time specified.

All participants in this study agreed that language is an important part of the interaction process among team members of multinational teams. The first role language plays in multinational teams is social and interpersonal. It is to establish and support a process of interactional exchange between the team members. It becomes an effective medium of communication, collaboration and establishment of relations between the participants in a given group. Some find a common purpose in it, others demonstrate respect. An HR specialist from an international organisation referred to a good command of the common team language as a prerequisite of being valued and being able to demonstrate competence in the workplace. One factor that was repeatedly mentioned as important was the nonverbal communication. An IT expert from Italy mentioned the visual element and gestures as important in the interaction process. The cultural nuance, in this case, comes across as the main ingredient of such comments. Another participant, a programme monitoring and auditing professional mentioned the language of ‘silence’. That is to say that the language is not limited to the auditory function. The visual, sensing and feeling modes all play a part in the communication role of the language. Apart from its purely technical audio wave-length, each language has a social wave-length identified by one of the participants. It serves an intermediary function. Interviewee ‘I’ (see Appendix 1) brought the importance of signs and non-verbal signals.

“I mean, somebody moves or doesn’t move, or blinks or doesn’t blink, or the head is down, or it doesn’t look... he or she doesn’t look in your eyes. Any signal that... that communicates something: a message, a hidden or a non-verbal message, it’s called a non-verbal communication...”

The opposite happens when the sensing and feeling characteristics of the non-auditory interaction emerge as a very important skill in the distant communication between team members with global geographical spread. Another cultural characteristic arises in the explanation below of a team member from a specific ethnic background where a smile means respect and a 'no' answer is avoided to save face and demonstrate admiration.

Researcher - *"How did you understand that a 'yes' is actually a 'no'?"*

Respondent 'G' - *"I knocked my head on the door... on the wall, I mean, ahh... The first time it's a big problem... and then I sent an email with lot of detail from the windows [IT-i.e. screens] and so the problem was solved. So, I said: wasn't it a small one, wasn't it a stupid thing? And then I investigated on my own."*

The above examples demonstrate the specific direct or implied complexities of the social interactional role of the language. Whether at the onset of a relationship or when the relationships are well formed and active, the role of the language has been recognised overwhelmingly by all interviewees as a social tool for interpersonal interaction.

The second aspect of the use of language in multinational teams seems to be of more technical and purely informative nature. The language functions as a medium for transmitting information and technical details related to task fulfilment. As one of the interviewees indicated there are certain issues with transmitting such information across languages.

"Lors des conférences call aussi, nous faisons face à quelques soucis. Ces réunions sont très techniques et certains employés qui pourraient apporter des solutions ne le font pas car ils sont incapables de s'exprimer en anglais."

("During conference calls also, we encounter some snags. These meetings are very technical and certain employees who can bring solutions do not do that as they are unable to express themselves in English.")

Respondent 'D'

The above experience of the participant suggests that the differences in sociolinguistic competence of the team members can impede sometimes the extraction and provision of relevant data that is of utmost importance to the specific activities of each and every such team. This evidence supports the conjecture that the sociolinguistic competence underpins information exchange. In that respect, the same participant who is a country director for an engineering company in the oil extraction business explained the following.

"La langue est un élément clé au sein des équipes multinationales car si elle est bien maîtrisée, ce sont les flux d'informations qui sont optimisés."

("The language is a key element within the multinational teams, because if it is well mastered, it provides for the optimisation of the information flow.")

Respondent 'D'

He considers the language as an essential instrument in the information exchange of a technical nature. Without it, according to several other participants, team members can feel 'excluded'. They might often have a solution to a particular difficulty or a problem, or simply

a different and helpful point of view. However, they are unable to contribute, and frequently remain silent because they are unable to participate in the discussion. Several of the interviewees referred to this lack of skills as being ‘handicapped’, a powerful sign of the important role the language plays in the transfer of information and knowledge within the multinational teams.

An error that is often committed by team members or mostly team managers is not spending enough time to observe and understand human behaviour, according to one participant. The meaning of language, the interviewee continued, is a crucial element in building interpersonal relationships, and even more challenging when one party does not master the other’s language

“...obviously again through intermediaries, or with others that would have a common language with me and a common language with them. But, I always try to, ahh... the less you interfere in the beginning, in their own culture, the better it is – until you learn their culture and language.”

Respondent ‘I’

The meaning of language and its use is better understood through reasoning, elaborated the interviewee.

“It’s not only the language interpreting somebody, interpreting the language. Somebody..., intermediary to explain to you why, you know. The history of it - why this person doesn’t speak? Maybe even if the person speaks your language or a language you speak, you know, not necessarily your mother tongue but, I mean... there has to be somebody to... I was always looking for some people to..., to reason, to explain to me, you know... Why, why we are not getting this communication?”

Respondent ‘I’

Having acquired sociolinguistic capability the same respondent was able to demonstrate their skill.

“I would be the intermediary.”

Respondent ‘I’

This is confirmation of the intermediation function of a system of communication such as language.

Relationships in Multinational Teams

In terms of relationship development language plays an important role in all contexts as expressed by the interviewees. Each participant in the study demonstrated a way of exploring the influence of language on relationships with team members of multinational and multilingual background.

The Monolingual Team Member

There is a combination of approaches to managing the language diversity, some converging, yet others very specific, that the participants in the study had used and have been using. The sensitivity to non-native speakers of a common language can be seen (Kassis Henderson, 2010) and was demonstrated by a monolingual speaker – a trait rarely seen in monolingual (usually English) native speakers according to the literature (Feely and Harzing, 2003; Kassis Henderson, 2010). The participant explained that ‘it was all about gaining clarity’.

“So, everything that we do is an iterative and learning process. So, you just need to reinforce that learning.”

“The feedback I get from people is that they like my level of English because I translate things for them into simpler English and make things better understood. So, I don’t have a strong accent, I don’t speak quickly. Also, I... my role is to interpret, you know, concepts and ideas.”

“And put it into forms that they can comprehend.”

Respondent ‘A’

This is an example where the team leader did not speak a foreign language and being a monolingual, he had developed an atypical aptitude. It corresponds to the sympathy for the other person usually present in communication among non-native speakers of a given language as illustrated above. The person used this to gauge the atmosphere in the team transferring the focus of the feedback to the actions of the team members.

“You can find yourself being in a workshop thinking that everybody understands and then when people put things into practice, could be writing a case study, could be doing some monitoring and evaluation, you realise that they haven’t fully grasped what you said.”

Respondent ‘A’

Such cues would prompt the participant to adjust the speed of articulation and adaptation of the vocabulary accordingly. This person has developed his specific sociolinguistic competence in a way that increased his consciousness and behavioural adaptability in terms of the use of language. It seems that by doing so the interviewee had created a type of compensatory mechanism that would enhance his rapport building through his ability to read the non-verbal language of actions and reiterate adaptively the messages that need to be grasped. The affinity with the team is achieved, according to that participant in the study, through listening and predisposing the rest of the members to feel encouraged and empowered to express their ideas and opinions. This, in effect, is the first step in building a rapport between native and non-native speakers of a language. It sends the right signal of reaching out and reassuring the other members that they are not threatened and not going to be ridiculed (Kassis Henderson, 2010).

Time is an important element in this practice of facilitating trust building. There is no evidence from the interviews of the relationship between time and the improvement of the relationship.

There were occasions where this same interviewee 'A' would have been labelled 'pedantic' by his compatriots because of his attention to 'inclusion' of all team members. Their diametrically opposite behaviour could keep the links between the team members at a strictly transactional level over time. Rigidity in attitudes could cause contacts between team members to remain static and never develop into a trusting relationship (Kassis Henderson, 2010).

Analysing such a situation leads to further understanding of the utility of the sociolinguistic competence. It seems that the number of languages mastered is not the only factor facilitating the transition from a transactional task-oriented contact to a relationship of confidence. Willingness and behavioural disposition appear to be closely intertwined and strengthen such an approach.

The Plurilingual Team Member

A different perspective is presented by a number of interviewees who either originate from a bilingual family and have added a third tongue or have learned two or more languages apart from the mother tongue later in life. A participant spoke of an almost innate and 'subconscious' sensitivity to non-native speakers.

"I don't know when I acquired this - probably as a child, coming from a bilingual family."

Respondent 'E'

It can facilitate communication as the non-native speakers of a common language share an exposure to the same difficulty, according that participant in the research.

"I'm not a native English speaker. So, probably it's easier for me as a non-native English speaker to speak to another non-native English speaker."

"We have the same problem or the same difficulty."

"So if I would be English and additionally I would be the boss, that would not be helpful. It would deepen the rift."

Respondent 'E'

These findings coincide with the similar or the same concerns spelled by Feely and Harzing (2003) and Kassis Henderson (2010). A further dimension of relationships lies in interpreting the yes-yes and yes-no dilemma – when team members from certain cultures will never say 'no', even if that is what they want to do.

"It's not polite to say 'no' to other people, for example."

"You have to go deeper. You don't ask straight questions. You go around it to understand if it's really 'yes' and whatever it means."

Respondent 'T'

In reviewing the responses of other interviewees it would appear that a good rule of thumb for self-testing the sociolinguistic competence is to learn to distinguish between the ‘yes’ that means yes and the ‘yes’ that means ‘no’, as described above. Grasping these meanings is important in mastering certain nuances of relationships in particular contexts where ‘yes’ is largely a sign of politeness than confirmation.

In situations where communication is hindered by a lack of sociolinguistic competence a spontaneous and unabridged ‘compensation for this disability’ is used.

“Then you have to make an effort to compensate for the language disability by showing willingness to establish a link, you know, by using eye contact, body language and that type of things.”

Respondent E

Similarly, during communication that takes place across continents, as during conference calls, due to the lack of visual cues the interaction process is hindered to a degree.

“It’s more difficult definitely. So, that’s why it takes a while to create a relationship. At the beginning, no to do mistakes, it’s better to keep the relationship formal. When you understand that there are some feedbacks, somebody’s trying to communicate with you. Also from an external point of view, not from a business point of view, you can try and get in touch. But if you are socio-linguistically, let’s say, handicapped you can’t do the first step. You have to have some experience.”

Respondent G

It can be seen from both examples that the participants talk about a ‘disability’ and a ‘handicap’ when one part of the communication channel is absent – no visual cues during conference calls - or the auditory element is missing or very limited due to unfamiliar language. In both cases, there is recognition that the communication is impaired. However, it has not stopped altogether, but it might take longer to build a rapport. Experience and using other forms of non-verbal communication like sensing and parallels from other languages spoken by the participant are used to help with the establishment of an initial contact in the first example. In the second example, the participant used a simpler basic or, as it was referred to, ‘formal’ level of language. In the process improving the audible channel of communication through practice and accumulating experience to compensate for the absence of visual contact.

These experiences shared by some of the plurilingual interviewees suggest that some team members that speak more than two languages could have developed corrective techniques and replicated and adapted them in other contexts and tongues. This mechanism or system of compensation was not mentioned by the monolingual participant in the study.

An important characteristic demonstrated by all plurilingual participants is that their views on sociolinguistic competence are converging. For them it is a ‘base’, as one participant puts it.

“Obviously, the language is the base. I mean, if there is a communication problem that is the language, you can solve it. Because talking all the time to the same people, at the end you end up understanding it.”

Respondent G

It is something they seem to take for granted, if one needs to master the sociolinguistic competence, as the quotation above demonstrates, it is only a matter of doing it. This appears to be the logic the plurilingual interviewees use to construct their strategies for initiating a contact, creating a stronger bond and eventually developing a relationship of trust. As demonstrated here, their focus is not on the language as such – the language appears to be a technicality. This was also confirmed when one of the interviewees was asked if being fluent in a given language creates a more trusting relation with another team member than when one is not that fluent.

“No, I don’t think so... I think, it’s showing genuinely that you are interested... It’s not the level of English...”

Respondent B

Yet another notes that the ‘language is not particularly important’. Rather:

“It’s the willingness to learn their language.”

Respondent E

Another repeating characteristic among the plurilingual participants in the research is that they do not feel ‘excluded’ from the group even if they find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings, for instance at the beginning of an assignment to a place they have not visited before. During the interview one of the participants was questioned if there was any feeling of exclusion or unwelcoming experience because of the initial difficulty with improving sociolinguistic competence in Spanish.

“No, no... no, no, no. No, no, no... no, no.”

Respondent F

The repetitive emphatic answer suggests that the initial difficulty in getting to grips with a new language did not impair the general sociolinguistic competence, confirmed by the following comment.

“It was difficult for me, let’s say, to grasp the language, to get the vocabulary and to... not so much to use it but to enrich it.”

Respondent F

The commitment to learning a language is a signal that there is willingness to proceed and develop the relationship. Further, the participant explained that, in fact, it rather contributes to the perception of ‘feeling included’ by the team. In that sense it is a two-way process. The

exchange begins with the exchange of intentions or a willingness to establish a contact, then a link. From the data gathered in the interviews, a plurilingual team member will usually demonstrate intention and attempt to establish a further rapport, compared to a monolingual colleague. There is no evidence of rejection or marginalisation of the plurilingual participant.

For the plurilingual team member time is important in two ways. More time is needed to develop interaction. The proactive behaviour of the plurilingual participant triggers a compensatory mechanism, establishing contact and communication with the rest of the team and consequently build trusting relationships. One of the interviewees defined this approach as

‘an open-door policy that works’.

Respondent E

A summary of the above differences in orientation towards establishing contacts, connections and relationships between a monolingual and plurilingual team members are displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Monolingual and Plurilingual Team Members’ Orientations

Language Aptitude Characteristic	Activity Approach	Exclusion	Inclusion	Connectedness	Time Needs (priorities)
Monolingual	reactive	partial	partial	sought - difficulty	for feedback
Plurilingual	proactive	none	full	actively sought	for adaptation

If relations are not established in a particular context among team members a participant noted that without such relationships one has:-

‘a small life’.

Respondent F

A ‘small life’ may lead to relationship breakdown. The recognition of the fact that every team member should make an effort, regardless of nationality, ethnic origin and sociolinguistic background was proposed by virtually all respondents in the interviews.

This discussion is based on the premises that relationship building is an interactive process, which implies exchange - a give-and-take arrangement. If there is no interaction, there could hardly be a relationship. There is unanimous confirmation by all participants that forced

relations create frustration and are short term. Each interviewee had examples from personal experience where inappropriate qualities are exhibited: attitudes, a lack of willingness to learn basic greetings in the local language, inapt behaviour towards the non-native speakers of a language among team members.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

These findings indicate that there are three interactive stages in the process of trustful relationship building - S1, S2 and S3 as seen in Figure 2.

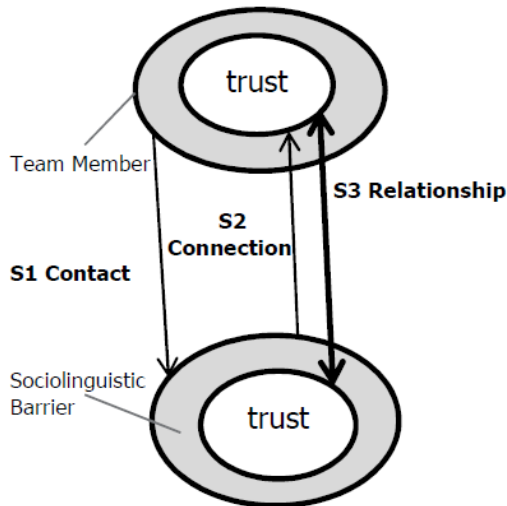


Figure 2 Team Relations – Stages

The introductory stage S1 creates an initial contact with the other party and is exploratory and transactional in nature. When there is no common language or where significant sociolinguistic barriers exist then this phase is extended. By contrast, when there is a common language the first contact S1 is short. S2 is not so clearly and explicitly identified by respondents but can be seen as a discussion or adaptation stage. It is of a predominantly transactional character. Should a comparative parallel be drawn with the IMP model (Palmer, 2007), it could possibly be named as an ‘established connection’. The last stage S3 consists of negotiations aiming to lift the sociolinguistic barriers that might exist, to gain the confidence of the other person or people and has relational characteristics.

In the introductory stage S1 each of the plurilingual interviewees notes several positive pre-disposing factors. Willingness to learn the local language in an expatriation assignment, greeting and demonstration of respect contextually relevant to the environment and team members, role reversal exercises and understanding of the investment the organisation has made in the specific area.

Interviewees identified working towards a common understanding across the disciplines and tasks of teams as facilitating the transition to the same ‘wave-length’, as one respondent noted, in the S2 stage. This aligns with the connectedness concept of Håkansson and Snehota (1995).

Transforming the connections from the S2 stage to trusting relationships is facilitated by competence in the language. One interviewee noted that improving the sociolinguistic competence and successfully forming relationships with the rest of the team members is the 'geopolitics' of the world of interactions.

An interesting aspect of this research and one that may be worthy of further investigation is the differences noted between mono- and pluri-lingual speakers. The latter demonstrate more conscious realisation of the language barrier that exists and hence a higher level of sociolinguistic competence in building and forming relationships. It would be interesting to conduct further work to confirm this finding, and then to extend this into further consideration of the workplace performance of team members with differing levels of sociolinguistic competence.

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Appendix 1. Participants Background

Participant/ Interviewee	Job Title/ Specialism	Nationality	Age	Mother Tongue(s) (MT)	Languages Spoken (excl. MT)	Countries of Assignments or Activities
A	Country Director/ Development Int'l NGO	English	45-50	English	none	Sierra Leone, Kenya, North Korea, UK
B	Various in: Project Mgmt – Engineering (TelCos)	English	50-55	English	French	Thailand, Japan, Pakistan, Israel, Germany, Nigeria, Cameroon, UK
C	Finance Director / Financier	Norwegian	45-50	Norwegian	English, Portuguese	Angola, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Norway
D	Country Director/ Financier	French	30-35	French	English, Portuguese	Angola, Republic of Congo, France
E	HR Manager/ Global Operations – Int'l Organisation	Swiss	40-45	French, German (Swiss)	English	Various (short and long assignments) Switzerland (HQ),
F	Project Mgmt- Consultant/ Forestry Expert	Dutch	55-60	Dutch	German, English, French, Spanish	Guinea (Conakry), Tanzania, Vietnam, Cameroon, El Salvador
G	Project Mgmt/ IT Consultant	Italian	30-35	Italian	English, Spanish	Italy
H	Project Mgmt/ Medical Equipment Consultant-	Austrian	55-60	German	English, French	Tanzania, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Germany, Cameroon

	Engineer					
I	Various in: Operations/ Programme Auditing - Int'l Organisation	Bulgarian	35-40	Bulgarian	English, French, German, Russian, Portuguese, Spanish	Uzbekistan, Serbia, Russia (Chechnya), Georgia, Angola, Chad, Switzerland, Denmark