

Title: Organizations as multilingual communities: A micro-level study of language influences on parallel processes of tasks and social relations

Author: Chi-Yun Chen¹ and Paul R Jackson²

Affiliation address: IESEG, School of Management, 3 rue de la Digue, 59000 Lille, France¹;

Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, Booth Street West, Manchester M15 6PB, UK²

Tel: +44 (0)7738011728

E-mail: ¹c.chen@ieseg.fr; chi-yun.chen@mbs.ac.uk & ²Paul.Jackson@mbs.ac.uk

Corresponding author: Chi-Yun Chen

University: IESEG, School of Management, Université Catholique de Lille¹, Manchester Business School, University of Manchester²

Permanent address: No. 24 Bei-ping Second street, Kaohsiung city 807, Taiwan¹

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Abstract

In a multilingual community, a single language is commonly regarded as solving the problem of communicating. However, the complexity of language—a joint influence of cultural, sociological and linguistic understanding—still affects ‘parallel’ processes on the effectiveness of task coordination and performance of team collaboration. When organizational actors communicate, they use or choose language selectively, based upon the need for information-sharing/-reporting and strategic positioning. This paper reviews the use of language in a multilevel framework and draws upon research on communication to develop a set of conceptual propositions for how the use of language affects processes. Our research draws attention to the strategic role of language-switching as a basis to create task- and interpersonal-specific assets for competitive advantage in the environment of language diversity.

Keywords: Lingua Franca (LF), Language, Microfoundations, Process, Relation

Introduction

An organizational structure must meet the need of the local conditions and be adaptable to both the local context and globalization. The growth of internal organizational complexity has been the focus of international business and management research with the goal of understanding how multinational enterprises (MNEs) structure their corporate principles for established global dispersion of operations to manage interdependence of subunits through internationally distributed but interdependent resources and activities (Malnight, 2001). MNEs have emerged as the dominant organizational form for large international organizations that expand their worldwide operations as multinational, multicultural and multilingual communities. Research on MNEs which operate in several organizational fields and which contain complex structures can offer analysis of diversified organizations providing further insights into the changing boundaries of organizational fields and firms across its work activities and subunits.

Multinational structures adopt a lingua franca (LF) to link dispersed subunits to share information resources and to operate across different levels: organization, team and dyad. This paper conceptualizes the role of language in MNEs as a linkage for a multilevel framework and investigates co-evolution of organizations and language in a multilingual environment. MNEs designate a LF is as an essential medium to ensure control and coordination of dispersed activities for information exchange, which enable the agents to work across organizational language diversities (Bartlett & Ghoshal 1989; Marschan, Welch & Welch, 1997). While organizational actors in MNEs function globally, the single use of LF superficially solve language diversities across organizational subunits. Yet, past research overlook the realistic issue—language diversities in microfoundations create in-built tensions of communication during task and relational processes.

We take the deeper view that language is not a problem to be solved but rather is constitutive of the organization itself. Our objective is to investigate the effects of using multiple languages during ‘parallel’ processes of coordinating tasks and managing social relations. In order to understand better the pragmatics of those language choices and also their consequences, the focus on microfoundations will provide explanatory mechanisms to perform how the emergent process affects performance.

The structure of the study is following: 1. Neglect of language, 2. Importance of microfoundations, 3. Taxonomy of the challenges; 4. Discussion and Implications.

1. Neglect of language

Past research has focused on the dimension of MNE operations across geographic units (eg, Nohria & Ghoshal, 1997) and functions (eg, Kogut, 1984), but the distinctive problem of language diversity—multilingual characteristic of MNEs has received relatively little attention (exceptions to this are Kogut & Singh, 1988; Salk & Brannen, 2000). Recent research have recognized that language diversities in MNEs affect global operation and organizational performance and communication is very difficult where those involved do not share a common native language (Feely & Harzing, 2003; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Luo & Shenkar, 2006; Vaara *et al*, 2005; Welch, Welch & Piekkari, 2005).

Failing to address the vital role of language, scholars and practitioners have asserted that using a LF is a prerequisite to overcome the problems of communication. Work can be effective as long as organizational actors have better language capability. The use of language is simply generalized as an unproblematic means of communication. However, when there is only a single LF to use across different levels, a complex environment does not lend itself to standardized coordination or planning. At one level, a LF solves the immediate problem of being able to communicate, but it also brings alternative challenges, which existing literature has failed to address adequately.

1.1. A lingua franca or multiple languages?

To understand a multilingual community's communicative practices in organizational processes, interview quotes (from cross-functional team representatives in MNEs of IT industry) serve to introduce core ideas and present our objectives. We recognize that the issues raised are not specific to cross-functional teams, and draw out the broader lessons for communication in organizations.

Huang (a Chinese native speaker, uses a foreign language—English as a LF and as a corporate/local language in a Regional HQs, Vancouver, B.C. Canada) describes the dilemma of using languages in task and social-relational issues.

‘International companies relay on multilingual speakers... language is not a big problem when we only talk about work... but when a work problem becomes personalising a foreign language to deal with relational problem becomes a major issue’

A group of researchers assert that adopting multiple language design in a multilevel framework of MNEs can positively affect global organization performance (Cossette, 1998; Donnellon, 1986). Luo and Shenkar (2006) propose that structure, strategy and the extent of transnationality will be important factors affecting whether the organization adopts either a single or multiple languages. An exclusive research focus on a single language misses both the challenges and the opportunities of adapting multiple languages.

West and Graham (2004) firstly developed the concept of language distance by measuring various national languages from a LF (English) in business environments. Dow and Karunaratna (2006) classified the family of national languages and compare their language distances. Ambos and Ambos (2009) measure genealogical distance between corporate headquarters and local subsidiary languages, rather than between each language and the LF. All these studies neglect the emergence of microfoundations when organizational actors use native or foreign language as corporate/local language or LF (see Table 1).

- Firstly, past studies simplify that the use of language by location is one’s native language and overlook the association between the native/foreign language and corporate/local languages at the micro-level.
- Secondly, past research has failed to investigate the (dis)advantages of using a LF as one’s native or foreign language.
- Thirdly, these studies overlook the distinctive differences between the characteristic of *richness* when organizational actors use or choose their native language and the characteristic of *distance* when organizational actors use or choose a foreign language.
- Fourthly, the *capability* characteristics of organizational actors—language capability and social-logical and cultural knowledge toward using and reacting native and foreign languages, also require consideration.

Vaara *et al* (2005) exclusively emphasize the use of a foreign LF in power-based interactions but neglect the challenge of language use in social relations. We highlight the characteristics of *language richness* and *language distance* between foreign LF and native language or between corporate and local language. Three contributions to literature:

- 1) *A single LF is insufficient on its own to guarantee task effectiveness and team performance.* We will provide examples to show why this is so and suggest what actors can do to manage such problems.
- 2) *Language richness*—an intrinsic characteristic of a specific language. The capacity of richness varies with the context.
- 3) *Language distance*—a relational characteristic of different languages when using a foreign LF. Distance may hinder the awareness of social appeal due to the lack of equivalence.

1.2. Language in processes

In multilingual communities, language can be selected by organizational actors for ‘pragmatic’ reasons for “those who operate in it to describe themselves and the circumstances” (Maturana & Varela, 1987:210). Taylor and Van Every (2000) emphasize language as the medium of conversation and the instrument of communication. Balogun & Johnson (2005) argue that sensemaking is primarily a narrative process, which involves “conversational and social practices” (Gephart 1993:1469). Also, “language is the medium of sensemaking and sense of understanding” (Taylor, 2006:146) to learn how organization emerges out of conversation through rhetorical processes. These researchers assert that organizational actors learn from interacting with others and coping with an environment and then inculcate valued features to provide skills. Accordingly, organizational actors use language as an active role in perpetuating old divisions or in creating new ones during collective actions and thereby, social actions are produced, reproduced and modified or changed.

We propose that the use of language works differently in task and relational processes. Organizational actors, who are grounded in a common environment (eg, nation, culture, institution) may make different choices between local and corporate languages (or between native and foreign languages) as their LF. *Ma* (a Chinese native speaker, uses a foreign language—English as a LF and as

a corporate/local language in corporate HQs, Vancouver, B.C. Canada) describes how organizational actors—common native language speakers, use foreign LF to conceal cognitive implication and present appropriate social actions in task coordination. He points to trade-offs involved in choice of language.

‘It’s hard to use a foreign language to show feelings... no emotion exchange it’s easier to make progress in some work but relationship can’t make good progress.. for a long-term project, bad relationship makes our team loose.. whole project would be jeopardized’

Teams are made up of globally dispersed actors who may or may not share a common native language. Yet, in a single-language environment, the use of a foreign LF requires greater sophistication than when using a native language. The sole use of a foreign LF gave rise to difficulties in sharing cognitive resources as well as significantly impacting relational process through adding to the complexity of inter-unit relational building (Salk & Brannen, 2000).

Instead of understanding the nature of a social world where organizational actors learn to interact with others, past research neglects the circumstances of how actors integrate in a social system to enhance team performance. We build on the distinction of teamwork between *task process*—the activities involved in achieving the team’s goals (what the team does) and *relational process*—including the interpersonal processes involved in undertaking the team’s tasks (how the team does what it does).

Kao (a Chinese native speaker, uses her corporate language—English as a foreign LF in a local subunit based in Taipei, Taiwan where the local language is Mandarin/Taiwanese) describes how organizational actors diplomatically incorporate language characteristics to manage social relations while coordinating tasks. Her statement discloses that individuals use language to create analogies—how they use their native language and react to a foreign LF.

‘I use Chinglish... I like to add ‘ah, la, oh’ these kind of sound in English... to be more expressive... when my Taiwanese colleagues speak in English only it occasionally makes me feel they have some kind of attitude snobbish or demanding... maybe be distant’

This quote reflects Daft, Lengel and Trevino’s assertion: “natural language conveys a broader set of concepts and ideas” (1987:358). The act of using language and the reaction towards the use of

language both reflect individual's mindsets (cognitive and motor actions) in interpreting and judging circumstantial factors to enact a situational context for completing general rules. Individuals in dyadic interaction interpret the analogies and integrate the observation and may choose or react to circumstances accordingly. While organizational actors communicate during the 'parallel processes', they deploy languages through the distinctive language characteristics to perform their cognition or to disclose their intentions, and consequently affecting social actions.

Multiple language choices provide organizational actors with alternatives to create a strategic position. On the one hand, the choice of language as mediator reflects organizational actors' cognitive process. While on the other, organizational actors choose language to moderate their social action. Through rhetorical processes within networks, sensemaking and/or meaning interpretation is emergent (ie, a higher level structure emerges from lower level actions), and language is intimately involved in those emergent processes.

2. Importance of microfoundations

A single level of analysis: Input-Process-Output (I-P-O) models in macro-level of relationships between firms, has dominated past research. This institutionalized template as an organizing structure to shape the ongoing communication actions may be devoid of active thinking. Zahra & George (2002:91) have criticized organization-level research for applying measures which are "rudimentary and do not fully reflect the richness of the construct". Recent research considers that relationships between macro-level variables are incomplete and potentially misleading without micro-explanations to justify those relationships and to address what happens underneath (Felin & Foss, 2005; Foss & Pedersen 2004; Teece, 2007).

Also, analytic strategy in organization-level follows convenience rather than theoretical purity. For example, processes which actually occur at one level (the individual level) may in reality be analyzed at another level (the organizational level) because it is difficult or impossible to study the phenomena at the appropriate level. Related to this, another common characteristic of research is that processes

are analyzed at an aggregate level but then explanatory mechanisms are adduced which could logically apply only at micro-level.

Research has largely neglected how microfoundations influence organizational performance. Microfoundations are micro-level factors (inputs, outcomes or both) act as mediators of the impact of macro-level inputs on macro-level outcomes. Microfoundations are cross-level moderators or joint effects, where different micro-level effects occur depending on the value of a macro-level variable.

2.1. Emergent process of I-P-O

The concept of emergence (Taylor, 2006) is an example of higher-level structures being formed from lower-level actions. The action performed by grouped individuals operating in organizations extends beyond the dyad-level of individuals' actions causing sequences of action. When these designed actions are used and recognized by other members of different groups, these actions could be viewed as imported knowledge in community.

To realize particular purposes, communicative actions that are habitually enacted by actors inevitably involve a range of acts, thinking and feeling. There is a strong temptation to make simplified assumptions when aggregating from the individual to the collective. When developing explanatory mechanisms from the dyad to the collective, we argue that organizational actors' perceptions influence their actions and thereby affect collective decisions.

MNE organization depends on dispersed teams to execute their worldwide strategies and to coordinate and control activities. The goal which organizations pursue is task achievement. Teams require people with diverse skills to work together and perform tasks. Accordingly, organizational actors need to collaborate in order to perform tasks (Marks, Mathieu & Zaccaro, 2001). Jackson (2006) pointed out that multilingual teams require more sophisticated tasks and relational processes for task effectiveness and team performance because of their high diversity.

We argue that using language resources—choosing (or switching between) different languages to create a multilingual context can facilitate parallel processes to develop a global strategy. When organizational actors use multiple languages to manage tasks that are woven into team performance, the alternative choice of languages provides a higher level capacity to support simultaneity and give

unity and systematicity. The interplay between different languages affects multilingual actors to perceive how a task issue challenges social relations, leading either to affect effectiveness or to create unintended conflict. In consequence, the microfoundations of language have consequences that impact team's relations to affect other team and influence the organizations performance as a whole.

When actors cannot fully transfer the full richness of meaning of cognitive resources in a foreign LF than in a native language, language can be problematic. Consequently, social interactions influence inter-unit relations within- or across-level. We suggest that the use of language forms alternative mechanisms—providing actors with a negotiation capacity in microfoundations to coordinate tasks and to create social ties simultaneously.

During the parallel team process, organizational actors are aware of their collaborators both stable and changing attributes, and accordingly determine when and which collaborative actions they required to solve particular tasks. To effectively complete tasks, actors learn to mutually adjustment to each others' activities through the recombination of work, social and behavioral components. Thereupon, they continually adjust their social relations to suit the task's pace and demands. Their act of offering appropriate support or creating tension would affect team performance.

2.2. Episodic interactions

Dyad-level causes sequences of action as a form of 'conjoint action', in which one comes to be a certain person in the social world through one's interactions with others (Cronen, 1995). Analysis of microfoundations can give a 'fine-grained understanding' or enable us to capture more fully what we know (Gavetti, 2005). Haas and Hansen (2005:1151) also support this view by suggesting the need for studies of microfoundations as an aid to "translating firm-level capabilities into task-level performance". We argue that microfoundations perspective is necessary where the behavior of individuals is qualitatively different from the behavior of organizations.

Shenkar (2001) raises the importance of micro-level measurement in cultural distance. Yet, the cultural factor is in a broader construct, which commonly subsumes the analysis of language concept. Later, Luo and Shenkar (2006) point out that culture is a given (when considering relationships between geographically dispersed units within a MNE), while language is a choice. We argue that

language stands as an individual factor, acting as a mediator for multilingual organizational actors to define the state-of-mind and as a moderator to nurture social integration.

Vaara *et al* (2005) use ‘observable’ episodic interactions with ‘deeper’ level meaning creation to examine generalizability and to elaborate how the use of language relates to practices and creates more permanent structures in organizations. Their bank-merger case study explains how the choice of Swedish as the corporate LF between a Swedish and a Finnish bank strongly influenced hierarchical control mechanisms within the organization. From the macro-level perspective, Harzing and Feely (2008) support that language as a source of power and advancement for diffusing company information and achieving a common corporate culture. However, Vaara *et al* (2005) manifests that Finnish native language users tend to choose Finnish or English when the choice of corporate LF benefits Swedish native language users over their Finnish counterparts.

Using a non-native (or foreign) LF is ineffective for day-to-day interaction. Episodic interactions demonstrate that actions at the dyad-level are different from the organization-level. Taylor (2006) suggests that by concentrating on elementary communication events and reviewing a single moment in an ongoing conversation, we can learn about how organization emerges out of conversation. This example also reflects how macro-level measurement rudimentarily explains the phenomena and ignores the hidden problem underneath. The choice of language is not just a narrative convenience. Speaking native language or speaking the language of others is not neutral in its consequences.

3. Taxonomy of the challenges: language use

Having sophisticate language capability may enable communication but the role of language in past research has neglected the taxonomy of language challenges. Organizational actors use (or switch) between a foreign LF and their native language or between corporate and local languages to handle joint-tasks and to create relational advantage. We propose that the use of language performs patterns in the parallel task and relational processes of teamwork and such patterns will influence the performance of the organization as a whole.

We classify the characteristic of *actor* and the characteristics of *language* as two influential factors of using language in parallel processes, in which:

- 1) The choice of language presents language characteristics of *richness* and *distance*.
- 2) The relation between actor and language identifies the distinctive use of *native* or *foreign* language. We expand this relation to associate with the choice of corporate or local language.

We use Instant Message (IM) logs (Chen, 2008) from our team study as ‘observable’ examples of episodic interactions in microfoundations to support our propositions. IM logs not only provide a linear sequence of interactive actions in text forming language records of daily interaction and habitual acts at dyad-level, but also present a deeper analysis of the role of language in the value systems of individuals. IM logs also illustrate how actors create a multilingual context by combining (or switching) between different languages and tactically use native or foreign language as their corporate and/or local language to manage the parallel processes.

3.1. Characteristics of actors—Capabilities of using language

When organizational actors who speak different native languages need to use a foreign language, the first challenge is their language capability. Capability of using a foreign LF and interpreting or presenting sociological context can be a driver that causes the combination of task and relational complexities. Conversely, complexities affect the choice of language when actors attempt to exchange the absence of information and clarify ambiguity effectively. Henderson (2005) distinguishes *language capability* and *sociolinguistic capability*. The difficulties of managing language literacy do not only occur in the sending and receiving of information concerning tasks, but also in understanding discourse patterns and interpreting expectations that result from interpersonal reactions to distinguish contextual subtleties for social relations.

3.1.1. Language capability concerns the level of the individual’s proficiency and mastery of the rules of phonology, syntax and semantics within a language. Just as native speakers differ in capability within their own language, actors will exhibit differing levels of language capability. When non-native language speakers seek alternative words, they consult a thesaurus, but they may be unaware of the associations of each alternative. It will be harder for non-native speakers to express

subtleties of meaning in a foreign language because their knowledge of their native language exceeds that of the foreign language. Miscommunication may arise when applying syntactic forms in one language is inappropriate to the other.

The process of translating from one language to another can limit the full richness of meaning and would be relatively difficult (Harzing & Feely, 2004; Marschan *et al*, 1997). Non-native languages users who lack capability may find difficulty when articulating their opinions, and subsequently jeopardize communication effectiveness while involved in their profession. They may also feel disempowered to express particular meaning, fearing embarrassment due to inappropriate wording or grammar, which limits their opinions within the language.

3.1.2. *Sociolinguistic capability* suggests “the capacity to interpret the social meaning of language and to respond appropriately in the context of interactions” (Henderson, 2005:69). It is broader in scope and relates to organizational actors’ degree of linguistic, social and cultural embeddedness and to the understanding of how diversities affect interpretation. Sohn (1994) suggests that social knowledge is an important element, enabling participants to learn and process the acquired understandings of others’ acts and then interpret the action of others. The management of relational process requires in addition a requisite level of sociolinguistic competence which is embedded in language and much more demanding to reflect closeness of relationships and power hierarchies.

The capacity to interpret contextual cues correctly is another capability. Organizational actors with high sociolinguistic capability are capable of distinguishing such sociolinguistic subtleties. While the choice of language suggests a strategic decision in a multilingual or monolingual context, the approach to perform contextual cues may cause ambiguity. Misinterpretation may subsequently surface due to the nature in how the perceived information corresponds to the expectations of counterparts. Organizational actors (from different countries or foreign cultures) who are incapable of recognizing connotations within a particular context or actors (from similar cultures) who find connotations and contextual cues alien to their language are more likely to cause misunderstandings.

It is often easy to make allowances for inaccuracies in grammar or choice of words. Yet, non-native speakers are unaware that using an unfamiliar language brings with it the likelihood of unintended

consequences when use of grammar or selection of specific words has implicit meaning. Moreover, when neglecting forms of address, the consequences for interpersonal relationships of poor sociolinguistic capability can be vast. Such as: social conducts (eg, manners, responsiveness, turn-taking) and nonverbal cues (eg, intonation, silences), performing formality and informality (eg, dialects, colloquialisms, and in text format: emoticons/smilies, semiotic elements—expression in capital and paraverbal words spelt phonetically: eg, ‘cya—see you’) and exercising paralinguistic expression—err, hmm, oh. Meanwhile, when building social relations, language capability of actors affects the transmission of contextual information and the characteristics of language provide information capacity.

3.2. Characteristics of language

We suggest two distinctive language characteristics: *richness* and *distance* that are different but related to associate with the use of native/foreign (non-native) language and the use of corporate/local language. Richness is an intrinsic characteristic of a language; while distance is a relational concept.

3.2.1. Language richness

Daft *et al* (1987) proposed media richness theory that communication media have different carrying capacities and vary in richness, defined in terms of the variety and extent of meaning cues which can be transmitted through those channels. Rich media provide the ability to convey multi-layers of information and change understanding within a time interval. Media richness theory can serve as a reference for the choices of language.

We expand this concept and apply similar ideas to language richness as a relevant explanatory framework. Eg, Written English is richer than ‘text-speak’ used in SMS messages since the former offers a wider array of options to express meaning. The need for frequent and intense transactions to develop in-depth understanding conducts the choice of language. Luo and Shenkar (2006) suggest a globally integrated language system, in which a corporate LF is used for task achievement that requires close interaction with subunits in other countries, while a local language is used where there is little need for global coordination but close contact with local stakeholders is required.

Table 2 illustrates that organizational actors from the same country of origin choose different languages to perform quite different cognitive intentions. Implicit social actions are introduced through a combination of different languages.

Insert Table 2

Both IM episodes show that organizational actors can communicate effectively in different languages. While shared use of a corporate LF offers a common ‘surface’ level of communication to facilitate exchanges, actors make mutual adjustments during their exchanges. In IM episode A, actors do not echo their counterpart’s language choice. The local native actor in a local subunit initiates a conversation for the concern of an open issue through their shared native language (Mandarin). Instead of using a corporate LF (English), the use of their shared native language suggests social bonding. Contrastingly, the choice to respond exclusively by using corporate (foreign) LF is a direct attempt to avoid involvement.

In IM episode B, actors use different languages to adjust different concern for activity configuration. Languages constantly evolve and are infused with new terms and expressions as a hybrid language to perform tasks and manage relations. Using a single LF during task process may be insufficient to convey multiple layers of meaning. Actors use a hybrid LF (Chinglish) of their corporate language (English) and native language (Mandarin) to follow their organizational rationalities. Yet, actors tend to use their shared native language (that provides richer resources than a corporate/foreign LF) to emphasize their local subunit plans. This leads to our first proposition of language choice in prioritizing local concerns.

When organizational actors share the same native language they use their native language to highlight their social bonds in an attempt to prioritize their local subunit concerns

Maznevski and Chudoba’s findings (2000) disclose that richer media affords greater effectiveness when performing complex tasks. Noorderhaven and Harzing (2009) link knowledge-sharing and intensity of social interactions between head office and subsidiaries, they consider face-to-face to be the richest medium. Although their researches do not inspect the factor of language, they point out that rich media provide a platform for intensity of social interactions between MNE units.

Language is a medium for encoding messages. We argue that languages also vary in their carrying capacity and in the richness of the resources that they contain for communicating meaning. The language of use that provides richness for task effectiveness may not be the same as the chosen language that provides richness to negotiate a difficult situation involving team performance. A rich language is one which contains a greater variety of semantic options and more complex syntax sufficient to integrate the understanding into a shared mental model.

An interview quote and IM episode C in Table 3 show that different native language users rely on the characteristic of language richness to create social ties while coordinating tasks.

Insert Table 3

The Canadian uses his counterpart's local native language (Mandarin) to benefit local native language users. This approach indicates a cognitive intention to build social relations with local units. While the local native language speaker uses corporate language to process task, he performs an echoing act by switching to local language as recognition of a social connection. The act of language-switching and multiple language choices provide organizational actors with a negotiation capacity to enact a situation. Actors can combine or switch between different languages to negotiate priorities and draw attention to tasks or social relations. This leads to our second proposition of language choice in enhancing social-relations.

When organizational actors communicate with local native language users in local subunits they use their local subunit language to enhance language richness and consequently creating social closeness for task coordination

In contrast, richness is context-dependent. Using rich media in communication can be too rich, which causes tension on conflict management in multicultural teams (Von Glinow, Shapiro & Brett, 2004). Native speakers will be more able to comprehend and convey subtleties in meaning through their native language. In Table 4, the characteristic of language richness provides overly rich cues and results in relational conflict in teamwork.

Insert Table 4

In IM episode D, organizational actors use their corporate language, which is also their native language to evaluate an issue. Yet, the formality of using their corporate language presents the highlighted non-verbal cues (in text format) to differ from the casual (or informal) style of using colloquialisms. In IM episode E, uncoupling task and social aspects illustrates how organizational actors realize particular social purposes through the choice of (switching between) corporate/foreign LF and local/native language to pursue their goals. Foreign (or non-native) language users will display their limited sociolinguistic capability by using “diverse expressive and interpretive mechanisms derived from their respective language systems” (Henderson, 2005:75).

When actors continually use their shared native language to argue, the state of tension grows. Native languages are richer because they provide native language users with more semantic options and ability of using syntax to convey intended meanings. Speaking native language or speaking the language of others is not neutral in its consequences for creating relational advantages. This leads to our proposition three.

When organizational actors who share the same native language find disagreement in task process, the richness of using a shared native language to emphasize relational tension jeopardizes teamwork

While clarifying their task problem, the disclosure of presenting tension from sequences of interaction makes counterparts switch between a corporate LF and their shared native language. Improvisatory language-switching and echoing dynamically adjusts an awareness of accountabilities to manage parallel processes in effectiveness of task coordination and for performance of team collaboration.

3.2.2. Language distance

The concept of language distance suggests that two languages are closer if they share a common genealogy (West & Graham, 2004) and if they share the family of origin (Dow & Karunaratna, 2006). This commonness would be shown by greater similarity in semantics (words in one language borrowed from another) and in syntactic forms. We suggest languages vary in two respects—the difference between the person’s native language and the language of use and the language itself.

Communicating in a language which resembles a native language (low in distance) will reduce this aspect of the liability of distance.

In IM episode A (Table 2) and E (Table 4), the same native language users initially use different languages to communicate for information clarification during task process. The actor initializes a personal concern through a shared native language. Yet, there is no echoing or imitating act of using their shared native language when the actor responds to his counterparts in a corporate/foreign LF. Using a foreign LF to communicate with the shared native language user draws closer attention to the subject of ‘distance’. Moreover, using foreign language will be less rich and the formality of using corporate language make cognitive intention difficult to convey, thus making social knowledge incapable of being fully transferred. We propose that the choice of language affects how organizational actors interpret sociological information and in consequence, affect their action.

The choice of language creates social distance in relational process

- ***when the shared native language users choose a foreign language***
- ***when the local subunit language users emphasize the formality of a corporate language***

From IM episode A and B (Table 2) and E (Table 4), organizational actors who have a shared native language in local subunits tend to negotiate with their headquarters in their own shared native language in attempt to express their local concerns for their local benefit. In contrast, actors in headquarters tend to initialize their discussion by using their corporate language, leading to proposition five.

When organizational actors negotiate with the same native language users, using corporate language to increase social distance eliminates interpersonal network that jeopardises organization operation

Through the choice of language (in all Tables), organizational actors use a corporate LF to indicate operation procedures and implement appropriate decisions with organization units in various locations. While the choice of language reflects its contextual cues, organizational actors select an applicable

language to present their cognitive intentions, such as creating the presence of social ties or prioritizing a different task operation. This leads to our final proposition.

When organizational actors communicate with local subunit actors, using corporate LF to proceed organizational rationality controls their task process

Henderson (2005) argues that the effectiveness of global teams depends on interpersonal relationships, and their formation depends in particular on high levels of sociolinguistic capability. Differences in linguistic structure may strongly influence how individuals articulate and interpret cognitive information as implicit knowledge for their social relations. How organizational actors tactically deploy language highlights different process: social-relational management or task control.

4. Discussion and Implications

We discuss how the use of languages is strategized in a multilingual community, suggesting several implications for multilingual teams, social relations, team processes, knowledge transfer and a multilevel model of organizations, and summarizing our research intention for future research.

4.1. Implication to multilingual teams

The ‘language distance/richness’ concept could apply to organizational actors of any origin who manage to use their native language and a foreign LF. The way in which actors use non-native (or foreign) LF to manage relational process is quite different from the way that they use foreign LF to prioritize task process. Organizational actors’ cognitive intentions and reactions towards their counterparts reflect on the use of language. We argue that:

- 1) actors incorporate language richness to reflect cognitions, perceptions and to indicate the sensitivity of emotions.
- 2) actors adopt language distance to reduce social involvement.
- 3) while capabilities of using language would be influential to the effectiveness of communication, language distance and capability do not necessarily covary.

If capabilities affect actors to decipher and deliver the communication content, degrees in language distance could cause different understandings and interpretation. Eg, Swedish and Finnish languages

have very different origins and so the distance between the two languages remains very high. This would suggest that it is difficult for Finns and Swedes to associate with each others' languages. Nevertheless, both are the official languages of Finland. Finns have a high level of exposure to the Swedish language from an early age. It is, therefore, likely that many Finns would find it relatively easy to communicate in Swedish.

Language distance affects actors in local teams when reporting issues to their foreign units or to organizational units in foreign countries. Although non-native/foreign language users may be competent in handling task issues, they may be challenged by contrasting levels of language distance. We further distinguish two scenarios in four circumstances by comparing the relationship between LF and users' native languages (LF equally close to both and LF distance from at least one) and between users' native languages (high and low distances, see Table 5). Additionally, we categorize the use of corporate, local and native languages into six types of interactions (see Table 6).

4.2. Implications for social relations

The IM episodes exemplify how actors strategize the use of multiple languages to present their cognitions for social evolvement. Their collective interactions synergize and make up the relations within or across teams. If organizational actors share the same native language, the relationship of that language to a corporate (or foreign) language has consequences affecting team's relationship to other teams. If organizational actors do not share a native language, their choice of language would affect how they process cognitive information and create mutual interdependence.

Incorporating multiple languages also echoes Luo and Shanker's (2006) proposition of a global language design. Organizational actors choose or switch between languages to promote ongoing task activities and reduce the challenge of social relations. The use of language constructs a form of social learning (through the acts of echoing and imitation) and has a considerable effect on social interactions, which motivate local units to transfer local concerns back to headquarters and encourage communication between units based home and/or host countries.

4.3. Act of language-switching as an integral strategy in parallel processes

While language characteristics convey a range of implicit meaning, organizational actors perceive equivalent perception through the choice of language and language-switching act. Meanwhile, they interact and learn to acquire how best to send comprehensible messages and how context-dependent messages should be relevantly decoded. We argue that the act of language-switching reinforces the selective exposure of information and consequently, reduce complexities that may lead to conflict.

While the choice of language reveals an underlying motive, language-switching is adapted to better joint-task collaboration and acts as a moderator to create dynamic capabilities (Zahra & George, 2002). A corporate (foreign) LF signifies the priority of task focus and neglects social distance. A native language provides rich capacity of information to highlight cognitive expression for social interaction. While the choice of language reflects one's state-of-mind, the tactic act of language-switching distinctively discloses cognitive and social-emotional contextual cues as moderator to control task process and to manage relational process.

Switching to a corporate (or foreign) language as a neutral language may create common ground (ie, task operation) comprehensible to all involved actors and perform a standard to the collaborative joint-tasks. In contrast, utilizing language distance to reserve emotional openness may mitigate social involvement and the probability of task participation. Accordingly, language-switching acts not only enhance associated language characteristics but also expand the sense of social awareness. Thus, the accumulated collective experiences of recurrent language-switching act create an implicit pattern at microfoundations and thereby, forming social knowledge.

4.4. Implications for knowledge transfer

Knowledge develops from 'the state of mind'—knowing and understanding (including cognition, patterns of beliefs, attitudes and norms), which is embedded in the interaction of people and manifested in what people do (Argote & Ingram, 2000). Language can be used as a multi-faceted construct in communication. Organizational actors learn to choose the most applicable language to enable swift and efficient responses. How actors deploy language—signifying the core of contextual cues and accessing deeper meaning systems, performs a unique type of implicit knowledge.

When actors are unable to convey the full richness of meaning in a foreign LF or through the formality of a corporate language, it may result in ineffective communication. Therefore, implicit knowledge may become sticky. We suggest that language distance is an indicator to explain how the use of a single corporate (or foreign) language can impede knowledge exchange across subunit boundaries and not to be transferred beyond local organizational boundaries (Szulanski, 1996; 2003).

Noorderhaven and Harzing (2009) suggest that the effect of social interaction increases motivation of subsidiaries to share and learn knowledge and then benefit the integration of workflow. Organizational actors switch between different languages to increase opportunities for social construction of knowledge in attempt to facilitate knowledge flow. The strategy of using multiple languages governs information ‘capacity’ through language characteristics to transmit context-dependent information. Hence, aligning the use of language systems with organizational strategy and dynamics reduces knowledge viscosity.

4.5. Implications for emergent process in a multilevel model of organizations

Organizations learn knowledge only to the extent that their members are malleable (Spender, 1996), suggesting that organizations learn social knowledge from microfoundations through emergent processes. Coff (1999) argues that organizations do not appropriate values, but individual appropriation affects their motivation to contribute to organizational value-creation. Yet, the simplified assumptions in organization-level (Foss, 2003) ignore social-relational processes in microfoundations.

In a global or multilingual environment, the ways in which language is used within a corporate communication system constitutes a strategy for achieving team interdependence on both global integration and local adaption. Individuals based in subunits or headquarters coordinate their tasks and develop their relations to emerge a higher level of association between peer subunits or between headquarters and subunits. Also, individuals’ function has the potential to erode their team synergy (Speitzer *et al*, 2002) and accordingly, hamper the organization or network. Our framework shows how microfoundations of dyad-level interactions influence team-level outcomes.

Future research

While developing this microfoundations research, our intention was to build a multilevel model that includes both within-level and cross-level influences on the outcomes of team effectiveness and organizational performance. Organizations as systems rely on teams (meso-level) to operate their tasks independently and coordinate with their counterparts interdependently. We consider that the potential benefits of applying the analysis of microfoundations enhance our understanding of cross-level linkages by linking macro-level inputs and macro-level outcomes mediated by micro-level processes. The interdependence between individuals (dyad-level) within or across teams develops an inter-related system of action that affects the outcome of organizational performance (macro-level). Thus, our concept of reviewing how organizational actors deploy corporate, local and native languages develops an emergent state of microfoundations to organizational performance, will be better suited in a multilevel approach for future research.

Table 1: Language distance in complex MNEs

N = Native language
C = Corporate language
L1 = Local language 1
L2 = Local language 2

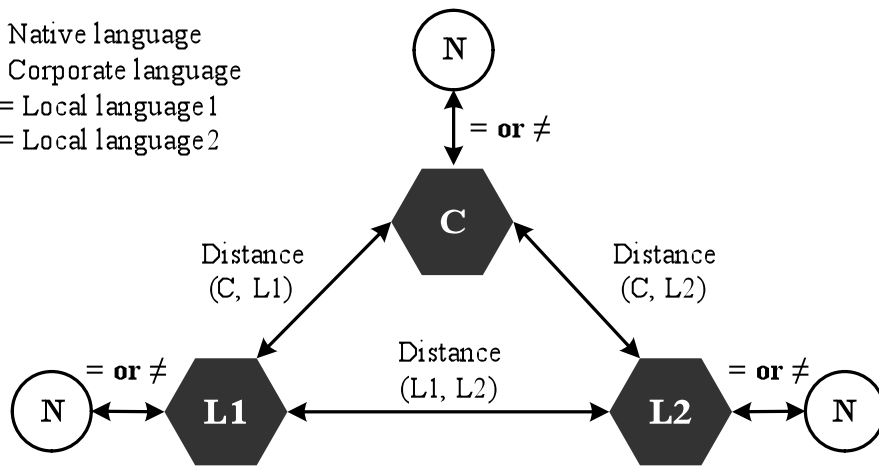


Table 2:

IM episode A: C=English, N=Chinese, L= Chinese

Gao (in Shenzhen subunit) and Qinwa (in Beijing regional HQs) are both native Chinese speakers in China. Qinwa only uses their corporate foreign LF while Gao only uses local native language

1. Gao: 你知不知道加拿大那边的服务器为参数a88888888做的配置呀? (*Do you know the server setting in Canada site regarding the parameter ta88888888?*)
2. Qinwa: **what do you mean? which parameter>\?**
3. Gao: TA88888888, 返回的custom域是一些乱七八糟的字符.. 我不确定... 还是因为解密错误... (*The feedback to the custom setting is unreadable... I am not sure whether... or errordecryption?*)...
4. Qinwa: **Does Juan assign this terminal ID for 你... I don't know the setup on canada side**
5. Gao: 嗯 谢了你的服务器能用吗? (*'umm' in phonic sounds, thanks, can it work on your server?*)
6. Qinwa: ... **sorry, i am testing another terminal now, have some problem with it...**
7. Gao: 没事 (*Nothing – meaning 'It's ok. No harm feeling'*)

IM episode B: C=English, N=Chinese, Taiwanese, L=Chinese, Japanese

Jin (in Taipei HQs, Taiwan) and Shi (in Tokyo subunit, Japan) are both native Taiwanese and Chinese speakers in R&D group. Actors' local languages involve Japanese, Chinese and Taiwanese, but they use English, Chinese and Chinglish – a hybrid language of mixing Chinese and English as their LFs

1. Jin: moshi moshi! working ma? *'moshi moshi' is Japanese meaning 'Hello'; 'ma' is Chinglish style phonetic, a particle indicating a question*
2. Shi: **just abt to start neh** *'neh' is Taiwanese style phonetic, a particle indicating emphasis*
3. Jin: poor little thing... sorry there are so many... what is the name of the antivirus thing in our system?
4. Shi: **it's called WOT la** *'la' is Chinglish style phonetic, an exclamatory*
5. Shi: 我可能會重新量一個表, 在算出一個公式給Hitachi (*I may need to estimate and measure a table again, and then create a new formula to Hitachi*)
6. Jin: Table? Ok. Same to BIOS porting not?
7. Shi: 一樣的? 一樣的形式嗎, 應該不是一樣的table吧!?! (*Same? Same template? I doubt it's the same table!?*)
8. Jin: 先用這兩個 template去量兩個table 在算出用什麼公式去做offset (*use these 2 templates to measure 2 tables first. Then you'll see what formula is suitable for offset*)
9. Jin: case by case嘛 (*case by case ma*) *'ma' phonetically supports a cognitive expression as a particle indicating obviousness of statement*
10. Shi: **ok 咩來閃啊** 今天跟一群咬橘子的談到累斃 (*ok, got to go. I've been talking with "a group of orange biter". It exhausts me*) *The language for 'got to go' is in Taiwanese 'Orange biter' is a Taiwanese expression, implying 'pigs'.*

Table 3:

Interview quote: C=English N=Chinese, L=Chinese

Lin (in a local subunit, based in Xiamen, China) illustrates how multilingual actors use their language resources through choice of a corporate and a local language to prioritize different issues. He describes how team colleagues make improvisational use of two languages in order to achieve their goals

'English is like a tool to communicate... mostly about work... we use Chinese style English... It depends on topics... and what kinds of issue we would like to emphasize'

IM example C: C=English, N=Chinese or English, L=Chinese

Both Go-si and Grant work in different regional HQs in China. Go-si is Chinese in regional HQs Beijing. Grant is Canadian in regional HQs in Shenzhen. They both switch between local and corporate languages and between native and foreign languages

1. Go-si: grant, one question here
2. **Grant: she me wen ti?** (*'What question?' – in Chinese spelling*)
3. Go-si: on Shanghai server, you create some sample pin and sample products. how did you create ...?
4. **Grant: it is my sample database so I created with TC on ...**
5. Go-si: So the products were created with TC but the data is copied from your sample database
6. **Grant: shi de, mei cuo** (*'Yes, you are right' – in Chinese spelling*)
7. Go-si: I C xie le (*'I see' in a paraverbal text 'Thanks' – in Chinese spelling*)
8. **Grant: bu ke qi** (*'You are welcome' – in Chinese spelling*)

Table 4:

IM example D: C=English, N=English, L=Chinese or English

Both Lorn (in corporate HQs, Vancouver, B.C. Canada) and Grant (in regional HQs in Shenzhen, China) are Canadian. They use their native and corporate language

1. Lorn: I will try capture the communicates between EM and EC. To see what was bad
2. **Grant: Zhang said with this EC and an old EM this function works! I don't know if EM and EC does the listening and if it matters what ports are set**
3. Lorn: Cool, I think I got what I need. It seems I can focus on EC
4. **Grant: are you crazy? Lorn, I CAN'T follow your logic!! What's wrong with you? Unless you can GUARANTEE me a fix so I know EM can be released. Don't forget we are forced to use an old model.**

IM example E: C=English, N=Chinese, L=Chinese

Go-si works in Beijing regional HQs and switches languages while communicating with Lai who is based in Shanghai – a local subunit. Both are native Chinese speakers in China

1. Lai: john到底有没有给你们发信? (*Does John finally send you guys email or not?*)
2. **Go-si: I don't know if john send the email to Grant**
3. Lai: 奇怪! 这个事情拖了一个多礼拜了!!! (*Strange! It's been taking over a week!!! – a semiotic text*)
4. **Go-si: Hmm**我也不知道 (*'Hmm' – a para-verbal text, I don't know the reason as well*)

Table 5: Contrasting levels of language distance	
Two native languages with HIGH language distance	
Circumstance1.	LF is far from one but close(or the same) to the other (leading to LF as partially effective and giving a power advantage to the closer language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two people use LF. For one, this is their native language but a second language for the other <i>Eg A British and a Thai do not share similar origins but both speaking English</i> Two people who are equally familiar with LF For one, the native language is very different but for the other, the native language has related commonness <i>Eg An Italian and a Thai speaking Spanish</i> 	
Circumstance2.	LF is close to both (leading to an effective LF).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two people have very different native languages but LF is relatively close to both actor's native languages <i>Eg A Swede and a Finn both speaking English</i> 	
Two native languages with LOW language distance	
Circumstance3.	LF is close to both (leading to an effective LF).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two people who are equally familiar with LF and their native languages are close to LF <i>Eg A Spaniard and an Italian speaking English</i> Two people who share similar cultural contexts use a common native language as a LF but their forms of address are different <i>Eg Traditional Chinese (as used in Taiwan, Hong Kong) has similar origins to Simplified Chinese (as used in China, Singapore, Malaysia).</i> <p>Hence, a native speaker of one would find it relatively easy to express rich meanings in the other Yet, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong are all culturally affected by British Colonialism using Chinglish—language distance would be less prominent</p>	
Circumstance4.	LF is dissimilar to both (leading to LF as ineffective).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two people are equally familiar with LF which is very different from their native languages but the two native languages between the two are similar(or the same). <i>Eg 1, An Italian and a Spaniard both speaking Japanese</i> <i>Eg 2, An American and a British both speaking Arabic</i> 	