Organising Multilingually:

Beyond Binaries and Static Oppositions

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Introduction and brief overview

During the past 15 years, research on language diversity and multilingualism in international business (IB) and international management has been burgeoning. Language has moved from being the ‘pariah’ of the 70s and 80s to a key area of concern for businesses that have become acutely aware of the significance of ‘efficient’ communication for the global marker. Companies have adopted a range of strategies in order to manage the growing diversity of languages. To this end, they have introduced one-language policies (typically but not always English), recruited speakers with ‘native competence’ in target languages, or they have started to work with external or internal translators or interpreters as well as other stakeholders in local networks. What is understood as ‘efficient’ in that context however and how much language strategies contribute to that effect is still open to debate.

In applied and sociolinguistics multilingualism at work has also attracted attention and a number of studies have made important theoretical and empirical contributions. Several special issues, conferences and conference tracks have brought together the growing community of researchers focusing on issues around implications of multilingualism, lingua francae, language policy and language use. These efforts have also consolidated the fragmented contributions. A recent special issue on multilingualism at work (Angouri, 2014) drew on cases from different workplace settings and geographical contexts and argued for the need to approach language at work holistically, and beyond binary categories and static oppositions such as one/many languages, local/global firms, white/blue collar positions amongst others. Yet, disciplinary boundaries still prevent workplace discourse researchers from engaging in a dialogue which could assist in shedding light on the complex and multifaceted nature of multilingualism.

Similarly in IB, a sign that the field of language(s) has reached a certain level of maturity is that literature reviews on the state-of-the art, both brief (Brannen, Piekkari and Tietze, 2014) as well as comprehensive ones (Terjesen, Tenzer, Hinger and Harzing, 2014), have started to appear. Terjesen et al. (2014) systematically reviewed 211 articles on language published in 102 management journals (both English and non-English) from 1982-2013. They found that large multinational corporations (MNCs) dominate the study of language diversity at the expense of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In their suggestions for future research, they identified the importance of examining countries that have more than one official language. Taken together, Terjesen et al. (2014, p. 19) conclude that “the field would strongly benefit from extending the scope of investigated regions, countries and languages” and make a call for more interdisciplinary research. Such reviews allow us to take stock of the accumulated body of knowledge, critically reflect upon it and outline an agenda for future research. They are also important to bridge the many silos that exist in academia.

In this paper we initiate a conversation between IB scholarship and sociolinguistics as well as applied linguistics. For example, in IB scholarship it is common to conceptualise language as a skill and capability that the individual (rather than the organization) possesses to perform the job. Turning to sociolinguistics and applied linguistics (e.g. Canagarajah, 2000; Jaffe, 1999) such an understanding language as a ‘technical’ skill vs. part of an individual’s repertoire and sense of self has already been addressed. Similarly, the need to conceive competence in a dynamic, situated way that goes beyond static lists of can/cannot do has also been foregrounded. Notions such as linguistic human rights, issues of ownership of a language variety, and the ethics of language teaching (e.g. Pennycook, 1998) can enrich current debates in IB research. In reverse, the extensive understanding of the organization in IB scholarship could fruitfully advance current research on the multilingual workplace in the socio/linguistic field.

Critical theorists have problematised the treatment of language as a commodity that individuals possess on the grounds that it is based on a narrow and static view of language. They argue that the very notion of 'efficient' communication in the globalised economy has had a commodifying effect on the understanding of language. 'Language' or 'foreign' language in this context acquires value in relation to the activities of an organization (Heller, 2010 for a review). Given that economic growth is at the heart of capitalism, global expansion of company activities, recruitment of an increasingly diverse workforce and access to new markets explain why language has acquired prominence in the current neoliberal economy.

Accordingly in this paper we aim to critically engage with some common binaries in research on multilingualism at work and to make a start in transcending disciplinary boundaries. International business activity has brought changes to the relationship between the global and the local and moved it away from the traditional binaries such as monolingual/multilingual, small/large and national/multinational. Consequently, the modern workplace – be it corporate, public or NGO – is linguistically diverse and dynamic. Employees operate at the interface of language, professional as well as national boundaries and they carry out daily routines in an increasingly complex linguistic ecosystem. We argue that multilingualism should be studied at the level of company and individual activities and practices rather than at the level of binaries (see also Conclusions section). The ever more complex organizational reality needs to be better captured in our theoretical models and approaches. In this paper, we outline and review themes relevant to the existing body of research on multilingualism and seek contribute to an alternative way of approaching phenomena that preoccupy researchers in both fields. We take a closer look at some common binary oppositions that underpin past and current research and make a case for a more multilayered, dynamic and multidisciplinary approach to the study of multilingualism in the workplace. We close the paper by identifying some priority areas for future research.

The role of categories in theory building

In language research, several categories are used and include global vs local language, parent country language vs subsidiary country language, multilingualism vs monolingualism, universality vs particularity. This has produced tremendously useful insights into the diverse and rich ecosystem of the modern workplace. The process of categorization is traditionally associated with the development of a new field of knowledge. Christensen and Carlile (2009, p. 241) emphasize categorization as an important step in building descriptive theory. Categorization is based upon attributes of phenomena that have been observed, and identified in the field. Researchers commonly classify their findings into categories, frameworks or typologies to simplify the world before exploring relationships and associations between categories. Such developments, however, often stay within firm disciplinary boundaries. To a certain extent this is inherent in the way academic research is organized but it is also limiting for the development of the research agenda on a complex phenomenon. The aim however here is not to suggest throwing the baby out with the proverbial bathwater. To the contrary, understanding current binaries is critical for advancing theoretical frameworks and methodologies that have served this area of research for years. We turn to this in more detail next.

The limits of *one* language

Both business studies and linguistics have prioritized the study of national varieties of languages. In IB, the dominant understanding is to categorize languages in terms of binaries such as English or French (Brannen et al., 2014). Another approach to language is to assess the degree of fluency that individuals demonstrate in a particular national language (e.g. high vs low proficiency, see e.g. Klitmøller, 2013). More recently, critical theory has introduced the notion of language "purity" posing the question of how pure the individual's language is in relation to the accent and pronunciation in use among the powerful groups in the organization. Some of this critical language research draws on post-colonial analysis that has introduced colonial ties between nations to better understand Englishization and power relations at the workplace (Boussebaa et al., 2014).

Taking a broader view, the dominance of national languages as a category in IB research reflects the evolution of the MNC over time. In their historical overview of language research in the MNC, Piekkari and Westney (2016 forthcoming) argue that the salience of language as a research topic grew out of major changes in the strategies and structures of the MNC. In the 1960s and 70s, the organizational architecture of the MNC was built on the overwhelming importance attached to the country-level environment as reflected in the very term multi-*national* (Piekkari and Westney, 2016 forthcoming). Each country subsidiary was connected to headquarters through flows of resources and the language of communication was the national language of the local subsidiary. In the 1980s, there was a transition towards a "network" perspective on the MNC which characterized much of the research at that time (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1989; Hedlund, 1986). This view attempted to capture the numerous and dense interactions directly between national subsidiaries and changed the role of the headquarters to a coordinator of the integrated network. In the 1990s the national subsidiary as a unit of analysis was finally abolished and replaced by discrete value-adding activities such as sales, manufacturing and R&D (Birkinshaw, 2001). This conception further intensified the interaction between subunits and reinforced the "network" model of the MNC. It is worth noting that the interaction within the MNC was not limited to a small number of upper-level managers but involved also middle managers and even front-line employees. Thus, cross-border communications had democratized (Charles and Marschan-Piekkari, 2002) and deeply penetrated layers of MNC organization through supportive modern IT technology. Taken together, it accentuated the increasing requirements on employees to acquire and improve their foreign language skills.

At the same time, in sociolinguistics the complex relationship between ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ has a long tradition. It is common for lay users to consider ‘language’ as having more speakers than a dialect or being the ‘correct’ form. These criteria however reflect powerful language ideologies and not linguistic ‘facts’. The widely known quote ‘language is a dialect with an army’ foregrounds that the relationship between language/dialect is directly related to political and economic issues (instead of linguistic ones). This said, the national varieties for many years dominated research in bi/multi-lingualism. Dialects are more rarely considered although their significance for the speakers and the connotations they carry are being exploited for the marketing of products and services. As an illustration, advertising heavily draws on representations of speakers of dialects within national contexts.

Overall, the association of language with one national language is directly related to the history of *nation state* and the ideology of *homogeneity* (Blommaert and Rampton, 2011). The “one language, one people” motto is common in symbolic representations of ‘nations’ and in political discourses on the broader sociopolitical environment where strong ideologies about language reside. In scholarly writings about language this means that one variety – typically ‘the’ national language – has been the basic unit of analysis and languages have been treated as separate *units.* The speaker is typically a monolingual native speaker surrounded by a speech community that shares the very same language variety. This rather neat, tidy and static way of attempting to capture multilingualism at work is familiar to any researcher in this area and has followed the development of thinking in linguistics and IB. Yet, such a view does not reflect the actual linguistic ecosystem of multilingual settings. This is the issue we discuss in the following section.

Categories of research settings

The workplace has provided the context for the study of multilingualism; this however has mainly been enacted as a range of comparisons between different professional settings. These include large MNCs and SMEs, multilingual multinational and domestic firms, white collar and blue collar workplaces, private and public sectors as well as manufacturing and services. We discuss them here in turn.

Large MNC vs the SME

Large multinationals dominated the research agenda for quite some time. The complexity of their activities and their diverse workforce made them prime sites for research. The linguistic profile of MNCs was typically contrasted with the 'smaller' firm which was deemed to be *monolingual* and *local*. Both these categories however do not apply to the reality of business activity. Recent research in the UK (ARCTIC, 2013) has shown that SMEs use a number of strategies for meeting their diverse language needs. This includes the more traditional working with translators and interpreters to recruiting speakers with high levels of competence in the target language. Similar findings were also produced in the case study of five Finnish SMEs by Pohjanen-Bernardi and Talja (2011). They found that the case companies did not have top-down developed, formal written language strategies, but their language strategies had emerged bottom-up through recurrent language practices. These SMEs used their partners and agents for translation purposes, had an informally designated common company language and actively relied on the language resources of native speakers. For many SMEs and family businesses foreign expansion is the main drive for competitiveness and growth (e.g. Hagen et al., 2013). Importantly, these studies show that SMEs are aware of their linguistic needs and the significance of language for the sustainability of their activity. They also show that the distinction between MNC/SMEs is more relevant to the practicalities of research designs rather than substantial difference in practices.

Multilingual multinational vs domestic firm

Much of the existing research has focused on the multilingual MNC. Yet, it is important to recognize that depending on how we ‘count’ language/s, not all multilingual corporations are multinational and vice versa, not all multinationals are multilingual (Piekkari and Westney, 2016 forthcoming). Purely domestic firms located in countries with two (e.g., Canada and Finland) or more official languages (e.g., Switzerland) or in countries with multiple linguistic communities, such as Indonesia or India, may be multilingual in their operations (Piekkari and Westney, 2016 forthcoming). Research undertaken on these firms, such as work on multilingualism in Catalan firms in Spain (Strubell and Marí, 2013), power relations in companies located in the French-speaking part of Switzerland (Gaibrois, 2015) or promotion of corporate bilingualism in Wales (Barakos, 2014) provide valuable insights into the role of language in multilingual firms. Another type of firm would be an MNC originating from an English-speaking country that operates in other English-speaking countries only. Such a firm would qualify as a multinational corporation but not as a multilingual one (Welch, Welch and Marschan-Piekkari, 2001).

White collar vs blue collar workplaces

Research on entry/low paid jobs in blue collar workplaces (Kirilova, 2013) has provided insights into the complex relationship between the role of L1 and lingua francae for boundary crossing and fitting in. Similarly, research in white collar settings (Mahili, 2014) has also shown the multidimensional relationship between local and global languages and language use and power in the ecosystem of the multinational workplace. Blue collar workplaces have been researched in relation to language competence – mainly in a company's or society's main languages and issue that has also preoccupied research focusing on white collar contexts. As with the other divides, we have argued in a recent paper (Kirilova & Angouri, forthcoming) that it is beneficial to study phenomena of language use and border crossing across the different strata of organizations and in relation to the broader socioeconomic environment.

Private vs public sector

To date, private business organizations have dominated the field of language diversity and multilingualism at the workplace. The common conception that they are 'truly' multilingual and potentially seen as more relevant research sites in the field of business studies can also partly explain this. Yet, other types of organizations such as hospitals and universities provide a highly suitable but unexplored research setting for examining this topic. Slíwa and Johansson (2014), for example, studied 19 business schools in the UK that represent linguistically diverse organizations in an Anglophone environment. They make a strong case for studying spoken English in higher education institutions such as business schools as an international business setting. The authors argue that business schools are highly motivated to internationalize and be globally competitive. As part of their internationalization strategies, business schools establish overseas operations to maximize their international market reach and recruit both staff and students globally. Slíwa and Johansson (2014) argue that an important enabling factor for the international expansion of the British business schools has been the status of English as the contemporary *lingua franca* of academia (Tietze, 2008). Because business schools in the UK produce knowledge and deliver education in English, career progression of academics is dependent on their language competence in English (Slíwa and Johansson, 2014). More generally, public organizations often explicitly profile themselves as forerunners in diversity management and claim to be exemplary in their practices, hence constituting an appropriate setting for relevant research. Finally we turn to a sector specific comparison to conclude the discussion here.

Manufacturing vs service sector

A bulk of studies in the field of language in international business has examined manufacturing rather than service firms, or firms with hybrid offerings involving elements of both products and services. Overall, however, the language environment of the industry has played a minor role in the field, potentially because the focus has been on internal rather than external, customer communications. Moreover, the level of analysis has tended to be the firm or individuals and teams within the firm rather than layers of context beyond the firm.

Yet, the industry sector such as services, engineering or textile may provide a useful macro-context for explaining and understanding the particular role played by language in the company. The industry has explanatory power in terms of understanding differences in the level of education between firms, the resources the firm allocates to language and translation activities and the way the customer interface is organized (Sanden, 2015). Marketing researchers, particularly in services, have shown that using more than one language and aligning with the language/s the consumers use affects how consumers perceive, experience and evaluate services (Holmqvist, 2009; Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012). Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) found that language had a great influence on how consumers perceive a service during a face-to-face service encounter, and that bilingual consumers always preferred to use their first or main language, particularly in high-involvement services involving limited control and comfort but high levels of risk.

To conclude, our aim has not been to exhaust the literature on all possible binaries. Instead, we have attempted to show how direct comparisons and static categories are limited and limiting in unpacking a phenomenon that is multilayered and complex. In closing, we consider an alternative view that emphasizes a fluid and hybrid conception of language(s).

Beyond binaries and static oppositions: Languages in flux

Thinking of languages as static binaries and separate entities does not fully capture the dynamic equilibrium of the speakers' repertoires and the way they are mobilized for work related purposes. It is clearly documented in linguistics that more than half of the world's population uses more than one linguistic variety in everyday life and that these varieties do not directly map on the world's 'official' languages. And for most countries in the world the national languages and the 'official' languages are not limited to one. However, this has only recently started to change theoretical models and approaches in unpacking language use at work.

After the turn of the century a number of new terms appeared in the applied and sociolinguistic writings. Canagarajah (2009, 2013) uses the 'meshing' of codes to challenge the notion of separating and prioritizing linguistic varieties. He also refers to translingual practices (Canagarajah 2013) to capture the work speakers do in actively mobilizing a varied linguistic repertoire in order to achieve interactional goals. Language practice then goes beyond national varieties putting emphasis on hybridity and fluidity (Canagarajah 2013). Other terms such as flexible multilingualism (Wei, 2011) or metrolingualism (Otsuji and Pennycook, 2010) and, the widely used superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007) also point to the notion of increased population movement and languages in flux. In line with Canagarajah, we argue that these practices are common in multilingual communities. Hence while these new terms do not necessarily refer to new phenomena as such, they do indicate the need to go beyond current binaries to better capture, organize and analyse language use in scholarly writings.

Although the distinctions discussed in this paper have served well analytical and empirical purposes for a considerable period of time, they do not reflect recent developments in organizational life. Cross-border flows of people and disaggregation of value call for multilingual organizing in the modern workplace. In fact, monolingual spaces have become the exception rather than the rule in both large and small businesses. Thus, multilingualism at work is not something that happens when one is out of a monolingual sphere, but rather a daily practice for most white and blue collar employees.

In IB research, Janssens and Steyaert (2014) challenge the notion of language itself in IB research, particularly the binary between universality and particularity, on the grounds that the relationship between globalization and language(s) is far more nuanced and complex. They criticize IB research for emphasizing either the advantages of introducing a common language or *lingua franca* in the MNC or its dark side in terms of "imperialistic and hegemonic effects" (p. 623). Janssens and Steyaert (2014, p. 634) argue that much of this research conceives language as a pre-existing system with "relatively fixed and stable borders between discrete languages". They advocate an alternative view of language as a social practice with inseparable and fluid categories between languages (p. 623). In their view, within every process of globalization there is a simultaneous "concern about issues of localization and contextualization" (Janssens and Steyaert, 2014, p. 623). They oppose the "the taken-for-granted assumption that the global and local could be viewed as separate entities" (p. 624). By drawing on Appadurai (1996) Janssens and Steyaert (2014, p. 624) claim that "we can only understand the global through the local and, simultaneously, that in our globalized world, there is no local which is not global." In other words, "local realities reflect global embeddedness" and "the global cannot be thought of without the local" (p. 633). For example, the term "glocalization" is a "reconstruction of locality in response to and under influence of globalization" (Robertson, 1995 in Janssens and Steayert 2014, p. 629).

Building on recent developments in sociolinguistics, Janssens and Steyaert (2014, p. 633) also promote hybridity in language use and invite researchers to focus on the "doing" of language in globalized localities and to capture micro-processes at the workplace. They focus on how actors "bricolage or even manipulate the linguistic resources they have available to them" (p. 633) which they call "linguistic performance" (p. 634). As discussed above, it is about mixing and blending languages or "translanguaging" (p. 625) in order to have a voice and a social identity that fits the situation at hand. They advocate a view of language as "the mobilization of multiple linguistic resources rather than"… "a discrete entity" (p. 624). In this regard, different languages are deeply intertwined and fused into each other and the very fluidity makes it difficult to determine any boundaries between them so as to indicate that they are different languages" (p. 629). Such a view also invites to reconsider the relationship between language and national identity and even reposition the relationship between the two.

The notion of languages in flux calls for a different conception of the organization than what has traditionally dominated IB research. It evokes an organizational model that has fluid rather than static boundaries. For the purpose, the metaphor of an ecosystem is useful (Angouri, 2014). It emphasizes a holistic approach to organizing multilingual processes and activities. The organization is understood as a heterogeneous network rather than a unitary player. A small firm can actually turn into a very important node in the network when the magnifying glass is placed on its activities rather than its boundaries. In this context, the global/local binary becomes difficult to sustain. For example, an English speaking SME in England which the first author studied considers itself monolingual on the basis of the first language of its employees. These employees however bring different Englishes to the workplace. At the same time the company has outsourced the "language problem" to local agents in different foreign markets. Although it does not perceive itself as a multilingual institution, language, professional and national boundaries are transcended in all its activities. In this regard, researcher-imposed top down binaries are useful for analytical purposes but e less appropriate for understanding the activities the employees perform. Thus, thinking at the level of the ecosystem – the business practices and activities that form the employees' daily routine – provides a more accurate, albeit messier understanding of the modern workplace and its complexity. As an approach, it defines organizing as a verb rather than a noun (cf. organization) through practice which we hope would offer more profound insights into language use at work.

Methodological Implications

People employ whatever linguistic features that help achieve their interactional goal. This is clearly reflected in the 'new' terminology we discussed earlier. Hence the issue is not a *new* multilingualism at work but a new *way* of approaching and theorizing about the multilingual reality of the workplace (Angouri, 2013). Such a reality requires more dynamic, fluid and flexible methodological approaches. By bringing together theoretical approaches and stances and undertaking more detailed ethnographic studies for example, the linguistic landscape becomes more visible to the researcher and 'thick' descriptions become available. This calls for multimethod designs which cut across binaries of the past (notably quantitative/qualitative or large/small dataset amongst others). One approach we consider useful is to combine micro analysis of daily practice with macro analysis of ideologies that are related to language use. Moving from the primacy of the MNC to a local (for the researcher) firm can benefit from ethnographic techniques. This makes the framing of new or different research questions on 'old' problems possible (Piekkari and Westney, 2016 forthcoming).

Christensen and Carlile (2009) argue that theory is improved only when anomalies and outliers are identified because they provide an opportunity to revisit the foundations of the theory. This may result in alternative ways for the theorist to attempt to visualize and capture the communicative ecology. Focusing on the 'outliers' of the past – such as the *multilingual domestic* firm or the *monolingual MNC* – would be worthy of more scholarly attention and could provide a good setting for future research on multilingualism at work. In line with the key principles of qualitative research, research that takes a bottom up perspective, is iterative and does not superimpose the researcher's view on the participants has the potential to move the field forward.

Conclusion: Beyond Binaries and Static Oppositions

In this paper we argued that studies on multilingualism, including our own, have studied languages as distinct varieties spoken by speakers with varying degrees of competence in the language. A number of issues still lay open for theorists and analysts to explore and debate however.

Overall, the modern workplace is changing at a fast pace and is becoming increasingly diverse. The employees' perceptions regarding the implications and the lived experience of carrying out daily routines in a range of languages need to be researched in further detail and from a multidisciplinary perspective. In this paper, we started a conversation between international business research and the sociolinguistic field of workplace discourse. The findings will pave the way for a more holistic understanding of language use in different professional settings and pave the way for future studies in the area. We hope other researchers will also join us in unpacking issues of common concern in an open and critical dialogue.

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