



Walking Through Jelly: Language Proficiency, Emotions, and Disrupted Collaboration in Global Work

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ABSTRACT

In an ethnographic study comprised of interviews and concurrent observations of 145 globally distributed members of nine project teams of an organization, we found that uneven proficiency in English, the lingua franca, disrupted collaboration for both native and non-native speakers. Although all team members spoke English, different levels of fluency contributed to tensions on these teams. As non-native English speakers attempted to counter the apprehension they felt when having to speak English and native English speakers fought against feeling excluded and devalued, a cycle of negative emotion ensued and disrupted interpersonal relationships on these teams. We describe in detail how emotions and actions evolved recursively as coworkers sought to relieve themselves of negative emotions prompted by the lingua franca mandate and inadvertently behaved in ways that triggered negative responses in distant coworkers. Our results add to the scant literature on the role of emotions in collaborative relationships in organizations and suggest that organizational policies can set in motion a cycle of negative emotions that interfere with collaborative work.

As organizations increasingly globalize, individuals are required to collaborate with coworkers across international borders. In such a globally distributed context, collaborations can be disrupted as workers struggle to achieve shared understanding (Grinter, Herbsleb, & Perry, 1999), fail to communicate contextual information (Cramton, 2001), encounter difficulties in establishing shared temporal rhythms (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2002), and rely on mediating technologies to facilitate their interaction (Hinds & Bailey, 2003; Hollingshead, 1996). According to scholars, communication is the most significant feature of collaborative interaction, but it can be disrupted in globally distributed teams (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Kraut, et al., 2002). In particular, international management scholars have identified language competence as a critical challenge for employees of global organizations (Fixman, 1989; Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999).

Increasingly, organizations are mandating English as the lingua franca, or common language, regardless of the location of their headquarters, to facilitate collaboration across national and linguistic boundaries (Crystal, 2003). The scant empirical studies that have examined the mandate of English at the global workplace make two observations. First, scholars report that organizations set the English lingua franca policy without a directed implementation process (Hildebrandt, 1973; Marschan, Welch, & Welch, 1997), thus allowing the transition to a mandated language to play out organically. Second, there are usually disparities in coworker lingua franca proficiency, with the most prominent gap being between native English speakers and non-native English speakers (Fixman, 1989; Knapp, 2003). These few empirical studies, however, examine language-related disparities between members of organizations who are largely independent of one another, thus are mostly unaffected by others' language proficiency. To date, we know of no studies that examine lingua franca adoption and its impact on native and non-native speakers who work closely together and often across national boundaries. In particular, the role of unequal lingua franca proficiency on the exchange of information and interpersonal relationships has escaped attention. Thus, in this study, we aim to inductively build theory that explicates: 1) the communication experience for native and non-native English speakers in an organization that mandates English as the lingua franca for everyday use; and 2) based on those experiences, to better understand the

impact of the lingua franca on collaboration among globally distributed coworkers.

We address these issues through a qualitative study comprised of interviews and concurrent observations of nine software development teams in one company (GlobalTech, a pseudonym) in the high-technology industry. Members of each of these teams were distributed across two countries yet relied on one another on a daily basis to accomplish their work. Although we were told by our company contact that language was not a concern because everyone in GlobalTech spoke English fluently, our ethnographic approach revealed that disparities in English language proficiency was a major challenge for these workers. Unevenness in proficiency not only disrupted information sharing, but often triggered a cycle of negative emotional responses that disrupted collaborative relationships on these teams. We found that cognitive theories of social interactions helped to explain the disruption to meaning making that we observed in our data, but were not equipped to explain the powerful emotional responses we encountered. Based on our analysis of these responses, we propose a model that describes how an organizational policy, such as a lingua franca mandate, can set in motion responses that trigger a cycle of negative emotions that disrupt collaborative relationships.

LINGUA FRANCA USE

English is a frequent choice of lingua franca because it facilitates the desirable entry into English-speaking markets and is spoken by over a billion people worldwide (Mackey, 2003). A common theme in the few studies on the effects of setting a one-language policy such as English is that it can be challenging for non-native English-speaking employees who have to adopt it for their everyday work (Hilderbrandt, 1973; Marschan et al., 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Reeves & Wright, 1996). As a direct result of having to work in a language that is not their mother-tongue, non-native English speakers tend to take more time to complete tasks, be dominated in meetings, and have less access to people and information important to their work. In one of the earliest studies of English used as the lingua franca, Hilderbrandt (1973) found that non-native speakers feverishly rehearsed their oral presentations in English before publicly presenting their arguments and required more time to generate written materials, thus investing more time in communication preparation than

their more fluent peers. Crystal (2003) argues that scientists and managers who do not speak English as their mother tongue will take longer to assimilate reports, will have less time to carry out creative work, and will be at a disadvantage compared with their native English speaking colleagues, particularly when engaged in meetings involving informal conversation. The relative disadvantage that arises in meetings was underscored by Knapp (2003), who is one of the few scholars to empirically examine lingua franca use between native English and non-native English speaking collaborators. In an in-class simulation of an international organization in which he instructed students to hold proceedings, Knapp observed that native English speakers dominated and shut out non-native students from discourse. Research also suggests that non-native English speakers and those who are less comfortable speaking English have reduced access to people and information needed to conduct their work. Employees who possessed advanced English competence at a Finnish company, for example, were often asked to be information intermediaries, exposing them to more extensive organizational and strategic data, as compared to their less proficient colleagues (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 2007). Park and his co-authors (1996) noted that employees fluent in the lingua franca at a multinational corporation reported feeling a greater sense of centrality within their organization. In a study of nine companies that had established English as their lingua franca, Fixman (1989) also reported that fluency in the lingua franca afforded employees the ability to participate in social chat and develop social networks at the workplace.

Taken together, these initial studies indicate that differences in lingua franca proficiency may place the burden of effort on those with less proficiency and endow more exposure and centrality within the organization to those who are more skilled in the lingua franca. These studies, however, do not examine what occurs when coworkers with different levels of proficiency collaborate or the effect that differences in lingua franca proficiency have on the accomplishment of collaborative work among international workers.

LANGUAGE, MEANING MAKING, AND JOINT ACTION

Communication and meaning making have been the subject of inquiry for decades. Intercultural

sociolinguistics and intercultural pragmatics, for example, are both concerned with how language conveys meaning in interaction (Tannen, 2005). This research suggests that individuals who grow up speaking different languages may be able to speak a common language, but not understand one another because they rely on different conventions for using and interpreting linguistic features (Gumperz, 1982; Tannen, 2005). Breakdowns as a result of incompatible language use can cause miscommunications, misunderstandings, and, ultimately, disrupt the ability of interactants to communicate effectively. From this perspective, we would anticipate breakdowns in communication and meaning making as a result of disparities in lingua franca proficiency.

Symbolic interactionism is also a useful lens for understanding the relationship between communication, meaning making, and joint action. Proponents of symbolic interactionism contend that “social acts... are developments from the social process made possible by communication through language” (Stryker & Statham, 1985). Meaning and social interaction are therefore interdependent. Meaning both evolves from and shapes interaction. Language, then, as the primary vehicle for human communication, is the principal avenue through which these interactions unfold (see Stryker & Statham, 1985). This perspective provides insight into how the language barrier encountered by workers may disrupt the ongoing process of meaning making necessary for joint work.

In interdependent work groups, a key objective is to be able to engage in joint action toward the fulfillment of a common goal. Blumer (1969), when mapping out Mead’s contributions to symbolic interactionism, discusses joint action at length. He summarizes:

...situations are met by working out joint actions in which participants have to align their acts to one another. Each participant does so by interpreting the acts of others and, in turn, by making indications to others as to how they should act. By virtue of this process of interpretation and definition joint actions are built up (Blumer, 1969: 72).

Without a common definition of the joint action, Blumer writes, people may orient their acts based on different premises, thus encountering obstacles to joint action. If uneven proficiency in English becomes a barrier, it would be reasonable to expect a problem in joint action, particularly if relevant information that promotes clarity between speakers is not mutually shared. Research on communication and meaning

making, however, do not address the intense emotional component we observed in our data.

EMOTIONS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Emotions are increasingly recognized as playing a pivotal role in organizational life. Emotions affect organizational citizenship behavior (Croppano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003), conflict (Barsade, Ward, Turner, & Sonnenfeld, 2000; Barsade 2002), whistle blowing (Gundlach, Douglas, & Martinko, 2003), responses to organizational decisions (Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004) and performance (Barsade, 2002). Recent research has suggested that emotions are more strongly related to behavior than cognitions (Ilies, Wagner, & Morgeson, 2007) and that even weak emotions can have a profound effect on organizational outcomes. In the literature on emotions, both in organizational research and social psychology emotions are categorized as positive (e.g. happy, proud) or negative (e.g. angry, anxious). Negative emotions can lead to rejection of others which contributes to a cycle of negative emotions (Barsade, 2002; Mendes et al, 2008). This cycle is particularly well documented in intergroup relations where the stress and effort required for intergroup interaction leads to negative responses (Mendes et al, 2008).

A significant amount of organizational research has focused on emotional contagion, e.g. the spread of emotions within a team or organization. Research on contagion suggests that the moods or emotions of team members can infect others. The processes through which this happens are not yet well defined, but unconscious mimicry seems to be one mechanism by which people follow the emotional lead of other group members (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). People automatically mimic group members' facial expressions, body language, speech, and vocal tones, and, once engaged in mimicry, begin to experience the emotion as well (see Barsade, 2002). There is evidence that emotional contagion benefits groups whereas emotional diversity is detrimental to group functioning (e.g. Barsade, et al., 2000). A gap, however, remains in our understanding of how diversity in group emotions is maintained and the processes by which this affects collaboration.

Recent research has also shown that emotions can be triggered by features of the workplace (Douglas et al. 2008). Douglas and colleagues (2008), for example, argue that aggressive behaviors in the workplace begin with triggering events such as abusive supervision and rigid policies. Maitlis and

Ozcelik (2004) describe how “toxic decision processes” in orchestras can generate widespread negative emotion. Overall, studies on emotion seem to suggest that emotions can have dramatic effects on how workers feel about themselves, their supervisors, and their organizations. To date, however, there is virtually no research examining the effects of emotion on global collaborative work processes. Few studies consider the process by which the actions and responses of workers trigger and affect one another when engaged in collaborative activity, nor are there studies examining the context and processes that sustain emotional diversity among members of interdependent work teams. Our qualitative data suggest that a feature of the collaborative environment (uneven language proficiency) can trigger a dynamic cycle of negative emotion and action among collaborators.

METHOD

Phase One

A five-person research team conducted in-depth ethnographic interviews and observations at a large high-tech multinational company, GlobalTech (a pseudonym), headquartered in Germany. GlobalTech officially adopted English as its lingua franca two years prior to this study. Operationally, the rule required that official verbal and written communication occur in English, so that employees from various language backgrounds could interact and collaborate.

In phase one, the research team traveled to Germany, India, and three cities in the U.S. to conduct interviews with 145 informants involved in nine engineering projects within GlobalTech . Most informants were engineers with the exception of 18 who served as liaisons between engineers and the sales division. Interviews were followed by observations of six of the project teams. To facilitate understanding of cultural nuances, our research team was composed of multilingual members who represented the three primary countries involved in the study: Germany, India, and the U.S. It is important to note, however, that the informants represented many more countries. The informants in the German office of GlobalTech, for instance, included people from several regions of Germany, as well as from places as distant as the United States, Tunisia, and India. The Indian location included informants from many different parts of India with diverse mother languages. Finally, the U.S. office of GlobalTech

included informants from China, India, Germany, Pakistan, Australia, and the U. S.

Insert Table 1 about here

Semi-Structured Interviews. Following procedures for conducting ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979), we structured interviews around a common set of open-ended questions aimed at learning about informants' experiences related to their membership in an internationally distributed work group. Topics included informants' experiences in working with people located in different countries, communication and collaboration processes across sites, and the nature of their interpersonal relationships with coworkers. Sample questions included: "What is it like for you to work with colleagues in other countries?" and "How do you interact with your colleagues at other sites?" While our questions were aimed at covering topics connected to work experiences, the inquiries were open-ended, so that the most pressing issues for individual informants guided the conversations.

Each interview averaged about one hour and was mostly conducted in conference rooms, private offices, and on some rare occasions, in cafeterias where informants and interviewers were seated in isolated areas. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Occasionally we collected diagrams, e-mail correspondences, and other artifacts that informants offered to supplement interviews.

Concurrent Observations. Because we were interested in exploring communication processes and social interaction among individuals working with colleagues located in other countries, we carried out concurrent observations of six of the project teams. We use the term "concurrent observations" to refer to the process of observing project members located at different sites at the same time. For example, for a work group split between Germany and India, one researcher conducted observations at the German site, while another researcher observed in India during the same week. This format allowed us to record social interaction and communication activities as they occurred and provided rich data on how individuals at each location experienced project group membership, how the rhythms of work varied across sites, how people experienced cross-site and local meetings, and how events were interpreted similarly or differently across sites.

Observations of each team lasted from eight to twelve hours per day for one week. Extensive

field notes documenting our observations were typed and distributed to everyone on the research team at the end of each day. During observations, we exchanged e-mails regularly in order to notify each other about important activities. For instance, one researcher observing in India sent her counterpart in Germany an e-mail about a teleconference scheduled by someone in India that involved individuals on the team who were being observed in Germany. These regular communications enabled us to observe the same events from our respective locations. During observations, we occasionally asked informants questions to clarify issues and get explanations and interpretations of various activities. We paid close attention to the interactions, attitudes, and responses of individuals as they communicated with collocated as well as distributed colleagues. In addition to sitting with informants to observe them while working, we attended meetings, observed conference calls, had lunch with informants, and went to after-work social gatherings whenever possible. In total, we spent approximately 550 hours observing participants.

Phase Two

Phase two of data collection occurred approximately one year after the previous set of observations at GlobalTech. Our goal was to learn about changes in the teams, as well as to discuss, validate, and better understand some of the observations from our preliminary analysis of the phase one data. Two of the authors returned to the GlobalTech offices in Germany, India, and the U.S. We interviewed sixteen managers representing all nine of the teams in our study. In some cases, we interviewed a manager at each site and in others we interviewed the previous as well as a newly appointed manager of the team. In addition to the interviews with managers, we met with members from eight of the nine teams in our study¹. In the team meetings, we described the study to the team members (for example, we had not previously explained the composition of the sample) and shared with them some of our initial observations from phase one. In most team meetings, two researchers were present so that one could present while the other documented the discussion that took place. Through these team meetings, we were able to explore more deeply with the informants insights from the first round of data collection.

¹ We were not able to schedule meetings with members of the ninth team because the team members in Germany had shifted all work to India and been assigned to other projects. As a result, the remaining team members in India could not meet with us for logistical reasons.

Data Analysis

At the outset of this research, we had no expectation that language would be an issue for the teams in our study. Within the first week of interviews, however, we discovered that language proficiency was a deeply felt concern for many of the people with whom we spoke. This insight was further supported during open coding when we found that nearly 70 percent of informants talked about the problem of language at GlobalTech without prompting.

For our data analysis, we followed empirical grounded theory procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the first stage – open coding – we associated the passages in over 6,000 pages of single-spaced text with codes that identified the recurring theme of communication challenges that arose due to the use of English as the lingua franca. Once we recognized how pervasive the issue of lingua franca use was in informants' depiction of their interaction experiences, we began to iterate between data analysis and reviewing the literature in organizational behavior, communications, and social psychology to help make sense of our findings, as well as to refine our coding scheme.

In the second stage, we clustered data into categories that were linked together along common dimensions. For example, we found three responses to anxiety about communicating in the lingua franca among our non-native English speaking informants: withdrawal, exclusion, and code-switching. At this stage, we also created sequential models that captured informants' experience of collaborating with team members in the lingua franca. These were created by identifying responses as described by informants and mapping them sequentially. This step allowed us to examine more closely the triggers and responses (cognitive, behavioral, and emotional) that characterized the process. In the last stage of analysis, we developed our overall model by iterating with theory and the existing literature on lingua franca language use, shared meaning making, and emotions in organizations. Through this iterative process, we realized that theories about meaning making were ill-equipped to explain the emotional triggers and responses that were so powerfully felt and acted upon by the informants in our study. As a result, we focused our attention on building a more comprehensive model that accurately reflected this complex process, integrated the emotional aspects of this process, and better explained the outcomes we saw at GlobalTech.

Finally, as noted, we scrutinized the validity of our findings by sharing them with a subset of GlobalTech study participants. Doing so yielded additional details that sharpened our interpretations, thus ensuring that we captured the impact of language and relationship dynamics that pervaded informants' experience.

FINDINGS

We present a model grounded in the study of the language challenges of global teams to help explicate how uneven proficiency in the lingua franca disrupted meaning making and interpersonal relationships for both native and non-native speakers at GlobalTech. We refer to *uneven proficiency* as the communication context in which there is a disparity in English language competency between native and non-native English speakers. We consider the US and Indian informants as possessing native level fluency in the lingua franca, whereas, German informants are second and less fluent communicators. We found that uneven proficiency in the lingua franca led to a series of experiences and behaviors involving both native and non-native speakers that negatively affected collaboration. Figure 1 captures the process we observed and the role that negative emotions played in disrupting collaborative relationships among workers. We begin by describing the interactive situation between native and non-native lingua franca speakers at GlobalTech.

Figure 1 About Here.

The Interactive Situation at GlobalTech

Uneven Proficiency in the Lingua Franca

As mentioned earlier, GlobalTech established English as its business language two years prior to our study. Reaction to the language policy among its workers was mixed. Indian and U.S.-based personnel perceived positively the introduction of English as the formal business language. All of the Indian informants we interviewed were fluent in English due to GlobalTech's hiring practices, India's British colonial history, and India's English language educational system. U.S.-based informants were also fluent in English, despite their wide range of national origins. In contrast, speaking and writing in English were difficult for many German informants who, although relatively fluent, told us that they were

formally trained to think and articulate ideas in their native language. It should be noted that uneven levels of proficiency existed for both verbal and written communication. These informants referred to the need to speak and write emails and documents in English as a “bottleneck,” “handicap,” or as what “holds them back” from effective communication. In describing his experience, one informant said that “the English expression is not really making the point that you are trying to make, and you are maybe an inch away from it.” Another informant offered this analogy:

It's like walking through jelly. You could walk so much easier if you could talk in German. But it's this language which is holding you back.

German informants explained that the experience of speaking English was more time consuming and, consistent with research on second language acquisition (see Mettler, 1984), could be more stressful. Attempting to communicate technical or business topics precisely in English was especially frustrating. One manager told us that even if people pursue English language instruction, “they don’t really teach engineering jargon there.” She went on to explain “So, that’s a whole new vocabulary that even if you were to go to a class for a month or two and take a Berlitz class, you wouldn’t have the same vocabulary.”

In addition to feeling hindered by the official lingua franca at GlobalTech, many German informants said they felt awkward speaking in English in front of other Germans, particularly when they had a “mediocre” grasp of the language. Likewise, many Germans preferred to write emails and documents in German if they expected the only readers to be German. One informant told us that “it always feels stupid to have two German colleagues talking to each other in English.” Germans also voiced the concern that the use of English with other German nationals interfered with their ability to build rapport and establish sound relationships with them.

Situational Communication Apprehension for Non-native English Speakers

Non-native English speaking informants appraised communication in the lingua franca as anxiety-provoking, resulting in apprehension and a concomitant reluctance to engage in discourse. Research on situational communication apprehension seemed particularly consonant with our data on peoples’ responses to their language struggles. Situational communication apprehension is “a transitory

orientation toward communication with a given person or group of people” (McCroskey, 1984: 87) where a speaker experiences “fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication” (McCroskey & Richmond, 1984: 347). McCroskey and his colleagues (1984) describe internal and external effects of communication apprehension, both of which we observed at GlobalTech. Internal effects of communication apprehension at GlobalTech were typically emotionally charged, for example, anxiety and strong feelings of discomfort. Many native German speakers told us that speaking in the lingua franca made them feel anxious, a stark contrast to their experience speaking their native language. Non-native lingua franca speakers who were typically vocal and confident in their native language felt timid and anxious when speaking in English. These internal emotional experiences triggered by the requirement to speak English in turn manifested in external behaviors, specifically avoidance behaviors.

When apprehensive actors feel discomfort in a particular context, they often strive to avoid those situations (McCroskey, 1984). In our data, we identified three strategies that non-native English speakers used to avoid these emotionally taxing situations: 1) withdrawal from discourse, 2) exclusion of native English speaking teammates from communication events; and, 3) code-switching or alternating between their native language and English. Withdrawal, as a response to communication apprehension, has been documented (see McCroskey, 1984), but we also witnessed exclusion and code-switching as a response to the apprehension triggered by uneven language proficiency.

Withdrawal. Some German informants said that they fell silent in meetings or restricted their participation because of what they described as their “mediocre” grasp of the English lingua franca. For example, one informant said that communication in English could be such a problem for him that if a meeting had to include non-German speakers, he refused to participate. In his words, “if we are going to extend the meeting to a larger forum, if we have to talk in English, then I say no! No, I don’t want to do this.” Commented another informant, “some people just don’t speak up at all (in meetings) because they are too shy to show their [poor] language skills.” When questioned about this by a manager in a group meeting when we returned in year two, a German informant explained that “sometimes people (engineers) do not speak up in design reviews because they don’t feel comfortable expressing themselves in English.”

She told us that she knew this because these engineers would sometimes speak with her in German after meetings about issues that they were uncomfortable raising at the design review meetings.

Withdrawal seemed to occur most often when workers who were less comfortable with English were mentally or physically fatigued, for example at the end of the workday, or under time pressure. The additional effort required for them to speak English, a language in which they were less fluent, when fatigued, became overwhelming and heightened anxiety.

Exclusion. In addition, informants said that decisions about who to include in communications sometimes were made on the basis of whether the involvement of that person would require that English be spoken, resulting in a more difficult exchange. In a typical example of how people at GlobalTech employed this strategy, a German informant told us that he would almost always refrain from calling his coworker in India to avoid the stress of conversing in English. He said that he would either find another way to address his concern or search for collocated colleagues who would be able to help. A U.S.-based informant also told the story of how a member of his group was excluded because of language:

She wanted to meet with this guy who was meeting with someone in Germany to discuss a project that they're all part of over the phone. But then the guy told her – "oh, the guy is tired and he wants to speak only in German." So it was going to be an only German meeting. She was pretty mad about that...when I heard that, at first I thought to myself -- gosh, there's that German thing again.

Avoidance of the lingua franca was not isolated to spoken English. Workers also resisted pressures to create documentation, including emails, in English. One German developer told us "If I needed perhaps to write documentation, it would have to be in English. It's too hard to write in English, so I don't do it and there's no documentation at all because it is too difficult to write it in English." Excluding native English speakers or avoiding lingua franca situations seemed to be particularly prevalent when informants who did not feel proficient in English felt heightened apprehension due to time pressure.

Code-Switching. A third means of coping with uneven lingua franca proficiency that we witnessed was code-switching. Code-switching is a phenomenon in which a bilingual speaker shifts from one language to another in the course of a conversation (Auer, 2000). In our data, code-switching was employed as a means of altering the situation that instilled these negative emotions in speakers. When

apprehensive about their language skills, workers at GlobalTech simply returned to the language in which they did not experience this anxiety – their native language. Code-switching suspended the requirement of speaking English yet provided a way to reduce anxiety while remaining engaged, perhaps even more engaged, in the communication event.

During our observations, we documented occasions in which German colleagues code-switched during the course of teleconferences that involved their distant coworkers. Many Indian and U.S. informants also discussed code-switching during our interviews with them. They said that Germans frequently reverted to the German language in meetings and audio-conferences where conversations might begin in English, but would have sporadic German words and sentences sprinkled throughout the discussion. In extreme cases, we were told, meetings turned entirely into German language sessions.

German informants were aware that they at times drifted into their native language in the course of communications involving English speakers. They perceived this as a minor incident that occurred only for short periods of time. They said they attempted to speak in English most of the time “but sometimes someone asks a question in German, and then everybody starts talking in German.” Many informants said they switched to German because their native language allowed them to make better arguments for their perspective. They typically offered an apology in advance for switching languages, made their point in German, and then provided a summary to non-German speakers. Others suggested that the language mixing was not within their control: “Sometimes the words come out of your mouth before your brain notices that it’s the wrong language.”

A notable phenomenon in our data is that German speakers and non-German speakers had dissimilar interpretations about the meaning of exclusion and code-switching. For German speakers, these strategies were intended to both manage their own anxiety and increase efficiency, and thus benefit the entire team. Although the Germans thought their strategies reasonable – given what they felt to be their limited language proficiency in English and the constant pressure they felt to balance inclusion and efficiency – the non-German speakers had a different interpretation of these behaviors. Non-German speakers were disconcerted because they

interpreted avoidance and code-switching as inconsistent with social conventions for the treatment of team members, often calling the behavior “rude,” and felt they were being de-valued, and, at times ostracized by the German speakers.

Impact on Joint Action and Interpersonal Relationships

Oftentimes, when German speakers employed avoidance strategies, joint action and collaborative relationships were disrupted. In the case of team members at GlobalTech, we believe that people held implicit expectations about how, as colleagues, they would and should be treated. Uneven proficiency in the lingua franca, however, subverted expected behaviors; the absence of these role-validating behaviors then threatened team members’ sense of themselves and undermined interpersonal relationships between distant colleagues. Difficulty in obtaining needed information occurred when native English speakers could not understand emails and design documents that had been written in German, and also when they, as non-German speakers, were excluded from meetings and conversations. While the company’s lingua franca policy stipulated that work-related communication be conducted in English, the policy was not always followed. In addition, older emails or documentation that were written in German (before the advent of the English-as-lingua-franca policy) were still relevant to current operations. Said one informant working in the U.S.:

Sometimes information doesn’t get shared...things just get communicated in German and then eventually, when I ask a question about a topic, I am told that there’s an e-mail about that, but it’s in German.

Native lingua franca speaking informants who did not speak any German told many tales of being forwarded email threads that had begun in German and then crossed country and linguistic lines. Sometimes a brief English summary was attached, which was intended to capture the gist of the preceding trail of communication exchanges, and which contained a request for a response. Informants, however, said that the summaries typically did not convey to their satisfaction the previous communication, the request put to them, or an indication of how to respond or act accordingly. A concerted effort by the non-German speaking recipients would be required to uncover the nuances and to ensure that they shared the same understanding of the correspondence as the German authors. Some recipients said that they tried to

use online translation tools, whereas others said that they would start calling the authors of each portion of the e-mail thread to reconstruct the story. The search for clarification was described as daunting. The central source of discontent seemed to be the inability to derive meaning from a communiqué where tacit, contextual, and jointly constituted knowledge was obscured. An Indian informant, Geet², recounted what he said was a frequent occurrence:

E-mails get written in German where two, three emails between people go back and forth on some topic, and then it's forwarded to me with some comments in English. Then, I can't really understand everything and I have to go to one of the translation sites online to at least see what is there, and what it means, still I often can't understand much of it...Most of the time, somebody who is handling some problem would have analyzed the problem in German before it is sent to me. If that piece is in German, it's difficult for me to understand what's going on. That is the main problem. They need to stick to the company language.

Geet's plea that people "stick to the company language" captured the ongoing frustration that he felt at being excluded from communications that were important to his work. Likewise, a U.S.-based colleague, Gary, whose project involved collaboration with German engineers, said that his coworkers abroad wrote a design document in German that outlined procedural details on a project that was directly linked with his job. Once created, the intent was to send the document to one of the translators that GlobalTech employed. Yet, translations rarely followed immediately, informants said. Consistent with previous empirical findings (Fixman, 1989), translators at GlobalTech did not adequately address the needs of employees because demand tended to outpace available support. Gary said that he regularly checked the intranet to see if the document had been translated to English as planned. Three months later, the document was still in German. He relates his frustration and how he tried to get what he needed:

It's still in German, and no signs of it being translated in the near future. The only person who could read it is Martina [a German expatriate] in our group...But then I'd like to read it too and get a feel for that document, and I don't want to ask her to translate it for me.

Gary went on to say that it was important for him to "get a feel of the document himself" and derive meaning without an intermediary.

Problems also occurred when coworkers misjudged the likely course of a meeting. For example,

² This is a pseudonym, as are all other names reported in this paper.

a German expatriate who worked in the U.S. office explained the constant tension he negotiated:

Our [German] colleagues are clearly not very comfortable with speaking English. So, for me, it's always a fine line of deciding if I should pull Natalie [native English speaker] in a conference call or if I should just do that quickly myself. And that's pretty unfortunate, because you always have the choice between keeping her in the loop, and spending three times the time than if you just keep it in German, which is pretty tough...So there's always this decision where I may think it's just a one-minute conversation, which I could just easily explain later to Natalie. So I just make the phone call to Germany and then the whole thing takes 30 minutes. Then of course you can never convey the whole thing back.

As this excerpt shows, withdrawal and exclusion disrupted joint action and created a continual source of tension between distant collaborators.

In addition to the difficulty of getting the same information as their German coworkers, informants discussed how the German-speakers' code-switching response seemed to impact the joint constitution of meaning and disrupted relationships at GlobalTech. While code-switching can be seen as an attempt to meet the needs of both German and English speakers, the comments of informants suggested that, in fact, the summarization that followed code-switching conveyed meaning that had already been constructed, rather than allowing everyone to participate in the creation of meaning. As noted previously, when German colleagues reverted to German for all or part of a meeting, they offered advance apologies for switching languages and almost always provided summaries at the conclusion of the German interchange. Non-German speakers, however, said that the summarization typically presented them with a finished thought rather than allowing them to participate in the shaping or questioning of ideas. One of the engineers in India, Kavi, explained that when meetings were diverted into German "actually, what we miss is the complete origin of the – we can't go to the root of the problem or whatever discussion is... which will be helpful in our analysis." Although decisions were not finalized in the side discussions, Kavi said that he lost important information whenever he was excluded from an exchange, despite receiving a summary at the end. He said, for example, that he might miss the analysis of technical issues that elucidated the root cause of a particular problem. He neither participated in the discussion, nor received the play-by-play analysis of the problem-solving session from which he could learn. Oftentimes, native English speakers faced with the code-switching behavior of their team members

felt that this signaled a lack of value for them as colleagues. How, they asked, could they be considered valued colleagues and yet be excluded from conversations among their team members?

Code-switching created particularly strong emotional responses on the part of the native English speakers. Greg, a developer based in the U.S. explained how he felt when his German colleagues would code-switch. In his words, “It didn’t feel good at all. It felt that the other person didn’t really respect you.” In India, another informant, Tarun, described how during a visit to the German site, his colleagues would code-switch to German. Tarun said “you feel neglected” and went on to tell us that if people were visiting India he would make more of an effort to ensure that they didn’t feel “lonely or isolated.” In fact, a number of non-German speaking informants described feeling “lonely” when they were excluded from meetings or when their German team members conversed in German in their presence.

Social ostracism theory predicts that experiencing ostracism for an extended period may evoke feelings of resignation (Williams & Sommer, 1997). Similarly, some of those who had frequently experienced the language switch of their German colleagues in mid-conversation to be demoralizing and to generate feelings of ostracism. Initially, many informants said they would get angry whenever they were excluded from conversations and would attempt to reenter the discourse. Later, however, some of these informants ceased to initiate repairs when the communication process was disrupted due to code-switching. An American informant, for example, said that initially she would be “infuriated” when her colleagues switched languages in her presence. Later, she said that her anger turned into resignation and she just sat silently and “let them continue to speak on their own.” Another informant who had worked at GlobalTech for three years described the same sequence of reactions:

Earlier, I would consider it rude because they would just start talking in their own language and you don’t know what they’re talking about. You want to say -- excuse me, what are you talking about? It’s like whether it be at the lunch table, be it in a meeting, be it I and another person are talking, a third person may join us and start off in German and... I felt that was very, very rude. But now I’m used to it. I’m just used to it.

A number of informants also said that they were perplexed by the fact that the German speakers were well aware of the presence of English speakers when they code-switched to German. English-speakers, at times, concluded that the switch was intended to exclude them. Said one informant:

The classic fear of all Americans, unilingual inhabitants of this continent, is that when somebody's talking in German and they know you don't speak German, the natural thought is -- they're talking about you.

Ostracism seemed to be most keenly felt by non-German speakers who were excluded from discussion during meetings. In these cases, relationships between the German and non-German speakers were strained. One U.S.-based team member described the tension saying, "It just makes me feel like I'm forcing them to do something that they don't want to do." We also saw evidence that inaccessible documents and, particularly, emails were occasions for feeling left out. In India and the U.S., engineers wondered about how, in the face of important documents and emails being only in German, a language they could not speak or read, they could really be considered valuable members of the team.

An Alternative Strategy - Engagement

Our focus until this point has been on non-native English speakers' avoidance strategies of withdrawal, exclusion, and code-switching, and the effects of these behaviors on joint action and interpersonal relationships at GlobalTech. These strategies were particularly salient to our informants because they represented a departure from "expected" interactions. There was, however, a fourth strategy – engagement. Oftentimes, non-native English speakers remained engaged in the interaction despite their apprehension. Although this alternative strategy did not evoke the same negative responses as the strategies of withdrawal, exclusion, or code-switching, it was not a perfect solution. As coworkers engaged across linguistic boundaries, miscommunications and misunderstanding sometimes resulted and people became frustrated. As one of our informants on a German-India team said:

If you can't express yourself that good, somebody else is reading between the lines, something that you didn't want to express... and the expression is not the right one that was chosen then, so you upset him or her.

Others complained of not "catching everything" and not being able to comprehend what was being said. As one German informant said, "We have to talk in English... that makes any meeting, I don't know, a quarter to a fourth longer. It's going to have lots of misunderstandings." Accents,

different word usage, and unexpected intonations caused miscommunications and required repeated repairs. On the whole, informants told us that they weathered through these stilted conversations and got their work done, but the miscommunications could cause hard feelings and frustration was heightened when faced with deadlines and time pressures.

Overall, our data suggest that while joint action was disrupted as a result of uneven lingua franca proficiency, this effect existed alongside a potent emotional response to the situation. Informants' negative emotional responses powerfully affected their emotional states and interpersonal relationships with distant coworkers. A cycle of negative emotion therefore resulted. The relationship between engagement and emotions is further explored in the next section.

The Cycle of Negative Emotion in Lingua Franca Dynamics

In trying to make sense of our data around language, we found that social interaction theories such as symbolic interactionism, helped us to frame the challenges that our informants experienced around meaning making and joint action. These theories, however, provided little assistance in thinking about the strong emotional reactions of people around the issue of lingua franca use. In figure one, we introduce a model that captures the process through which uneven proficiency disrupted meaning making, joint action, and interpersonal relationships in GlobalTech. We rely on recent research on emotions in organizations to unpack these processes and build a model that more accurately reflects the progression that we came to understand at GlobalTech. To highlight our contributions to theory, in figure one we shaded the elements that go beyond the predictions of cognitive theories of communication.

Using symbolic interactionism as a lens, the strategies of withdrawal, exclusion, and code-switching would be expected to disrupt meaning making and joint action as non-Native English speakers withdraw from communication, exclude others from meetings, or code-switch. As a result, participation in joint meaning becomes difficult and, potentially, disrupts interpersonal relationships due to different interpretations of those interactions. Symbolic interactionism, however, does not explain what would prompt non-Native English speakers to use strategies of withdrawal, exclusion, and code-switching rather than engaging in the interaction, nor does it explain why informants were in tears as they talked about

how they felt about the code-switching behavior of their coworkers. In sum, these cognitive theories do not capture the critical role of negative emotions in triggering and sustaining these disruptions.

Our data show that in the presence of uneven lingua franca proficiency, non-native English speakers experienced negative emotions. They felt fear and anxiety, as well as embarrassment and shame about how they sounded when trying to communicate in English. As a result, they withdrew from communications, excluded native English speakers, or code-switched into their native tongue. These emotionally-triggered strategies, particularly code-switching, were in turn interpreted by native English speakers as indications of disrespect and lack of value, thus triggering negative emotional responses in native English speakers. Through this cycle of negative interpretations and responses, collaborative relationships were disrupted.

Although engagement generated some frustration and withdrawal and exclusion generated occasional negative emotional responses, code-switching was consistently met with intense negative responses from our informants. The overwhelming responses were anger and frustration, but informants also described feelings of neglect and loneliness. We saw clear indications of feelings of ostracism, a response that Williams (2001) describes as the experience of being ignored or rejected because one's presence is viewed as inconsequential to a source. In India, an informant, Sri, described how his colleagues would code-switch to German. Sri said,

Like if you're sitting with two or three Indian colleagues are sitting and four or five German colleagues are sitting. So, you know they start speaking in their language so you... that problem sometimes we see it... so that then you feel, okay, you feel neglected.

In fact, a number of non-German speaking informants described feeling "lonely" when they were excluded from meetings or when their German team members conversed in German in their presence. These negative emotional responses took their toll on interpersonal relationships within the team, particularly between sites, but also within sites in cases where there were native German speakers on the teams in the US, causing hard feelings between team members.

Maitlis & Ozcelik describe toxic decision processes as "organizational decision processes that generate widespread negative emotion in an organization through the recursive interplay of members'

actions and negative emotions” (2004: 375). We saw something similar at GlobalTech, but the trigger was an organizational policy, the lingua franca mandate, not organizational decisions processes. Emotion and action were deeply intertwined and emerged from the organizational policy of the lingua franca and from the context that this policy created for coworkers at GlobalTech. Because the effect of the policy was not even across team members, it triggered negative emotions and actions that polarized coworkers as they interpreted the actions of team members and tried to alleviate their own negative emotional experiences. Figure 2 captures the dynamic cycle of negative emotion triggered by this organizational policy.

Figure 2 About Here.

As indicated in Figure 2, the negative cycle was activated when one person or a set of people experienced the policy as disruptive; they saw it as putting in place behavioral expectations that generated fear, anxiety, and shame. To alleviate these unwanted negative emotions, these workers took action. Some of these actions, particularly code-switching, were interpreted as devaluing by a second person or set of people who were previously unaffected by this policy (native English speakers). Continuing the cycle, when confronted with negative emotions, the second person took action that inadvertently generated a negative response on the part of the first person. This recursive process is similar to processes observed in couples and close relationships where negative behaviors generate negative feelings about the partner and the relationship (Mulincer, Orbach, & Iavnieli, 1998).

These cycles of negative emotions, actions, and interpretations were recursive and the cycle was broken only when perspective-taking allowed a new interpretation of events and generated empathic action. Perspective-taking refers to the cognitive process of taking the point of view of others and is an important part of developing shared meaning. Empathy is an emotional process that follows perspective-taking, one in which people feel compassion and concern for others (Barsade, 2002; Davis, 1983). When coworkers took the perspective of others, empathized with their struggles, and altered their action accordingly, a break in the negative emotional cycle occurred.

These efforts at perspective-taking led to sensitivity and behavioral adaptations that seemed to ameliorate some of the tensions associated with uneven language proficiency and encourage engagement

as non-native English speakers were put more at ease. In speaking about his German team members, a US informant sympathized, “Sometimes they feel they cannot communicate some technical issue using English, they’ve got to go back to their mother tongue. And that one I can understand.” Another informant explained how he thought about the experience of his German colleagues and adapted his behavior to accommodate their language skills.

They feel very comfortable with the German language; communicating in German... they have to adjust to working with us, with that limitation. I'm sure it was a major irritation for them... you know they are trying their best to see that we are getting what they want us to get... the habit I had was to repeat their words, information that was exchanged, so that they know that I have got it. So it's a little adjustment here and there.

Another Native English speaking informant expressed appreciation for the efforts of their German colleagues saying, “I think even though it is really tough for them, they create all the documents in English. That way they are doing a really good job.”

Perspective-taking, we found, went both ways, with non-native English speakers also trying to understand the experience of native speakers and adjust accordingly. A German informant, for example, explained what he thought it might be like for non-German speakers and how important it was to speak English:

[If] You sit in a group of Germans and they talk German to each other and you don't know if they're talking about you or not, and... I would feel uncomfortable being in China and them just talking Chinese and me not being able to understand anything. So, being sensitive, I guess we try to talk English as much as we can and try to involve people.

Another German informant talked about the importance of getting accustomed to speaking English so that Indian colleagues would have access to the information that was created. He said “Perhaps if I do it in English, there’s a chance an Indian colleague can follow what I did.” Non-native English speakers told us that they tried to use their collective English wisdom to generate the best possible version of an English communiqué. One such occasion was noted by our German-speaking research team member who captured the following exchange among four German colleagues who were painstakingly working on using the appropriate English vocabulary on a Power Point presentation:

Jonas sits at his computer, the other four are standing behind him. They continue to discuss the importance of defining the meaning of the words they are using so that

everybody is talking about the exact same thing. Thomas says: "Kein Widerspruch, also alle haben genickt. Also alle sind in synch; das ist nicht immer der Fall, aber diesmal." which translates [as]: "There is no objection, everybody nodded. So everybody is in synch? That's not always the cases." Then they go to another slide ... Thomas interrupts and asks what Jonas means by "status," a word labeling one of the columns. Thomas says that the label "status" is always dangerous, because it can be misunderstood. They all agree on his critique and talk more about alternative ways to say it.

This example shows non-native English speakers working together to produce linguistically accurate information by trying to anticipate the response of the native English speaking audience.

Perspective-taking and the behavioral adjustments that followed seemed to interrupt the negative emotional cycles triggered by uneven lingua franca proficiency. When coworkers empathized with the plight of their distant colleagues, they often took action that was less likely to be interpreted as threatening or devaluing. Informants, for example, told us about listening more carefully, working hard to involve others, and being painstakingly careful in their communication to avoid causing offense. Even given the same actions, when coworkers expressed understanding and concern for the experience of their distant colleagues, their interpretations of their coworkers actions were more forgiving and less likely to contribute to this negative spiral. Although perspective-taking was not the primary response to uneven lingua franca proficiency, this alternative path eased the emotional burden of the lingua franca mandate.

A pivotal element in the cycle of negative emotion that emerged from our data is the role of interpretation. When non-native English speakers invoked strategies of withdrawal, exclusion, or code-switching, they did not intend to harm or belittle their distant coworkers. They were trying to mitigate or avoid their own negative experience. The cycle of negative emotion relied on native English speakers interpreting the behaviors of their German colleagues as ostracizing and devaluing. In some sense, this observation ties back to symbolic interactionism in that the meaning of the interaction was not agreed upon. Symbolic interactionism, however, does not address the relationship between divergent meanings and the emotional responses we witnessed. Our data suggest that coworkers were attaching divergent meanings to the behavior of their distant colleagues and that the negative emotions followed.

Also central to our theoretical model is that this process is one that drives a divide between people or groups based on the initial locus of disruption. In our case, the initial disruption was to the non-

native English speakers. If, however, the policy had been one that required all employees to take classes in German to be competitive for pay increases or mandated an onerous German-based quality assurance system, the initial disruption may have first been felt by the non-Germans. Our general insight is that when policies disrupt groups unequally, a recursive cycle of action and emotion are triggered as workers attempt to redress the situation and alleviate their own negative emotional experience. If this cycle is not broken, collaborative relationships are disrupted.

DISCUSSION

Our ethnographic study at GlobalTech allowed us a glimpse into how an organizational policy and the features of collaborative work, can lead to a negative cycle of emotion and action that disrupts collaborative relationships among native and non-native lingua franca speaking interdependent coworkers. We describe in detail how emotions and actions were intertwined and evolved recursively as coworkers attempted to release themselves from unwanted negative emotions and inadvertently acted in ways that transferred negative experiences to their distant coworkers. This process is in stark contrast to that depicted in the emotional contagion literature. Emotions are said to spread among group members through mimicry, as people mimic the behaviors of coworkers and thus experience the emotion itself, and empathy, as people experience others' emotions (Barsade, 2002). Our results suggest an alternative process by which negative emotions are handed off between group members trying to divest themselves of negative emotions. Rather than contagion, we observed emotional diversity that was sustained, although not in the same configuration, in these teams. Our results expose the process through which emotional diversity, not contagion, may develop and be persistent in teams. This process requires that the organizational team context differentially affect team members such that a steady-state only occurs through a process of perspective taking and empathy.

Our study took place in the context of globally distributed work teams. It is possible that this context made emotional contagion more difficult. Emotional cues are often difficult to transfer without direct face-to-face contact (e.g. Kruger, Epley, Parker, & Ng, 2005). Montoya-Weiss and her colleagues (Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001), for example, found that conflict was not conveyed across

distance in distributed teams. Although members of our teams met face-to-face on occasion, the majority of their interaction took place through mediating technologies such as telephone and email, thus obscuring many of the cues that convey emotion. We believe that being geographically distributed may have exacerbated the dynamic we observed in our study. Had team members been face-to-face rather than distant, they may have had access to more cues to promote perspective taking and empathy. In future research, it would be informative to examine more directly how geographic distance affects contagion and perspective-taking processes.

Although our examination of emotions and actions required an individual level analysis, our study was conducted in a team context. We can thus explore the effects of team context on the processes we observed. As expected, we saw few language challenges in the India-US teams. Although there were occasional issues with understanding accents and word choices, there were relatively few language-related tensions in these teams. Germany-US and Germany-India teams reported language challenges at about the same rate. The US team members, however, were more inclined to experience fear of being talked about. We attribute this to a relatively mono-lingual society in the US as compared with India. US informants generally spoke a single language and were less accustomed to situations in which code-switching occurred. More importantly, we noticed that members of teams whose dynamics were fraught with conflict and tension were more likely to have negative interpretations of their distant coworkers' responses to language challenges. Tensions arising as a result of the work seemed to fuel negative interpretations of non-native English speaking team members' coping strategies. This observation is consistent with studies suggesting that threat leads to feelings of shame and anxiety (Mendes, et al. 2008). In teams characterized by an ongoing sense of anxiety, perspective-taking and empathetic action were less prevalent. It is important to note that although these tensions could be based in and affected by power dynamics between groups, this is not a necessary condition for the process that we observed. Our data do not support a conclusion that informants at any location engaged in an effort to wield power over those at other locations. The data show that contributors generally felt badly when an interaction went awry.

Our goal in this study was to understand the effect of lingua franca use on collaboration among

globally distributed colleagues. We succeeded in describing how the common stock of knowledge and joint action were disrupted, why this was an emotionally potent issue for both German and non-German speaking workers at GlobalTech, and how the mandate of lingua franca usage triggered a negative emotional cycle among global workers. The present study is one of the few that examines language problems faced by internationally distributed collaborators. Although some previous studies by researchers of international management (Marschan, et al., 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Fixman, 1989; Reeves & Wright 1996) have explored language barriers, no theoretical framework had yet emerged to explain how those barriers play out among international workers. With the increasing prevalence of international work and internationally distributed work, it is critical to introduce theoretical and empirical perspectives that explicate the impact of lingua franca and bring it into the mainstream of organizational behavior literature. Although intercultural sociolinguistics, intercultural pragmatics, and symbolic interactionism have acknowledged language as a critical carrier of communication, little work has explored how differences in language backgrounds and language proficiency might affect the creation of shared meaning. Cossette (1998) argues that language in organizations “must necessarily be examined in the light of the tongue spoken or written by the individuals concerned – in other words, the system of linguistic signs used by them” (p. 1364). Our work helps to fill this gap and extend our understanding of language in organizations to include the emotional components that so powerfully affected workers at GlobalTech. Symbolic interactionism provides a cognitive perspective on communication with little specificity on expected relational effects when the interdependent process of interaction and interpersonal relationships is strained. We provide a comprehensive explanation of how breakdowns unfold, including both the cognitive and emotional consequences.

We also contribute to theory about the interpersonal effects of situational communication apprehension. Most research on situational communication apprehension focuses on the individual experiencing communication apprehension, the situations that promote it, and the responses of individuals confronted with these stressful situations. Little research has explored how individuals’ responses to situational communication apprehension affect interpersonal relationships or organizational dynamics. In

fact, few studies of situational communication apprehension have been conducted in organizational settings, so the way apprehension plays out in these settings has essentially gone unexplored. Our findings suggest that situational communication apprehension, being intricately linked with negative emotions, can have detrimental effects for not only the individual experiencing it, but also for those confronted with their coping responses, and thus that situational communication apprehension may be a matter worthy of the attention of managers and leaders in organizations.

A third theoretical contribution of this work is understanding the effects of code-switching when a situation of uneven lingua franca proficiency exists. Code-switching was one of the responses we observed to situational communication apprehension. Although code-switching between bi-lingual speakers has been studied extensively, few studies examine code-switching among speakers who switch to languages not shared by other people involved in the discussion. In other words, in most code-switching studies, all people share the languages in which the conversation is taking place. Thus, ours is one of the few studies of the effects of code-switching when the language is shared by some, but not by all of the participants in a communication (for an exception, see Myers-Scotton & Jake, 2000). It is also one of the first to examine code-switching in an organizational setting. The practice of code-switching, although described as always disruptive, has been shown to have positive effects by narrowing social distance and symbolizing a show of solidarity between actors who share a common language (see Myers-Scotton & Jake, 2000). It can also, however, produce negative effects by increasing social distance, especially when those not sharing the focal language are excluded. Our findings suggest that such distancing can occur when code-switching is used among distant collaborators in organizations.

Our data analysis situated the problem of proficiency at a German-based company. The largest number of employees were located in Germany and the German site was seen as “the heart and soul” of the company. We think these factors exacerbated the effects that we saw. Had we, for example, included an Italian site in the study, we may not have seen such strong emotional responses to the Italian team members speaking in their native tongue because it would not have been confounded with possible issues of control felt by those at the periphery toward those at headquarters. These are limitations in our study

that need to be addressed with additional empirical research. Our study also was limited to the examination of a single lingua franca – English. Although English is a common choice as a lingua franca in international organizations, it is not the only possible lingua franca. Although we would expect to see similar effects in organizations with a lingua franca other than English, replication will be required to ascertain the degree to which the findings of these situations may be generalized.

Despite the limitations of this study, our findings have important implications for managers who are charged with overseeing internationally distributed projects. In particular, managers need to understand the communication challenges that people face when they have a low level of proficiency in a lingua franca. Managers also need to understand the probable coping strategies that those workers may employ, which may involve withdrawal, exclusion of native lingua franca speakers, and code-switching. To avoid negative emotional cycles, managers need to create inclusive communication environments that have high levels of psychological safety, and promote high employee morale and group cohesion. In particular, managers can become attuned to and remove communication barriers that may threaten their employees' sense of belonging. For example, they can reinforce the use of a lingua franca at every turn, as well as provide language training for those employees who have a weak command of or who lack confidence in speaking and writing in the company language. Most importantly, managers can encourage perspective-taking and empathy by promoting conversations that reveal peoples' experiences as they grapple with this potentially disruptive policy. Consistent with recent research on cross-cultural adjustment (see Swagler & Ellis, 2003), we found that language confidence may have been a larger concern than language skill. Although German colleagues often were technically fluent in English, they were not completely comfortable using the language professionally. To that end, we also encourage managers to promote opportunities for people to practice the lingua franca in non-threatening settings. As employees' language skills and confidence strengthen, situational communication apprehension will likely be reduced for them and their tendency to employ exclusionary coping strategies may diminish. This suggestion was reinforced during our second phase of data collection – German informants told us that one of the only times they spoke English was with their distributed colleagues. They said that a lack

of practice in less pressured situations made it difficult for them to improve their skills and gain the confidence they needed to be more effective in their globe-spanning interactions.

For people who are engaged in internationally distributed work composed of participants with varying skills in a lingua franca, the findings of this study have implications for the way in which they use the company language and interact with coworkers. To start, we believe that it is important that workers engage in perspective-taking with the goal of understanding the experiences and constraints of their colleagues. In talking with our informants, we found that few were aware of how hard their German colleagues were working to converse in English; similarly, few German informants were aware of the feelings of exclusion and ostracism felt by some of their non-German speaking colleagues. They believed that the summaries at the end of meetings sufficed. Building awareness of the experiences of coworkers with different language backgrounds and proficiencies and empathizing with those experiences can circumvent the negative cycle and, we believe, is an important step in ameliorating the emotional burden felt on all sides of this issue.

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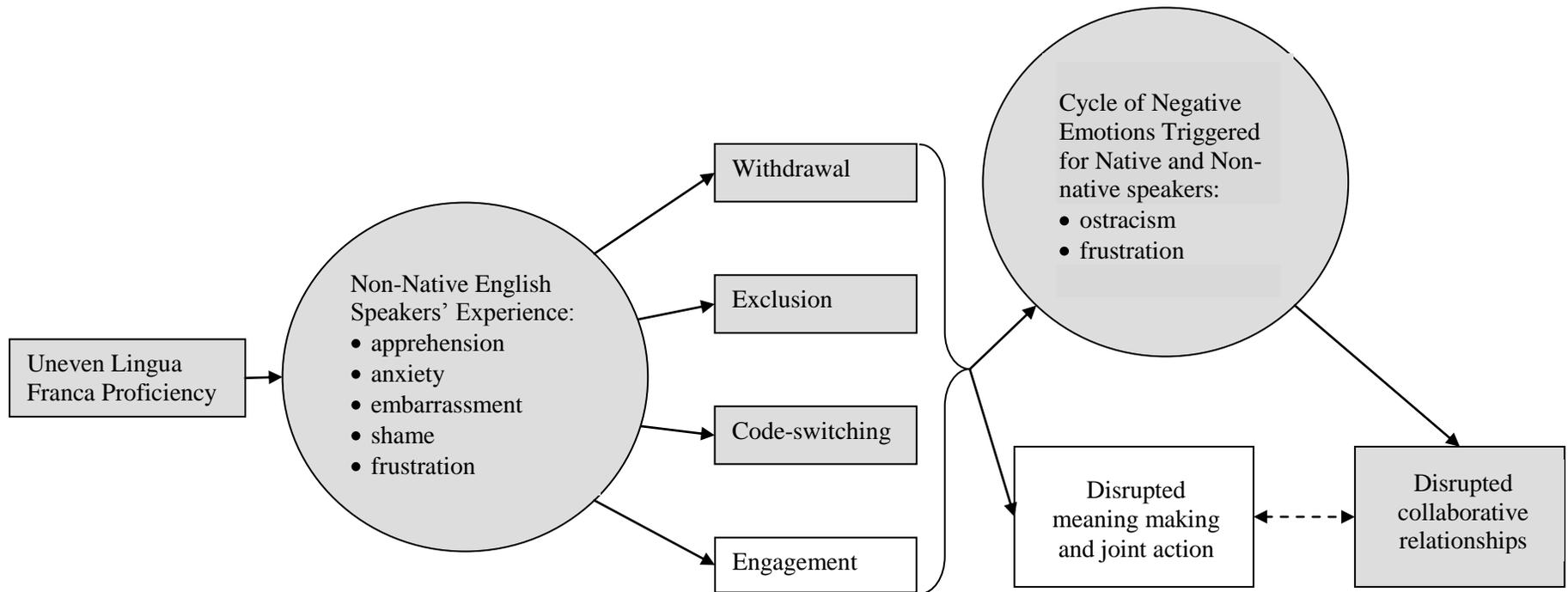


Figure 1. Effects of Uneven Lingua Franca Proficiency on Collaboration.

Note: Shaded boxes represent the new concepts and relationships introduced in this study.

