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Abstract

Multinational corporations (MNCs) are highly dependent on a corporate language to control and coordinate their distributed operations. However, research on the impact of language differences on intra- and inter-unit communication is still underdeveloped. In this study, we focus on corporate language-based communication avoidance (CLBCA) which has received little systematic attention in international business (IB) literature despite the negative impact it may have on MNC effectiveness. Applying a research methodology labeled multi-sited ethnography, we traced CLBCA across three Danish owned MNCs and identified five contextual factors that affect avoidance behavior in second language encounters: formality level, media leanness, group size, power difference, and relation strength. Thereby, this study provides novel insights into context dependent language barriers in MNCs. A central argument in this article is that communication avoidance in MNCs should not be perceived only as an individual level variable as has been the practice in most studies so far.

Keywords: corporate language; communication avoidance; language management; HQ-subsidiary relations; virtual media; power; multi-sited ethnography; qualitative method

1. Introduction

The success of multinational corporations (MNCs) depends on their ability to control and coordinate activities across geographical, socio-cultural, and linguistic borders. Therefore, communication between and within units becomes essential if firms are to respond rapidly to the changing market conditions in which they operate (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002). One factor that has consistently been found to affect intra- and inter-unit communication is language barriers (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio, 2011; Luo & Shenkar, 2006). Because fluency in the common corporate language varies, inter-personal interaction may be impeded due to unfamiliar vocabulary, the speed of speech, the accent, or the frequency of mistakes (Henderson, 2005). The negative consequences of such communication difficulties are severe as they may impact inter-unit knowledge transfer (Ghoshal & Nohria, 1989; Mäkelä, Kalla, & Piekkari, 2007), global value chain management (Govindarajan & Gupta, 2001), international conflict management (Von Glinow, Shapiro, & Brett, 2004), and headquarter-subsidiary relations (Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2007; Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen, & Piekkari, 2006).

Hence, while language facilitates practices of control and coordination in MNCs, it may also function as an obstacle to organizational processes. Language barriers could, thus, be a substantial problem that intensifies as the MNC expands globally (Harzing & Feely, 2008). For example, Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, and Welch (1999a) found language barriers to be eminent on all position levels of an examined MNC. Moreover, in a recent study on German and Japanese headquarter (HQ) and subsidiary managers, language barriers were mentioned as a problem in 42 out of 44 interviews (Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011). These empirical findings indicate that language barriers are a widespread and profound feature affecting vital processes in the MNC. Consequently, calls for research on linguistic issues have been put

forward in a increasing number of articles (e.g. Harzing, et al., 2011; Luring & Selmer, 2012; Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012; Zander, Mockaitis, & Harzing, 2011). In particular, Harzing and Feely (2008) argue that a way forth could be to develop more empirically grounded and systematic research into the nature of language challenges in MNCs, seeking to answer the question: “[...] what is it exactly about language that creates the problem?” (p. 58).

In this article, we intend to respond to these calls for more research on the nature of language barriers in international organizations. Thus, our aim is to explore why individuals sometimes avoid verbal communication in the common corporate language, i.e. to identify factors affecting corporate language-based communication avoidance (CLBCA) in MNCs. We will do this by studying intra- and inter-unit inter-personal interaction in three Danish MNCs; all using English as a common corporate language. CLBCA should here be understood as the reluctance to engage in communication using the language that has been selected by the corporation as the official language. Since the psychological literature has dealt extensively with personality traits causing communication avoidance (see Ghonsooly, Khajavy, & Asadpour, 2012), we will focus on the contextual factors that can affect individuals’ willingness to interact through English as the common language. In order to do this, there is a need for a methodological tool that allows researchers to explore linkages between communication avoidance and factors constituted by the context in which the corporate language encounter occurs. This type of exploratory research endeavor is typically pursued by the use of an ethnographic approach (Moore, 2011). However, inter-personal interaction in MNCs is seldom confined within single organizational units. Thus, a traditional ethnographic method developed to the study of geographically isolated villages may fall short in providing an understanding of the particularities affecting communication in an IB context (Agar, 1986). Consequently, we apply a multi-sited ethnography approach including semi-structured

interviews and participant observation in HQs and subsidiaries. This methodology enables researchers to cross national and organizational boundaries tracing specific concepts and their application throughout dispersed social networks (Marcus, 1995). Yet despite its potential for capturing interactions in contexts that span across multiple geographically distant sites, the method has rarely been applied in IB research (Peltonen, 2007). Thus, this article can be considered a pioneering effort also in terms of methodology.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language and communication avoidance

Language can be conceptualized as generally agreed-on, learned systems of signification or meaning which are central to the process of constructing organizational, social, and global realities (Born & Peltokorpi, 2010). Today, MNCs use not only the local language of the corporate headquarters, but most often officially select a common corporate language. Such a language functions as a joint vehicle for communication and allows members from different speech communities to partake in ongoing dialogue and information sharing (Feely & Harzing, 2003; Luring & Selmer, 2010). However, while the introduction of a common corporate language provides MNC employees with shared means for interaction, not all individuals are equally comfortable with or capable of expressing themselves in a second, learned language. Consequently, the necessity to speak in a language that one does not master in its entirety could lead organizational members to avoid communication in the corporate language.

Communication avoidance has been the object of numerous studies in communication and psychology literature (Burgoon & Hale, 1983). In broad terms, communication avoidance can be conceptually defined as the reluctance to engage in verbal interaction with other

individuals (McCroskey, Fayer, & Richmond, 1983). Communication avoidance has most often been examined as a trait-like characteristic with cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations (Bell, 1986). However, some authors also deal with communication avoidance from a 'state' perspective focusing on perceived rewards for communicating and the perceived consequences of approaching or avoiding communication encounters (Pearson, Child, DeGreeff, Semlak, & Burnett, 2011). Results indicate that communication avoidance decreases relational satisfaction and perceived influence in organizations (Avtgis, 2000). Communication avoidance has also been linked negatively to success with finding a job (Krzystofik & Fein, 1988) and progressing in a career (Estes, 1979). Research findings also show that individuals who are new to the group and avoid communication are evaluated less positively by team members and are judged to be less credible and attractive than individuals who do not avoid communication (Fordham & Gabbin, 1996; McCroskey, 1984).

The above mentioned research tradition, however, focuses almost entirely on communication in a monolingual context and thus does not include language proficiency as a factor. The few articles that deal with communication avoidance and also include second language interaction show some interesting results. Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) argue that second language communication avoidance is more closely related to communicative competence than communication avoidance in the first language that is closer linked to personality traits. For example, Jung, McCroskey, Feyer, and Richmond (1983) found that Puerto Rican immigrants reported well below norms of communication avoidance when communicating in Spanish, but over 40 percent reported being highly avoidant when communicating in English. Based on the review of such results, McCroskey (2004) concludes that second language interaction could probably amplify communication avoidance in general.

2.2. Corporate language and avoidance of communication in MNCs

While the communication and psychology literature focuses almost entirely on individual consequences, communication avoidance could also have serious implications for the functioning of business organizations. Not least since management activities, employee collaboration, and knowledge sharing to a large extent are based on verbal communication (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2003). Moreover, since MNCs are multilingual organizations, it is likely that communication avoidance will be a substantially greater problem here.

Though no attempt to systematically study communication avoidance in MNCs has been published, a number of studies have indicated its existence in international organizations. Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, and Welch (1999a), for example, showed how language skills distorted communication patterns in a Finnish MNC because managers and employees were reluctant to speak in the common corporate language. In an earlier publication, the same authors describe how individuals in the organization would ignore or disregard communication in the common corporate language (Marschan, Welch, & Welch, 1997). Harzing and Feely (2008) reported that managers with insufficient linguistic skills would at times refrain from verbal communication in order to avoid being considered unintelligent. SanAntonio (1987) describes how business meetings in a Japanese subsidiary were notable quieter when foreign nationals were present due to having to communicate in English. Barner-Rasmussen (2003) found that language difficulties reduced the number of top-management visits to foreign units whose language they did not master. Luring and Tange (2010) described how a number of Danish HQ employees felt insecure and uncomfortable with communication in the common corporate language and as a result avoided interaction with

non-Danes. Finally, studies have consistently found a frequent use of language nodes in MNCs which also reflects avoidance of communication in the common corporate language (e.g. Harzing, et al., 2011; Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999b).

Beside the prominent role of language, the context affecting communication avoidance in MNCs may be different from that in domestic organizations. MNCs are large organizations spanning geographical boundaries most often based on a hierarchical structure linking different units (Ghoshal & Nohria, 1989). According to Dörrenbäcker and Geppert (2011), the stratification of HQs and subsidiaries in MNCs creates specific power relations that can be reinforced by national identities. Hence, the link between power relations and communication avoidance may be an important aspect to study in MNCs. The extensive need for technically mediated communication in such dispersed organizational networks could also differentiate MNCs from domestic organizations in terms of communication avoidance patterns (cf. Scott & Rockwell, 1997). Finally, the geographical, linguistic, and cultural distance between units may lead to weaker inter-unit personal relations (cf. Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2005). In the following, we present a methodology by which one can explore and capture the influence and consequences of such diverse contexts on social interaction in the MNC.

3. Methodology

3.1. Multi-sited ethnography

Multi-sited ethnography originates from a line of anthropological research arguing that social phenomena cannot only be conceived from a local perspective, but must also include and capture the impact of globalization on social activities (e.g. Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Taussig, 1993; Wolf, 1982). In a seminal paper Marcus (1995) describes multi-sited ethnography as a method using traditional ethnographic data collection techniques but

following a research topic across several geographical field sites for shorter periods of time. This requires a reflexivity of the field of study, which is not necessary in traditional ethnography, since the multi-sited field does not necessarily correspond to a confined spatial entity (Cook, Laidlaw, & Mair, 2009). In other words, the extent of the research field is dependent upon the questions the researcher aims to answer. A main feature of multi-sited ethnography is that the method uses a tracing process through multiple spaces thus revealing layers of meaning that are not readily detectable. This tracing can involve research themes (e.g. the story, the plot, the metaphor, or the conflict) and objects (e.g. people or things) as to discover dynamics and interconnections affecting social interaction *within* and *across* social entities (Hannerz, 2003).

Multi-sited ethnography has been argued to solve the need for a way to analytically explore global processes and actions that extend over multiple places and social networks (Falzon, 2009). Hence, multi-sited ethnography, allows researchers to understand a greater variety of perspectives connected to a specific action or process (Gallos, 2009). Researchers who only look at a subject in one locality may never understand its full impact on an international scale and would therefore gain an incomplete image of the issues. Finally, having multiple sites provides opportunities to compare actions in the different communities that are studied (Falzon, 2009).

In this study, we aim to better understand how the context of interaction may affect communication avoidance in MNC units dispersed over many different geographical locations. The influence of the context is often difficult to assess using more detached methods such as a quantitative survey because many factors are implicit (group behavior) or sensitive (power relations). There is therefore a need for a sensitive and flexible approach that allows the researcher to follow unexpected paths while tracing the subject of inquiry in

different units of international organizations. Finally, we believe that traditional ethnography falls short of our research aim because the interaction context in an MNC is not confined to single units.

As such, we use multi-sited ethnography to provide descriptive explanations, not by focusing solely on a single unit, nor on the whole MNC, but by contextualizing intra- and inter-unit themes that affect the daily lives of employees and managers (cf. Peltonen, 2007). In this line of thinking, we believe that multi-sited ethnography could be useful in opening the ‘black box’ of MNCs, capturing the internal dynamics while acknowledging the geographically distributed nature of such organizations (cf. Doz, 2011). In doing so, multi-sited ethnography answers several methodological calls for analysis of MNCs functioning by means of empirical contextualization rather than more narrowly from theoretical abstraction (e.g. Birkinshaw, Brannen, & Tung, 2011; Welch, Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2011).

3.2. Site selection

From the inception of the multi-sited fieldwork, the aim was to explore CLBCA, and our tracing included HQs and eleven subsidiaries of three Danish MNCs. In table 1 we have summarized the organizational characteristics of the firms included in the study.

*** Insert Table 1 about here ***

We commenced in the HQ of a pharmaceutical MNC, here labeled PHARMA. In PHARMA we observed, during our field study, that differences in the formal and informal interaction context as well as group size would affect employees’ willingness to communicate in the corporate language within and across units. We decided to trace these two sub-themes to two

other MNCs that had encountered similar challenges. In collaboration with the global HR manager in each MNC, we selected two new sites in which to conduct extensive field studies. The first site was the Indian subsidiary of WIND, an MNC delivering renewable energy solutions. Here several new sub-themes emerged, relating to the employees' use of media and difference in power. The second site was the HQ of an engineering consultancy (CONSULT), and here we found, while continuously exploring the sub-themes discovered in PHARMA and WIND, that the strength of relations between the communicating parties would also impact CLBCA. The tracing process continued within and across HQs and subsidiaries in the three MNCs (see Figure 1) until we had solid confirmation for the existence of sub-themes identifying five contextual factors affecting CLBCA and interrelations between them. These were: formality level, media leanness, group size, power difference, and relation strength. This whole process took the researchers two years to accomplish. Throughout the project we included research assistants to support us in native language interviews, observations and interview transcriptions.

*** Insert Figure 1 about here***

3.3. Data collection and analysis

We carried out participant observation in all three MNCs both in HQs and relevant subsidiaries. We would typically be situated among the informants in large open space offices which allowed for observation of communicative encounters. Here, we could observe and listen to informal conversation between co-located employees and see and listen to individuals talking on the phone. We would also participate in the daily routines of the workplace such as morning meetings, birthday parties, and other social gatherings. All observations were jotted down to be written up in full field notes.

For the interviews we applied a semi-structured approach that resembles conversations. This lets the informant take unexpected turns and thus may lead the researcher down unpredicted paths (Hannerz, 2003). Although we had a deep theoretical knowledge of the general field of language management, we started out by being very exploratory in our approach to the unexplored theme of communication avoidance. We thereby relied almost entirely on observations for development of our first preliminary interview guide. This guide changed in the beginning of the project but eventually assumed a more fixed form including background questions and questions about reasons to avoid common corporate language communication. By iteratively going back and forth between findings in the field and insight from literature, we gradually developed the questions related to the identified sub-themes, i.e. formality level, media leanness, group size, power difference, and relation strength.

In order to gain as many viewpoints and angles as possible, we interviewed individuals from different functional areas and levels in the organizations. We also interviewed individuals with excellent and poor corporate language skills. In cases where informants were not proficient in the corporate language, we did the interview in the informant's first language (e.g. Danish). We also used native speaker assistants (Mandarin, Korean and Spanish) to do interviews under our guidance. The interviews took place in settings where informants could speak freely (e.g. individual offices or vacant meeting rooms). Most subsidiary employees were either interviewed face-to-face in the subsidiary or when they visited the HQ. However, in some cases (11) we had to do the interview by use of Skype. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and in some instances translated to English from other languages (Danish, Mandarin, Korean, and Spanish) by native speakers. In table 2 we have listed the

total amount of observations and interviews conducted in the HQ and subsidiaries in the three MNCs.

*** Insert Table 2 about here***

In accordance with the ethnographic methodology, we commenced the data analysis while still in the field. During the multi-sited fieldwork, we shared detailed descriptions of each research site and the stories related to our research theme. Once returned from the field, we coded all our material using the qualitative data analysis program Nvivo. We used the overall theme of the study as our main code (CLBCA). Subsequently, the five sub-themes, each representing a contextual factor, were used as sub-codes (formality level, media leanness, group size, power difference, and relation strength). Finally, we re-coded the sub-codes in order to further analytically explore the contextual factors. For example, the sub-code 'group size' would be sub-sub coded to: 1) small group, and 2) large group. The discussions that arose from the coding of each MNC served to ensure the validity of the findings within and across MNCs. We only used information that could be verified by several informants or by different data-sources (see Table 3).

*** Insert Table 3 about here***

4. Results

Following the multi-sited approach of tracing sub-themes in and across the selected MNCs, we found five contextual factors that affected the link between language proficiency and communication avoidance: formality level, media leanness, group size, power difference, and relation strength.

4.1. Formality level

We found that individuals were more avoidant of speaking the corporate language in an informal sphere compared to more formal work situations. This sub-theme emerged during the initial field work conducted in the HQ of PHARMA. Here, informal communication was generally sparse, and employees only communicated in the corporate language when strictly necessary. As a Polish production specialist mentioned: “When you have to communicate in a language that you do not know to perfection then one keeps to oneself the little remarks that would otherwise be more natural – for better or for worse”. A similar comment was made by a Danish international marketing manager: “Personal discussions don’t go very deep – also because of the language”. Hence, both employees and managers tended to avoid speaking about informal and personal issues in the corporate language due to insufficient language proficiency. This insight was confirmed in our tracing to WIND and guided our fieldwork in the HQ of CONSULT. For example, in CONSULT we could observe that Danish employees would leave for lunch at 11.30 while foreign nationals would go at 12.00 or later. When an Italian engineer was asked about this practice he explained:

When it comes to social issues, like lunch, often the international group goes together. I think it is understandable that people go with those who speak your mother tongue ... I often go for lunch with the other Italians. Even when you are all in the same condition and speak English together, it’s never as relaxing as speaking in your mother tongue. (Italian engineer, CONSULT, HQ).

In the HQ of CONSULT, it was also found that more formal situations made employees, who were less proficient in the corporate language, more comfortable. A French manager

described to us that it was not only the reduced vocabulary that caused difficulties in informal communication. It was also because a conversation was expected to be smooth and relaxed when talking informally. As the manager said: “I find it very uncomfortable to speak about my personal life and my ideas when it is like this... staccato communication. This is not a problem when we speak about work. Work communication is not relaxed”. Also the fact that informal communication often dealt with more sensitive issues, such as politics or personal problems, made it more problematic not to master the vocabulary than in work situations where employees had to try to understand each other despite the hardship.

In tracing the formal/informal sub-theme through all three MNCs, it was found that formality level would impact the relation between low corporate language proficiency and communication avoidance behavior. Thus, individuals would be more avoidant of speaking the corporate language in informal settings than in formal settings.

4.2. Media leanness

Media leanness emerged as another contextual factor related to CLBCA. After tracing formality level to the Indian subsidiary of WIND, we observed that employees perceived telephone to be a more formal media than face-to-face communication, and that they would refrain from discussing personal issues in telephone conversations with employees located in the HQ. This insight led us to trace the impact of media leanness on CLBCA to the HQ of WIND. Here, avoidance behavior related to telephone conversations was a well-known problem. It often led to frustration as this Danish HR manager expressed: “If somebody calls them [the HQ] they [the subsidiaries] will just say screw them, and go about their daily business [...]”. Since the same manager argued that communication avoidance in English was prevalent in Spain, we decided to trace the sub-theme to the Spanish subsidiary of WIND.

Here, we confirmed that employees with low corporate language proficiency would tend to avoid communicating in the corporate language. However, it was tracing in CONSULT that led to further insights concerning the reasons why employees found telephone conversations difficult. Thus, a Polish manager in the Polish subsidiary of CONSULT explained how telephonic communication in the corporate language would make him feel particularly stressed due to the absence of body language:

“Phone is more difficult because on phone there is no face so I can misunderstand and make mistakes. One time I misunderstood familiar with family. When you talk face to face it is easier. By phone I misunderstand word and the sentences [...] To tell you the truth I try to avoid telephone conversations because I am afraid of this discussion”.

(Polish manager, CONSULT, Subsidiary, Poland)

Additionally, a Chinese individual (WIND) reported making a call but hanging up the telephone when she noticed the conversation had to be conducted in the corporate language. Hence, insufficient language proficiency combined with a lean media seemed to increase communication avoidance.

4.3. Group size

Group size was another theme that emerged during our fieldwork in PHARMA and was confirmed through our tracing process. Here, we noticed that corporate language communication in large groups (5 persons or more) differed from that in small groups (3 to 5 persons) or dyads. Thus, we decided to include group size in the tracing process. Employees and managers in the Chinese subsidiary of WIND told us that their discomfort in speaking the corporate language increased with the size of the group they had to address. One-to-one

communication would be the least stressful for non-fluent individuals. As described by a Chinese supply chain analyst:

Individual communication is easier. I can speak more fluent in one-to-one communication than group communication. I easily get nervous when there is a group meeting and others are listening to me, so I speak slowly. I will not feel as relaxed as talking to only one person. (Chinese analyst, WIND, Subsidiary, China, transl. from Mandarin).

Also, in meeting situations in the HQ of CONSULT, we observed that some individuals who took part in discussions when being in smaller groups would often let others do the talking in larger forums. When confronted with this, a Danish senior engineer answered: “Some Danes do not contribute in the larger groups as they did when we all spoke Danish. They are shy and think they cannot express themselves well enough”. Furthermore, a Chinese financial controller in the HQ of PHARMA had observed that the response time of the other non-native speakers of English would often be longer in large group discussions. She had come to the conclusion that: “[...] in the big group they go through everything in their brain first before they say something. But when it is one-to-one, they ask a question more immediately”. These findings suggest that the size of a group in which communication has to take place will affect the willingness of less proficient individuals to communicate.

4.4. Power difference

Another sub-theme that first emerged during our fieldwork in the Indian subsidiary of WIND was power difference. Here, a number of non-native English speakers told us that CLBCA increased if they had to converse with more powerful individuals than themselves. As we

traced the theme in the HQ of CONSULT, we found that if employees had to talk with managers in their second language, they became more aware of their language deficiencies and thus more stressed. This disposition was expressed by this Polish engineer: “For me I get more insecure when I have to speak to my boss, I am afraid to make mistakes in English. I don’t talk to him very much”. On an intra-unit level, it was thus mainly the subordinate-manager relation that affected CLBCA, while on an inter-unit level, employees would mention the dominating status of the HQ as affecting their willingness to communicate in the corporate language.

Concurrent tracing in the Polish subsidiary of CONSULT led to an understanding of the combined effects of position and unit-status on CLBCA. Here, we found that if an employee had to speak to a manager from the HQ, it would prove even more difficult. Thus a Polish engineer mentioned: “If it’s the head of the department at HQ you get really stressed. You tend to think more of the grammar than on content”. Similar views were expressed in PHARMA and WIND, as this Latvian controller in the Latvian subsidiary of WIND mentioned: “I am thinking – oh my god...he is checking every single word. He is laughing at me right now in his mind”. Hence, in all three MNCs it was found that power difference would impact the relation between language proficiency and communication avoidance. On an intra-unit level, CLBCA was mainly related to positions (managers/subordinate), while on an inter-unit level, unit status (HQ/subsidiary) would affect avoidance behavior.

4.5. Relation strength

In the Danish HQ of CONSULT, the final sub-theme emerged. While tracing the impact of media leanness and power difference on CLBCA, informants would mention that the duration of a relationship would decrease tendencies to avoid communication. Thus, a strong relation

would make it less stressful for non-native English speakers to conduct a conversation in the corporate language since there would be less doubt about the intentions and benevolence of the other party. Similar perceptions were found in the Swedish subsidiary of CONSULT and in the Japanese subsidiary of PHARMA. We also traced the sub-theme to the Chinese subsidiary of WIND and the Korean subsidiaries in PHARMA and CONSULT.

Apart from increased trust, a strong and long relation also included a learning curve. The communicating parties would develop skills to better understand each other's use of the corporate language. As a controller in the Latvian subsidiary of WIND argued: "If you always communicate with one person, you will know more about his or her accent, talking speed, pronunciations, and expressions". A Chinese employee in WIND described a similar notion:

I do not quite understand most of the Indians because of the strong local accent.

I can only understand a few who I contact often, because I know them well and I am used to the way they are talking (Chinese supply chain coordinator, WIND, Subsidiary, China, transl. from Mandarin).

In the Korean subsidiaries of PHARMA and CONSULT, we learned that a strong relation to HQ employees especially made telephone communications more comfortable and less stressful. One described it the following way:

To begin with I found it very frustrating to speak on the phone with the people in HQ because my English is not so good. And when you cannot see their face on the phone then maybe they are making funny faces or something. But now I know them quite well. I have even met some of them here. So the problem is

less now. (Korean engineer, CONSULT, Subsidiary, Korea).

Hence, good interpersonal relations seemed to interact with media leanness in the way that individuals with low English language proficiency were less reluctant to speak over the telephone if they knew the other person well, if they trusted the other person, and if they had developed a mutual understanding of the each other's imperfect language (see figure 2 for depiction of the relation strength /media leanness interaction).

Finally, we found that a strong relation could ease the communication to one's superiors:

I feel more relaxed when communicating with my boss in the HQ, because we have a very good relationship. We know each other very well. Sometimes I can even guess what he wants even though I don't understand every word. The communication fluency depends on how much you know your colleague.
(Korean marketing manager, PHARMA, Subsidiary, Korea, transl. from Korean).

The notion that a stronger interpersonal relation made it easier to engage in a conversation with superiors was mentioned by a number of individuals in Chinese and Korean subsidiaries. Hence, relation strength seemed to interact with power difference such that personal relations reduced the effect of power differences on communication avoidance of less proficient English speakers. This is illustrated in figure 2.

*** Insert Figure 2 about here***

5. Discussion

The effect of CLBCA on inter-personal interaction is not unknown in communication research, psychology, or in business studies. Yet, this knowledge has not been used to systematically identify and examine intra- and inter-unit factors in MNCs that are related to this problem. By use of multi-sited ethnography, we traced important contextual factors that would impact the relation between corporate language proficiency and communication avoidance. In contrast to the lion's share of research on communication avoidance (Avtgis, 2000; Burgoon, 1976; Burgoon & Hale, 1983), we have focused on factors beyond individual psychology that could affect communication avoidance in a positive or negative direction. Thereby our research points to new directions for MNCs in relation to leveraging CLBCA since we approach the problem also from an international and organizational perspective.

Through our observations and interviews we identified five factors that affected the relation between corporate language proficiency and communication avoidance: formality level, media leanness, group size, power difference, and relation strength (see Table 4).

*** Insert Table 4 about here***

We found that a formal context for interaction reduced CLBCA since a number of informants were more reluctant to engage in a dialogue of more informal character. The role of formality level has previously been touched upon by Charles (2007) who quote one of her informants who argued that banking terminology was not as difficult as finding the right expressions in ordinary small talk. Similar results were found by Luring and Selmer (2011) showing that the rate and consistency of speech in the corporate language had a negative association with informal communication in multicultural organizations.

With regard to media use, we found that individuals displayed more CLBCA when they had to use the telephone compared to face-to-face interaction. This is in line with IB studies that have suggested that virtual communication, due to lack of channel richness, is more challenging than face-to-face interaction (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000).

Group size also had important consequences for CLBCA. This effect has also been noted in domestic communication avoidance literature (Bell, 1986; Frederickx & van Mechelen, 2012; Jung & McCroskey, 2004). Moreover, in an MNC setting, Neeley, Hinds and Cramton (2012) also cite an informant arguing that he is more reluctant to speak in a meeting situation.

The interrelations between language use and power relations have attracted some attention from IB scholars in recent years. This literature has in particular been concerned with social identity (Lauring, 2008; Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, & Säntti, 2005), language choice (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012), and status loss (Harzing, et al., 2011; Neeley, 2013; SanAntonio, 1987). Lustig and Andersen (1990) found a link between individuals with little control of the interpersonal environment and communication avoidance. This could be supportive of our finding that individuals are more avoidant when communicating with high power others.

The last contextual factor that we found was relation strength. This concept seemed to interact with media leanness and power difference. The finding that strong relations will decrease CLBCA could be linked to Semmer and Inversin's (2004) finding that sympathy with the interaction partner decreases communication avoidance. The interaction between relation strength and media leanness may be compared to Walter's (1994) finding that long term interaction partnerships had a positive effect on expected further computer mediated

communication.

Not only has our research confirmed indications from the communication avoidance literature predicting that when speaking a second language, individuals' willingness to communicate is reduced. We have also demonstrated that conditions external to the individual can increase or decrease the avoidance behavior. In other words, communication avoidance should not be seen purely as an individual level variable which has generally been the case in previous research (e.g. Fordham & Gabbin, 1996; Ghonsooly, et al., 2012; Krzystofik & Fein, 1988).

While different contextual factors may be prominent in other second language communication settings, e.g. in the education system, in this study we systematically examined MNCs. MNCs are characterized by a need for extensive and timely second language intra- and inter-unit communication in order for employees to share knowledge, coordinate and report business results and for managers to motivate and control activities (cf. Harzing, 2001). This stresses the need of technical media for interaction. Hence, the finding that media leanness is a prominent cause for CLBCA is a central finding in adjusting and updating existing communication avoidance theories to the IB field. Similarly, the finding that power relations between HQ and subsidiary units can increase communication avoidance is important for understanding language use in MNCs. We also found that strong relations between communicating parties will reduce the communication avoidance caused by media leanness and by inter-unit power differentials. This can provide important cues of how to increase individuals' willingness to engage in inter-unit second language communication when working in MNCs.

Finally, an important result of this study is the finding that multi-sited ethnography has a

unique potential to describe interpersonal dynamics in dispersed business organizations such as MNCs. Accordingly, the methodology could be useful for IB researchers to address the concerns of creating contextualized explanations when the research field stretches across geographical space (cf. Welch, et al., 2011). We therefore urge more scholars to apply this unique tool for understanding complex conceptual relations in a globalized business world.

5.1. Managerial relevance

Our study shows that CLBCA should preferably not be dealt with only at the individual level. Much research concerned with language proficiency problems suggests actions that are aimed at individual level solutions. This may be by improving language skills (Selmer, 2006), by language-based recruitment (Selmer & Luring, 2013), or by easing anxiety levels (Arquero, Hassall, Joyce, & Donoso, 2007). While these are certainly important measures to take, which may well reduce the general level of CLBCA, interventions should also include the organizational level. According to our research, this could be done in relation to formal or informal situations, use of media, optimal group sizes, the approach to communication by powerful individuals, as well as the role of social relations.

With regard to formality level, it is clear in our study that most individuals prefer to speak their native language in informal situations. There seems to be two ways to deal with this issue. One approach would be to reduce the informal content from communication in situations where this may be unnecessary and at the same time stressful for one or more parties in the conversation. For example, a manager should be sensitive to the reaction of employees when engaging in complex informal conversations that could cause anxiety in the subordinate. This approach would be comparable to what could be observed in PHARMA and CONSULT where informal corporate language interaction was reduced in general or involved

only specific language groups. If, however, informal interaction is perceived to be of value e.g. for social cohesion, job satisfaction, and knowledge sharing, then another approach would be to encourage this type of communication. In the HQ of CONSULT, a social practice of dividing lunch times between international and Danish employees had developed. Policies could be implemented in order to present more inclusive ideals. Managers' own practices could also play a substantial role in breaking the pattern of segregated informal interaction.

The CLBCA related to the use of lean media and in particular the telephone can be dealt with in similar dual fashions. One strategy would be to avoid telephone conversation unless highly necessary. Although a number of managers expressed a preference for the use of telephone for inter-unit communication, this may not always be the best strategy if one of the communicators struggle with the corporate language. Klitmøller and Lauring (2013) showed, contrary to general assumptions, that conversations through e-mail may in instances with low shared language commonality be preferable even for complex knowledge sharing. In general, e-mails provide advantages in the form of spelling check and built-in delays due to time differences that allow for revision of formulated messages. On the other hand, if employees never talk to each other on the telephone, there will be no learning curve with regard to language use and less relationship building that could otherwise reduce avoidance behavior in the long run. Hence, both strategies to diminish CLBCA caused by lean media may be useful, and managers should consider the situation and the communicating parties involved before choosing one over the other. For example, in the case of a regularly returning event, telephone may work better – especially if individuals have at least medium verbal English language skills. In other situations, a telephone call could cause the other part to lose face due to poor verbal language skills that would not be apparent in an e-mail dialogue.

The size of the group should also be taken into consideration. Managers could, for example, arrange discussions in smaller groups in situations where the input of all members is important. Managers also have to acknowledge that their higher position in itself could cause CLBCA for some individuals – in particular in the case of HQ managers confronting subsidiary subordinates. Hence, communication may in such situations benefit from being less direct (using e-mail or other inter-mediators) until stronger relations have been built to reduce the subordinate's discomfort.

5.2. Limitations and future research

There are important limitations to this study that have to be taken into account when building on its results. First, the study has been carried out in MNCs all headquartered in Denmark. As part of the Nordic countries, Danes are generally known to have a high English language proficiency which may differ from other countries. In order to test the generalizability of the current study, more research is needed taking departure in countries with different types of language use patterns. This could be countries where English is spoken as a native language or countries where the native language has a broad and more dominating position worldwide such as China, Spain, France, or Germany. Nonetheless, some of our results seemed to be comparable to studies done by Neeley (2013; 2012) in German and French speaking organizations.

Second, the subject of our study holds in itself an important limitation. Since we investigated communication avoidance, we have been aware that we may not have gained access to the viewpoints of many of the individuals that are most avoidant and thus had no desire to be interviewed. However, we have been highly aware of this problem and have therefore used native speakers of Danish, Mandarin, Spanish, and Korean in order to include also those

individuals that could be reluctant to be interviewed in their second language. Moreover, we did not rely only on interviews since we were present in HQs and subsidiaries in extensive periods of time. Therefore, we were able to observe incidences where individuals with poor English language skills avoided communication and could talk to them about it afterwards. Over time, we also gained the trust of individuals that struggled with the English language and thus could interview them more freely at a later stage. If, in fact, our results are biased by our inability to access those individuals who were most communication avoidant, the problems outlined in this article may actually just be even more prominent than depicted here.

With regard to further research on communication avoidance, a number of future research avenues can be suggested. Multi-sited ethnography is a novel exploratory approach that enables the researchers to trace and explore complex relations between concepts in the field over time and space. Hence, future research of a more quantitative nature could assist in testing and validating our model outlining contextual factors affecting MNC employees' CLBCA. Also, in this article, we have focused only on how contextual factors affect corporate *language*-based communication avoidance. Other studies may also examine how contextual factors in MNCs affect communication avoidance that stems from *cultural* differences (cf. Peltokorpi, 2010; Pryor, Butler, & Boehringer, 2005). An attempt to create a model of how the combination of linguistic proficiency and cultural differences could affect MNC employees' communication avoidance in HQs and subsidiaries could be a worthwhile, although ambitious, future research endeavor. Moreover, while we were not able to find an effect of language policy as a contextual factor, other studies may explore this further in relation to CLBCA. Finally, future research could also distinguish between communication avoidance in verbal and written media and seek to understand when and why non-fluent English speakers resort to using written media, such as e-mail, in order to avoid verbal

communication.

6. Conclusion

While studies of communication avoidance have a long tradition within communication research and psychology, very little has been done to apply existing knowledge to an IB context. Our analysis adds to existing knowledge by taking departure in the theoretical framework developed in traditional communication avoidance literature and by use of multi-sited ethnography applying and adjusting this knowledge to the IB context. In MNCs not only individual level variables but also group and organization level factors affect CLBCA in a complex pattern. The knowledge acquired in our intra- and inter-unit tracing processes is useful because it provides a foundation for developing measures in order to handle or reduce the negative effects of contextual factors on CLBCA in MNCs.

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Table 1: *Organizational characteristics of each MNC*

	PHARMA	WIND	CONSULT
Industry	Pharmaceutical	Renewable energy	Engineering consultancy
Number of employees	~33,000	~23,000	~6,000
Number of countries	75	20	8
Yearly turnover (billion Euros)	~10	~6	~ 0.7

Figure 1: Simplified sketch of the multi-sited tracing process.

- > Indicates tracing to sites where new sub-themes related to the theme of CLBCA were identified
- > Indicates tracing to sites where existing sub-themes related to the theme of CLBCA were explicated and confirmed
- TIME Indicates the chronological order of the data gathering

Table 2: Interviews and observation

Interviews	PHARMA	WIND	CONSULT
HQs	Denmark: 30	Denmark: 23	Denmark: 28
Subsidiaries	Japan: 1 China: 2 Korea: 5	India: 32 Spain: 14 China: 2	Latvia: 1 Poland: 3 Serbia: 1 Korea: 4
Total number of interviewees(n =146)	38	71	37
Managerial levels	Senior and middle managers	Senior, middle and non-managers	Senior and middle managers
Observations	PHARMA	WIND	CONSULT
HQs	240 hours	80 hours	320 hours
Subsidiaries	26 hours	280 hours	32 hours
Countries	Denmark and Korea	Denmark, India and Spain	Denmark, Sweden and Korea
Departments	Marketing	Production, R&D and HR	IT, Engineering

Table 3: Coding example using multiple data sources from the HQ of CONSULT

<i>Source</i>	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Interview</i>	<i>Observation</i>
<p><i>Code: CLBCA</i></p> <p><i>Sub-code: Group size</i></p> <p><i>Sub-sub code: Large group</i></p>	<p>“Seminar on language management that we held for 38 Danish employees and 12 foreign employees. In the following discussion in English it was very hard to get people to talk except for two natives speakers. After the meeting several Danes came up to us to speak about the topic but in Danish”</p> <p>- <i>Field notes CONSULT: Participation in Department seminar.</i></p>	<p>“You can see it at the department meetings. When we speak English at department meetings many of the Danes don’t say as much as they did when it was Danish back then. I think it is about them being shy about having to speak English to a large crowd and uncertain if they can express themselves well enough”</p> <p>- <i>Semi-structured interview with Danish/English Senior Engineer CONSULT</i></p>	<p>“When sitting among a group of Danish nationals at a meeting there was a lot of informal commenting between the Danes on what was being communicated but no one addressed the whole group”</p> <p>-<i>Field notes CONSULT: Observation during Department meeting</i></p>
<p><i>Code: CLBCA</i></p> <p><i>Sub-code: Group size</i></p> <p><i>Sub-sub code: Small group</i></p>	<p>“Some individuals, who do not normally speak in big meetings, seem to speak in one-on-one discussion and in small meetings”.</p> <p>- <i>Field notes CONSULT: Participation in meetings.</i></p>	<p>“I simply feel less awkward and shy about my English when there are fewer people present.”</p> <p>- <i>Semi-structured interview with Chinese Engineer CONSULT</i></p>	<p>“In the small meetings up to four persons it seems that everyone is participating no matter what their proficiency level is”</p> <p>-<i>Field notes CONSULT: Observation during meetings</i></p>

Table 4: *Appearance of contextual factors in interviews and observations*

<i>Communication avoidance contextual factors</i> <i>N = 146</i>	Formality level	Media leanness	Group size	Power difference	Relation strength
Number of interviews:	35	25	42	19	31
Observations:	PHARMA, WIND, CONSULT	WIND, CONSULT	PHARMA, WIND, CONSULT	Only interview data	Only interview data

Figure 2: *Interactions between contextual factors affecting CLBCA*