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**Together-Telling Across Borders:**

**Co-constructing meaning in a divided world**

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**Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to show how a process-based approach to language use can contribute to a better understanding of how to communicate cooperatively in the workplace, and more broadly, in a divided world. The interest of this approach lies in its priority on flow in a world of “ceaseless change, emergence and self-transformation” (Nayak and Chia, 2011). With its ontological focus on organiz-*ing* rather than static organiz-*ation* and on *becoming* rather than on *being* (Weick, 1979; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), process thinking invites researchers to consider language not only as the basis of communication flow, but as an integral part of the flow of organizing.

By bringing together the fruits of language-oriented and process-oriented organizational studies (OS) research, we aim to provide a more compelling analysis of the place of language within organizational theory than the one it occupies today. Our assertions are based on two decades of evidence that language “has the capacity to change the way in which the internationalizing firm operates” (Piekkari, Welch & Welch, 2014, p. 234). Despite this evidence, language as an object of study, including research on language-in-use, multilingual practices, and linguistic hegemony, arguably remains the elephant in the room for many OS scholars who fail to consider the implications of language issues, even as they seek to understand the role of discourse in organizing.

Even more striking is the lack of dialogue between language-sensitive OS researchers and those of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) stream of organizational studies (Cooren et al., 2011). CCO scholars are keen to understand how communication drives organizing but have tended to limit their focus on communication to discourse and discursive strategies up to now, instead of examining the role of language practices in organizational processes. At the same time, international business (IB) scholars attribute processual features such as adaptability and fluidity to language practices without engaging with or attracting the attention of process-oriented OS researchers. It is our contention that the absence of an interdisciplinary dialogue results in missed opportunities for advancement of theory and practice in both fields.

We begin with a review of process-centered and relevant language-centered research, including studies which highlight the role of language in interaction flows. In the second part of this paper, we provide our empirical results based on data gathered in interviews with managers and managing directors from four countries working in the aeronautical sector. These results are then used to analyze the link between language practices, interactional flows and organizing. In our conclusion, we discuss the implications of our findings for the advancement of process-based studies and suggest future paths of exploration for joint research by language-centered and process-centered OS scholars.

**Literature review**

***The process orientation of organizational studies***

Process philosophy, or the notion that everything flows, has existed since antiquity; it was Heraclitus who, according to Plato, first noted that one can never step into the same river twice (Nayak, 2014, see Seibt, 2016 for a fuller discussion of the origins of process philosophy). Although we find process-oriented philosophers such as Bakhtin, James, Dewey and Pettigrew throughout the twentieth century (Helin et al., 2014), this perspective has been actively growing as a stream in organizational studies since the 1990’s (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Process-thinking represents a departure from approaches which consider objects of study as fixed and classifiable, insisting instead on the constantly evolving, dynamic character of organizational phenomena (Nayak & Chia, 2011). Within process studies, scholars such as Pettigrew (1985) and Lorino (2010) describe processes as continuous and interdependent but relatively sequential, while others see them as nonlinear and discontinuous, in constant recombination (Boje and Saylors, 2014). What they all have in common is the notion of flux and the rejection of static objects of research.

The emphasis which processual scholars place on constant transformation and emergence should not be taken as a dismissal of the importance of structure in the age-old debate between structure and agency. Instead, a process orientation is compatible with Giddens’ (1984) argument that structure itself is in constant flux as a result of ongoing processes, which are in turn shaped by structure. Even buildings, for example, participate in processes as they constrain or facilitate the circulation of people and material, centralize operations and project a certain image of the company (Cooren et al., 2011).

***The place of language in process thinking***

Although language-sensitive researchers have not developed a process-oriented stream as such, the findings of sociologists and IB researchers regarding language practices could interest process-oriented scholars. Studies on code-switching (Gumperz, 1982), language clustering (Kassis-Henderson, 2005), translanguaging (Langinier & Ehrhart, 2015) and “linguascapes” (Steyaert, Ostendorp & Gaibrois, 2011), for example, show how language use is in constant flux depending on the context. Aichhorn’s work on shared language which is created through accommodation and negotiation strategies reflects a processual orientation (2013), as does Janssens et al.’s exploration of the link between language use and power struggles in multilingual settings (2004). Studies such as these could serve as a basis for a more systematic enquiry into the role played by language in the shaping of organizational processes in both IB and OS research.

As mentioned in the introduction, OS researchers recognize that discourse and discursive strategies are embedded in the processes of organizing through speech acts, directives and declarations which position the organization and influence its course of action (Putnam & Nicotera, 2010; Taylor, 2009; Schoeneborn et al., 2014). This influence can be seen in the power of rhetoric to breathe life into strategic concepts when it captures and federates the attention of organizational actors (Langley, 2007), an important function which Wodak refers to as “get[ting] people on board” (2014, p. 51).

However, these studies do not represent the full spectrum of the insights offered by research on language, a gap which has been recognized by Cooren and his colleagues who find that “[T]here is a paucity of knowledge of the ways in which language and communication enable, constrain, or otherwise form a part of unfolding organizational activity in its sociomaterial context.” (Cooren et al., 2014, p. 2). Cooren and Fairhurst’s discourse analysis of “the organizing potential of language in use” (2004, p. 132) and Wodak’s analysis of consensus-building discursive strategies during meetings (2014) are worthy of note as they are moving the process agenda forward by examining discourse in the form of language-in-use at the microlevel. For example, Wodak has identified strategies accomplished by language-in-interaction such as justifying, legitimating, challenging, encouraging, and bonding.

The reticence of organizational scholars to take language-in-use more seriously may be explained by the image they may hold of language as a technical subject rather than one of the drivers of organizing processes. Two prominent process scholars, Nayak and Chia, have gone as far as to assert that the naming of phenomena can hamper process thinking as it creates the illusion of a settled order, masking the fluid nature of reality (2011). To counter the “ordering impulses of language”, they call on process scholars to adapt language to process thinking by “creatively extend[ing] its scope of expression” (p. 291) through the use of gerunds such as “organizing” and “becoming” (Nayak &Chia, 2011; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). By reducing language to naming, and naming to ordering, they fail to link language’s naming function to the social processes in which language is embedded. This points to a gap in understanding that language-sensitive OS scholarship can help to fill.

***Interaction order and interaction flow***

We find ample evidence of the importance of interaction and interaction flow in organizing processes in the literature. According to CCO researchers Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen and Clark (2011), organi­zations are “constantly (re)produced, (re)incarnated, and (re)embodied in local interactions” which are situated within an ongoing chain of discursive acts (p. 1158). In their pioneering work on language and international companies, Piekkari, Welch and Welch (2014) found that one of the principal ways that language impacts organizational structures is through its role in shaping communication pathways and interactions. Interactive processes have been described as “*axial – not peripheral – to organizational existence and organizing phenomena*” for their role in the production of meaning (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 22). Langley and Tsoukas (2010) report that interaction processes among company members make up the organization.

McPhee and Iverson (2009) identify four flows within organizations that are influenced by communicative processes, two of which are interactional: the flow of negotiation between actors and the organization, the flow of coordination between and within activities, the flow of reflexive self-structuring and the flow of institutional positioning. We will come back to this Four-Flow model in the final discussion, as it can be seen as a springboard for further reflection on language and organizing.

In this paper, we draw on literature focusing on interaction as a generator of trust and reciprocity to better understand the link between language and organizing, relying in particular on the work of Goffman, Bakhtin, Van Oortmerssen et al., Gumperz and Girin. Manning (2008) links Goffman’s interaction theory to organizing in these terms:

Social interaction is a communicative dance based on trust and reciprocity — the *foundations of organizing*. Thus mutuality and duality (responsiveness) constitute the ‘promissory, evidential character’ of social life’ (Goffman 1983a: 3).

(Manning, 2008, p. 686, italics added by the authors)

We find parallels between Goffman’s notion that interaction generates trust and reciprocity and Bakhtin’s *concept of addressivity and responsiveness* (1981), Van Oortmerssen et al.’s “*interaction flows*” (2015), Grice’s *“cooperative principle*” (1989) and Girin’s “*indexicality*” and *“language communities”* (1990). According to Goffman, a speaker’s responses to another’s utterances are intended to lead to “a working consensus” (1959, p. 9) by validating prior statements and triggering a confirmation or a reaction. This notion is not unlike Bakhtin’s concept of “responsiveness” which implies a linking of dialogical utterances crucial to the co-production of meaning. Van Oortmerssen et al. (2015) describe “interaction flows” in which participants build on each other’s verbal or non-verbal signals, following crucial but unspoken rules that recall Gumperz’s “contextualization cues” (1982) and Grice’s “cooperative principle” (1989). In each of these cases, speakers observe pragmatic norms and routines that non-native speakers do not always detect. Girin’s work on “indexicality” and “language communities” has shown that speakers often express ideas that can only be understood within the cultural and physical context in which they are uttered. The very use of indexical elements such as local expressions can unify speakers who share a context while alienating those who do not, a phenomenon which is at the heart of what he calls “language communities” (1990).

Each of the theories described above contributes to an understanding of the embeddedness of language-in-use within organizing-as-process, as they point to factors which enable or constrain interaction flow. As our empirical results will show in the next section, members of organizations are confronted on a daily basis with situations in which responsiveness, a working consensus, the cooperative principle, contextualization cues, indexicality and language communities are the lifeblood of organizing.

**Findings from the field: Strategies used by European managers who deal with language diversity**

The qualitative data on which our results are based were gathered in semi-structured interviews with nine managers and directing managers from Bulgaria, Romania, Spain, Thailand, Italy and France working in the aeronautical sector in Toulouse, France. Two were CEOs of companies, two were marketing managers and five were HR managers. The sectors involved were aeronautics and the food-industry. The in-depth interviews took place from June to November in 2012 and lasted about one hour. They were conducted in French and English, recorded and transcribed by one of the co-authors. The French answers were then translated into English by the bilingual authors, one of whom is a native French speaker and the other a native English speaker.

The purpose of the initial enquiry was to learn more about language practices in organizations and their impact on performance in international settings where language diversity is common. The interviewees were selected for their experience with language diversity and international issues at the strategic level. Overall, the questions covered topics ranging from the use of a lingua franca in multinational companies to multilingualism, comprehension difficulties, language-based misunderstandings, language for communication and identification, participative competence and trust. For the purposes of this current study, we extracted the data which addressed our goal of learning more about the way language issues shape organizing through interactional flows. In order to analyze the qualitative data in more detail, we then narrowed our material down to the responses of four of the nine managers whose insights best represent the experience of all those who were interviewed.

Two of the interviewees, FN and NB, both French, work in subsidiaries of a German family company based in Toulouse in the aeronautical sector. FN is the CEO of one of the subsidiaries based in Germany while NB is the executive vice-president of sales and marketing, in charge of the subsidiary based in Brazil. The third interviewee, MF, is the Italian sales and marketing director of an important aircraft manufacturer based in Toulouse, France, which operates in a joint partnership between two major players in Europe. Finally, ISA works for the European leader in the aeronautics industry. She is in charge of the coordination of all human resource (HR) departments at the headquarter in Toulouse.

**Interpretation of the data**

We first extracted data which shed light on the impact of language practices on interactional flows. Specifically, based on the interviewees’ feedback and the theories presented in the literature review, we looked for instances of indexicality, contextualization cues, language communities, responsiveness and cooperative speech, as well as the absence of these factors. We then analyzed how the processes of organizing were affected by the outcomes of interaction. In the next section, we report and discuss our findings.

**Principle findings**

The situations described by the managers we interviewed can be classified into five categories:

1. Situations in which making an effort to ***speak a partner’s language*** contributes to the success of the interaction flow
2. Situations in which making an effort to ***accommodate speakers of other languages*** contributes to the success of the interaction flow
3. Situations in which ***the sharing of a common native language*** affects the success of the interaction flow depending on the context
4. Situations in which ***language differences are used in order to avoid giving information***, obstructing interaction flow.
5. Situations in which ***a knowledge of the other party’s language without their being aware*** gives one party an advantage, to the detriment of interaction flow

These categories do not cover all language-related situations that affect the flow of interaction, of course. In conducting the interviews, our objective was to learn more about the embeddedness of language in organizational processes based on the experience of our panel of managers, rather than to portray in one paper the rich diversity of organizational contexts in which language plays a role.

We take a closer look now at the field quotes that exemplify the five categories of language-related situations and analyze their impact on interaction flow and organizing processes. Table 1 indicates which of the drivers of interaction flow are implicated in each of the language-related situations, as well as their impact on flow.

**Table 1. Enablers and Obstructers of interaction flow**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Situations | Indexicality &  contextualization cues | Language communities | Responsiveness | Cooperative speech |
| 1. Making an effort to speak a partner’s language | x (enabler) | x (enabler) | x (enabler) | x (enabler) |
| 1. Making an effort to accommodate non-native speakers |  |  | x (enabler) | x (enabler) |
| 1. Favoring those who share a common native language | x (enabler or obstructer) | x (enabler or obstructer) |  |  |
| 1. Using language differences to avoid giving information | x (obstructer) | x (obstructer) | x (obstructer) | x (obstructer) |
| 1. Using one’s knowledge of the other party’s language without informing them. | x (obstructer) | x (obstructer) | x (obstructer) | x (obstructer) |

***1. Making an effort to speak a partner’s language***

Speaking the language of one’s customers, partners or subsidiary employees. As we recall from the literature review, meaningful interaction occurs when speakers engage in dialogue using addressivity and responsiveness, rather than producing a series of self-serving monologues (Bakhtin, 1984) and when their verbal exchanges follow accepted norms (1989). In the case of FN, the French CEO of a German subsidiary introduced earlier, speaking in German instead of English at a meeting attended by 1500 German employees helped him overcome a potentially tense situation regarding the transfer of jobs from Germany to France and gain the approval of the employees.

The secretary of the works committee made a virulent speech against this project and after I was supposed to explain myself concerning the general results and everyday business. But I thought to myself, if I avoid this subject it is not going to go over well and so I took the mike and I said [in German] “I want to talk about the transfer project” and I got a standing ovation. Out of the 1500 people there, most were not concerned by the transfer. Afterwards, some people came to me to say, “You spoke in German” and I could not have done it in English. This was a determining factor and that day there was a real breakthrough.

As this example demonstrates, speaking the other person’s terms conveys respect for their cultural identity and transforms the “outsider” into a member of the language community, associating his or her initiative with responsiveness and cooperative speech. In FN’s case, gaining the workforce’s cooperation during a strategic move meant using the local language and addressing the delicate issue upfront.

Speaking the other’s language is also a way to build good relations and trust. According to FN,

… If you speak the other’s language, that person will be much more available, since you can talk about a variety of subjects, whereas in English people are much more on their guard… I’m convinced that the fact that you master their language helps build good relations.

Good relations and respect for local cultures are particularly crucial when people of diverse origins engage in negotiations. MF, the Italian marketing and sales director of a major aircraft manufacturer, explains that negotiating with Latin-Americans in their language makes a difference in the outcome:

The Latin-Americans were looking for an advantage, but they said that negotiating in their language would more surely lead to a win-win than a lose-lose than negotiating in English. … it’s up to us to adapt. They’re the customers.

For the same reason, when a delegation comes from abroad, his company makes sure that there are people on the welcoming team who are from the country or countries of the visitors. Not only does this smooth out the communication and avoid misunderstandings, but it also communicates the company’s responsiveness to the visiting delegation’s needs. As we know, members of a language community recognize certain contextualization cues, or verbal and extra-linguistic indexical elements which unify the members. The presence of a compatriot can therefore serve as a unifying force between the receiving company and the visitors, facilitating the interaction flow.

Subsidiaries are particularly sensitive to efforts to speak their language, as we saw in the case of FN in Germany. NB, who is in charge of a subsidiary based in Brazil, describes a problem based on the lack of an ability of the headquarters based in Toulouse to speak local languages. “Almost half of the e-mails are not sent to the headquarters. The only way we will be able to influence our subsidiaries is to speak their language,” he says. This example shows that the lack of attention to language issues can have a direct impact on the flow of interaction between headquarters and its subsidiaries, which is detrimental for the organizing processes of the company at the strategic level. Microlevel and macrolevel studies on corporate language policies, multilingualism, accommodation strategies, linguistic hegemony and the power of a lingua franca in general would be relevant to OS researchers in this regard.

Finally, as a result of a merger, one of the managers, MF, experienced the challenge of learning a new way, the corporate way, of talking to customers on the phone. As he explains, this opportunity to adopt best practices improved his interactions with customers:

What we learned from [a strategic merger] was certain ways of doing things, best practices, like how to answer a phone call, to speak to a client: « May I help you? » Italians just said “pronto”. They never first gave their first and second name and “How can I help you”… because 95% of the time there’s a client on the line calling us because he needs something. That’s customer care.

In this section, we have seen that speaking the other’s language conveys responsiveness which has a bearing on the flow of interaction. It is a way to show good will by appealing to other speakers’ language communities and the indexical elements that federate them.

***2. Making an effort to accommodate non-native speakers***

There were fewer instances of situations of accommodation reported in the interviews, and those instances tended to raise the issue of native speakers not accommodating those who are less proficient in their language, threatening interaction flow altogether. Communication accommodation (see Coupland & Giles, 1988) refers to the use of strategies that help non-native speakers understand native speakers during verbal exchanges, such as a choice of words which takes the presence of non-native speakers into account, a slower pace, repetition, and an effort to articulate clearly. According to ISA, the HR manager who works for a leading company in the aeronautical sector, the ability to accommodate people’s level of comprehension is a matter of experience with non-native speakers.

People who live in Great Britain don’t make any effort to adapt. They don’t understand that it is not our mother tongue and even if we speak it on daily basis, we are not immersed in it. Those who live here and who are more used to speaking with non-native speakers at several levels, well yes, clearly, they do adapt.

We see from this example that the native speakers who are rarely confronted with the problem of understanding people in another language are the ones who are the most likely to dismiss the issue of language use in organizational settings. This also happens in international settings where native and non-native speakers assume that everyone is at the same level of experience, as confirmed by MF in the following quote:

[I]t happens fairly often and not just in negotiations. People who are used to an international context and it’s their language so they know all the nuances… they don’t realize that their audience is not following… and they are often the ones who are the least successful at conferences…” (MF)

“The ones who are the least successful at conferences” implies that they are the least likely to foster a flow of interaction, due to a lack of responsiveness and a failure to follow the basic cooperative principle which calls for speakers to take their listeners into consideration. This situation illustrates why language usage, a seemingly technical issue, is in fact a factor of success in organizing.

NB and MF report that a lack of communication accommodation is not systematic. When, for example, NB works with native speakers at [company X, a major aircraft manufacturer], there is a visible effort on their part to use vocabulary that can be understood by non-native speakers. However, when he works with Americans or English at most other partner companies, they “take for granted that we understand and they use a really elaborated vocabulary and which is not the usual vocabulary at [NB’s company]. MF finds that when there is not a concentration of English people, they remember to adjust their speech to the less proficient speakers. On the other hand, when they are in the majority, such as when there is a panel of five English people, they interrupt each other and carry on as if the audience can follow a fast pace and colloquial expressions.

From the literature, we know that (most) speakers do not purposely exclude non-native speakers when they fail to alter their language and speak more slowly; rather they share contextualization cues which are valuable to the flow of interaction, a desirable goal in itself. At the same time, they create a barrier between themselves and non-native speakers who do not respond to the same indexical symbols. The frequency of this problem and its detrimental impact on interaction flow point to the importance of the link between responsiveness, indexicality and the outcomes of organizing as a promising area of research for both language-sensitive and process-oriented OS scholars.

In the context of an internationalizing world where English is still dominant in multilingual settings but Anglo-Saxons are not as systematically present, the question of accommodating weaker speakers is even more complicated. The experience of NB captures the complexity of what can be seen as mutual accommodation:

When you speak English, the concepts you want to use or the issues you want to deal with are poorly expressed. And so, as soon as the topic becomes a little bit complicated, at least one of the two persons, if not both, can’t go further in English and consequently you have to switch to the mother tongue of the person (…) and as a result someone has to abandon English and speak French, German, Portuguese, Russian or Chinese to the person who doesn’t understand. (…) Which is really embarrassing because very often the only common language is English; you have a Brazilian, a German, a Frenchman, a Chinese, so once you have explained in Chinese to the Chinese what he had to understand, you have to explain to the Frenchman. And there it differs completely, you have different interpretations and with a poor English you can hardly patch things up even when you go back to English. But communication is more efficient than with bare minimum English.

This quote demonstrates the essence of processual thinking. As frustrating as such situations can be, the very fact that accommodation is unfolding in an ever-evolving context should be seen as a positive factor in the flow of interaction. In this situation, the actors engage in dialogical responsiveness in order to create a space that is unique to their communicative needs, and that space will disappear when they recombine with other heterogeneous or homogeneous groups. Counter-intuitively, language diversity can provide opportunities to advance cooperation, but more research is needed to understand the underlying processes.

Finally, the complexity of multilingual settings is often amplified by cultural differences which can interfere with the ability of non-native speakers to make sense of the other party’s intentions. This is demonstrated in the following incident described by MF:

We had a meeting with the Japanese here and questions were raised and when I put a question to the Japanese, it was a very important question, he looked at me and lowered his eyes and we waited for a long time, the room was silent and the Japanese didn’t say anything. And I looked at my colleague who told me not to do anything and a long time after he said yes. And the colleague explained to me afterwards that the Japanese had waited to answer to show that he couldn’t simply say yes to a question raised by an important person of the meeting.

If MF’s colleague had not advised him to wait for the answer, he might have caused a breakdown in the flow of interaction because his cultural references regarding silence and communication of respect were not the same as those of the Japanese. This anecdote provides valuable insight into the importance of communication-based indexicality for the flow of interaction. Also, because the incident took place in a high-level meeting, we see once again that communication is embedded in strategic outcomes of organizing.

***3. Favoring those who share a common language***

Indexicality can lead to language-based preferential treatment when people share a common culture or language with the corporate headquarters, as noted by NB in the following quote:

Those who succeed in the aerospace industry are those who speak German because the head office is in Germany, even if the official language is English. It’s a way to acquire a certain status and the key to access to top jobs. There’s an unspoken agreement that those who are only fluent in English will get nowhere.

Although the corporate language is English at NB’s company, the language associated with access and power is German. This arrangement seems to indicate that the intensification of international business encounters is not homogenizing language practices between speakers of diverse languages. For the moment at least, indexicality remains a powerful force that ties speakers of a language community together, even at the corporate level.

The effects of a mastery of the company’s dominant language on organizational life have been studied by language-sensitive IB researchers such as Neeley and Dumas (2016), who found that a proficiency in the corporate language can lead to undue status and privileges while barring potentially talented employees from opportunities for promotion. Beeler & Lecomte (2017)’s study of linguistic hegemony has shown that teamwork and synergy are lost and the co-production of meaning is threatened when managers allow language proficiency to prevail over dialogical responsiveness and multivoicedness (Bakhtin, 1981).

On a more positive note, interaction flow can be enabled by policies which capitalize on the sharing of common linguistic and cultural references. As we saw earlier, teams which are composed of members who share the culture of their customers and partners benefit from bonding opportunities between members of the same language community. In the next anecdote, MF explains how even the accent of the American sales manager becomes a contextualization cue when his company receives American visitors:

Our sales manager is American. Of course, when we receive a delegation from the USA, it is good to know that he is here and that he can speak and that they will hear their own accent. It is not a question of language because everybody speaks the language, but we can see it with certain delegations. Americans are open-minded, but when they speak with another American, then doors open widely.

The two anecdotes in this section show how interaction flow can be enabled or obstructed depending on whether language is used as a bonding agent or an instrument of hegemony. In the next section, we will examine how *not* sharing a common language becomes a weapon in some cases.

***4. Using language differences to avoid giving information***

The decision to share or withhold information from one’s partners or customers can affect the degree of trust between them. NB’s experience shows that pretending to not speak or understand English well enough in order to withhold information can interfere with smooth relations.

What was important to me as the director of the Brazilian subsidiary of [Company x] was to have a clear vision of the financial and industrial situation on extremely down-to-earth subjects such as “When will the landing gear for Boeing be delivered?” But with my English and their English we weren’t able to understand each other. I would say that they also were bluffing, maybe they were telling me that they spoke bad English in order not to have to give me clear information.

… I would even say that they used the excuse that they couldn’t speak English well to avoid having to give me clear information. English was a convenient way to hide a number of things.

This case reveals the negative side of language communities that is characteristic of many in-groups (Tajfel, 1982): When speakers of different languages or cultures do not feel that they owe members of other groups their loyalty, they will be more inclined to hide information from them, leading to a breakdown in interaction flow. In order to restore responsiveness, NB could undertake to learn enough basic Brazilian Portuguese to communicate with the subsidiary, a point which he himself made and which was reported in the subsection on speaking the other’s language. English would remain the default language while Portuguese would serve as a bonding agent.

***5. Using a knowledge of the other party’s language without their being aware***

The final field quote which we have selected illustrates another aspect of language differences, the use of one’s knowledge of the others’ language to learn what they really think without their being aware of it. MF reports:

We have an Italian salesman who speaks Arabic, but he never lets the other companies know that. From time to time [the other party] says things and he understands. He sometimes lets us know interesting things, like what their perception was, or that they talked about a price and said to each other, “They didn’t tell us yesterday that...,”, etc.

“Language-based espionage” affords the eavesdropping party an advantage during discussions and may improve their ability to respond to their counterparts, but their privileged position can be a double-edged sword if it distorts the nature of their cooperation with the other party and results in a lack of dialogical responsiveness on their part. As the field quotes reported in all five subsections have shown, language is both the key to trust-building and a means of power that can be used against others.

**Discussion**

We set out to explore ways that language-sensitive research can contribute to and benefit from OS process-oriented research by shedding light on the embeddedness of language in the flow of interaction. The data shows that responsiveness and cooperative speech are instrumental in enabling the flow of interaction when people make an effort to speak a partner’s language or accommodate weaker speakers. Sharing a common language generates responsive reactions and enhances interaction flow between members of a language community, but it can also create boundaries between language communities, potentially causing a breakdown in interaction flow. We also saw that language differences can be used as a weapon in two different ways: First, as a way of avoiding communication, and second, as a way to “eavesdrop” on partners’ conversations without their knowing that their counterpart speaks their language. Each of these situations can have a bearing – positive or negative – on outcomes such as network-building, negotiations, coordination and strategic planning.

In the chart below, we summarize concepts that underpin language-sensitive communication research as well as the key insights from our case study of strategies used by the European managers that we interviewed. from Bulgaria, Romania, Spain, Thailand, Italy and France who work together in the aeronautical sector in Toulouse, France. We conclude by considering the implications of the insights for together-telling in contentious settings.

**Table 2. The Theory and Practice of Cooperating across Boundaries**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Approaches** | **Principal concepts** | **Discursive strategies reported in the interviews** |
| Co-constructing  meaning | - Grice: *cooperative principle*  - Bakhtin: *dialogism, addressivity & responsiveness* | - Offering responses that build on each other.  - Showing an attentiveness to the other’s words.  - Using language that shows good will. |
| Using common  references | - Peirce, Girin: *indexicality*  - Gumperz: *contextualization cues* | - Doing one’s best to speak the other’s language.  - Avoiding language that leaves the other out.  - Using references that speak to the other’s culture. |
| Accommodating differences | - Bakhtin: *heteroglossia & polyphony*  - Aichhorn, Coupland & Giles: c*ommunication accommodation* | -Welcoming diverse accents & styles in a meeting.\*  - Helping weaker speakers, articulating well, repeating, simplified language, slower pace. |
| Creating a dynamic | - McPhee & Iverson:  *interaction flow*  - Goffman: *working consensus* | - Clarifying, reframing and readjusting if necessary.  - Using language that points to progress made. |

All of the strategies on interaction flow support McPhee and Iverson’s Four-Flow Model (2009) that was introduced in the literature review. As speakers engage in the flows of negotiation and coordination, they learn to adapt their speech to that of their negotiation partners and colleagues, sharing common references whenever possible. The flow of reflexive restructuring, itself an outcome of the flows of negotiating and coordinating, can be associated with the constant repositioning that takes place in dialogical situations where speakers address and respond to the concerns of others. Finally, institutional positioning is the result of processes that include a multitude of polyphonic, heteroglossic dialogues. At the heart of all four, we find language.

**Conclusion**

Our investigation into language-as-process represents an attempt to break the boundary down between process-oriented language-sensitive OS and process-oriented mainstream OS, by showing that each of the two orientations holds different but complementary pieces of the same puzzle: the power of language-in-use in companies. Language-oriented researchers can contribute their findings on language policies, language diversity and language-based power at the micro and macrolevel, while OS researchers can contribute to language-sensitive studies on the embeddedness of language-in-use in organizing-as-process.

Language can be either a bonding agent or an instrument of hegemony in cross-cultural situations depending on how it is used (Beeler & Lecomte, 2017). Together-telling, as we have seen, incorporates many of the bonding practices reported above, but what happens to multivoicedness and responsiveness in the face of hegemonic or divisive speech? Our research indicates that linguistic, social and political barriers can only be overcome if all parties are motivated to look for solutions together. As the case of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers fighting for fair treatment shows (see Rosile, Boje, Herder, & Sanchez, 2021), together-tellers can best apply the principles of the co-construction of meaning, use of common references, and accommodation of differences to build unity between diverse groups who share their determination to change the global supply chain.

***Future paths of exploration***

The impact of language-as-process on organizing is only one exploratory path that process-oriented language-sensitive research can take, of course. Concepts such as “language operative capacity” (Welch & Welch, 2015) could be examined under the lens of CCO research, for example. In addition, the development of a paradigm which integrates process thinking with other theories such as dialogism, semiotics and negotiated order could yield valuable insights.

As mentioned in the literature review, discourse studies such as Wodak’s interaction analysis of meetings (2014) can be seen as a bridge between current language-centered OS and mainstream OS research as they deal with the effects of language at the microlevel as part of organizing. This paper is a call for more such exploration. Methodologically, the embeddedness of language in processes could be tracked in longitudinal studies. Interaction flow could also be explored in other business contexts, at other levels of the organization than top management, and in other geographic zones.

Finally, learning more about how and why communication and interaction flows break down could help not only OS and language-sensitive scholars, but also managers and politicians who seek to resolve tensions related to language diversity in organizations and in society today. Process-thinking in general is a potentially fruitful direction for research on organizing inside and outside of the communication-constituted organization.

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