UNIVERSITY OF TURKU
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The role of language in knowledge sharing within multinational corporations

Focus on individuals in multinational teams

International Business
Master's thesis

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Knowledge sharing is a prerequisite for a functioning organization and a competitive advantage for those who are able to do it effectively. Multinational corporations with their globally dispersed organizational structure are in a privileged position to achieve this. However, in order to share knowledge effectively they must fully understand the implications of language use for the individual employee as well as for entire multinational teams.

The purpose of the thesis is to understand how language influences knowledge sharing within multinational teams. This is done by first examining the study of language in international business, namely from the perspectives of language proficiency, language-induced emotions, and communication behaviour. Theories of social identity and self-categorization are employed to facilitate further understanding of related phenomena such as language-based grouping and power dynamics. Subsequently, multinational team members from five different MNCs are interviewed.

Qualitative methodology was adopted in conducting the research. The interviews were carried out virtually in the spring of 2022. Thematic analysis was utilized to process and analyze the collected data in order to uncover the varied roles that language plays in knowledge sharing at the higher organizational levels of multinational corporations where multiple languages are habitually used.

Reflected against the accrued understanding, the findings of the thesis suggest that high language proficiency among multinational team members is associated with fewer communication difficulties and reduced frequency and intensity of negative language-induced emotions, although perceived and real relative differences in language skills can evoke these emotions regardless of one's relatively superior or inferior proficiency. Nevertheless, non-native speakers with high language proficiency have the propensity to act as liaisons and facilitate understanding for linguistically less proficient members by adopting communication behaviours that are directed at enhancing knowledge sharing.

Key words: language, emotions, communication behaviour, knowledge sharing

Pro gradu -tutkielma

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Tiedon jakaminen on edellytys organisaation toiminnalle sekä kilpailuetu niille, jotka pystyvät tekemään sen tehokkaasti. Monikansalliset yritykset, joiden organisaatiorakenne on hajautettu maailmanlaajuisesti, ovat erityisasemassa tämän saavuttamiseksi. Tätä varten niiden on kuitenkin ymmärrettävä kielenkäytön vaikutukset sekä yksittäiseen työntekijään että kokonaisiin monikansallisiin tiimeihin.

Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman tarkoituksena on ymmärtää, miten kieli vaikuttaa tiedon jakamiseen monikansallisissa tiimeissä. Tämä toteutetaan tarkastelemalla ensin kielten tutkimusta kansainvälisessä liiketoiminnassa, erityisesti kielitaidon, kielenkäyttöön liittyvien tunteiden sekä viestintäkäyttäytymisen näkökulmista. Lisäksi sosiaalisen identiteetin ja itsekategorisoinnin teorioita hyödynnetään tutkimusaiheeseen liittyvien ilmiöiden, kuten kieliperusteisen ryhmäytymisen ja valtadynamiikan ymmärtämisessä. Tutkielman aineiston keruu toteutetaan haastattelemalla monikansallisten tiimien jäseniä viidestä eri monikansallisesta yrityksestä.

Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisesti. Haastattelut suoritettiin virtuaalisesti keväällä 2022. Kerätty aineisto käsiteltiin ja analysoitiin hyödyntäen temaattista analyysia. Näin voitiin havainnoida, millainen rooli kielellä on tiedon jakamisessa monikansallisten yritysten ylemmillä organisaatiotasoilla, joissa useiden kielten käyttö on tavallista.

Pro gradu -tutkielman tulokset viittaavat siihen, että monikansallisten tiimien jäsenten korkea kielitaito on yhteydessä vähäisempiin kommunikaatiovaikeuksiin ja vähäisempään kielenkäyttöön liittyvien kielteisten tunteiden esiintymistiheyteen ja -voimakkuuteen. Koetut ja todelliset suhteelliset erot kielitaidossa voivat kuitenkin herättää näitä tunteita riippumatta siitä, onko kielitaito suhteellisesti parempi vai huonompi. Lisäksi kielitaitoiset muut kuin äidinkielen puhujat ovat taipuvaisia toimimaan yhteyshenkilöinä ja helpottamaan kielitaidoltaan heikompien jäsenten ymmärtämistä omaksumalla viestintäkäyttäytymistapoja, jotka kohdistuvat tiedonjaon tehokkuuden parantamiseen.

Avainsanat: kieli, tunteet, viestintäkäyttäytyminen, tiedonjako

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background for the study

Human capital, that is individuals' skills and abilities within an organization, is a valuable and unique organizational resource that cannot be copied or substituted. The potential of this resource can be realized if the knowledge held by an organization's employees is successfully passed to others, so that its value can be seized and leveraged. (Cabrera & Cabrera 2005, 720.) Indeed, knowledge sharing is an important factor in determining a company's operational and financial performance, and it has been positively linked with a company's innovation speed and quality (Wang & Wang 2012). Innovation, on the other hand, can be a significant source of competitive advantage for a company (Brem et al. 2016), thus making knowledge sharing a relevant subject in pursuit of advancing an organization's operational as well as financial performance through enhanced efficiency.

Knowledge sharing within an international organization is a complex process. With globalization, a variety of languages are used to communicate at multinational corporations (MNCs) daily, turning them into fundamentally multilingual entities. The use of multiple languages with varying degrees of language proficiency has implications for the communication efficiency within these multilingual organizations. (Civico et al. 2019, 769–770.) As pointed out by Szkudlarek et al. (2020, 101126):

> Organizations are created, managed, lead, and dissolved through communication, which plays a major role in the exchange of knowledge, the development and maintenance of relationships...

In the case of multinational corporations, different languages influence these exchanges of knowledge (Janssens et al. 2004). Generally, language-related challenges of multilingual organizations are addressed with the implementation of a lingua franca, more often than not that language being English. This gives rise to potential communication difficulties in multinational teams as some team members are inevitably faced with the need to communicate in a second language (Chen et al. 2006, 679). In addition, it poses the risk of creating social groups around languages within the organization (Wöcke et al. 2018, 670). Using a language other than one's mother tongue can thus have a direct effect on interpersonal knowledge sharing and, ultimately, on the information flows of the entire organization. In multilingual organizations these language-related challenges can impose barriers for effective communication, consequently hindering efficient knowledge sharing (Tenzer et al. 2021). In fact, language can act as a barrier, a facilitator as well as a source of power in multilingual organizations (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999, 426). This poses a challenge to managers in terms of control, communication as well as coordination (Piekkari et al. 2005, 333).

In addition to language skills, one’s communication behaviour is influenced by the emotions associated with the use of a particular language. Experiencing negative language-induced emotions can lead to communication behaviour that directly impedes knowledge sharing. Emotions such as situational discomfort, fear of being judged negatively and fear of poor performance have been associated with communication withdrawal and communication avoidance as well as code-switching (Aichhorn & Puck 2017, 754.) The emotions that employees associate with a specific language thus affects how they communicate with their colleagues (Hinds et al. 2014, 545). At worst, negative emotions and notably fear can lead to unwillingness to share sensitive information within the organization to the extent of critically disturbing the functioning of entire global multinational corporations (Vuori & Huy 2016).

Given the importance of efficient and effective knowledge sharing in the functioning of an organization, it is imperative that people operating in a multinational work environment understand the implications that the use of a particular language can have for individual employees’ experienced emotions and their subsequent communication behaviour. This thesis seeks to broaden understanding on what these language-induced emotions are, how an individual might react to these emotions in their communication and how these emotions can be managed either by the individual themselves or by a manager in order to facilitate knowledge sharing.

1.2 Research context

The studied phenomena of this thesis take place in the context of the multinational corporation, a type of organization that has taken a growing role in the world economy in recent decades (Forsgren 2017, 5). A multinational corporation (MNC) in this thesis refers to a corporate organization that operates in at least one other country besides its home country by producing goods or services. To best serve the purpose of the thesis, the multinational corporation is conceptualized from the perspective of organization capability. This perspective suggests that the multinational corporation’s firm-specific advantage lies not so much in its ability to operate in an increasingly efficient manner as in its uniqueness of managerial and organizational processes (Forsgren 2017, 58). Within an organization such as the MNC, where interaction is limited by geographical, cultural, and linguistic discrepancies (Kostova & Roth 2003, 304), an organization’s ability to share knowledge effectively across its internal boundaries is of particular relevance. Luo and Shenkar (2006, 322) claim that the multinational corporation is

> a multilingual community in which language, while socially evolving, is also deliberately selected and structured as part of an international strategy, design, and organization.

Hence, by aligning its language policies with its organizational strategy and dynamics, an MNC can enhance communication, coordination as well as knowledge sharing within the organization (Luo & Shenkar 2006, 321). This thesis seeks improve understanding of this role that language plays in knowledge sharing within multinational corporations. Although issues related to the internal use of multiple languages concerns the majority of MNCs, it has been suggested that their existence is more broadly recognized in Europe and Japan when compared to Anglo-Saxon MNCs due to the dominant role of English as the lingua franca of international business (Fredriksson et al. 2006, 411).

Since an MNC’s internal communication tends to consist of several languages, including the home country, host country, and corporate languages, the linguistic heterogeneity and complexity of multinational corporations provide a desirable research context for studying language and communication issues (Fredriksson et al. 2006, 407). Within MNCs, these issues extend to multinational teams, which are the primary focus of the thesis. Henderson (2005, 74–75) points out that in multinational teams where the principal language of communication is English, team members have to be wary of the fact that despite the use of a shared language, their varying native languages can elicit differing reactions and interpretations.

For this thesis, employees from five different MNCs are interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. The headquarters of the MNCs in question are located in Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and Finland with the most interviewees’ location being the MNC’s headquarters or subsidiary in Finland. The interviewees belong to multiple overlapping multinational teams within these organizations either as team members or team leaders and come into contact with at least two languages in their regular communication.

The thesis topic relates to prior literature that discusses the role of language in international business (IB) on several points: perspective (individual), theory (social identity), and phenomenon (knowledge sharing). What is more, the topic makes for an interesting target of inquiry because of its centrality in the conduct of international business. Analysis of language use has also been suggested to contribute to global team management theories and improve global team management practices (Chen et al. 2006, 679). Despite the evident practical importance of language in multinational corporations, the study of it in the field of international business is still evolving.

1.3 Research question and structure of the thesis

The purpose of the thesis is to answer the research question of *How does language influence knowledge sharing within multinational teams?* To fulfill the purpose of the thesis, three sub-questions are presented:

- What emotions does the use of different languages evoke in multinational team members?
- What communication behaviours do multinational team members adopt when using different languages?
- How do multinational team members overcome communication challenges associated with the use of different languages?

The purpose of the first and second sub-questions is to gain a better understanding of multinational team members’ experienced emotions and adopted behavioural strategies when different languages are used. The third sub-question, on the other hand, is designed to probe for approaches that multinational team members apply to attenuate emotional or behavioural responses that might otherwise have a negative effect on knowledge sharing. In terms of scope, it should be acknowledged that the main focus in multinational team members’ knowledge sharing is on verbal communication. Written communication is only considered to the extent that interviewees have separately commented on it. Also, as all interviewees are white-collar employees in senior positions, the contributions of this thesis are limited to higher organizational levels excluding the top management.

This thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the topic and provides motivation for its selection as well as the purpose of the thesis and its structure. Chapter 2 comprises a literature review of the study of language in international business. In chapter 3 the theoretical framework is presented in the context of the topic. Chapter 4 demonstrates the methodology used for the collection and analysis of data. Subsequently, findings of the study are discussed in chapter 5. Finally, chapters 6 and 7 present conclusions and a summary of the thesis, respectively.

2 Language in international business

Language as a topic of interest for academic inquiry in management sciences remained unacknowledged for the most part until the 1990s. Before that, language-related issues were largely considered to be limited to the selection of a corporate language and profession-related technicalities (Maclean 2006, 1377–1378). Since then, the study of language in international business from the perspective of intercultural communication and knowledge sharing has predominantly focused on information flows between an MNC's headquarters and its subsidiaries or between the subsidiaries themselves (see, for example, Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999; Harzing & Feely 2008; Reiche et al. 2015), often in the context of language standardization (see, for example, Piekkari et al. 2005; Fredriksson et al. 2006; Aichhorn & Puck 2017; Wang et al. 2020). These studies also show that despite an official corporate language policy, the benefits of which are considered manifold and range from easier communication between and within multinational teams to better access to technical literature, documentation, and information systems (Feely & Harzing 2003, 45), in reality the communication of MNCs tends to be multilingual (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio 2011, 291). In fact, some MNCs have consciously adopted a flexible language policy where the use of a given language is based on functionality, thus promoting a natural approach towards multilingualism at the workplace (Angouri 2013). Similarly, Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio (2011, 294) have argued that instead of trying to manage language use in MNCs by taking English as a given, companies would be better off adopting a multi-level approach, where language use at the host country, regional, and home country levels are considered.

2.1 Language proficiency

A common language acts as a medium of not only communication but also as one of shared meanings and systems of signification between individuals with different backgrounds (Mäkelä et al. 2007). In today's world of international business, this shared language is generally English or more precisely business English as a lingua franca (BELF) when referring to communication between non-native speakers. Considered as task-oriented simplified English that includes elements from other speakers' mother tongues, BELF emphasizes clarity and accuracy of content over accuracy of grammar with the use of business-specific vocabulary (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010, 391–392, 394).

Language can equally act as a barrier for communication when one's understanding or ability to express themselves in the common language is limited (Rogerson-Revell 2007, 116). Tenzer et al. (2014, 509) define language barriers as "obstacles to effective communication, which arise if interlocutors speak different mother tongues and lack a shared language in which they all have native proficiency". Some of the more evident factors associated with the emergence of a language barrier include the use of unfamiliar vocabulary, a fast pace of speech, a strong accent, and frequent reoccurrence of mistakes (Henderson 2005, 70). Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999, 431) observe that language's role as a barrier and a facilitator in intercultural communication makes it a determining factor in the formation of communication patterns and informal networks. Among fluent speakers, one's poor language skills are prone to lead to some level of social exclusion or to one's deliberate seclusion from communication (Lønsmann 2014; Wang et al. 2020; Tenzer et al. 2021). Low quality communication has also been suggested to increase feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, creating a negative cycle that leads to further deterioration of the quality of communication. Moreover, the use of rhetorical skills such as humour, symbolism, negotiation, persuasion, and motivation is particularly demanding in a non-native language and as such prone to cause misunderstandings. (Harzing & Feely 2008, 53, 58.)

The implications of ineffective communication for knowledge sharing in MNCs are exemplified by one case study on a cross-border merger that found various communication challenges between two merging organizations after the introduction of a shared corporate language. In this case, a Finnish and a Swedish company merged, with Swedish being adopted as the merged entity's official corporate language. The decision spurred language-related issues that were particularly prevalent in personnel below top management, ranging from performance appraisal to management development and loss of key personnel. For example, some Finnish managers would remain quiet and struggle to express their professional views in meetings with their Swedish counterparts, due to their limited knowledge of the Swedish language. Some Finnish employees went as far as to seek positions where the use of Swedish was not essential to perform the tasks required by the job. (Piekkari et al. 2005.)

Language can form a barrier for effective communication and hinder knowledge sharing even when all speakers are deemed to be fluent in the working language. This is due to differences in the individuals' cultural backgrounds that affect each speaker's sensemaking process. That is, language forms a hidden barrier for knowledge sharing when the sensemaking process of the speaker and the listener take place in different cultural contexts. The cultural background of a person can affect, for example, how direct they are in expressing criticism or giving orders, which can cause conflicting interpretations in a multinational group of team members. (Tenzer et al. 2021.) Detecting the sources of these difficulties that are more likely to go undetected represents the more obscure aspect of communication competence, where the listener can think that they have understood the message, when in fact they have not (Henderson 2005, 70). While culture is not directly the object of this study, it is imperative to acknowledge its manifestation in one's use of language and communication behaviour more broadly.

In this literature review, the term "native speaker" is used to refer to the native speakers of an MNC's official corporate language. Much of the reviewed literature focuses on the impact that the implementation of English as the MNC's new corporate language has had on communication and knowledge sharing among the company's employees. Hence, the term "(official) corporate language" refers to English, unless specified otherwise. The term "non-native speaker", on the other hand, refers to those whose native language is something other than the MNC's official corporate language (English), unless further context is provided. The literature review focuses especially on language barriers through language-induced emotions such as foreign language anxiety, which often stems from deficient or disparate knowledge of the language of communication (Hinds et al 2014, 544), and the associated communication behaviour in order to provide further understanding of language's implications for knowledge sharing within multinational corporations.

2.2 Language-induced emotions

Language-induced emotions are positive or negative feelings that an individual experiences when they use a foreign language. Language-induced emotions are context-specific, that is, they only tend to arise when an individual is involved with a foreign language. The type of language used in these instances may be formal, informal, spoken or written. (Aichhorn & Puck 2017, 749–750, 758.) International business literature has mainly concentrated on the negative spectrum of language-induced emotions in pursuit of a better understanding of the communication behaviour that these emotions provoke. The study of language-induced emotions and their relationship with an employee's communication behaviour has largely focused on situations where an MNC, often in the context of a merger or an acquisition, has implemented a new corporate language (Piekkari et al. 2005; Aichhorn & Puck 2017). Oftentimes this language is English, the lingua franca of international business. The debilitating effect of negative language-induced emotions on international collaboration and subsequently on multinational team (MNT) performance (Hinds et al. 2014, 551) from the perspective of communication makes the subject relevant for further academic review. Following the premise of this thesis, this literature review primarily focuses on negative language-induced emotions as they play a key role in addressing language barriers that hinder intercultural communication and knowledge sharing.

Both native and non-native speakers of a corporate language are prone to experience a range of negative emotions during intercultural communication (Wang et al. 2020). However, negative language-induced emotions appear to be most prevalent among non-native speakers. This group of negative emotions that an individual tends to experience when using a foreign language is commonly referred to as foreign language anxiety (FLA). Within MNCs, foreign language anxiety has been associated particularly with situational discomfort, fear of negative evaluations as well as fear of performing poorly. (Aichhorn & Puck 2017, 751, 754.)

The most evident source of foreign language anxiety stems from deficient or disparate knowledge of the language of communication. Asymmetries in the knowledge of a language become apparent when one struggles to express themselves in a desired manner or fails to articulate their views with the precision that they intended. (Hinds et al 2014, 544.) Non-native speakers have been found to feel discomfort especially when communicating with native speakers (Wang et al. 2020), despite some non-native speakers finding that communication with native speakers flows more smoothly and naturally than with other non-native speakers (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010, 388). The discomfort experienced by non-native speakers is associated with the fear of negative evaluations, which in turn is driven by the individual's will to avoid feeling embarrassed (Aichhorn & Puck 2017, 754). Other language-induced emotions, labeled by Tenzer and

Pudelko (2015, 612) as self-directed, include stress, fatigue, shame (Wang et al. 2020), insecurity as well as a sense of being threatened and displaying weakness (Tenzer & Pudelko 2015, 612). Non-native speakers have also reported feeling awkward when speaking in the presence of other non-native peers who share the same mother tongue, often due to lack of confidence (Hinds et al 2014, 544).

MNC employees are prone to experience foreign language anxiety regardless of their level of language proficiency (Aichhorn & Puck 2017, 756). Even so, the intensity of negative emotions experienced during intercultural communication seems to be affected by one’s language proficiency or rather lack thereof (Aichhorn & Puck 2017, 760) as well as by the perceived relative difference in fluency between interlocutors (Tenzer et al. 2014, 526; Tenzer & Pudelko 2015, 613). In other words, if one were to consider themselves as notably less proficient in the spoken language than their colleague, they would likely experience anxiety related to that language more strongly as opposed to a situation where one considers their language skills as superior. Conversely, when two non-native speakers use a third, shared language such as the corporate language to communicate with one another, language-induced emotions are deemed to be positive and contributive to more efficient and effective intercultural communication (Aichhorn & Puck 2017, 758), although some accents may pose an additional challenge for understanding (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010, 389). This relative ease of communication between non-native speakers could be explained by the remark that experienced FLA seems to be less intense when perceived language difficulties are rather similar (Tenzer & Pudelko 2015, 613). Moreover, the use of English among non-native speakers with a similar proficiency level removes the notion of anyone having disproportionate power over others due to the language of communication (Tenzer & Pudelko 2017, 53).

Albeit to a lesser extent, native speakers also experience language-induced emotions when communicating with non-native speakers. Studies show that frequent code-switching and use of local language at the company’s headquarters, despite having a distinct corporate language, causes resentment among native speakers (of English). This creates a risk of forming language-based ingroups and outgroups. (Aichhorn & Puck 2017, 760–761; Wang et al. 2020.) In the reviewed literature code-switching or switching between two languages during a conversation refers to shifting between the speaker’s native language and the corporate language, which often is English. Code-switching and use of local language seem to be regular occurrences in cases where the dominant language spoken at the company's headquarters differs from the official corporate language. Other emotions of native speakers that surface as a response to code-switching of non-native speakers include frustration, anger, guilt as well as feelings of exclusion and discouragement (Hinds et al. 2014, 545–546). Tenzer and Pudelko (2015, 614) group these emotions under the category of other-directed resentment. Also, native speakers of English have reported experiencing discomfort when required to adjust their way of speaking to make themselves understood by their non-native colleagues. In these instances, the emotional unease is rooted in the non-native speakers' insufficient knowledge of the corporate language. (Wang et al. 2020.)

Upon further inspection, it appears that while non-native speakers and native speakers are both prone to experience negative emotions during intercultural communication, the reasons for these emotions seem to differ. Non-native speakers' negative language-induced emotions are primarily rooted in the fear of being viewed negatively whereas native speakers' negative emotions mainly relate to temporary and arguably involuntary linguistic exclusion or the obligation to adjust one's way of speaking to facilitate communication. Moreover, these negative language-induced emotions are bound to impact individuals' communication behaviour. The following subchapter aims to unveil how.

2.3 Language-induced communication behaviour

The emotions that employees associate with a specific language affect how they communicate with their colleagues. Individuals choose varying behavioural strategies to regulate their emotions when using a foreign language. These strategies can be organized into three categories: situation selection, situation modification, and reappraisal. (Hinds et al. 2014, 545.)

In the case of non-native speakers, situation selection refers to the deliberate avoidance of situations, such as meetings, where a foreign language would be used because of anticipated language-induced anxiety (Hinds et al. 2014, 545), consequently contributing to the formation of a language barrier (Aichhorn & Puck 2017, 750). In one study it was learned that some German-speaking employees in charge of organizing meetings purposefully left out speakers of English so as not to have to speak English (Hinds et al. 2014, 545). In this extreme case FLA appeared to be strong enough to drive professional decision-making. Furthermore, non-native speakers appear to feel more comfortable speaking a foreign language in small and one-on-one meetings as opposed to large meetings (Rogerson-Revell 2007, 115). This is supported by Aichhorn and Puck's (2017) findings that FLA may evoke non-native speakers to avoid such situations where their performance, because of their language skills, can be viewed negatively.

Situation modification represents a more common set of emotion regulation strategies. As opposed to completely avoiding involvement in a foreign language situation, the individual seeks to regulate language-induced anxiety by adjusting the situation itself. Essentially, this means limiting one's use of a foreign language, for example, by staying silent or code-switching during meetings. (Hinds et al. 2014, 545.) Counterproductive to knowledge sharing, MNC employees have also been found to act as if they have understood what has been said to them even when they have not, all just to avoid embarrassment (Aichhorn & Puck 2017, 758; Wang et al. 2020). A typical example of this would be nodding in agreement to someone's proposal when one has not grasped all the details of the suggestion. Yet, one decides to not ask for a clarification because they fear that the other person might think that it is their inferior language skills that prevented them from getting all the information the first time.

Reappraisal refers to changing one's emotional response to a situation by adopting a perspective, in this case, through empathy. This essentially changes the meaning of the event for the individual; for example, instead of being concerned with performing well in a foreign language one focuses on being understood by the other party. (Hinds et al. 2014, 545.) Wang et al. (2020) observed that people, who expressed interest or compassion towards representatives of another culture were more likely to regard situations of intercultural communication as opportunities instead of barriers. Consequently, they would also reach perceivably better communication outcomes.

Native speakers adopt different emotion regulation strategies to respond to the communication behaviour of non-native speakers. In terms of situation selection, although rarely, native speakers have been found to choose to leave a meeting when the conversation switches to something other than the corporate language. Alternatively, and more commonly, unwanted code-switching is addressed by appealing to the importance of the corporate language, the language that everyone should be able to understand. (Hinds et al. 2014, 546.) However, native speakers were also found to engage in reappraisal, demonstrating that language-induced emotions and the subsequent behaviour do not always hinder knowledge sharing (Wang et al. 2020). In the European context, native speakers (of English) have been found to actively simplify their language when communicating with non-native speakers by slowing down and articulating their speech as well as by avoiding the use of more complex vocabulary and idiomatic expressions (Rogerson-Revell 2007, 114). Thus, while it would seem that code-switching can reinforce the linguistic barrier for knowledge sharing in MNCs, this appears to be contingent on the emotion regulation strategies adopted by others.

Although many studies on code-switching behaviour in international business report its implications for knowledge sharing as negative, code-switching has been found to facilitate efficient knowledge sharing within MNCs in certain contexts. The positive effects of code-switching on knowledge sharing are possible in an environment of trust and management support in the form of shared technical vocabulary, inclusion, and contextualization of knowledge. In the case of one Finnish MNC, negative emotions that were generally associated with code-switching such as resentment and feeling threatened or excluded were avoided by ensuring that code-switching was short and that an explanation of the conversation in the corporate language was provided afterwards. (Ahmad & Barner-Rasmussen 2019, 100671.)

The behavioural strategies reportedly adopted by MNC employees suggest that the use of different languages can have a noticeable impact on one’s communication behaviour. What is more, these behavioural adjustments are often made to alleviate negative language-induced emotions, at the expense of effective knowledge sharing. Therefore, it is imperative for an MNC that its employees communicate openly to the limit of their language skills. The next subchapter discusses findings on how multinational team members can address language barriers and overcome communication challenges.

2.4 Solutions to employees’ language barriers

When it comes to tackling negative language-induced emotions, Tenzer and Pudelko (2015, 608, 613) argue that the leader of a multinational team is better positioned to deal with them than the team members themselves, although detecting language-induced anxiety in others requires one to have high empathetic capabilities. In fact, the question of who is best suited to attenuate employees’ negative language-induced emotions is rather ambiguous, since the use of a foreign language can actually enhance one's self-regulation abilities, despite exhausting cognitive resources (Hadjichristidis et al. 2017). Nevertheless, addressing negative language-induced emotions is imperative not only for the sake of the emotions themselves, but also to avoid misunderstandings and facilitate communication, and successful application of emotion management strategies can contribute to enhanced sensemaking, more productive team atmosphere as well as increased commitment to leadership following within the multinational team (Tenzer & Pudelko 2015, 616, 619).

One effective way to overcome language barriers concerns the direct unwinding of the situation that gives rise to language barriers in the first place, with the aim of reducing the negative (language-induced emotion) effects of the language barriers themselves. This is done by verbally addressing unwanted code-switching behaviour, by allowing less proficient team members to have more time to speak as well as by improving understanding through repetitions. However, one ought to be careful with limiting code-switching so as not to block its use completely as an important channel of emotion regulation. (Tenzer & Pudelko 2015, 615.) In fact, message reiteration or repeating important points of a process with well-established code-switching practices has been suggested to contribute to a welcoming attitude towards multilingualism and, consequently its effective use in knowledge sharing. By repeating what has been discussed, a team leader can provide clarification to a discussion and potentially double-check, with the aid of more than one language that a message has been successfully conveyed. (Ahmad & Barner-Rasmussen 2019, 100671.)

Another alternative for addressing the negative language-induced emotions triggered by language barriers focuses on reducing the individual's negative appraisal of language barriers. Should a multinational team member perceive their language proficiency, or lack thereof, to have a negative influence on the team performance, the negative emotions associated with the use of that language are likely to be intense. However, if the same team member can be convinced that language proficiency itself is no obstacle to team performance, the associated language-induced emotions can be alleviated. (Tenzer & Pudelko 2015, 617.) This echoes the findings where employees who expressed interest or compassion towards representatives of another culture were more likely to regard situations of intercultural communication as opportunities instead of barriers (Wang et al. 2020). When appraising situations of foreign language use from the perspective of knowledge sharing, MNC employees can adopt varied strategies to reduce ambiguity in communication. For example, non-native MNC employees might choose to ask confirmatory questions and avoid small talk during knowledge sharing or select their medium of communication based on its perceived effect on knowledge sharing. Notably, employees with high proficiency in a non-native language have been found to be more likely to engage in verbal knowledge sharing, either face-to-face or in the form of a phone call, as this provides a fast way to address issues and receive immediate corrective feedback. Conversely, in cases of lower language proficiency or anticipated difficult accents employees tended to prefer to engage in knowledge sharing in written form such as via e-mail. (Ahmad 2018, 255–256).

It pays to bear in mind that in order to successfully address language barriers, the work environment itself ought to be conducive to knowledge sharing. Such an environment can be achieved with implementations that suit an organization's culture and incentivize its employees to engage in effective knowledge sharing practices. Essentially, this could mean training programmes that develop employees' self-efficacy and teamwork skills including their capacity to convey knowledge, formalized orientation and socialization programmes, less formal social events as well as intrinsic rewards such as recognition for knowledge sharing behaviours. Furthermore, knowledge sharing is supported by an open and trusting corporate culture where reciprocal face-to-face communication and inclusive decision-making are cherished along with perceivably fair managerial decisions and support. (Cabrera & Cabrera 2005, 731–732.) In light of this, displays of appreciation on the part of the manager and open communication about language barriers are suggested as suitable approaches in pursuit of a more positive view on language barriers among team members. More importantly, open communication facilitates emotional solidarity among employees by allowing them to recognize each others' emotions and helping them to understand others' language-induced communication behaviours. (Tenzer & Pudelko 2015, 618.) Also, while managers of multilingual organizations should stick to the corporate language, English, as their language of communication since such use is strongly associated with group cohesiveness, they ought to be less concerned about other members' language use as this does not appear to have a similar effect (Lauring & Selmer 2010, 278).

2.5 Summary of literature review

The interactive relationships of the reviewed concepts are illustrated in figure 1. As one can observe, perceived and real relative differences in interlocutors' language proficiencies, especially but not limited to those between native and non-native speakers of the company's corporate language, give prominence to situational anxiety. Other self-directed language-induced emotions include discomfort, insecurity, shame, and fear of negative evaluations. An employee faced with such negative emotions typically seeks to regulate them by altering the context of the situation, through situation selection or situation modification, so that involvement with the foreign language is limited or disappears altogether. This way, the chosen emotion regulation strategy directly affects one's emotional state as well as their capacity to share knowledge sharing. Furthermore, the figure suggests that these experienced knowledge sharing interactions set the premise for the language-induced emotions that one is likely to feel in future instances.

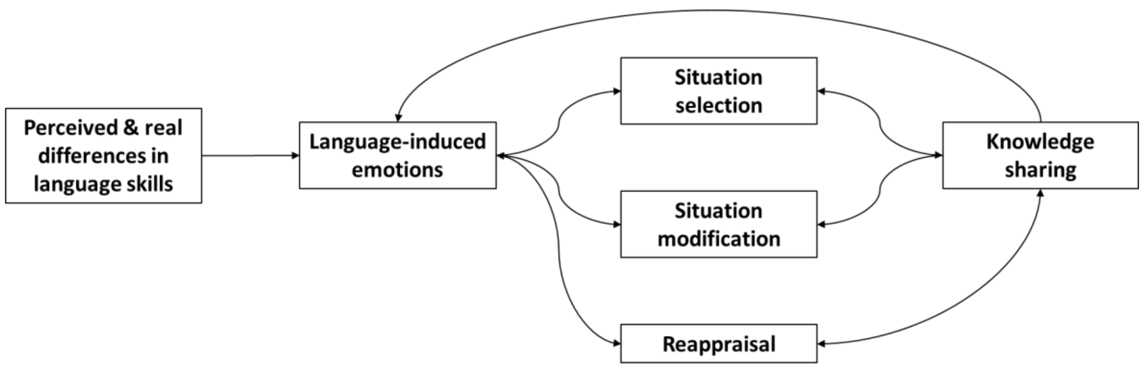

Figure 1. Conceptual relationship of language skill differences and knowledge sharing.

Although undoubtedly beneficial to the employee's emotional stability in the short-term, situation selection and situation modification are principally regarded as counterproductive communication behaviours from the perspective of knowledge sharing, particularly in a multilingual environment such as the multinational corporation. Engaging in deliberate reappraisal of situations that involve language barriers, on the other hand, appear to enable effective knowledge sharing. Similarly, emotion management strategies can be used to reduce or remove the perception of a language barrier in order to facilitate effective knowledge sharing in a multilingual context. The following chapter continues on this journey by presenting the theoretical framework with which additional elements that influencing an individual's knowledge sharing patterns can be elaborated and studied.

3 Social identity and self-categorization in knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing is a prerequisite for a functioning organization. Wang et al. (2014, 979) have summarized knowledge sharing as

> providing other employees with explicit knowledge (such as formulas, processes, and routines) as well as tacit knowledge (sharing experiences and know-how) to help others accomplish goals, collaborate with others to solve problems, develop new ideas, or implement policies or procedures.

This is also the definition of knowledge sharing adopted in this thesis. To gain a better understanding of the role of language in knowledge sharing within MNCs, theories of social identity and self-categorization are used to provide a framework for connecting an individual's social identity traits with communication behaviours that can facilitate or hinder knowledge sharing with other multinational team members.

3.1 Theories of social identity and self-categorization

Social identity and self-categorization theories are a commonly used theoretical approach in the study of language in international business (Tenzer et al. 2017, 825). In this thesis, the theories are applied to better understand an individual's perceptions and emotions concerning the use of language, and specifically how it might affect the individual's knowledge sharing within the organization. While the theoretical approach focuses on the perspective of the individual it is hoped that implications for knowledge sharing within the broader organization can also be addressed.

The social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner explains that one's social identity consists of one's ideas of self that are derived from their social group memberships along with their respective emotional, psychological, and evaluative components (Turner 1987, 29). Such memberships can for example be based on gender, ethnicity, culture, or language. In international business, social identity theory has been used to study the role of language in for example the formation of social groups within an organization (Wöcke et al. 2018), internal competition for organizational resources and recognition (Lauring 2008) as well as a subsidiary's knowledge inflows (Reiche et al. 2015).

Social identity theory suggests that individuals aspire to positively evaluate social groups that they identify themselves with in order to enforce a positive social identity for themselves. Based on the same notion, the theory asserts that one's social group needs to be viewed positively in relation to other comparable groups to reinforce this positive social identity. (Turner 1987, 30.) The theory thus provides a linear explanation for the relationship between a person's different memberships (such as language) and the development of their social identity. However, in the case of one MNC, where competition for resources and recognition prompted some employees to view their relationships with others through language, both hostile and welcoming behaviour was reported between individuals of different native languages. This suggests that social identity development as a process is actually more fluid and context-dependent than linear in practice. (Lauring 2008, 344, 356.) In cases, where one's social group appears to be inadequate in comparison, on the other hand, one will either seek to leave the group for another (psychologically or in real life) with more positive attributes or alternatively attach additional positive qualities to their own group (Turner 1987, 30).

The related self-categorization theory, also referred to as the social identity theory of the group, builds on the assumption that an individual holds multiple concepts of self. Each of these self-concepts is individually triggered by a specific situation of social interaction, consequently producing self-images corresponding to that self-concept. While the self-concept cannot be observed per se, the prompted subjective experience of self, that is, the self-images, can. (Turner 1987, 42, 44.) This is exemplified in identity building, where one's sense of self and others is fit in the present social environment, described by Ybema et al. (2009, 301) as

> a complex, multifaceted process which produces a socially negotiated temporary outcome of the dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions, between self-presentation and labeling by others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance.

A self-concept is considered to consist of at least three separate levels of self-categorizations: the superordinate level, the intermediate level, and the subordinate level. The superordinate level refers to self-categorizations that stem from one's identity as a human being in relation to other species. The intermediate level, on the other hand, is concerned with self-categorizations that are based on one's identity in relation to different social groups, the membership of which (ingroup vs. outgroup) is determined by social similarities and differences. Finally, the subordinate level refers to self-categorizations of one's identity as a unique individual that is separate from other ingroup members. The occurrence of a specific self-category at a specific level is dependent on the attributes of the individual as well as those of the situation. (Turner 1987, 45–46.) This thesis is primarily concerned with the intermediate level, that is the ingroup vs. outgroup dynamics, within an organization. To provide an example of how such dynamics can materialize, in the case of one Spanish MNC, Wöcke et al. (2018, 670) found that the Spanish-speaking managers of the organization had better access to both individual and subsidiary resources compared to their peers that did not speak Spanish. What is more, Spanish nationals appeared to be at an even greater advantage in comparison with other Spanish-speaking employees in this regard, leading to the conclusion that nationality as a construct elicited favoritism of home-country nationals.

In MNCs, a key promoter of interaction and consequently, of knowledge sharing, is the interpersonal similarity of employees; employees that share a similar national-cultural background, native language, or status in the organization are more likely to interact and share knowledge with one another, notably in informal business-related situations such as during breaks between meetings (Mäkelä et al. 2007). Moreover, employees that share the same or a similar native language tend to form groups and engage in knowledge sharing more amongst themselves compared to others. This language-based grouping is also known as language clustering, and it affects informal communication as well as information flows within an organization. (Ahmad & Widén 2015.)

3.2 Language-based grouping

Language-based grouping is caused by a process called iconization, during which a group of individuals subconsciously establish links between a particular language and certain social characteristics, for example, culture or nationality, creating a sense of language identity. Consequently, when one uses a particular language, it reflects to others an identity that consists of the social characteristics (simplistically put, stereotypes) associated with that language, regardless of whether these characteristics are true or not. In this manner, symbolic boundaries are created between different languages. (Ahmad & Widén 2015, 433–434.) However, it has been suggested that such mental constructs that have been learned in a native language context could actually be reduced when a foreign language is used, given that the human memory is language-dependent by nature (Hadjichristidis et al. 2017, 648). Thus, if one's information processing takes place in a foreign language before a stereotype is activated, the use of a second language could in fact potentially facilitate multinational interactions.

In the event of communication failures caused by language barriers, language can become the definitive determinant of group boundaries (Harzing & Feely 2008, 54). By the same logic, language can create a sense of false familiarity among employees that speak the same language but for example have different national-cultural backgrounds (Mäkelä et al. 2007). These symbolic boundaries act as a source of categorization that drives communication behaviour and subsequent knowledge sharing patterns. That is, one's perception of different languages combined with the distinct features associated with them helps in determining who and what one identifies with. (Ahmad & Widén 2015, 434, 438.)

Language proficiency does not appear to be the sole determinant of one's pertinence to a language-based group. In the case of an MNC based in Denmark, whose official corporate language was English, it was found that the Danish employees viewed foreign employees who merely expressed willingness to learn the local language (Danish) as part of their ingroup. The Danes held this positive view regardless of the foreign employees' level of Danish. Moreover, the Danes were reported to be more open to communicating with the employees that were inclined to learn Danish. (Lønsmann 2014, 109.) This supports the observation that communication clusters have a propensity to develop around multilingual employees (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999, 432). Conversely, international employees who had no intention of learning the local language were viewed negatively, even though the company had no mandate to learn it. The reasoning was connected to the underlying assumption that Danish is to be spoken in Denmark – a view that is considered by many an essential part of the social identity in the country. (Lønsmann 2014, 95, 108–110.) This observation suggests that social categorization based on willingness to learn a language, in addition to actual and perceived language proficiency, is a relevant factor affecting communication patterns within a multinational corporation. Reluctance to learn a new language, however, demands further elaboration. Bordia and Bordia (2015, 415, 418, 420) argue that one's unwillingness towards adopting a foreign language in an MNC setting can be explained by a perceived threat to the individual's language identity. Namely, a strong native language identity derived from distinct exposure to one's local language decreases the likelihood of actively participating in company language training programs and consequently adopting a new working language. Moreover, one's willingness seems to be supported by their foreign language proficiency as well as their personal need for social, economic or career advancement.

Categorization based on language differences is maintained in two ways. Firstly, the symbolic boundaries are reinforced through fractal recursivity. Fractal recursivity is a term used to describe the human tendency to attribute other, potentially completely unrelated, differences to a language-based group to make the symbolic boundaries between language-based groups appear more clear-cut. (Ahmad & Widén 2015, 435–436.) This is in line with the assumptions of the social identity theory, which suggests that individuals tend to highlight differences with other social groups when they identify themselves with one, thus causing ingroup members to appear more uniform (Turner 1987, 30). Fractal recursivity goes unchallenged until new information that is not compatible with the existing categorization is presented (Ahmad & Widén 2015, 436). The information that does not seem to correspond to the established categories or the social images within them is explained away or simply discarded through a process known as erasure (Lønsmann 2014, 93).

In terms of communication, language-based grouping is tricky in that an individual can be oblivious to the existence of their own categories and see their communication patterns as merely normal. That is, language-based categorization of people can unknowingly affect one's communication behaviour with other individuals. (Ahmad & Widén 2015, 431.) Consequently, it can be speculated that this language-based communication behaviour rooted in one's social identity is not independent from the anticipated emotions associated with the use of a particular language.

Interaction driven by interpersonal similarity thus encourages clustering within the organization, consequently enhancing knowledge sharing within clusters relative to the information flow between them. While clustering may increase knowledge sharing among similar others, it can function as a barrier to those without similar characteristics and hinder the spread of new information. (Mäkelä et al. 2007.) The implications for knowledge sharing can thus be ambiguous. Employees pertaining to a language cluster are likely to possess more information about each member's knowledge and abilities, facilitating the emergence and realization of new opportunities. Moreover, this can reinforce one's social identification with the group, leading to increased engagement and confidence towards other ingroup members related to asking for advice, helping, as well as sharing important information. (Ahmad & Widén 2015, 438.) Arguably, the effects would appear to be contrary in knowledge sharing between language-based groups. This can pose a risk to companies, given that informationally diverse groups that value diversity tend to perform better than those valuing similarity (Homan et al. 2007). Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that interpersonal similarity based on language does not apply to all individuals as such. Internationally oriented multilingual employees appear to be less prone to identify themselves as representatives of their native population and rather view themselves as internationals who have a heightened willingness to interact with foreigners (Peltokorpi & Vaara 2014, 610–611). This arguably has implications for their position in multilingual organizations, which deserves further scrutiny.

3.3 Power dynamics

Linguistically proficient individuals have the capacity to establish an array of contacts within an MNC, giving them the means to leverage their language competencies to exert power (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999). This also applies to interactions between native and non-native speakers, with some non-native speakers reporting of instances where native speakers have used their language to leverage power in the interaction (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010, 388–389). Similarly, knowledge of an important corporate language that is not widely spoken within the company unit can encourage some employees to use it to bypass or, conversely, to gatekeep organizational hierarchies (Peltokorpi & Vaara 2014, 611). Linguistically proficient individuals are not only capable of exchanging information across the MNC's internal boundaries, but they are also skilled at using their personal networks to connect different people within the organization, acting as a liaison for the interactions of others and actively intervening in the resolution of misunderstandings and conflicts between groups, thus helping in building intergroup trust (Barner-Rasmussen et al. 2014, 888). In turn, employees of multinationals that lack language proficiency have been found to establish personal relationships with those equipped to act as language mediators, in order to make up for their limited language skills (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999). However, relying solely on employees' language skills can have ambiguous implications for organizational performance. In one study on MNC subsidiaries in Japan it was discovered that overstressing the importance of home country language skills (English) in the recruitment process led to the selection of employees with a good command of English at the expense of functional skills and commitment to the organization, which ultimately hindered interunit knowledge sharing (Peltokorpi & Vaara 2014, 607, 611).

The use of a particular language can on its own be a source of power as associating socio-economic characteristics, such as status, with a certain language gives it a hierarchical dimension. When these associations are established with a language, that language becomes emblematic of those characteristics that are then extended to include all speakers of that language community. This hierarchical dimension of language implies that language clusters must also be hierarchical, which has potential implications for inter-cluster knowledge sharing. (Ahmad & Widén 2015, 438.) Hence, when an employee chooses to speak a given language, they also communicate all social and symbolic attributes associated with that language, along with the message that they wish to convey.

On the individual level, power–authority distortion occurs when the person with the formal authority in the relationship is forced to give up some of their power to the person who holds no formal authority in the relationship because of the latter's superior language skills in the corporate language (Harzing & Feely 2008, 55). This echoes the findings of Piekkari et al. (2005) concerning the Swedish-Finnish merger, where Swedish-speaking Finns obtained greater influence as gatekeepers and liaisons within the newly structured organization thanks to their language skills. Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999, 436–437) claim that this so-called shadow structure made of language clusters and individual mediators between them is in a position to challenge and potentially undermine the functioning of the company's formal organization structure. In fact, parallel communication channels formed around employees' language capabilities as opposed to the organization's formal information structure adds to the polarization of language-based group identities along with code-switching and power–authority distortions, creating a risk of inter-group conflicts (Harzing & Feely 2008, 54).

Within a multinational team, language can equally act as a moderating force to other sources of power. Namely, superior language proficiency as well as increased formality of the language of communication allows one to leverage their existing powers related to position and expertise. (Tenzer & Pudelko 2017, 57.) The adoption and use of a specific team language can thus have noticeable implications for the power dynamics within a team. Similarly, possession of valuable information and having shared goals can be used to compensate for one's relatively poorer language skills, and the perceived loss of power (Takino 2020).

3.4 Synthesis

It appears that situations of intercultural communication activate self-concepts in an employee in order for them to relate to the situation based on the social similarities and differences with other partakers through which ingroup and outgroup members of their social groups are identified. One predominant factor influencing this categorization is language. Categorization and establishment of symbolic boundaries between different languages result in language-based grouping within organizations, where language-based ingroup members are considered speakers of the language that defines their membership in that ingroup while people in the language-based outgroup are not considered to possess that skill. Such language-based grouping in organizations risks promoting information flows built on language capabilities rather than formal organizational structure. This allows multilingual employees to act as gatekeepers, thus giving them disproportionate power to regulate the flow of information. This is illustrated in figure 2. If this parallel information network were to begin to dominate knowledge sharing patterns, language-based group identities could become increasingly polarized and further hamper the formal information flows of the organization.

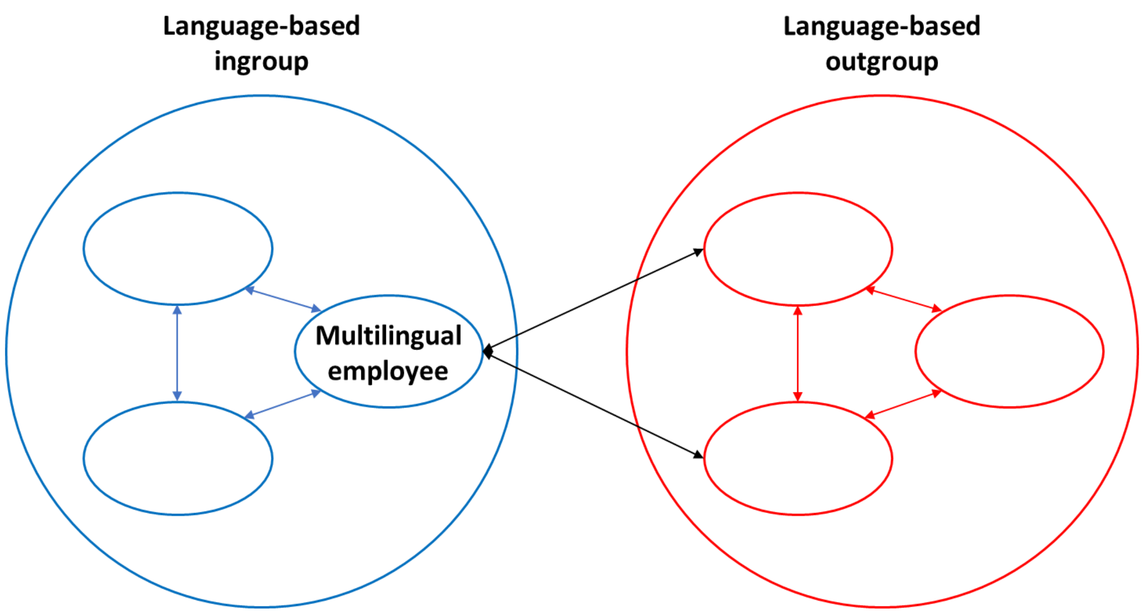

Figure 2. Language-based grouping from a multilingual employee's perspective.

It should be noted that the literature review does not singlehandedly explain to what extent the differences in interlocutors' language proficiencies or the associated negative emotions might encourage knowledge sharing within an employees' own language cluster as a form of emotion regulation, nor is it explicitly clear how the polarization of language-based group identities could potentially hinder engagement in deliberate reappraisal of situations that involve language barriers, which has been regarded as an effective remedy for knowledge sharing in a multilingual context. However, the theoretical framework together with the literature review provide a strong basis for exploring how language influences knowledge sharing within multinational teams in a way that addresses the emotions and communication behaviours that the use of different languages can evoke in multinational team members. Moreover, the theoretical framework and the literature review facilitate the study of how potential communication challenges associated with the use of different languages can be overcome.

4 Research design

To answer the research question of the thesis, data was collected using a methodology that considers the nature of the research question and makes it possible to acquire information that challenges the researcher's views and predispositions, as suggested by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 26–27). Within the qualitative domain, this study applied a constructionist methodology which implies that social reality is constructed by partakers of social interaction. That is, one's comprehension of social reality is subject to change at social encounters. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 13–14.)

4.1 Research approach

This study followed an exploratory research strategy. Social science exploration, which is representative of the selected research strategy in this research context, has been defined as

> a broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking designed to maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to description and understanding of an area of social or psychological life (Stebbins 2001, 3).

The exploratory research strategy was chosen because it facilitates the discovery and study of novel unexpected phenomena during the research process (Doz 2011, 584). The research strategy is thus apt for the study of the relatively understudied role of language in knowledge sharing within multinational corporations. Flexibility, in terms of how data was collected, and open-mindedness, in terms of where data was collected, were used to ensure the effective application of an exploratory research strategy. This orientation is purposed for achieving inductively derived generalizations about the studied phenomena. (Stebbins 2001, 5.)

Typical for qualitative research, the research process of this study was circular in nature and corresponding to what is known as a hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle depicts the research process as an iterative cycle in which the researcher interprets the accrued knowledge at each stage of the process to improve and focus the following part of the process. The repetition of the cycle helps to create a deeper and more enhanced understanding of the research topic. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 32–33.) This iterative learning process that includes feedback, rethinking, and reviewing is also necessary to ensure the internal consistency of the study (Edmondson & McManus

2007, 1156). As opposed to a strictly deductive or inductive research approach, the interaction of theory and empirics in this study was rather a mix of deductive and inductive approaches implying a form of reasoning where theory and empirical evidence are combined in a systematic fashion. In this research approach the underlying factors consisted of reality, applicable theories, the study itself as well as the analytical framework. (Dubois & Gadde 2002.)

4.2 Data collection

4.2.1 Interviews as source of information

The primary data for this study was collected in the form of one-on-one interviews. The use of this data collection method supports the study's constructionist methodology, in which understanding is interpreted and constructed through shared meanings and language (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 19–20). This implies that understanding during interviews is mutually created between the interviewer and the interviewee. In one-on-one interviews, information is conveyed not only with words, but also with context, facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures and other elements of social interaction that together contribute to richer data. Moreover, the selection of one-on-one interviews as the principal data collection method for this study is further supported by Rogerson-Revell's (2007, 115) findings that employees tend to be more at ease with speaking a foreign language in one-on-one meetings as opposed to larger settings.

The design of these interviews was based on the characteristics of an in-depth interview: they were conducted on a one-on-one basis, they utilized open-ended questioning and inductive probing to achieve depth, and they sought to resemble a normal conversation. A loosely structured one-on-one interview allows the researcher to establish trust with the interviewee and focus on interpreting the answers in greater detail as well as observe the interviewee's reactions and behavior during the interview. By asking open-ended questions the researcher leaves room for follow-up questions that can help the researcher reach a deeper understanding of the research topic than what would be achievable with a structured interview. (Guest et al. 2008, 113–114.)

The interviews took place with individuals from five linguistically diverse multinational organizations between 25th February 2022 and 27th April 2022. Of the total of six interviews conduced during the study, four were conducted in Finnish and two in

English. All interviews were conducted virtually on Zoom, varying from 34 minutes to 59 minutes in duration. The interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission to facilitate the data analysis process. Since the interviews were recorded in their entirety, the need for field notes was limited, allowing the interviewer to better navigate the interview and direct their attention to relationship building and communication with the interviewee (Hart 1991, 196).

4.2.2 Operationalization table

Edmondson and McManus (2007, 1155) emphasize a study's methodological fit as the factor that determines the quality of the field research, defining it as "internal consistency among elements of a research project". These elements comprise a research question, a literature review, a research design, and a contribution to literature. The purpose of the operationalization table is to ensure this thematic consistency throughout the thesis where each element is visibly connected to the research question. Table 1 demonstrates how the operationalization table is applied in this thesis and may provide the reader with useful information for evaluating the methodological fit of the research process.

Table 1. Operationalization table.

Title of the study	Research question	Sub-questions	Theoretical background	Interview questions	Themes
The role of language in knowledge sharing within multinational corporations: Focus on individuals in multinational teams	How does language influence knowledge sharing within multinational teams?	1. What emotions does the use of different languages evoke in multinational team members? 2. What communication behaviours do multinational team members adopt when using different languages? 3. How do multinational team members overcome	Language in international business, theories of social identity and self-categorization	Communication patterns within the team and the firm, language proficiency, language-induced emotions, language-induced communication behaviour, solutions to employees' language barriers	Language-induced emotions experienced by multinational team members, communication behaviours adopted by multinational team members, tools used to overcome communication challenges

Title of the study	Research question	Sub-questions	Theoretical background	Interview questions	Themes
		communication challenges associated with the use of different languages?			

The interview questions of this study were constructed to inquire about the individual's experiences related to the themes identified in the literature review. This was done to ensure internal consistency between the data collection process and the literature review so that the sub-questions and consequently the research question could be reliably answered. For example, questions such as "Have you experienced language-related communication challenges with your team members?" and "How have these situations made you feel?" aim to unveil potential language-induced emotions, while questions such as "In what type of situations is the native/foreign language usually used?" and "How do you normally feel/behave in such situations?" sought to uncover potential associations between language-induced emotions and communication behaviour. The interview guide can be found in appendix 1.

4.2.3 Selection of interviewees

The interviewees were selected for the study based on their participation in internal cross-border communication as part of their day-to-day work, with the target group consisting of native and non-native speakers of their respective company's corporate language. It was also required that the interviewees had current or recent experience as leaders or members of a multinational team. Additionally, factors such as department function, and tenure were considered in the recruitment process to ensure a rich research context.

Although the interviewees' workplaces were not the target of this study per se, the interviewees were encouraged to recall experiences of working in multinational teams related to their current or most recent employer to improve the credibility and quality of the data. Since the data and the results ultimately relate to the interviewees' employers, provision of some basic context can be deemed appropriate to enhance the study's credibility. The interviewees were working or had recently worked at MNCs whose headquarters were located in Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and Finland. and most of the interviewees were working or had worked at an MNC headquarters or subsidiary in Finland. While the interviewees' operated in varying MNC functions, they all held a senior position in their respective organizations. As for the exposure to multinational teams, the interviewees without an exception belonged to multiple overlapping teams within their respective organizations either as team members or team leaders. Additionally, each interviewee came into contact with at least two languages in their regular communication in these teams.

Table 2. Interviewee profiles.

Company / team code	Location	Function	Position	Tenure (years)	Native language	Foreign language skills
COMPANY1 TEAM1	Finland	Strategy	Senior	5	Finnish	English, Swedish, Italian
COMPANY2 TEAM2	Finland	Financial planning	Senior	7	Finnish	English, French, Polish
COMPANY3 TEAM3	Finland	Logistics / Project management	Senior	11	Finnish	English, German, French, Spanish, Swedish
COMPANY3 TEAM3	Finland	Logistics / Project management	Senior	3	Arabic	English, Finnish
COMPANY4 TEAM4	Finland	Sales	Senior	8	Finnish	English, Swedish, French, German, Chinese
COMPANY5 TEAM5	Belgium	Public relations / Communications consultancy	Senior	2	English	French, Italian, Spanish

All interviewees were native speakers of the interview language except for one, whose native language was Arabic and interview language was English. Given the relevance of language and emotions in the study, it is acknowledged that the use of a foreign language can make it more challenging to talk about emotions (Von Glinow et al. 2004, 578). However, since the interviewee spoke English fluently, the effect of the interview language on the responses is considered negligent.

As the participation of human subjects necessitates some ethical considerations this study assumes the ethical principles of research with human participants of the Finnish National Board of Research Integrity (TENK 2019). Furthermore, full confidentiality and anonymity was confirmed with the interviewees at the time of invitation as well as at the beginning of the interview in order to mitigate potential uncertainty related to negative evaluations or other unwanted consequences. As the research question is primarily concerned with the individual's experiences, emotions, and communication behaviours, it was considered of first-hand importance that the individuals participated in the study informed and out of their own will. The research data management plan of this study can be found in appendix 2 with clarifications on how the collected data is managed, stored, and destroyed.

4.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to process and analyze the collected data. Thematic analysis is a suitable data analysis method for working collaboratively with participants in settings that require the processing of large data sets while still permitting the discovery of unexpected insights (Braun & Clarke 2006, 97). The application of thematic analysis in this study followed the systematic approach proposed by Nowell et al. (2017) to enhance the transparency of the analysis. The principal format of the collected data at the time of analysis was textual as the data from the conducted and recorded interviews was transcribed so that it could be effectively studied and coded. The purpose of coding is to identify important categories in the data (Nowell et al. 2017, 5). In this study, coding i.e., the sorting and organizing of the data, was done manually. The codes were then linked together to form broader themes and subthemes that could be organized and interpreted. Additionally, the complementary use of notes throughout the data collection and analysis processes supported the efforts to identify relevant and recurring patterns in the data.

The thematic analysis started with familiarization with the data. In practice, this meant reviewing the video and audio recordings of the interviews. At this stage, all commentary that could be regarded as immediately relevant for the study were written down and timestamped. The codes were generated under the themes outlined in the interview guide. These themes were "Communication patterns within the team and the firm", "Language proficiency", "Language-induced emotions", "Language-induced communication behaviour" and "Solutions to employees' language barriers". These codes were compared against the literature review as well as the content of other interviews, and some were correspondingly placed under a different theme to match the structure of the thesis and facilitate the analysis. Finally, the codes were aggregated for the presentation of results. This way of progressing in one's research through meticulous comparison of data at its different stages of analysis with open coding ensures that a chain of evidence is kept throughout the process (Beuving & de Vries 2015, 42–43).

4.4 Trustworthiness of the study

In order to successfully evaluate the trustworthiness of the research process, the reader should be presented with a clear description of the data analysis along with the assumptions that guided the process (Nowell et al. 2017, 2). The trustworthiness of this study is evaluated based on criteria suitable for qualitative research. For this study, the criteria are Lincoln and Guba's (1985) credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The following paragraphs will present brief explanations of each criterion along with a description of its application in this study.

Credibility represents the extent to which the researcher's interpretation of the key concepts is aligned with the reader's understanding of the same concepts (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). The credibility of the study primarily relies on the coherent use of the data collection and analysis methods. Firstly, collecting data through one-on-one interviews allowed prolonged engagement with the interviewees and the interviewer time to ensure mutual understanding of the discussed concepts and their causations throughout the interview. Similarly, the key points of the interviewees' comments were systematically repeated back to the interviewee to ensure the accuracy of the made interpretations. The interviewees were regularly asked to elaborate on their comments so that the interviewee's message could be captured correctly. These requests for clarification are considered one of the significant advantages of interviewing (Hart 1991, 192), and arguably have a positive effect on credibility. Secondly, the data was triangulated through collection from multiple sources (six employees with multinational team experience from five different MNCs), thus arguably increasing the credibility of the research (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007, 28). Namely, the answers of Finnish nationals as representatives of non-native speakers of English quickly showed signs of saturation with similar or identical responses to certain questions. Additionally, views of a non-native speaker and a native speaker of English provided much needed diversity to support or challenge some of the presented views of Finnish nationals. The answers of all interviewees were also checked against the literature review for prior and novel findings for referential adequacy.

Transferability concerns the extent to which the study is applicable in another research environment (Tobin & Begley 2004, 392). In other words, transferability demonstrates how the study relates to prior research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). Considering the interpretive nature of qualitative research, this study relies on the incorporation of thick descriptions to improve the transferability of the research process. By providing a comprehensive description of the research context as well as the actions that were taken to carry out the research, the reader should have enough information to technically replicate the study at will. In the case of this thesis, this information comprises the interviewed personnel, interview mode, length and questions as well as the steps taken during the data collection and analysis.

Dependability describes the extent to which the study is structurally coherent, that is the reader can be shown that the research process is well-documented and all in all logical and traceable (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). Consequently, dependability can be proven through an audit trail that allows others to assess the researcher's decisions, methodology, data, and ultimately the results based on documentation. This also includes the component of reflexivity where the researcher assumes a critical position towards the research process that the researcher has been a part of. (Tobin & Begley 2004, 392.) Thus, this thesis fulfills the criterion by providing an easy-to-follow trail of decisions starting from the selection of the research topic and question, the reviewed literature, and the relevant theories to the selection of methods and interviewees.

Finally, confirmability represents the extent to which the results and interpretations are logically supported by the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). Essentially, this means that the previous criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability are achieved. The results should thus be believably objective and not altered by the researcher's subjective opinions.

5 Findings

In all five MNCs represented by the interviewees, the corporate language was stated to be English. Although the use of English was not explicitly enforced at any of the companies, the status of English as the working language was virtually unquestionable. All company materials including internal documents, presentations, newsletters, and computer systems were in English despite the informal use of other languages at the office since, as expressed by one interviewee, “there very rarely is a monolingual audience”. The lack of need to translate materials was considered positive and timesaving. Formal day-to-day communication within teams as well as between teams, including meetings and emails, was in English. This was said to be the result of the fact that it was the one language that all team members could efficiently communicate in.

The reported prominence of English at the interviewees’ workplaces sets the premise for the presentation of the findings, which is done according to the interactive relationships identified and illustrated in the literature review. First, results concerning perceived and real differences in language proficiency are presented. This is followed by the presentation of results on language-induced emotions and communication behaviour, after which solutions perceived or tried by the interviewees to overcome communication challenges are presented. Finally, the findings are further contextualized.

5.1 Language proficiency

All interviewees viewed themselves as fluent speakers of their company’s corporate language, English. The level of English was verified with one native and one non-native speaker during the interviews as these were conducted in English. The self-evaluated English language skills of other interviewees were supported by their educational background (international business) as well as their extended stays abroad either due to work and/or studies. Both native and non-native speakers also described the overall level of English within their team as either high or really high with some variation in style and accent. Some interviewees pointed out that this was likely due to the language requirements set for these positions. Such hiring process, where potential employees are to have a certain proficiency in the company’s corporate language, is known as language-sensitive recruitment (Peltokorpi & Vaara 2014, 601).

While it was generally perceived that knowledge was successfully shared within the teams without exception, some non-native speakers felt that some of the nuances (related to tone or "reading between the lines") were lost when communicating in English. The overall communication also tended to be more issue-centric and formal when English was used. Similarly, explaining nuances and joking was found more challenging in English, echoing Harzing and Feely's (2008, 53) remarks that rhetorical skills such as humour, symbolism, negotiation, persuasion, and motivation are particularly demanding to perform in a non-native language. Moreover, the interviewed native speaker had observed that while the general level of spoken English was very high within the team, the level of written English was noticeably lower. There was reportedly an apparent difference between those who had experience in studying in an English-speaking country and those who did not, as "they (who did not) still maintain some level of their national language through the structure of their sentences, (and) the vocabulary they use."

As for the knowledge of English among white-collar workers more broadly, both native and non-native interviewees provided similar recounts of there being greater variation in the knowledge of English between native and non-native speakers as well as among non-native speakers. However, the overall level of English was generally deemed as high, although some stronger accents (such as French or Indian) were reported as hindering understanding, verifying the remark made by Henderson (2005, 70) that a strong accent can also be enough to act as a language barrier. On the other hand, at the factory level of one organization, where knowledge of English was not required, the level of English was regarded as notably poorer. Overall, it was recognized that the use of the local language was required at the lower organizational levels more frequently to ensure a successful transfer of information.

The interviewees were largely unanimous about the benefits of communicating in the corporate language. Despite English being a second language for the majority, all interviewees found that it was convenient to communicate in the corporate language. Non-native speakers widely shared the view that it was actually easier to use English than their native language in a professional setting. In fact, non-native speakers recalled having trouble remembering professional terms in their native languages as much of the English terminology is often incorporated in the conversation as such regardless of the language of communication. Although some Finnish interviewees found it silly to write an email in English to another Finn speaking the same mother tongue, this was considered necessary and done “in the name of efficiency” as the chain of emails would likely end up including someone who did not speak the language. More commonly, use of English at work was viewed as adding efficiency and reducing cultural differences despite the latter still remaining noticeable in international communication.

Perceived disadvantages of communicating in the corporate language mainly related to communication at lower organizational levels. When employees from lower organizational levels would join a meeting, the meeting would sometimes be prolonged due to the need to translate some pieces of information from English to the local language. The use of English in these situations where the knowledge of English appeared to vary more significantly also raised doubts among the native and more skilled non-native speakers of English that some things might not be said because of the perceived extra effort that communicating in English would require. One interviewee also discussed a situation where a presentation that they were supposed to give was given by someone else who was a native speaker of the language of the target audience to ensure more effective knowledge sharing. In this case one’s input of professional knowledge was weighed against their language skills, which had to be addressed carefully. Although the notion of power was not explicitly associated with language use, one interviewee pointed out that people who could express themselves more fluently and convincingly also brought their issues to light more visibly in a given setting. At the office level, the disadvantages of communicating in the corporate language were noticeably more limited with email being considered the means of communication that was most prone to induce misunderstandings.

All interviewees made it clear that despite the lack of enforcement concerning the use of English, the formal communication at the office was strictly conducted in English. One interviewee’s remarked that “We always speak English if there is even one (person) that does not speak Finnish as their first language.” This experience that communication is automatically switched to English as soon as a person that does not speak the language being used was a remark universally shared by all interviewees. However, other languages were reportedly used quite openly in informal situations. For example, at the Finnish offices it was recognized by native as well as non-native speakers that the use of Finnish was frequent in informal situations or in sharing background information, particularly between native speakers of the language. Finnish was sometimes used during coffee breaks specifically to help the non-native team members practice the language. Similarly, the interviewee at the office in Brussels recalled that French and Italian were frequently used in informal situations, in addition to English, as there were native speakers of these languages both at the managerial (French) as well as at the lower organizational levels (Italian). The presence of a local language was observed during visits at offices in other countries as well.

To summarize, the native and non-native participants of this study viewed themselves and their team members as highly proficient in English, which was the undisputed language of communication in formal settings. More broadly, one's proficiency in English appeared to correspond to their organizational level in the company. At the senior level, the use of English was perceived as practical, and it was widely accepted on the grounds that it would add efficiency. At this level, knowledge sharing was regarded as unproblematic by non-native speakers apart from occasional difficulties in understanding or explaining nuances. Communication difficulties only became more noticeable when lower-level employees participated in meetings conducted in English. In these instances, as well as in situations of informal nature, other languages widely spoken in the companies such as the local language were frequently used.

5.2 Language-induced emotions

This section comprises results that seek to answer the sub-question of *what emotions the use of different languages evokes in multinational team members*. Here, special emphasis is placed on non-native speakers' experiences with native speakers of English and the local language as well as on native speakers' experiences with non-native speakers of English.

Non-native speakers had varying associations regarding communication with native speakers. Some felt that it was easier to understand native speakers (as opposed to other non-native speakers) because they spoke their language more clearly while others reported having greater difficulty understanding native speakers of English, namely from the United Kingdom and Ireland. These difficulties were rarely experienced within the team, but rather when communicating with another team or another department of the organization. Some interviewees reported feeling uncomfortable or overpowered when communicating with native speakers due to their pace of speech and use of double meanings. To these interviewees, the fluency of native speakers was perceived to be at a whole different level. As described by one interviewee: “I felt less able to perform (in comparison)”. Some non-native speakers also shared the experience that native speakers did not understand that the person they were speaking with was in fact not a native speaker, despite the apparent fluency. This feeling of performing more poorly did not occur when communicating in English with other seemingly fluent non-native speakers. However, contrary to prior reports of non-native speakers feeling that their use of English is not appreciated by native speakers of the language, which has led to a rise in tensions between the two parties (Glaister et al. 2003, 101), no deterioration in relationships due to language-related issues was expressed.

Between non-native speakers with different mother tongues, English was the preferred language of communication. Sharing a similar skill level was provided as one reason for the use of English. Overall, the interviewed non-native speakers, who were all fluent in English, reported feeling quite comfortable using the language at the office with others who also possessed a high level of English. There were, however, some reported difficulties in understanding people from outside the teams, but these were primarily due to the poor level of English of the other party and were found to cause fatigue among listeners. Similarly, situations where the other person was unable to express themselves evoked frustration and anxiety in some interviewees. Communication was found to be particularly challenging when the discussion concerned something that had no prior equivalent. However, none of the interviewees reported having such communication difficulties or negative emotions when trying to express themselves in English. With some non-native speakers, it remained unclear whether this was in fact the case or whether these interviewees were reluctant to explicitly acknowledge the experience of these emotions as they might also expose one’s fear of being evaluated negatively or performing poorly due to perceived inferior language proficiency. Nonetheless, one expatriate who was part of a Finnish-majority team felt like he was sometimes burdening others with the use of English specifically because of him as the rest would otherwise speak Finnish among themselves:

> It could be much more easy to sort of like put your feelings and your emotions into your mother tongue, not in English… If I’m not there, they could be like, maybe, I don’t know, maybe 2% extra comfortable.

With native speakers of a language other than English, communication in the interlocutor’s native language was found to create a distinct connection, ensuring that the non-native speaker will be remembered as “the person who speaks the language”. In these instances, native speakers have appeared to react positively to communicating in their language acknowledging that their mother tongue is being spoken. For example, one interviewee who had limited working proficiency in Finnish, found communicating in the language a funny and rewarding learning experience despite the communication often taking longer and therefore sometimes feeling uncomfortable and laborious. Another interviewee had similar experiences with communication in French, confirming that it takes more time to formulate sentences and there is a high need to double-check the grammar even in basic instances despite the interviewee being fluent in French. However, exposure and active use of the language reportedly had a positive effect on the confidence to use the local language.

The interviewed native speaker identified two types of miscommunications that occur within the team. The first type of miscommunication takes place when one simply misunderstands instructions because of the language: “You tell someone to do x and they do y.” Even though not being understood in one’s own language was reported as feeling frustrating at times, this was not seen as an issue: “I can’t complain because I am at an advantage compared to everyone else in my team.” Nevertheless, the fact that many colleagues did not admit it when they did not understand the interviewee posed an evident challenge:

> You’re trying to explain something to some and there’s a blank face coming back at you. You know, they don’t want to admit they didn’t understand because they feel embarrassed.

The interviewee reported reading the other person’s facial expressions on multiple occasions in an attempt to verify whether they truly understood what was said. Regardless of this communication challenge helping colleagues was not perceived an issue, since the interviewee felt like he was the one at an advantage.

The second type of miscommunication was perceived to be caused by misperceptions of the way one communicates, rather due to culture. The interviewee provided an example of this by explaining that his manager from Romania can be incredibly blunt, direct, and even rude via SMS, in spite of otherwise being an emotionally intelligent manager, following that this created a lot of discomfort during teleworking. Although culture is not the target of this study, an experience reported by another interviewee further suggests that it nonetheless plays an inevitable role in people’s attitudes towards language use. As a non-native speaker of both the corporate and the local language, the interviewee felt appreciated by his colleagues for trying to speak Finnish without experiencing a sense of “dominance”, which was apparent in other larger European countries such as Germany, France, and Italy, where, as exemplified by the interviewee, “if you are in France, you need to speak French.” Reportedly, this was not the case in Finland.

5.3 Language-induced communication behaviour

This section comprises results that aim to answer the sub-question of *what communication behaviours multinational team members adopt when using different languages*. The described communication behaviours are sorted according to the three behavioural strategy categories that individuals choose from to regulate their emotions when using a foreign language: situation selection, situation modification, and reappraisal. Considering that none of the interviewees mentioned adopting communication behaviour that corresponded to situation selection, that is, the deliberate avoidance of situations where a foreign language would be used (Hinds et al. 2014, 545), this behavioural strategy will not be discussed in greater detail. Nonetheless, two interviewees reported of instances, where it was assumed or verified that other employees had prolonged their interaction with the interviewees due to the need to communicate in English. For example, one interviewee recalled occasionally wondering why some of his emails that were written in English were not answered, suspecting that some of his colleagues were reluctant to respond in English.

In some meetings, some of the Finnish interviewees engaged in code-switching between English and Finnish with their native peers due to other employees’ lack of confidence in the use of English. The interviewees assured that this was accepted by the partaking members who did not understand Finnish well. Code-switching was namely used to explain matters of complex nature with precision. This did not appear to be an issue as long as the non-Finnish speaking members were given a summary of what was discussed in English before moving on to other matters. From the perspective of a non-native speaker of the local language, this form of code-switching was not perceived as problematic; the interviewee reported raising his hand and asking for a clarification when he did not understand something. This interviewee also occasionally engaged in code-switching when asked a question in Finnish, telling others that he will respond in English.

In reappraisal, one changes their emotional response to a situation by adopting a perspective through empathy (Hinds et al. 2014, 545). This approach was widely adopted by the interviewees, and it was commonly considered that co-workers were forgiving when it came to dealing with differences in language skills, as the primary focus of a professional interaction was on understanding the other person and discussing the content of work. One interviewee viewed that this instrumental approach to English was problematic in the sense that two non-native speakers had no incentive to improve the quality of the language. For example, idiomatic expressions from one’s own language were used, even if they did not exist in English, as long as the other person understood what was meant.

The communication behaviour strategies adopted by the interviewed Finns seemed to largely resemble those of native speakers of English reported in prior studies. In situations where the other person could not express what they wanted to say, the situation tended to be alleviated by display of empathy or an active quest for mutual understanding. When some expressions encountered during international communication were lost, the situation was addressed with a direct question regarding the meaning of the expression.

The interviewed native speaker reported adopting a wider range of behavioural strategies to accommodate non-native speakers. The interviewee reported consciously speaking more slowly and using more limited vocabulary with expressions to make the language easier to understand. With repetitions, the same thing was said repetitively as opposed to switching up. The interviewee also reported having incorporated some of the mistakes widely used in the work environment into his language to facilitate the understanding of others.

5.4 Solutions to employees’ language barriers

This section includes the results that contribute towards answering the sub-question of *how multinational team members overcome communication challenges associated with the use of different languages*. Generally, the occurrences where language issues had to be addressed at the interviewees’ organizational level were perceived to be rare or unimportant. However, the use of English in situations where the knowledge of English appeared to vary more significantly raised doubts among the native and more skilled non-native speakers of English that some things might not be said because of the perceived extra effort that communicating in English would require. In these situations, the interviewees with apparently higher level of English often acted to ensure that partaking members understood the essentials of what was discussed. This was done by asking for a person's opinion directly and giving them time to answer if they had not yet taken the time to comment on an issue or by unobtrusively double-checking the contents of the discussion with the other person after a meeting.

Figure 3 is an illustration of the relationship of language skill differences and knowledge sharing based on the results. The most noticeable deviation from the figure discussed in the literature review concerns the behavioural strategies adopted by the interviewees. Namely, no interviewee reported of an instance where they had used a behavioural strategy resembling situation selection. Moreover, it ought to be clarified that in the reported findings, it was not only the perceived and real differences in language skills between the interviewee and their interlocutor that, through anticipated discomfort, spurred the interviewees to engage in behavioural strategies such as code-switching. This also happened when two individuals sharing a social space (e.g., a meeting) with the interviewee had observable differences in language skills. In these instances, some of the interviewees adopted a mediating third party role to facilitate knowledge sharing between the two individuals, for example by explaining some complex matters in another language.

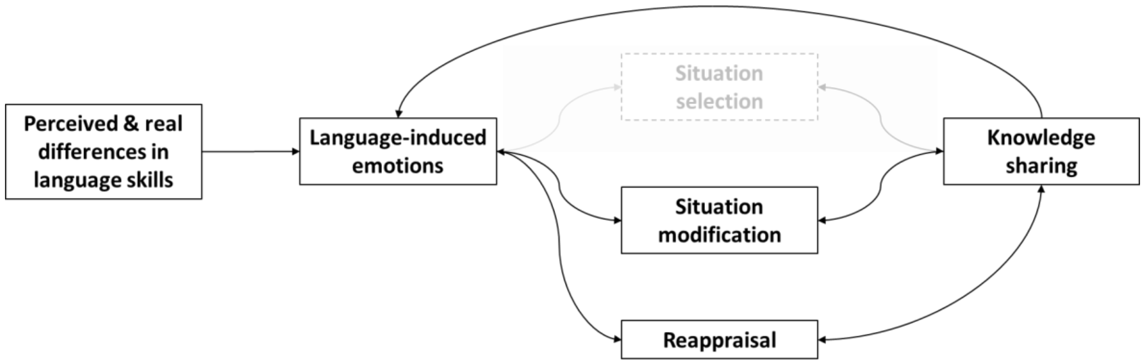

Figure 3. Observed relationship of language skill differences and knowledge sharing.

In the case of misunderstandings, this urge to ensure effective knowledge sharing sometimes appeared to lead to overcorrective behaviour. One interviewee reported having a tendency to react to instances of miscommunication by micromanaging:

"When you are having these miscommunications, you feel the need to communicate more frequently with your subordinates." In these instances, the given tasks are broken down, explained verbally, and followed by an email that includes key details of the verbal communication: client, task, where to find support (optional), and the deadline. This way the person charged has a reference point for the information, should they need any further clarifications.

Given the widespread knowledge and use of English at the interviewees' organizational level, the informal use of other languages does not appear to influence the emergence of language-based groups to the extent of compromising the formal information channels and organization hierarchy. If anything, the linguistic gap with the potential to give rise to language-based grouping is between those with native or high proficiency in English and those with limited or absent knowledge of the corporate language. Thus, while the use of English at higher organizational levels facilitates knowledge sharing, its use tends to be less beneficial when members from lower organizational levels (with lower proficiency in English) are involved.

5.5 Contextualization of the findings

This section provides the reader with additional contextual elements about the interviewees' work environments that aim to facilitate understanding *how language influences knowledge sharing within multinational teams*. In terms of knowledge sharing patterns within the studied teams and the companies more broadly, the frequency of face-to-face interactions at the office was reportedly on the rise when compared with other means of communication such as phone and video calls. This physical proximity in communication was directly suggested by one interviewee as having a more meaningful effect on the openness of communication. The fluctuation in the use of different communication methods was seemingly driven by workplace policies on office work relating to the ongoing global pandemic. The frequency of communication with different teams or team members, on the other hand, seemed to largely correspond to the degree of mutual involvement in each project. Although communication was less frequent with other project teams of the same department that were not involved in the same projects, regular exchanges of information took place so that shared characteristics between different projects could be identified. Team communication primarily took place in the form of meetings with smaller groups (of 4–5 people) to organize the work in a more agile manner.

The perceived impact that the use of a given language had on the flow of information varied. In one organization, language use was described to resemble that of a hybrid model of English–Finnish: “Whenever English is needed, it’s used. Whenever Finnish is needed, it’s used.” In another organization the interviewee had been specifically told that some people had delayed their communication with him because they were worried about communicating with a native speaker. For example, someone has taken extra time to finetune the English of their work. This is perceived to be due to their lack of confidence to use English (with a native speaker). The case appears to be the opposite between two non-native speakers, where English creates a sort of a bond.

One should consider that language is not the only factor affecting the flow of information within an organization. Notably, many restrictions adopted by companies during the COVID-19 pandemic led to the disappearance of live coffee break conversations as they were replaced with online meetings, and notably phone calls to meet the need of urgent communication. Knowledge sharing from the perspective of networking and sharing of innovative ideas appears to have been negatively impacted during the pandemic because of the overall drop in live interactions. Returning to the office after an extended period of teleworking was reported as having lowered the barrier for having conversations about minor issues, namely with superiors.

At the end of the interview, the interviewees were asked for suggestions to improve international communication within their respective companies. Although all interviewees were primarily content with the way issues related to language were handled in their respective organizations, some ideas were proposed. These mainly concerned education and training opportunities for employees and included general language maintenance (of English) for non-native speakers, a course of the basics of business English for newcomers, education on the implication of culture on the use of language (cultural sensitivity), and active exposure to different cultures by mixing teams to avoid the emergence of us vs. them dynamics.

6 Discussion and conclusions

In this chapter, the results are further discussed and reflected against the literature review and the theoretical framework. Additionally, conclusions regarding the results are presented so that the research question of *how language influences knowledge sharing within multinational teams* can be answered. Before delving into the sub-questions, the research context is briefly compared with those of prior studies.

The multinational team members' views on the status of English as the corporate language and lingua franca align with prior findings on the perceived usefulness of English as the common language of communication within MNCs (see, for example Feely & Harzing 2003, 45). The results also confirm Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio's (2011, 291) findings that in spite of English being the official working language, the MNC's internal communication is in fact multilingual. Namely, other languages with many native speakers, such as the local language, are widely spoken. While the informal use of other languages is visibly tolerated at the office, there is not enough evidence to claim whether these companies consciously pursue a flexible language policy as described by Angouri (2013), where the use of a given language is based solely on functionality.

The perceived language barriers are noticeably less ubiquitous in comparison with those identified in the literature review, with some non-native speakers experiencing that nuances are lost when communicating in English. In the odd case, strong accents can impede understanding although in this study this did not concern communication within the team. As defined by Tenzer et al. (2014, 509), language barriers are "obstacles to effective communication, which arise if interlocutors speak different mother tongues and lack a shared language in which they all have native proficiency". The relative lack of these language barriers supports the interviewees' claims that the level of spoken English was universally high within the multinational teams. Nonetheless, the English used was somewhat more issue-centric and formal in style when compared to native language use, echoing Kankaanranta and Planken's (2010, 391–392) description of business English as a lingua franca (BELF) as a task-oriented simplified English that emphasizes clarity and accuracy of content over accuracy of grammar. However, *what greatly stands out in comparison with the literature review are the repeated remarks made by non-native speakers that it is actually easier to use English at work than their* *native language*. The fact that non-native speakers recall having trouble remembering professional terms in their native languages since much of the English terminology is used regardless of language of communication appropriately demonstrates the pervasiveness of the non-native speakers' use of English at work.

6.1 Language-induced emotions experienced by multinational team members

Given that low quality communication should increase feelings of uncertainty and anxiety (Harzing & Feely 2008, 58), having fewer communication difficulties can be expected to reduce the occurrence and intensity of negative language-induced emotions. This appears to be the case with the study's non-native speakers, as few reported feeling uncomfortable or overpowered when communicating with native speakers due to the perceived relative difference in language proficiency. In these instances, non-native speakers went on to emphasize this disparity by pointing out that native speakers did not always seem to understand that their interlocutor was a non-native speaker. However, some non-natives feel that it is actually easier to communicate with native speakers than with other non-native speakers.

It is not immediately clear how non-native speakers can have mixed emotions regarding communication with native speakers especially when they are essentially fluent in English. However, one might suggest that some non-native speakers can perceive their English to be relatively poorer compared to their native interlocutors (Tenzer et al. 2014, 526; Tenzer & Pudelko 2015, 613) regardless of language proficiency, thus giving rise to situational discomfort, fear of negative evaluations and fear of performing poorly – feelings associated with foreign language anxiety (Aichhorn & Puck 2017, 754). This is further supported by the findings that these feelings do not occur when communicating with other fluent non-native speakers of English, arguably since negative emotions associated with the use of a foreign language tend to be less intense when perceived language difficulties are rather similar (Tenzer and Pudelko's 2015, 613).

What stands out from the results when compared against the literature review are the reports of some non-native speakers experiencing frustration and anxiety in situations where the other person is unable to express themselves. This suggests that (fluent) non-native speakers can experience negative language-induced emotions even in situations of superior language proficiency. Moreover, this superior language proficiency would allow one to leverage their existing powers related to position and expertise (Tenzer & Pudelko 2017, 57). Yet, such leveraging of power was not stated in language use. Regardless, the remark made by one non-native speaker that people with the ability to express themselves more fluently and convincingly also brought their issues to light more visibly suggests that even among non-native speakers those with notably higher language proficiency have the capacity to leverage their power through skillful use of language.

Frustration is a distinct feeling also experienced by those who are not understood by others. In the interviewed native speaker's case, superior language proficiency in relation to some other team members appeared stark enough for the native speaker to feel frustrated and not understood in their own mother tongue. While the emotional unease verifiably lies in the non-native speaker's insufficient knowledge of the corporate language (Wang et al. 2020), the observation further supports the notion that perceived and real relative differences in language skills can evoke negative emotions in multinational team members regardless of whether their language skills are relatively superior or inferior.

When it comes to speaking a second language other than English, non-native speakers appear to receive a seemingly positive reaction from native speakers. Arguably, this happens when knowledge of a given language is somewhat unexpected. Being remembered as "the person who speaks the language" suggests that one's language skills appeal to the native speakers' social identity in some form. This is supported by findings where even one's willingness to learn a language helped one to be viewed as part of the native speakers' ingroup (Lønsmann 2014, 109) as well as by the recount that communicating in a local language can be a funny and rewarding learning experience for a non-native speaker despite the associated occasional discomfort and extra work. Nevertheless, the link between belonging to a native speaker's ingroup and language learning as a non-native speaker ought to be further studied for enhanced credibility.

6.2 Communication behaviours adopted by multinational team members

Code-switching is the most frequently cited communication behaviour adopted by fluent non-native speakers. *However, this is less dictated by the need to relieve built-up anxiety than by the practical need to facilitate understanding and translate important* *pieces of information for the less proficient members of the organization*. Thus, fluent non-native speakers do not use code-switching as a tool to regulate their own emotions per se, but rather as a tool to enhance knowledge sharing within the team. In order to prevent anyone from being left out of the conversation, those not speaking the other language (besides English) used in code-switching are filled in on what was discussed shortly afterwards. This form of generally accepted code-switching behaviour with similar pre-requisites supports Ahmad and Barner-Rasmussen’s (2019) findings, all the while challenging the view of many studies where code-switching is portrayed as a practice that mainly hinders knowledge sharing (see, for example, Hinds et al. 2014, 545–546; Aichhorn & Puck 2017, 754; Wang et al. 2020).

Fluent non-native speakers seem to hold a pragmatic view of the role of English, which is to help exchange information as efficiently and effectively as possible with little regard to mistakes. This reappraisal of English as an instrumental tool appears to be widespread among multinational team members and at the senior level more broadly, reflecting Kankaanranta and Planken‘s (2010) description of MNC employees’ attitudes towards business English as a lingua franca. Supporting Rogerson-Revell’s (2007, 114) earlier findings, native speakers, on the other hand, seem to take a more active stance in terms of facilitating the interactions with non-native speakers by consciously speaking more slowly and repetitively as well as by using more limited vocabulary with expressions to make the language easier to understand.

6.3 Tools used to overcome communication challenges

The lack of managerial interventions because of language issues suggests that the quality of communication at the senior level is high enough to make such interventions redundant. On the other hand, assuming that everyone knows English can be regarded as a bit misleading, given the variation in the level of English and the culture that is and is not seen in its use. However, when members from outside the core team were involved in discussions, more fluent non-native speakers appear to adopt a facilitating role in communication, confirming that linguistically proficient individuals are skilled at acting as liaisons for the interactions of others and actively intervening in the resolution of misunderstandings and conflicts between groups (Barner-Rasmussen et al. 2014, 888). This is done by directly asking a person for their opinion and giving them time to answer if they have not yet taken the time to comment on an issue, corresponding to the emotion management strategy that relates to the direct unwinding of the situation giving rise to language barriers (Tenzer & Pudelko 2015, 615).

Another way of overcoming communication challenges concerns double-checking the contents of the discussion with a person after a meeting. In this context, it is worth recalling that code-switching can also be used to add precision while discussing complex topics since repeating important points of a process with well-established code-switching practices can contribute to a welcoming attitude towards multilingualism and its effective use in knowledge sharing (Ahmad & Barner-Rasmussen 2019, 100671). Nevertheless, excessive double-checking can lead to micromanaging, which arguably reduces the risk for prolonged misunderstandings but does not necessarily address negative language-induced emotions in oneself or others.

6.4 Theoretical contributions

Theoretical contributions can be expressed by deconstructing the results and relating the relevant findings to prior theoretical understanding of the topic. In addition to confirming numerous findings made by researchers who have studied the role of language in international business as well as strengthening the topic's relevance for the field, the theoretical contributions of this thesis add to the present understanding of theories of social identity and self-categorization in the context of language-based grouping. Supporting Peltokorpi and Vaara's remark (2014, 610–611) that internationally oriented multilingual employees seem less prone to identify themselves as representatives of their native population and rather view themselves as internationals, this thesis proposes based on the reported experiences and associated communication behaviours that multinational team members with high fluency in the corporate language are more likely to identify with other multinational team members that possess relative fluency in the lingua franca, regardless of background. This implies that it is not only the employees sharing a similar national-cultural background, native language, or status in the organization that are more likely to interact and share knowledge with one another (Mäkelä et al. 2007), but that interpersonal similarity also applies to those identifying with a social group the members of which share a similar proficiency in a non-native language. Evidently, native speakers of the language are excluded from this social group, given the regularly perceived difference in proficiency between them and fluent non-native speakers.

Moreover, as opposed to language-based groups where employees sharing the same or a similar native language tend to form groups and engage in knowledge sharing more amongst themselves compared to others (Ahmad & Widén 2015), fluent non-native speakers of a lingua franca actively use the tools at their disposal to include less proficient speakers in the communication. Arguably, the evidence only proposes that this applies to communication in a professional setting. Furthermore, the dynamics that determine ingroup and outgroup memberships for a social group that builds on perceived proficiency in a shared non-native language is somewhat arbitrary and would likely require a longitudinal study on the subject so that the phenomenon can be better understood.

6.5 Managerial implications

This thesis presents several managerial implications. Firstly, it raises awareness of the important role that language as well as language-induced emotions have in knowledge sharing within MNCs, which are inherently multilingual despite the unquestionable status of English as a lingua franca. Secondly and most importantly, this thesis refines the typology of situations where an MNC team leader or member should take into consideration the potential effects that language and the associated emotions might have on knowledge sharing.

Since high proficiency in a language is associated with fewer communication difficulties and reduced negative language-induced emotions, it is undoubtedly beneficial for managers to have a good command of the corporate language and the lingua franca. This allows managers to be emotionally available to facilitate the communication of others with lower language proficiency and more apparent communication challenges. Managers who are native speakers of the language should pay special attention to their style of speech and be wary of the fact that apparent fluency does not translate to native fluency. Similarly, education and training opportunities for employees in the form of business English and cultural sensitivity courses could facilitate understanding between individuals in a multilingual context such as a multinational team.

This thesis proposes that message reiteration combined with established code-switching practices contributes to the formation of a functioning multilingual work environment where knowledge is effectively shared within multinational teams. This applies to native and non-native speakers alike. Moreover, active exposure to a demographically rich work environment such as the multinational team, where the use of a lingua franca is necessary, can help avoid the emergence of ingroup vs. outgroup dynamics that can actually hinder knowledge sharing within an organization.

6.6 Limitations of the study

In order to properly evaluate the significance of this study's results, one must be aware of the study's limitations. Perhaps the most evident limitation of this study relates to the limited number of interviewees. While the data collected from multinational team members that were non-native speakers of the corporate language (English) but native speakers of the local language (Finnish) showed clear signs of saturation, other perspectives (non-native speakers of both the corporate and the local language and native speakers of the corporate language) rely on the experiences of single individuals. Nevertheless, results similar to those described in the literature review suggest that these one-on-one interviews were abundant in information of value, although further inquiry is undoubtedly needed to verify these findings.

Another apparent limitation to the study concerns the virtual mode of interviews, which limits the scope of the study by not allowing the interviewees' work environment to be observed. This also prevents the researcher from observing any real-life interactions between multinational team members. What is more, extended on-site engagement with individual multinational team members or even with entire multinational teams could contribute to richer and more reliable data and potentially provide insights that were not detected in this study. However, with these limitations, it is important to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of the interviews was very much rampant. Consequently, physical proximity with the interviewees was not deemed appropriate.

As for the content of the interviews themselves, there is some uncertainty regarding how the interviewees interpreted the notion of language issues in communication as many of the interviewees appeared to hold a rather instrumental view of the use of English. That is, communication was generally considered successful as long as the other person simply understood the core message of what was said. The emotions and the relevance of style of speech were explicitly acknowledged to a lesser extent.

Finally, one limitation of the study that unveiled itself during the interviews concerns the influence of national culture in language use. Should different cultures inhabit varying attitudes towards multilingualism at the workplace, the emotions and the communication behaviours associated with the use of a given language can vary noticeably. These variations in language use can then have important implications for the way that knowledge is shared within the organization.

6.7 Future research

This thesis provides avenues for future research that could be worthy of further probing. One topic potentially of particular interest concerns the still somewhat unclear link between an MNC employee's social identity and their language-induced emotions. Understanding what social groups one identifies with in given contexts of intercultural communication could help explain how these emotions and social identity are connected if at all. A longitudinal study that allows prolonged engagement with employees in multiple MNCs could prove to be beneficial in this endeavor. Moreover, such pursuits could result in valuable insights not only for international business but also for other fields where understanding of these psychological relationships can be applied.

Another focus area that deserves greater attention on its own concerns the communication between native and non-native speakers in MNCs, namely from the perspective of language-based grouping. It seems that the language barrier between native speakers and non-native speakers is systematically larger and more persistent than between non-native speakers of different origin, regardless of the non-native speaker's language proficiency. Development of behavioural and mental tools to address this apparent barrier could improve the quality of knowledge sharing between native anglophones and non-native speakers. Similarly, better understanding of the function of social identity in this regard to help in bridging this gap.

7 Summary

Effective knowledge sharing is a prerequisite for a functioning organization and a competitive advantage for those able to harness its full potential. Multinational corporations with their globally dispersed organizational structure are in a privileged position to achieve this. However, in order to do so they must fully understand the implications of language use for the individual employee as well as for entire multinational teams. This thesis approaches the role that language has in knowledge sharing through language-induced emotions and communication behaviour with the theoretical support of social identity theory and the phenomenon of language-based grouping. All the while raising awareness of the importance of language in the field of international business, this thesis enhances understanding on the implications that language and the associated emotions can have for knowledge sharing.

Firstly, multinational team members working at the senior level perceive the status of English as the common working language in MNCs as dominant yet useful. Moreover, the knowledge of English tends to be high, and the language barriers appear subtle. The style of English used in MNCs seems to differ from native language use in its issue-centricity and apparent formality, and the language is primarily viewed as an instrumental tool that facilitates the efficient and effective exchange of information. Regardless, the internal communication of MNCs is rather multilingual.

Secondly, high language proficiency among multinational team members is associated with fewer communication difficulties and reduced frequency and intensity of negative language-induced emotions. Nevertheless, non-native speakers are still prone to perceive their English to be relatively poorer when compared to their native interlocutors, which can give rise to situational discomfort, fear of negative evaluations and fear of performing poorly. Native speakers and non-native speakers can equally experience frustration and anxiety in situations of superior language proficiency, suggesting that negative emotions in multinational team members are evoked by perceived and real relative differences in language skills regardless of whether their language skills are relatively superior or inferior.

Finally, high language proficiency allows non-native multinational team members to act as liaisons and facilitate understanding for linguistically less proficient members by adopting communication behaviours that are directed at enhancing knowledge sharing as opposed to regulating one's own emotions. The primary tools to facilitate knowledge sharing include established code-switching, direct questions, and double-checking. Native speakers, on the other hand, tend to address language barriers more directly by consciously speaking more slowly and repetitively as well as by using more limited vocabulary. Moreover, considering the relative ease with which fluent non-native speakers communicate with one another, this thesis proposes that multinational team members with high proficiency in the corporate language are more likely to identify, and subsequently interact, with other multinational team members that possess relative fluency in the lingua franca, regardless of background.

Given that high proficiency in a second language is associated with fewer communication difficulties and reduced negative language-induced emotions, it is preferential for managers to have a good command of the corporate language and the lingua franca. This allows managers to facilitate the communication of other employees with lower language proficiency and potential communication challenges. Managers who are native speakers of the language of communication should pay special attention to their style of speech and be wary of the fact that apparent fluency does not translate to native fluency. Native and non-native speakers' use of message reiteration combined with established code-switching practices can contribute to the formation of a functioning multilingual work environment where knowledge is effectively shared within multinational teams. Moreover, active exposure to a demographically rich work environment such as the multinational team, where the use of a lingua franca is necessary, can help organizations to avoid the emergence of ingroup vs. outgroup dynamics that could otherwise hinder knowledge sharing.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background information on the interviewee

Company code:

Team code:

Workplace location:

Department/function:

Organizational level:

Tenure with the firm:

Native language:

Foreign language skills (spoken and written):

Interview language:

Interview date, time, and place:

Current job profile

When did you start working at this company?

What is your current position?

When did you start in this position?

What does your current job entail?

Who is in your team?

Communication patterns within the team and the firm

Within the team/company, who do you communicate with regularly or on a day-to-day basis? How do you communicate with them? (face-to-face and/or via email/phone calls/video calls)

How frequently do you communicate with other members on your team? How do you communicate with them? (face-to-face and/or via email/phone calls/video calls)

Language proficiency

What is the corporate language of your company? Why? How is its use enforced in the company? What languages are used in your team?

What languages do you speak/write (at work)? How would you evaluate these language skills?

Have you lived abroad? Where? How long? What language(s) did you use there?

How would you evaluate the spoken/written language skills of your team members? How are they reflected in the way the team works?

In your view, what are some of the benefits or disadvantages of communicating in the corporate language? What type of problems have you encountered when communicating in the corporate language?

In your view, how does communicating in the corporate language affect the sharing of (for example, product or marketing) knowledge within the team? Any examples?

Language-induced emotions

Non-native speakers: How do you feel about communicating in a foreign language with your team members, who are native speakers? How do you feel about communicating in a foreign language with your team members, who are non-native speakers? Could you give an example of a situation, in which you have experienced these feelings?

Native speakers: How do you feel about communicating in your native language with your team members, who are non-native speakers? Could you give an example of a situation, in which you have experienced these feelings?

Both: Have you experienced language-related communication challenges with your team members? Any examples? How have these situations made you feel?

Language-induced communication behaviour

In what type of situations is the native/foreign language usually used? How do you normally feel/behave in such situations? Who do you talk to?

In what type of situations does someone contact you to ask for information, advice, or help? Who? How do you normally react to such situations?

Solutions to employees' language barriers

Team members: How does your team leader react to language issues? How does that make you feel?

Could you describe a situation in which the team leader successfully/ineffectively addressed language-related emotions in your team?

Regarding international communication within the company, are there any areas of improvement that you would like to suggest?

Team leaders: How would you evaluate the occurrences of miscommunication, if there are any, within your team? In your view, what is the role of language in these situations?

How do you react to language-related communication issues within your team?

How do you think the members of your team feel about language issues at the workplace?

APPENDIX 2 RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT PLAN

The production of this study includes collection of interview data on behalf of the researcher. The interviews as well as the collection of interview data is necessary to successfully perform a scientific inquiry on the individual's experiences related to language use in knowledge sharing within multinational corporations. Personal identifiers are used to contact the interviewee candidates. The researcher functions as the controller of all gathered data and the interviewees are informed of this via a notice. The gathered data is saved locally on the researcher's private computer that is password and malware protected.

While the content of the interviews cannot be linked to the interviewees per se, the video recordings used to store the data can. As identifiable data should only be stored as long as necessary, it is decided that the video recordings be destroyed upon the completion of transcription and anonymization. The anonymized transcripts and notes obtained from the recordings are to be retained for 5 years per the recommendations of the University of Turku after which they are destroyed. In the meantime, this data will be stored locally on the researcher's private computer that is password and malware protected.

No data collected in this study will be stored in a public archive/repository. Hence, there is no need for the creation of any metadata.