

Language in intercultural business interactions: A self-perceived power perspective

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural business interaction has received limited scholarly attention in business-to-business (B2B) marketing research, with language and culture particularly being largely neglected topics despite the literature noting their importance in B2B marketing. This study addresses this omission by focusing on how managers make sense of the role of language in intercultural business interactions. We also explore the role of language as a potential source of individual power in international business (IB) relationships. The empirical enquiry focuses on an *extreme case* of Russians' intercultural business interactions with Finns or in Finland before the war in Ukraine. The findings show that context and language, as well as translation power dynamics are intertwined, generating an additional level of power dynamics that emerge from the business per se. Language particularly influences self-perceived power in business relationships and can lead to dependence or frustration due to linguistic limitations. The study contributes to research on B2B marketing and IB by highlighting that individual-level exposure to intercultural business interactions entails significant linguistic challenges that cannot be solved only by using English. Specifically, it contributes to addressing the issue of language in use, which has rarely been examined in the literature on intercultural interaction in the B2B environment.

1. Introduction

Given the complex cultural and linguistic backgrounds of today's managers (see, e.g. Ivanova-Gongne, 2015), many business relationships involve intercultural interactions. However, intercultural business interaction has received limited scholarly attention in business-to-business (B2B) marketing research despite a recent increase in interest in it (Koponen, Julkunen, Gabrielsson, & Pullins, 2021). Language and culture, in particular, are largely neglected topics despite their substantial impact on B2B marketing (Elo, Minto-Coy, Silva, & Zhang, 2020; Ivanova-Gongne & Torkkeli, 2018; Lowe, Ellis, & Purchase, 2008). In recent years, the literature on the impact of language on international business (IB) activities has grown, and evidence that language plays a role in a wide range of IB and management decisions is mounting (Tenzer, Terjesen, & Harzing, 2017). For example, a common language increases trade flows between countries by 44% (Egger & Lassmann,

2015), and language skills have been shown to have a positive influence on decision makers' international opportunity recognition (Hurmerinta, Nummela, & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2015). It is also widely recognised that the culturally rooted meanings of speech acts, such as requesting or refusing, or certain concepts may create misunderstandings in intercultural business interactions (Tenzer et al., 2017). Strikingly few B2B marketing studies have focused on language use, whether at a general level (Deng, Wang, Rod, & Ji, 2021; Zhao, Gao, & Gu, 2022) or in specific situations such as intercultural B2B interaction.

What is more, extant B2B marketing research has tended to construe language from a positivistic, reductionist perspective dominated by a focus on Western languages (Lowe et al., 2008) and has failed to fully account for the multilingual nature of the social space of IB relationships (cf. Janssens & Steyaert, 2014; Westney, Piekkari, Koskinen, & Tietze, 2022). It has also largely ignored contextual circumstances such as history, legislation and local linguistic habits, which the broader IB

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literature has increasingly recognised as relevant to language-related challenges (Gaibrois, 2018; Langinier & Ehrhart, 2020; Steyaert, Ostendorp, & Gaibrois, 2011). Language issues in IB relationships have been particularly overlooked in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Tenzer et al., 2017). Internationally operating SMEs face a range of linguistic challenges (Knowles, Mughan, & Lloyd-Reason, 2006; Sui, Morgan, & Baum, 2015). However, their formal policies and experiences tend to be more limited than those of large multinational enterprises (MNEs), and individuals working in SMEs approach the challenges of multilingual operations differently depending on personal language repertoires, prior experiences and relevant support resources (Knowles et al., 2006; Wilmot, 2017).

We begin to address these lacunae by providing one of the first studies bringing language to the fore in B2B marketing. This is an important contribution given how global migration and its consequences for IB operations and linguistic power relations are increasing. We approach individual-level struggles related to understanding and handling linguistic boundaries in internationally operating SMEs as sensemaking processes (Weick, 1979; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). We argue that individuals engaging in sensemaking around language issues remain embedded in specific social contexts that influence their sensemaking efforts, as their efforts to make sense of language in international B2B relationships are shaped by these contextual circumstances. Shedding light on how and with what consequences is the main focus of this study. We therefore pose the following research questions:

- How do individual managers in SMEs draw upon the home and host countries' linguistic contexts when making sense of language use in intercultural business interactions?
- Does the role of language as a potential source of individual power in business relationships change when individuals operate outside their home country contexts, and if so, how?

To illustrate our conceptual discussion of these questions, we draw on three sets of interview data totalling twenty-four interviews with SME owner-managers of Russian origin, conducted between 2012 and 2018. They focus on intercultural business interactions in international B2B relationships between individual Russian and Finnish customers, suppliers, and business partners, with Russia as the home country and Finland as the host country. Some focal SME owner-managers are located in the home country, and some have migrated to the host country. The language-related power constellations in B2B uncovered by our research provide an individual-level perspective of the challenges, insights, and transformations that local and migrant SME owner-managers experience during intercultural interactions.

Finland and Russia are neighbouring countries with a long history of political and economic links and extensive bilateral trade (Ollus & Simola, 2006). Beyond these relationships, there has historically been much movement of people between these countries. Russian speakers¹ are by far the largest ethnic group of residents born outside Finland and by now constitute 1.6% of the population, with Russian citizens constituting 0.57% of the population (Statistics Finland, 2021). From the late 1990s until the war in 2022, it was relatively easy for Russians to migrate to Finland.

Despite significant economic interconnections, geographical proximity and cross-border human mobility, Finnish-Russian business relationships have often been characterised by cultural differences (Ivanova-Gongne et al., 2022; Vinokurova et al., 2009). Business in free market economies, such as Finland, represents relative stability and

tends to be more innovative, whereas business in countries with state-controlled economies, such as Russia, is largely associated with instability of views and a turbulent environment (Ivanova-Gongne et al., 2022). Thus, cultural aspects are decisive factors influencing business relationships and behaviour in Russia (see, e.g. Ivanova-Gongne & Torkkeli, 2018; Puffer & McCarthy, 2011).

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the interconnections between Finland and Russia have drastically changed, and business relationships between Russian and Finnish companies have largely been halted (Yle News, 2022). Our findings, however, can be extrapolated to a range of other contexts where individuals engage in international B2B relationships between countries with different languages, cultures, and economic systems. Furthermore, as a result of the war, hundreds of thousands of highly skilled individuals, including entire start-ups (Javits, 2022), have migrated from Russia, making it important throughout Europe to better understand intercultural interactions with individuals of Russian origin.

The *linguistic context* of our study is summarised in Table 1. National policies and practices relate to the respective national languages (Russian in Russia and Finnish and Swedish in Finland), while the IB context also involves English. Language usage in this context covers diverse IB communication settings from migrant to local, inward to outward and cooperation activities representing a broad range of business relationships and tasks.

The contribution of our study lies in addressing an issue (i.e. language in use) that, despite its importance, is rarely touched upon in the literature on intercultural interaction in the B2B environment, including in the *Industrial Marketing Management* (IMM) journal. Articles on intercultural interactions in IMM focus mostly on cultural distance (Gu, Wang, & Wang, 2019; Jia, Wang, Xiao, & Guo, 2020), cultural differences (e.g. Voldnes, Grønhaug, & Nilssen, 2012), critique and/or use of Hofstede (1980) dimensions (e.g. He & Sun, 2020; Jia et al., 2020) and cross-cultural comparisons of, for instance, industrial purchasing (Habel, Jarotschkin, Schmitz, Eggert, & Plötner, 2020), trust (Lohtia, Bello, & Porter, 2009) and network capability development (McGrath & O'Toole, 2014). By contrast, studies on language as an essential element of intercultural interactions in B2B are, to the authors' knowledge, almost non-existent in the IMM and B2B marketing literature in particular. The few studies on language use in IMM focus on its role in B2B brand engagement (Deng et al., 2021) and contract adjustment (Zhao et al., 2022) and do not consider an intercultural environment. In other words, the swiftly growing interest in language-related research in the neighbouring field of IB (Karhunen, Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen, & Piekkari, 2018; Tenzer et al., 2017) is not reflected in international marketing, even if both fields engage with very similar empirical contexts.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. First, the extant literature addressing language and intercultural business interaction and power is reviewed. Second, the research method is explained, and then the illustrative material and findings are presented. Finally, the discussion and conclusion are provided.

2. The role of the linguistic context in intercultural business interactions

Sociolinguists have long recognised that contextual characteristics related to language are closely associated with political principles and national identities (e.g. Blommaert, 2006). *Official (national) languages* and common linguistic standards are twinned with notions of patriotism and nation-building, meaning that what is seen as linguistically correct or acceptable can change over time as external circumstances change (e.g. Millar, 2005; Rutten, 2019). Language practices may represent national policies following titular languages but can simultaneously be seen as forms of linguistic oppression (Elo & Ivanova-Gongne, 2020; Phillipson, 2006). Hence, such perspectives related to language users and their positions in intercultural business interactions may be loaded

¹ By Russian speakers, we mean individuals whose native language is Russian irrespective of citizenship. Thus, for instance, about one fourth of the Estonian population is Russian speaking, and, in turn, Estonian citizens form one of the largest group of immigrants in Finland (by citizenship).

Table 1

Linguistic contexts in Russia and Finland (Source: Authors' own summary based on the sources presented in the table).

	Russia	Finland
National language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multilingualism was strongly promoted during the early years of the Soviet Union, and there was an extensive Russification policy by the mid-1930s (Lähteenmäki & Vanhala-Aniszewski, 2010); Russian replaced local languages (e.g. Ukrainian and Belorussian) in, e.g. education and administration (Lähteenmäki & Vanhala-Aniszewski, 2010). - The Communist regime used Russian as a means of unification and assimilation (Grenoble, 2003); minority languages nearly disappeared (e.g. Khilkhanova & Khilkhanov, 2004). - Today, the Russian language and its purity are promoted across the Russian Federation (Lähteenmäki & Vanhala-Aniszewski, 2010). - 2017: A new language policy that diminished the role of minority languages (e.g. Tatar and Bashkir) was implemented. The teaching of native minority languages became voluntary, and the compulsory teaching of such languages was considered illegal (Yusupova & Ozerova, 2021). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The country is officially bilingual (86.5% of the population are registered as Finnish speaking and 5.2% are Swedish speaking; Statistics Finland, 2021). - Both Finnish and Swedish as national languages are mandatory school subjects. The codification and legitimisation of Finnish had a key role in Finland's independence; there was emphasis on opportunities for trade and Nordic collaboration through Finnish–Swedish bilingualism (Statistics Finland, 2021). - Russian is spoken by 2.5% of the population (languageknowledge.eu, 2019) and is the first language of 1.6% of the population (Statistics Finland, 2021); it is not an official national language and is traditionally underrepresented as an optional foreign language in Finnish schools. - Finnish, Swedish and Russian are mutually incomprehensible.
English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The use of English started to peak only after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. - Knowledge of a foreign language, i.e. English, can be considered 'additional profit', 'good investment' and a 'competitive advantage' (Laetina, 2012, p. 61). - Knowledge of the English language in Russian companies is generally low (see Outila, Piekkari, & Mihailova, 2019). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Among Finns, 45.2% know English (Languageknowledge.eu, 2019), - The notion of English as the language of globalisation has a strong foothold in business, culture and research.

with meanings and hierarchies beyond the language per se, generating critical events and impediments for business relationships, such as relation-related avoidance behaviours (Elo, Benjowsky, & Nummela, 2015). Language often represents organisational power structures that may be exclusionary to some while being implicit and less visible to others (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999). At the other end of the spectrum are long-standing efforts to dismantle language-related barriers to international understanding and IB relationships through the establishment of global languages or *linguae francae*. While decried by many as overly homogenising or even imperialist, the notion of *English as the language of globalisation* (Phillipson, 1992) can be said to constitute the default approach to language within B2B marketing (Lowe et al., 2008). Similar views on language can be found in international management (see, e.g. Tietze, 2008 for a critique). Variations in these different approaches to language exist in parallel, often compete and sometimes clash. In any given intercultural business interaction, actors can usually legitimately draw upon more than one approach to language. For individuals involved in IB relationships, balancing these can be a significant challenge.

In the course of IB relationships, actors usually encounter a delicate mosaic of contextually embedded linguistic requirements. Even within a specific context, actors may need to draw upon different approaches to language to advance divergent goals and communicate with different stakeholders (e.g. local customers versus multinational company [MNC] sister units; Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio, 2011), making it impossible for them to adhere exclusively to one specific approach. Producing adequate responses in such situations may be especially challenging for SME actors, who tend to have relatively limited resources compared with MNC actors. In some contexts, drawing on the diaspora resources available in the host country and engaging employees with suitable linguistic skills already within the organisation can alleviate communication problems by using the home country's language, despite operating in a host country context (Elo et al., 2020; Elo & Ivanova-Gongne, 2020; Elo, Ivanova-Gongne, & Kothari, 2022).

2.1. Language as a source of individual-level power in intercultural business interactions

In business interactions and relationships, power stems from organisational (market environment and commercial attractiveness), individual (knowledge, skills and profile) and relational factors (relationship and outcome focus) (Meehan & Wright, 2012). In this study, we focus on the individual origins of power, in which market knowledge (i.e. the

knowledge factor) and negotiation and language skills (i.e. the skills factor) play a role in whether an individual in a business relationship has the capacity and potential to influence others (see Meehan & Wright, 2012 for more individual-level variables of power). Individuals' self-perceived power may affect how they act in an IB relationship, even though these perceptions of power 'may not represent reality' and may solely be in the heads of individuals (Meehan & Wright, 2012, p. 678). Thus, while individuals with less power are more likely to adapt to the other, powerful individuals are less likely to do so (Voyer & McIntosh, 2013). Furthermore, 'individuals in power have more control over resources, and therefore do not need to be dependent on others' (Voyer & McIntosh, 2013, p. 644).

Much has been written in B2B marketing on power in B2B networks and relationships (Hingley, 2005; Hingley, Angell, & Lindgreen, 2015), but most studies focus on the organisational side of power in the framework of buyer–seller relationships, often painting the buyer as the more powerful entity in this dyad (Kähkönen, 2014). Other perspectives on power in B2B marketing literature have focused on the organisational roles within the network, the size of the company and the context (e.g. Hingley et al., 2015; Sandberg, 2014). In an international context, however, power may depend on an individual's self-perceived power and his/her ability to bring value to the partner (through, e.g. local market knowledge, social capital or language), be it a supplier, a buyer or other types of stakeholders. For example, in the Chinese context, individuals can be powerful irrespective of their organisations' roles in the network—whether these organisations are small companies, independent distributors or suppliers, for instance—because of Guanxi principles and the importance of interpersonal relationships when entering the market (Sandberg, 2014; Zhuang, Xi, & Tsang, 2010). Given their local market knowledge, social capital and language knowledge, individuals in such a context act as boundary spanners who help the foreign company establish business relationships with other partners in the local market (Elo et al., 2020).

One aspect that provides individuals with boundary spanning ability is a low psychic distance from the host culture with which an individual interacts and the ability to switch between cultural frames and linguistic codes (Barner-Rasmussen, Ehrnrooth, Koveshnikov, & Mäkelä, 2014). In our case, we use the concept of psychic distance rather than cultural distance, as we regard this concept from an individual level. Thus, while the concept of cultural distance is based on differences between cultural values across nations or groups of people (see, e.g. Elia, Petruzzelli, & Piscitello, 2019), psychic distance is largely about 'an actor's perception of a foreign country' (Ojala, 2015, p. 827). Based on a review of previous

literature, Ojala (2015) states that psychic distance serves as an umbrella for cultural distance in the sense that it includes ‘several dimensions, such as differences in geography, culture, language, politics, the level of education, the economic situation, the level of industrial development, time zones, and so on’ (p. 827). Psychic distance has been found to influence the learning process related to business relationships and internationalisation (Nordman & Tolstoy, 2014). Furthermore, as psychic distance is based on individual perceptions (Sousa & Bradley, 2008), it can be different for two individuals in business relationships, depending on their cosmopolitanism, knowledge of different cultures and languages, and other factors (Ojala, 2015). To decrease psychic distance, a manager may accept his/her relative lack of power in the host society and be open to learning new languages, as well as actively seek information about, for instance, the cultural specifics of the other. Studies in social cognition, however, show that people with high levels of self-perceived power tend to overlook ‘the most informative cues about others’ and do not actively seek such information (Fiske & Dépret, 1996, p. 34).

Language is fundamental to power relations in a society. The national language (or languages) typically dominates the forms, usage patterns and practices of local businesses, providing access to resources and power (Gal, 1989). These dynamics also apply to IB contexts (see, e.g. Langinier & Barner-Rasmussen, 2023, on the impact of language on international careers). However, individual-level language-related issues in IB contexts have also been found to be entangled with power in other ways. For example, individuals who know relevant languages (e.g. the language used by top management) tend to have better access to information and are thus better positioned to advocate the interests they represent (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999), influence firm-level decisions (Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, & Säntti, 2005) and act as organisational boundary spanners (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014). Language skills thereby helps in decreasing psychic distance by facilitating the understanding of other cultures, institutional and market environments and so forth (Ambos, Leicht-Deobald, & Leinemann, 2019; Ivanova-Gongne, Lång, Brännback, & Carsrud, 2021). Language has been shown to be a major obstacle to SME foreign market entry, requiring the use of interpreters or boundary spanners to overcome it (Ojala, 2015). While a lack of language knowledge can be compensated for by using boundary spanners or interpreters, this would mean a loss of control over resources and thus lower self-perceived power (Voyer & McIntosh, 2013). Those with weak or irrelevant language skills often feel disenfranchised (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999), anxious (Wang, Clegg, Gajewska-De Mattos, & Buckley, 2020), excluded (Gaibrois, 2018) and even ostracised (Neeley, Hinds, & Cramton, 2012).

Such dynamics have also been identified among actors who, objectively speaking, have very high levels of linguistic competence, such as foreign-born academics working in the UK (Sliwa & Johansson, 2014), and actors who wield considerable power in other respects, such as senior managers in a Japanese MNE in which English was introduced as a corporate language (Peltokorpi, 2022). In line with these findings, language skills have also been shown to be a powerful driver of subgroup formation (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999), sometimes resulting in vicious cycles of decreasing trust. These may occur, for example, as less skilled speakers engage in controversial practices, such as code-switching, to try to keep up (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011; see also Ahmad & Barner-Rasmussen, 2019), while those with linguistic advantages are perceived to use these to their own benefits (Tenzer, Pudielko, & Harzing, 2014).

Situations differ—acts seeking commonalities when communicating are complemented with acts of exclusion. The linguistic context relates to the liabilities of foreignness and outsidership (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009), as language is an instrument that can be used for exclusion and othering. Hence, not being able to use a language professionally may cause hazards and disadvantages, but culture and origin may also generate such liabilities and emotions that influence business relationships through acts of communication (e.g. Wang et al., 2020).

In sum, prior research suggests that interpersonal power relationships can take on unexpected new dimensions because of language, such as when linguistic skills are not aligned with hierarchical or market positions or when language barriers stop one from displaying and deploying one’s actual skills and competencies. As Meehan and Wright (2012) point out, managers who do not operate in their native languages may also be in weaker positions to set rules and practices. Perceived inequalities in communication and language usage emerge particularly in migrant- and cross-cultural language usage, in which comprehension and participation in communication differ depending on the ability to use the dominant language of the host country or the business language (Elo & Ivanova-Gongne, 2020). Individual SME owners and managers involved in B2B are subject to their sentiments and perceptions on respective contexts and interactions, and power constellations are also perceived and enacted (e.g. Ghauri, 2003; Wang et al., 2020).

Fig. 1 presents a reflection of the theoretical discussion and serves as the basis for the interpretation of our empirical findings (see Section 4). In short, previous literature suggests that intercultural interactions in B2B business relationships follow certain patterns depending on what language is used, such as a national language (dominant or titular) or a common business language (host/third-country language), which can generate a self-perceived power (im)balance in the business interaction (cf. Hingley, 2005). This balance is negotiated situationally by the individuals involved by using the language skills and knowledge needed for the B2B business role and task (see Fig. 1). In this negotiation process, the context offers different affordances for local and migrant SME owners/managers as language users.

3. Methods

A qualitative approach is appropriate for an exploratory study, such as the present one. We address experiences and practices that are socially constructed through culture and language, applying an interpretivist approach in which researchers who are part of what is studied interpret and reflexively analyse a small sample in an in-depth manner (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). We draw upon three qualitative datasets, one in 2012 and two collected in 2017–2018, to enable an abductive style moving from the respondents’ descriptions and meanings to categories and concepts that generate a more theoretical understanding of a phenomenon (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). The first dataset consisted of three interviews. This dataset served as a pilot study regarding identifying self-perceived power in the data and provided some insights into overall patterns related to sensemaking in language (e.g. the usage of boundary spanners). The second dataset consisted of thirteen in-depth interviews with Russian native managers of SMEs located in Northwest Russia (home country context) who were involved in IB relationships with their Finnish counterparts at the time of data collection. The interviewees were sought with the help of the local international chamber of commerce, which sent out invitations for interviews to relevant interviewees from their database, and then the interested interviewees contacted the researchers by expressing their willingness to participate in the interview. The third dataset included eight in-depth interviews with Finland-based (host country context) Russian migrant entrepreneurs involved in IB operations, including their Finnish and Russian-based counterparts. As a criterion, all datasets included inherent sensemaking of the intercultural interactions between Russian and Finnish counterparts.

To illustrate our argument, we selected eight interviews from the two datasets collected in 2017–2018 that contained the clearest examples of the general patterns that were also noticeable in the rest of the data. Hence, these rounds represented purposive and theoretical sampling and provided an adequate set of interviews (Saunders et al., 2016). The characteristics and backgrounds of the selected interviewees are presented in Table 2. The sizes of the respondents’ companies were indicated with an approximate rather than an exact number, labelling them as micro (fewer than 10 employees), small (fewer than 50) or medium

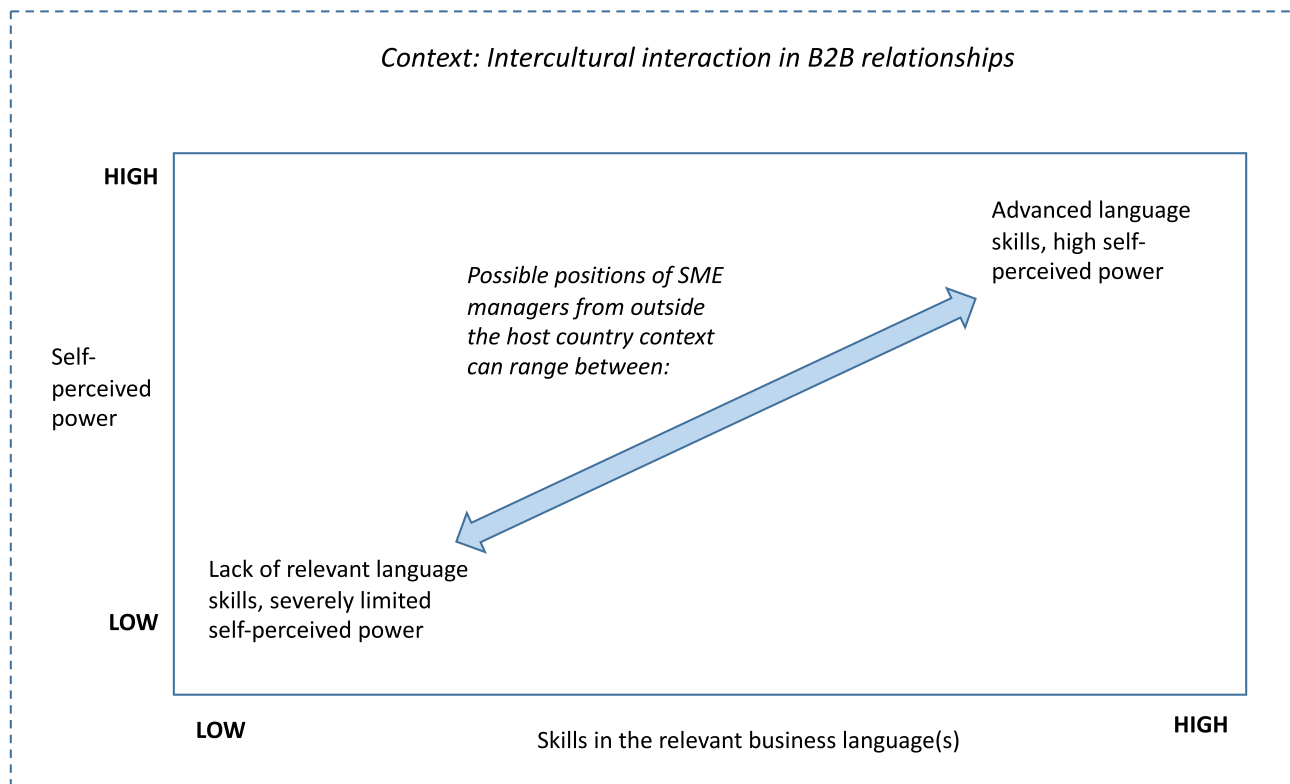


Fig. 1. How language skills and self-perceived power are linked in intercultural B2B interactions (Source: Authors' own elaboration).

enterprises (fewer than 250) to better ensure the respondents' higher levels of anonymity. The definition of an SME is based on EU recommendation 2003/36 (European Commission, 2023). The respondents and their companies were anonymised carefully to protect their integrity as business actors (Wiles, Charles, Crow, & Heath, 2006), so the names used in this study (see Table 2) were fictional. We also described their overall perceptions of language usage in business interactions, as this was relevant to the focus of the study. The types of relationships of the selected interviewees with the Finnish partners varied, allowing for qualitative data diversity, which is relevant when applying a constructivist, interpretive perspective (see Kvale, 1996). Thus, the aim of the data is not to compare findings but for the cases to complement one another in providing a holistic view of the question in focus. We consider each respondent as an individual case.

Among the eight selected interviewees presented in Table 2, we identified two groups. One group consisted of individuals engaged in intercultural business relationships while remaining to be based in their home country context (in this case, Russia). The other group consisted of individuals dealing with business relationships while being themselves embedded in the host country context (Finland) as migrants or because of extensive exposure of their business activities to the Finnish market. The respondents located in Russia either perceived their company as relatively Westernised companies, or they studied abroad or previously worked for foreign companies. The Russian-speaking individuals located in Finland had either senior roles in the companies they were working for in Russia or had their own businesses in Russia before moving to Finland. Compared with focusing on only one type of case, including both sets of cases provides a fuller picture of how self-perceptions of individual power change when transferring to a novel context.

All interviews were conducted in the respondents' native language (Russian), allowing a localised perspective of the focal issues and enabling the respondents to 'fully express themselves' (Welch & Piekkari, 2006, as cited in Tsang, 1998, p. 511). As authors, we are natives of the national contexts being examined (Russian and Finnish), which meets the *prolonged engagement* criterion of research trustworthiness and

thus enhances the credibility of contextually bounded interpretations (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

We examined the respondents' interviews as sensemaking (Weick, 1979; Weick et al., 2005) or the process of applying various interpretation repertoires when making sense of certain situations and interactions (see Ivanova-Gongne, 2015; Ivanova-Gongne & Törnroos, 2017). Sensemaking 'unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage [in] on-going circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively while enacting more or less order into those on-going circumstances' (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). In other words, sensemaking can be defined as "the way people make bets on 'what is going on' and what to do next" (Colville & Pye, 2010, p. 373).

Sensemaking has cognitive, narrative and communicative dimensions (Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008), which enable individuals to act upon the meaning attached to the interpreted situation. A key characteristic of our analysis is that sensemaking is enactive of the environment (Weick, 1995), meaning that it 'is about making sense of an experience within our environment' (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010). Being highly contextually embedded, established societal approaches to language represent the environment but are, at the same time, incorporated into individuals' minds and help them interpret the world. Therefore, the approach(es) to language that an individual applies while making sense of a situation further shapes intercultural interactions between this individual and his/her business partners.

The research data were interpreted using thematic analysis, which focused on the content and what was said by the interviewees rather than how (Riessman, 1993). We searched for themes, patterns and occurrences reflecting the data and respective theoretical views that may explain language use in the context of intercultural business interaction (Mees-Buss, Welch, & Piekkari, 2022; Saunders et al., 2016). Thus, while reading the interviews, we focused on the following themes: what language was used in what kinds of situations, why and how this language was used, how the quality of language (e.g. accent or diasporic partners) influenced communication, how these language practices were related

Table 2
 Characteristics and backgrounds of the interviewees (Source: Authors' own elaboration).

Name	Industry	Size of the company	Position	Type of rel-p with Finnish companies	Short background and overall perceptions about language
SME managers located in Russia (North-West)					
Ivan, company Alpha	Automotive	Small	Head of marketing	Seller (RUS) – Independent dealer (FIN)	Completed his MBA in England and has good command of English. He perceives that the 'older generation' in Russia has a harder time with intercultural business relationships, as there are certain 'psychological [and] cultural barriers, knowledge of language, etc.' He feels that it is easier for the younger generation to overcome these barriers because they have 'internships abroad', 'travel abroad from childhood' and 'don't see psychological and cultural barriers to entering European markets'. He senses imbalances; for example, his first trip to the US was 'psychologically hard' for him because of 'Russia–US relationships and when you go there, everything is awesome and brilliant, but there's still some barrier, some prejudices'.
Boris, company Beta	Industrial automation	Medium	CEO	Joint R&D development	Sees language as a big problem. Studied English in school, but does not use it that much and is afraid of making mistakes. He said, however, that language is not a major problem for his engineers, as they understand one another on a professional level using expert jargon. Mostly, they have a translator with them during intercultural business interactions, but this is not that handy. In some Finnish partner organisations, there are Russian speakers. For their expansion to Finland he feels that they would need some 'insider' with knowledge of the language and the business mentality. The company's partners from the Finnish side were mostly Finnish speaking, but they had one who was constantly located in Russia and spoke Russian. She mostly dealt with partners through translators or spoke Russian with those who knew Russian, but she felt that the 'blueprints were self-explorable'; she did not see any language problems.
Alena, company Gamma	Engineering (gas)	Micro	CEO	Seller (RUS) – Buyer (FIN)	Has good command of the English language. Before establishing her own company, Maria oversaw the establishment of the subsidiary of a major US company in Russia. She transferred that experience to her company by building the company work, logistics, accounting and documentation differently. She also tries to employ young people, as it is easier for them to adapt to new rules/ways of doing. Most of her personnel and engineers know English.
Maria, company Delta	Healthcare industry	Small	CEO	Independent distributor (RUS) – Seller (FIN)	
Russian-speaking migrant entrepreneurs located in Finland					
Irina, company Zeta	Healthcare industry	Micro	Migrant entrepreneur	Seller (RUS) – Various partners	Migrated to Finland from Russia to do her PhD and in order to have a better life for herself and her children. Has fluent knowledge of English and lower intermediate knowledge of Finnish. In Russia, she worked as a chief dentist in a clinic. Her current company develops medical devices. Established the company with a close friend who had lived in Finland for more than 20 years and knew the Finnish language. When communicating with Finnish companies, she uses English, but her Finnish-speaking partner is of great help when in need of Finnish language.
Maksim, company Eta	Healthcare industry	Micro	Migrant entrepreneur	Service provider (RUS) – Various partners	Migrated from Israel to Finland as the 'land of opportunities'. Did business in Russia before as well. Fluent in English but has problems due to lack of knowledge of the Finnish language; he also feels that Finns 'aren't so eager to have contact with foreigners' due to his Russian surname. He encountered difficulties understanding contracts and has lost some money as a result. Now prefers to have all the documentation with suppliers in English. He feels that without fluency in Finnish, it is not possible to expand his business further. Was not yet able to 'find a decent partner or team that would help [him] overcome difficulties related to Finnish [language]'.
Olga, company Theta	Clothing	Micro	Migrant entrepreneur	Seller (RUS) – Various partners	Moved to Finland from Russia after her husband did. She operated a restaurant business in Russia and is fluent in English, with lower intermediate knowledge of Finnish. In Finland, she had a clothes shop that sold a Russian brand of clothes (had a franchise agreement), but on the advice of a Finnish bank that gives loans, she tried not to openly disclose the origin of the brand: "They [the bank] told me, 'Don't say that you're a Russian brand; say that you're a European brand' ... but of course people ask. Many thought that we're a Spanish brand [because of the colourful design of the clothes]."
Anastasia & Kirill, company Iota	Reselling of wooden pellets	Micro	Migrant entrepreneur	Reseller (RUS) – Various partners	A married couple who migrated to Finland from Russia to pursue a better life for their children. Another reason for moving is the rampant corruption and lack of safety in Russia. Both speak fluent English and have little knowledge of Finnish. Kirill had a business in Russia and travelled between Russia and Finland for business purposes before moving to Finland. They had a Finnish business co-owner but had some conflicts with him because of differing views on how to develop their business; the Finnish co-owner did not want a 'big business', while they wanted active expansion and development. There were also some misunderstandings concerning co-ownership. The couple claims that the Finnish co-owner did not want to officially register them as co-owners because of their Russian origin and the negative consequences of having Russians as co-owners of the company (e.g. for obtaining bank loans).

to business relationship development and how the respondents resolved challenging language-related situations (e.g. use of boundary spanners). The themes were arrived at via the authors in-depth knowledge of the topic and their previous research related to it. The author team consists of researchers with in-depth expertise in language (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Ivanova-Gongne et al., 2021), intercultural business interaction and relationships (e.g. Ivanova-Gongne, 2015; Ivanova-Gongne and Torkkeli, 2018), as well as migration studies (e.g. Elo, Minto-Coy, Silva and Zhang, 2020; Elo, Ivanova-Gongne and Kothari, 2022). All of these experiences helped to reach a consensus about the themes for coding, endowing the study with high reliability. Furthermore, these topics have repeatedly appeared in the interviews during the first reading of the transcripts by the authors."

An additional layer of analysis was made in relation to self-perceived power as exhibited in the respondents' sensemaking. Looking at how things are said allows us to understand the interviewees' cognition, as 'language use is based on thoughts' (Tenbrink, 2015, p. 98). The interviewees themselves might not be knowledgeable of all the cognitive aspects embedded in their sensemaking (Tenbrink, 2015). However, 'language use reflects crucial aspects about the speakers' concepts, mediated by their understanding of the communicative situation, at any given moment' (Tenbrink, 2015, p. 100). A high-power speech exhibits perceptions of control of the self and control of others (Gibbons, Busch, & Bradac, 1991; Hosman & Siltanen, 2006), which corresponds to the literature on self-perceived power mentioned in Section 2.1. Therefore, we look at how these perceptions of control over resources are reflected in the interviews.

All the authors were involved in the analysis of the data, which was done manually using spreadsheet software and without the use of any specific coding software. One of the authors is a Russian speaker, and the primary analysis was conducted in this language, allowing insight into the nuances of the respondents' sensemaking (Welch & Piekkari, 2006). All the interviews were translated into English by professional translators. Thus, the other authors engaged with the data through the English version of the interviews. The Russian-speaking researcher was able to provide insights into the context of the interviews, thus making back-translation unnecessary, as the *cultural* level of the text is more important than its linguistic features; it is also impossible 'to produce a target-language text that is fully equivalent in all its features' (Chidlow, Plakoyiannaki, & Welch, 2014, p. 574). The presence of both native and non-native speakers also leads to the possibility of a double analysis, in which the data are analysed both from *insider* and *outsider* perspectives, allowing the outsiders to 'question meanings, turns of phrase, expressions and metaphors that may be taken for granted by a native speaker' (Welch & Piekkari, 2006, p. 427).

4. Experiences of language usage in intercultural business interactions

4.1. Language skills and experiences of home country-based managers of internationally active SMEs

At low levels of exposure to the Finnish market (host market) and operating from the home market (Russia), most respondents initially expressed no problems when asked about difficulties in interactions because of language. In terms of the theme of *language usage in different situations*, they often stated that good levels of English in their companies were enough to do business successfully with their Finnish partners. However, the fact that English was the second language for both Russians and their Finnish partners was acknowledged as creating some obstacles.

From a business perspective, language is more or less, let's say, simplified, adapted; here, there are no problems for sure ... It's easier [however] when you sign a bilateral agreement/contract that's in Russian and English. In case it's in Russian, English and Finnish, then it's a bit

[more complex] ... translations, etc. ... But it concerns those situations when you have to go to the court or when it's an official contract that has to be notarised on a government level. – Ivan, Marketing Director, Company Alpha.

Ivan felt that it was easier to interact in the US because 'English is their native language', and with Finland, sometimes it is difficult to 'remember something, like individuals' names, town names and other non-standard things'. In general, he felt that managing two languages was easier than handling three (i.e. Finnish, Russian and English).

When it comes to the theme of *quality of language affecting communication*, some respondents also stated that common professional jargon facilitated communication and interactions with partners. According to the respondents, in cases in which such professional jargon knowledge or non-verbal language (e.g. engineering blueprints) was present, a common language (i.e. English, Russian or Finnish) was not even required.

When engineers start talking with engineers, then it [the interaction] is even better ... they don't understand [one another's language]; one doesn't know Russian, [and] the other doesn't know Finnish, [but they have their own language]. – Boris, CEO, Company Beta.

The [Finnish] manager, who was always in Russia, spoke well in Russian. Others had translators, but the schemes, drawings and blueprints were self-explicable. We didn't see any language barriers. – Alena, CEO, Company Gamma.

Apart from resorting to professional language, the interviewees resolved *challenging language-related situations* in other ways. In cases in which English is not an option for communication or managers do not have the necessary knowledge, companies have to use professional translators, influencing the quality of interactions. The respondents often mentioned the essential roles of bilingual employees in partner companies; these often acted as boundary spanners (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014) by facilitating interactions and eliminating misunderstandings. Boundary spanners, especially bilinguals, have received little attention in B2B marketing but are crucial for maintaining relationships and often perform the roles of communicator and negotiator (Poblete & Bengtson, 2020).

If there are Russian-speaking persons [in the foreign partner company], then it's good as well. Communication becomes easier, especially if the client visits us and shows us their products. If there's a need to translate, then, after all, the clients are also busy and start to rush. If there's a Russian-speaking person, then it's easier. But I should say that it's not the main requirement; it's nice but not the main thing. – Maria, CEO, Company Delta.

The experienced *language practices* of the interviewees affected *business relationship development* to some extent (see also Elo et al., 2015). In the case of managers operating in the Russian market serving Finnish partners, the amount of self-perceived individual power was high because of their high market knowledge, knowledge of the local language and the high status of these individuals in their companies and in business relationships with their Finnish partners. Informal interpersonal relationships are essential for doing business in Russia (Ivanova-Gongne & Torkkeli, 2018). A common language, in turn, improves the understanding of cultural specifics, which increases familiarity between negotiating partners and thus increases trust (Selmier & Oh, 2012). Therefore, Russian managers act as boundary spanners (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014) and a gateway for Finnish and other foreign partners to the Russian market irrespective of the types of business relationships, and they have certain power to decide how the business relationships and interactions are built. For instance, similar to other respondents, Maria from company Delta, which acts as a distributor, mentions that Finnish companies are slow in replying and sometimes

disappear; she further states that there are no ‘unique companies’, so in such cases, they will send a reminder once or twice but not more than this, and then they will just ‘find partners from another country’. This self-perceived power relates to high control over resources, including linguistic strategies (see [Voyer & McIntosh, 2013](#)), that is, the perception that the English language, mixed language strategies or communication via a professional language or via a translator is sufficient for a balanced interaction with partners.

Some of the respondents considered opening a subsidiary and entering the Finnish market; in this case, the loss of power because of language and a lack of market knowledge was apparent. For instance, Boris from Company Beta told a story they had with a Finnish partner. They discussed a product of company Beta that, according to the Finnish partner, was good and could be sold in the Finnish market. However, the Finnish partner suggested to ‘delete all the Russification (language)’ from the product so that ‘nothing gives a hint that the product is from Russia’ and that they would sell it through a Finnish company. When Boris asked why they should do so, the Finnish partner said something like, ‘Well, you understand, now Russia is an aggressor and something else, and we’re afraid that no one will buy it [the product]’. Boris also mentioned that to establish a subsidiary in Finland, they would need a person who ‘knows the language and the mentality and situation in the market’. In this case, loss of power relates to a lack of control over resources, e.g. the need to rely extensively (not just for translation purposes) on another individual or a company ([Voyer & McIntosh, 2013](#)) and the need to hide information on the country of origin. Therefore, language may serve as the determining factor for understanding the cultural values (i.e. the Finnish language) ([Selmier & Oh, 2012](#)) or disadvantages related to racialisation based on audibility (i.e. the Russian language; see more in [Krivonos, 2020](#)).

As soon as business operations had to cross the border or deal with the Finnish market on a more in-depth level, language thus served as a major element that determined the control of existing resources and dependence on other persons; this is linked to a lower amount of self-perceived power (see [Voyer & McIntosh, 2013](#)), as well as to the liability of foreignness and enhanced psychic distance. We elaborate on these aspects in the examples in the next section.

4.2. Language skills and experiences of migrant entrepreneurs when operating in the host market (Finland)

Operating in the host market (Finland) and higher market exposure entails the managers from outside the host country context (in our case migrant entrepreneurs) to work more deeply within the host country’s regulative and normative environment. Especially for recently arrived migrant entrepreneurs operating in a host context, the language setting creates challenges that need time and learning to be overcome. In our data, this was linked to *use of the host country language* in business situations, namely the need to know Finnish. Furthermore, knowledge of Finnish was considered to allow for a more in-depth level of business relationships by understanding and conveying the details of the business. The respondents who knew the Finnish language or had a business associate with the necessary knowledge felt the most confident in their business. However, the use of a boundary-spanning business associate comes with certain risks because of increased reliance on another individual; this indicates loss of control and thus lower self-perceived power ([Voyer & McIntosh, 2013](#)), as well as the possibility of negative outcomes in case of loss or conflict with the boundary spanner.

There are problems like if someone [Finnish partner or potential partner] is weaker in terms of English language skills, or it’s just not comfortable for them to speak English. But my business associate is perfect in this ... he speaks Finnish and then he leads the discussion ... – Irina, Company Zeta.

Irina praised the ease of doing business in Finland and the reliability

of their Finnish partners while still perceiving certain challenges in intercultural interactions. According to her, Russians were more open to communication, whereas Finns were more closed, as it was difficult to understand what they had on their minds.

For the interviewees that resided in Finland, the *quality of language* influenced both overall communication when doing business, as well as business relationship development. In contrast to Irina’s case, the respondents who had neither a Finnish-speaking partner nor fluency in Finnish themselves experienced several problems when operating in the Finnish market and when developing business relationships with Finnish partners. These problems concerned details on how to manage a business in Finland in terms of contracts, workspace repairs, taxes, social insurance and other aspects.

I came like a blind kitten, even though I had led a business before and could do it pretty well. Of course, language hit me hard; I didn’t know the Finnish language. I signed contracts here, which in the end ... I suffered from those a lot. – Maksim, Company Eta.

Thank God everyone speaks English, but I can say that we’ve had some problems here, problems when there was a need to have some details, for example, in terms of payments to pension funds. And there were also difficulties when we were doing renovations in our shop. The first shop was very expensive, mostly because we didn’t know specific details [on how to better handle it]. We overpaid a lot in the opening phase, that’s for sure. – Olga, Company Tetha.

Olga also mentioned that when trying to find a space for their shop, she interacted with shopping centres and received a reply only from a shopping centre in a city region that was initially highly multinational. The shopping centre owners were also of a foreign origin, and she believed that this had a role in the more positive attitude towards her company. Another example she provided of interaction and a lack of market knowledge was a conflict with a foreign shoe company concerning the name of the brand. The foreign company had the same name for their brand and was already active in the Finnish market, whereas Olga had a misunderstanding with the Russian mother company (with whom they had a franchise agreement). The Russian mother company gave Olga ‘exclusive rights to distribute the brand’, while their trademark was still in the registration process. In the end, the Russian mother company offered to buy the foreign brand, pay royalties and so on, but it was unsuccessful; this resulted in diminished marketing activities. Olga wanted to tell this story as an example of the differences in ‘mentalities’. In order to alleviate the *challenging language-related situation of understanding the specifics of doing business in Finland*, Olga established a community of Russian-speaking entrepreneurs, which she saw as a form of diaspora support:

We [community of Russian-speaking entrepreneurs] help one another very much. Really, told such things that you wouldn’t even read anywhere. You can obtain this knowledge only from personal experience. – Olga, Company Tetha.

One entrepreneur was completely unsuccessful in establishing a business with Finns because of language issues and had quite a negative perspective on doing business in Finland as a whole. She felt that not speaking Finnish like a native and without an accent may lead to the company being perceived as an ‘outsider’ and may diminish their chances of any business with Finns. Establishing business relationships with Finnish customers was more complicated,² as it was difficult to sell

² Anastasia and Kirill from company Lota had a Finnish-speaking co-owner before. However, by the time of the interview, they had parted ways with their co-owner because of differences in views on how the company should develop. They then had to deal with their Finnish business partners on their own and reflected on their intercultural interactions from that perspective.

Table 3
Differences in sensemaking of the role of language and perceived power in intercultural business interactions (Source: Authors’ own elaboration).

Analytical themes	Perspectives from theory	Managers in the home country (Russia)	Entrepreneurs in the host country (Finland)
Language use in different situations and language quality	Perception of English as a language of global business	English is oftentimes enough. <i>‘From a business perspective, language is more or less, let’s say, simplified, adapted ...’</i>	English is oftentimes not enough. <i>‘If someone [Finnish partner or potential partner] is weaker in terms of English language skills, or it’s just not comfortable for them to speak English’</i>
	Host country language perception	Lack of language knowledge brings minor, situation-specific challenges only. <i>‘concerns those situations when you have to go to the court or when it’s an official contract’</i> <i>difficult to ‘remember something, like individuals’ names, town names and other non-standard things’</i>	The Finnish language is needed to understand details concerning, e.g. the normative environment <i>‘Thank God everyone speaks English, but I can say that we’ve had some problems here, problems when there was a need to have some details’.</i> <i>‘I came like a blind kitten ... Of course, language hit me hard’.</i>
Relation of language practices to business relationship development	Psychic distance	Professional jargon helps the ‘common’ language and perceptions of low psychic distance	Realisation of psychic distance and the need for adaptation. A Russian origin brings wrong associations. <i>‘delete all the Russification (language)’</i> <i>‘nothing gives a hint that the product is from Russia’</i>
	Liability of foreignness	<i>‘... schemes, drawings and blueprints were self-explicable’</i>	<i>‘It’s not enough to know the language to sell products here ... Let’s say, I’ll learn the Finnish language; I’ll be talking with an accent anyway’.</i>
Resolving challenging language-related situations	Use of translators or bilingual employees (of Russian origin)	Use of translators or bilingual employees (of Russian origin)	High dependence on local partners when in need of success. But, act as boundary spanners for transnational relationships themselves.
	Use of boundary spanners	<i>‘... it’s nice [to have a Russian-speaking manager in the partner company], but [it’s] not the main thing’</i>	<i>‘my business associate is perfect in this ... he speaks Finnish and then he leads the discussion ...’</i>
	Amount of resources	<i>‘knows the language and the mentality and situation in the market’</i> High amount of resources and options <i>‘There are no unique companies’; can ‘find partners from another country’</i>	<i>‘Russians were interested in us because they were looking for a Finnish partner’.</i> Low amount of resources, creating own resources (e.g. Russian-speaking diaspora help) <i>‘We [community of Russian-speaking entrepreneurs] help one another very much. Really, told such things that you wouldn’t even read anywhere’.</i>

products without full knowledge of the Finnish language, and it also disclosed their foreign origin, which was a negative factor.

We talked to potential partners in English, called different companies and offered our products also in English, and Finns didn’t want to make contact. They saw that it wasn’t Finns but foreigners, and no one agreed to buy our products ... It’s not enough to know the language to sell products here ... Let’s say, I’ll learn the Finnish language; I’ll be talking with an accent anyway. They’ll know that I’m not a Finn, and they’ll in any case have this constant barrier, that they wouldn’t want to buy anything. – Anastasia, Company Iota.

On the contrary, the Russian business partners (suppliers of the products they sold) of Anastasia were ‘interested in them, as they were looking for a Finnish partner’ and Anastasia’s company was that ‘Finnish partner’ for the Russians and what was beneficial, spoke Russian. This example shows how Anastasia’s self-perceived power depended on language. We proceed with a discussion of the research questions (see Section 1) based on the empirical examples and theoretical background.

4.3. Language and self-perceived power

Our key finding is the variation in how the Russian respondents make sense of the role of language in their intercultural business interactions with Finns (see Table 3), with the difference arising from their extent of exposure to the Finnish market and their business relationships with

Finnish partners. Table 3 reflects on those differences by summarizing the findings from the analytical themes³ and relating them back to the theories and concepts discussed in Section 2.

In general, managers with lower exposure to the Finnish market—who could be labelled as home country-based managers of internationally active SMEs—made sense of their experiences primarily by referring to views on language rooted in their home country (Russian) context. They expressed greater trust in their ability to handle challenges in English or through interpreters and consequently also seemed to have higher levels of self-perceived power. While the use of interpreters or reliance on bilingual employees (of Russian origin) in the partner organisation may indicate the loss of power, such a linguistic strategy was only one of the many others available to the managers in the home country context, which means higher control over resources and, in turn, higher individual power (Voyer & McIntosh, 2013). Consistent with Fiske and Dépret (1996), managers with higher self-perceived power levels may overlook and/or not actively seek for informative cues about others. Thus, managers in the home country diminished their perceptions of cultural differences and psychic distance by emphasising common professional language or the relative sufficiency of English to cope with the interaction.

By contrast, those with greater exposure to the host (Finnish) market—who could be labelled as migrant entrepreneurs—expressed views on language anchored in both the home and the host contexts. Thus, they were able to notice cultural differences, and they emphasised these

³ While certain interview quotes may relate to more than one analytical theme, in Table 3 we assigned them to one theme only for the sake of clarity

more extensively. The migrant entrepreneurs also regarded the *English as a global language* approach with some scepticism, emphasising instead the importance of the local language and local partners and acknowledging that fluency in English provided them with less self-perceived power in the Finnish context than they had expected. The Russian language and their Russian origin were, in turn, mostly disadvantages, but they also understood their usefulness in the case of transnational relations and interactions with the Russian market. Compared with their peers who were less exposed to the Finnish market, they spoke in greater detail regarding how language played a role in the host context, with an emphasis on the dominant local language (Finnish), and they explicitly expressed lower levels of self-perceived power or even powerlessness in some situations. Lower levels of self-perceived power and perception of increased psychic distance may force migrant entrepreneurs in the host country context to be more conscious of the cues of others' and consequently of local language importance (see Ambos et al., 2019; Fiske & Dépret, 1996). This is also in line with findings that migrants in general have lower control of their resources (Dabić et al., 2020), which may lead to a lack of power, and that despite learning the host country's language, accent or audibility may play a role in their disadvantages and act as an indicator of otherness (Krivonos, 2020) creating a liability of foreignness (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Krivonos (2020) states that among the challenges of Russian speakers in working life in Finland are their accent or audibility and the possibility of being racialised on these grounds, which is similar to our findings.

In sum, the location and context of the business interaction matter, with migrants who own and run SMEs in the host market having very different experiences of the power balance related to language and market exposure compared with their peers who remain based in the home country. We stress that these patterns reflect more than surface-level differences in language requirements and skills between Finland and Russia; what the data suggest is that different levels of exposure to the Finnish market affect respondents' beliefs about the usefulness of certain language/s and thus the legitimacy and power of language users in that market. Specifically, their beliefs in the power of English as the language of globalisation weakens, and they increasingly perceive the Finnish business environment as characterised by an emphasis on the primary, i.e. dominant, national language.

5. Discussion

While it is often thought that language problems in IB can be solved by using English (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2014), the findings of this study illustrate that this is not necessarily so, both because linguistic realities are more complex than that and because individuals make sense of language based on models rooted in the specific social contexts with which they are familiar. The findings align with recent IB studies that highlight the importance of considering the existence of multiple languages and the importance of the home-country linguistic context in IB (Brannen et al., 2014; Tenzer et al., 2017), thus supplementing the discourse-based view in IB (Treviño & Doh, 2021) in the B2B marketing domain. Moreover, the nuanced view to business- and linguistic context supports the idea that it is not possible to explain social phenomena without consideration of their contexts and that language usage and power structures require contextual explanation (Welch, Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, Piekkari, & Plakoyiannaki, 2022). The findings show that context and language, as well as translation power dynamics are intertwined, generating an additional level of power dynamics that emerge from the business per se (Hingley et al., 2015; Westney et al., 2022). We argue that the B2B marketing literature would benefit from such a *mosaic use of languages* approach, which would enhance the much-needed contextualisation of business interaction research at an individual level (Ivanova-Gongne et al., 2022; Ojansivu & Medlin, 2018) while accounting for its intercultural aspect. Building on these overarching observations, we now proceed to answer our two research questions.

First, our respondents with less exposure to the Finnish market displayed a globalist notion of English as a lingua franca, a language of global business that can be used in intercultural business interactions anywhere in the world. This belief in the power of English was often coupled with the perception that language-related problems could be solved by supporting English language communication with the use of professional languages, simultaneous translation and/or mixed-language strategies (see Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Gaibrois, 2018). This view of language offers SME managers an intuitively attractive way to make sense of language requirements and demands associated with intercultural business interactions (cf. Ivanova-Gongne & Törnroos, 2017). However, our study shows that it comes at the risk of significant negative surprises. With increasing insight into the demands of a specific host country market (in our data, mainly as a result of migration or the desire to establish a subsidiary in the host country market, which is Finland in this case), the understanding of our Russian respondents shifted towards emphasising the importance of the dominant national language. This understanding of language—familiar from their home country context—provided our respondents with a comprehensible frame for making sense of the linguistic context they encountered in Finland as their exposure to that host country market increased. The role of language in international management of firms has been examined mainly using structural, functional, and social practice views of language (Karhunen et al., 2018), and the findings of the present study link to the social practice view in particular.

Second, we find that language indeed functions as a source of self-perceived individual power in business relationships. This perception of one's own power therefore changes when the linguistic context changes, sometimes driving one to rely on others to compensate for the insufficient language skills (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Elo et al., 2020) or resulting in significant frustration because of negatively perceived accents (e.g. Gaibrois, 2018; Wang et al., 2020). Building on the theories discussed in Section 2 and the findings, Fig. 2 develops further the theoretical framework presented in Fig. 1 on the interrelation between language and self-perceived power in the context of intercultural business interaction.

Specifically, the Russian respondents who were not significantly exposed to the Finnish market seemed to be more in control over their resources, including linguistic ones, thus displaying more self-perceived power when making sense of their intercultural interactions with Finnish business partners (see Voyer & McIntosh, 2013). However, the respondents with more exposure to the Finnish host country market tended to see the language of the host country as a reason for a decrease or loss of self-perceived power. While in both cases (in the home and host countries), some of the interviewees were able to use linguistic boundary spanners in order to facilitate intercultural interactions (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014), the risk of increased reliance on boundary spanners was higher in the case of migrant entrepreneurs because, for them, it was the main language resource they had to rely on. For managers with extensive exposure to the host country, the use of language boundary spanners was one of the many language strategies and diaspora resources they used to handle intercultural business interactions (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Elo et al., 2020), so the level of control over such resources could be higher.

In general, our interviews with Russians who took the step to migrate to Finland and set up their own companies strongly suggest that the host country's national language becomes increasingly relevant for migrant entrepreneurs, and they see themselves as being both embedded in and constrained by that dominant language context (Elo, 2016). Prior research suggests that multifaceted linguistic skills in transnational bi-/multilingual migrant entrepreneurs may provide fast lanes to IB markets (Elo et al., 2020). Similarly, the migrant entrepreneurs in our sample confirmed that the applicability of the English as the language of global business approach had limits (Tenzer et al., 2017), beyond which the host country's national language (Finnish) was dominant, and business interactions were difficult to handle successfully without access to skills

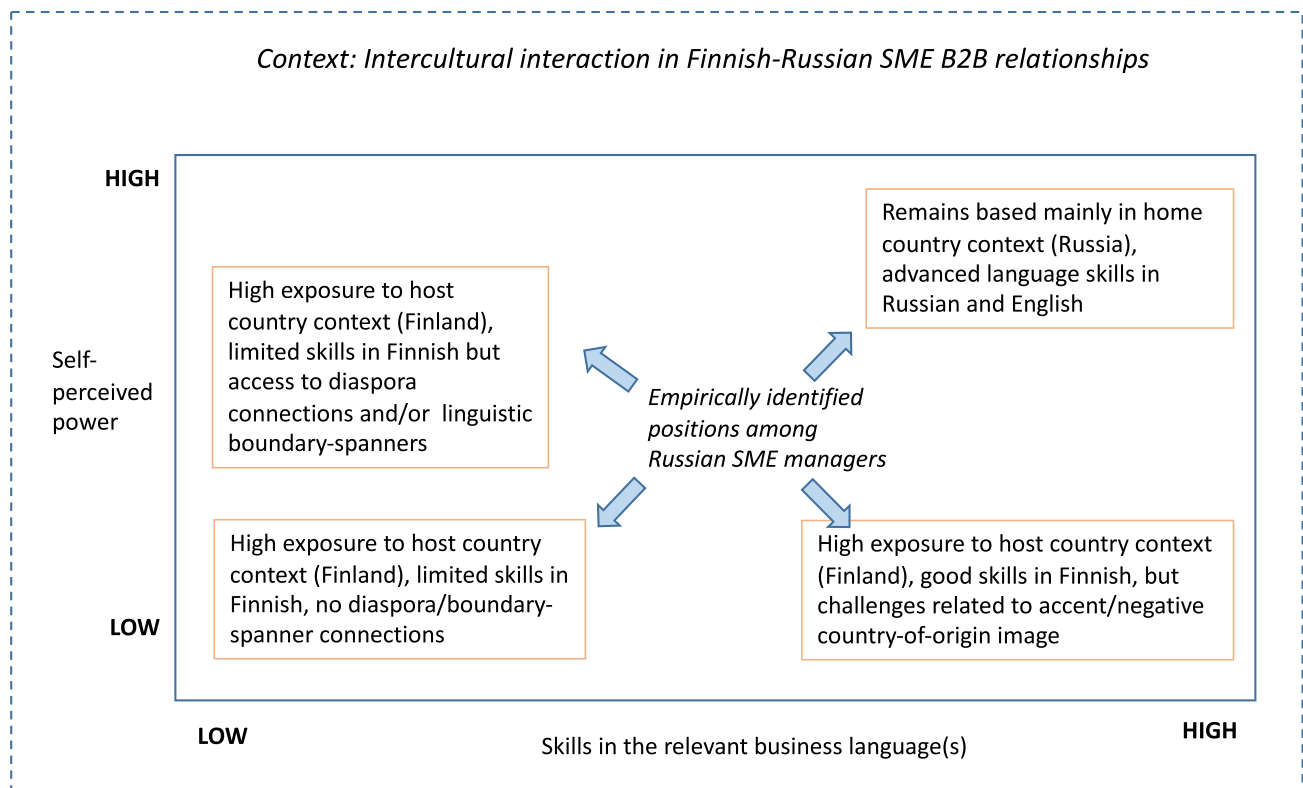


Fig. 2. Self-perceived power and language in intercultural business interactions (Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the findings).

in that language. Host market exposure jolted them out of an English as the language of global business interpretive frame and into a different sensemaking repertoire centred on the notion of a dominant national language that was familiar to them from the Russian context. This appeared to be concomitant with disappointment and feelings of rejection, unfairness and perceived power imbalance (see e.g. Gaibrois, 2018; Neeley et al., 2012).

In short, our findings illustrate how insufficient language skills can drastically affect the power balance in intercultural business relationships when individuals begin to operate outside their home country contexts. Specifically, their professional expertise loses much of its value because it cannot be deployed as efficiently, and dependency on third parties or middlemen increases. Moreover, our findings suggest that these consequences are unexpected to many SME managers, who hold too rosy views of the usefulness of English as the global language of IB. These patterns are likely to persist across cultural/linguistic boundaries other than those between Russia and Finland. We also believe that they help shed light on how deficient language skills at the individual level result in export barriers and liabilities of foreignness at the firm level (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). We argue that this happens by curtailing key actors' self-perceived power, forcing them to rely more on intermediaries, such as boundary spanners and diaspora networks. As our results show, these solutions can work rather well and may occasionally carry some advantages. However, they probably make the firms' operations costlier and slower, thus raising their export barriers and increasing their liability of foreignness. Against this background, we advance theorizing and introduce the following propositions for future enquiry:

- Actors' self-perceived power in an intercultural B2B relationship varies as a function of their degree of host market exposure and their skills in the relevant host market language.
- Lower self-perceived power at the individual level is associated with higher export barriers and increased liability of foreignness at the firm level.
- While intercultural and language skills are inherently individual capabilities, a lack of relevant skills at the individual level can be compensated for in intercultural B2B relationships through the use of boundary spanners and diaspora resources. However, individuals' self-perceived power becomes lower the more they depend on such middlemen.
- A high degree of trust in a specific intercultural B2B relationship moderates any negative effects of actors' degrees of host market exposure, skills in the relevant host market language and use of boundary spanners/diaspora resources on their self-perceived power.

By depicting the dynamics of power and language in intercultural business interactions and by extending theoretically driven and testable propositions based on the findings, this study provides a notable theoretical contribution to the B2B marketing literature. This study is among the very first to shed light on the role of language in B2B marketing, an important and necessary area of research in light of increasing global migration and the concomitant increase in multilingual realities in business and society. In the following, we outline the theoretical contributions of this study in more detail.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

Cultural studies in B2B marketing often take a comparative approach using Hofstede (1980) or other national culture dimensions (e.g. Habel et al., 2020; He & Sun, 2020; McGrath & O'Toole, 2014). Language as an aspect that is interrelated with and embedded in the cultural context (Jiang, 2000) but can also be regarded as separate from culture (Karhunen et al., 2018) has not been sufficiently highlighted in B2B marketing literature despite its apparent importance for intercultural

business interactions (see Tenzer et al., 2017). While recent research on language in the IB field is more extensive (e.g. Karhunen et al., 2018; Peltokorpi, 2022; Tenzer et al., 2017), similar to cultural studies, language-sensitive IB research predominantly considers language at the national level of analysis (see Brannen et al., 2014). By contrast, our findings highlight how national-level patterns feed into individual experiences and the sensemaking of language use in intercultural business interactions. This study adds to the literature in IB and B2B marketing (e.g. Westney et al., 2022), which emphasises that the question of language in intercultural business interactions is not that of a monolithic English as a lingua franca perspective. We argue that the issue of language in IB relationships resembles a mosaic of approaches to language, with individuals applying different pieces of that mosaic, depending on a given situation, as a means of plausible interpretation of the situation, its power constellation and the adaptation to it.

Our findings contribute to the still scarce B2B marketing literature on intercultural business interaction that emphasises the complexity of the cultural embeddedness of individuals engaged in these interactions and the need for an emic approach to culture (Ivanova-Gongne, 2015; Ivanova-Gongne et al., 2022; Sharma, Tam, & Wu, 2018). By focusing on language, our study shows that increasing individuals' international exposure is associated not with the etic presupposition of the growing emphasis on English, as accentuated in previous literature (see Brannen et al., 2014), but rather with the emic recognition that embeddedness in the cultural and linguistic context of the target market is important. Migrant business owners are implicitly expected to communicate using the host country language as a way to build bridges when targeting local clients, even for ethnic crossover marketing (Elo et al., 2020). Additionally, over time, international exposure and related contextual learning may foster and advance individuals' language practices while reducing perceived impediments and critical events that lead to avoidance behaviour (Elo et al., 2015). Hence, language strategies deserve particular attention in cross-cultural B2B relationship development, as they influence self-perceived power imbalances, with implications for firm-level phenomena, such as the liability of foreignness.

Our findings also add to the literature highlighting the importance of bilingual individuals as boundary spanners in IB (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014) and the use of diaspora networks (Elo et al., 2022) to overcome the loss of self-perceived power. We see the use of linguistically skilled boundary spanners and common language diaspora networks as a language strategy that helps compensate for the loss of self-perceived power attributed to a personal lack of relevant dominant language skills.

5.2. Managerial implications

When faced with linguistic challenges, individual SME managers should draw upon their home countries' linguistic contexts when making sense of language use in intercultural business interactions. However, they need to combine this with a sufficient understanding of the host market's business environment. Managers need to be aware that this process may, at the same time, come to change their own relative positions, with important consequences for their self-perceived power. As a result, they should reflect on the importance of having the upper hand in their business relationships abroad; there may be specific reasons, such as preventing the spillover of knowledge or intellectual property rights in business relationships, that can emphasise the need to acquire and retain a favourable power balance in their intercultural interactions. Correspondingly, managers need to explore and understand the language practices and resources used in a particular business, and these preferences may impede or foster business relationships. Many SME owners and managers today have international or migratory experiences and may prefer and/or use their third languages in business interactions. Hence, the power structures in business may not only be highly asymmetric across language user groups but also be highly context specific, even within a country. For management, language

becomes a carrier of additional business power dynamics and international opportunities that call for sensemaking.

From a strategic perspective, the findings of this study suggest that it may be beneficial for managers responsible for foreign market entry to start learning the host country's language before launching operations in that market; indeed, gaining language proficiency beyond English can be a key component in developing equitable business relationships in a B2B context. The ability to develop business relationships and networks is of particular importance for SMEs because of their inherent lack of resources compared with large MNEs. As managers of SMEs are encouraged to leverage business relationships as part of their firms' internationalisation strategies, the present study implies that developing language proficiencies should be part of that process.

Managerially, the findings of this study also further emphasise the importance of a multicultural workforce and bicultural individuals in a company, as recruiting and empowering individuals who can act as boundary spanners may also linguistically save significant time and effort in the international operations of companies. Time is of the essence for SMEs that seek rapid international expansion in particular, such as born globals (Rennie, 1993). Therefore, it may be that possessing a wide spectrum of language proficiencies is even more important to certain types of SMEs than to others.

5.3. Limitations and further research

This qualitative study set in a particular intercultural context does not aim at any statistical generalisations. In particular, the limitations of the study relate to different contextual settings, such as location, migrant status, type of business and buyer–seller roles in business, which provide idiographic features and limitations related to within-category data, e.g. similar status or roles. Nevertheless, the study's findings on B2B relationships in a specific context, and also generalised with due care outside that context as summarised in our propositions, suggest that issues, such as power structures and relationship asymmetries, have a broader theoretical and practical significance and can be instrumental in other B2B relationships and contexts as well (Saunders et al., 2016). These possibilities call for further enquiry using both qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods.

We especially encourage further research and theorizing on language use in intercultural business interactions and its relation to self-perceived power by considering the dominant home and host languages. Whether fairness and power balance would be perceived similarly, for example, among Indian or Ghanaian respondents, whose interpretation repertoires may be more inclined towards the acceptance of multilingualism at the national level than among our Russian respondents, remains one of the many interesting questions for future research raised by this study.

We also call for a deeper understanding of how professional jargon, mixed language strategies and non-verbal language can bridge across national contexts. These aspects of language use in work-related contexts have been touched upon repeatedly by IB scholars (see, e.g. Aichhorn & Puck, 2017, on *company speak*, or Gaibrois, 2018, on hybrid language) but have been integrated only to a very limited extent into prior work on intercultural B2B relationships, thus presenting a rich avenue for future enquiry.

Furthermore, SMEs and their owner–managers as supply chain and B2B actors constitute an underexplored arena of language use (Tenzer et al., 2017) that becomes highly relevant with the digitalisation of business interactions and the codification of language and communication. For example, it is possible that ubiquitous digital tools ranging from Teams to SAP increasingly force SMEs towards the use of English. They also provide relevant and highly diverse cultural and power constellations in IB relationships, which helps raise interesting questions on the role of culture, language and power in global supply chains (e.g. Smagalla, 2004) and global factories (Buckley, 2009; Eriksson, Nummela, & Saarenketo, 2014). Assumptions regarding the role of home and

host country languages may need updating, as national languages or English may no longer be the dominant language used in specific B2B businesses (e.g. because of large-scale migration).

In terms of limitations, any research based on Russian data needs to discuss the consequences of the attack against Ukraine in February 2022. While our research is limited to interview data collected before the war, this is a clear example of how geopolitical challenges impact IB and language usage in B2B, amplified by institutional responses and policies, such as sanctions and bans. In 2021, some 2400 Finnish companies were involved in sales to the Russian market, were present on the Russian market or had subsidiaries there (Hyytinen, 2022). By late 2022, most of these had pulled out, and business relationships between companies from Russia and Finland had mostly ceased to exist (Oksanen, 2022), with seemingly very limited prospects of revival in the near future. However, as mentioned above, this empirical context is still relevant to research, both in itself and in a more general socio-cultural sense. First, it exemplifies the more general dynamics of how the linguistic context may shape business relationships and the self-perceived power of individuals in such relationships. Second, the business relationship dynamics described in the study may now resurface in Europe and third countries, such as the US, the United Arab Emirates or Turkey, where hundreds of thousands of highly skilled Russians have fled during the war (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022). Third, this exodus underlines the need for a better understanding of business interactions with Russians in diaspora, which is not limited to business in or with Russia as a country.

6. Conclusion

Our findings uncover a range of challenges related to language and power that SME owner-managers can experience during intercultural interactions in B2B, especially those who have migrated and set up or planned to set up their businesses in new host countries. They especially highlight the significant linguistic challenges associated with individual SME managers' exposure to intercultural business interactions and that these challenges cannot be solved only by using English. These findings can be extrapolated to a broad range of contexts beyond the Russian-Finnish one. Inasmuch as host societies are interested in integrating migrants and encouraging migrant entrepreneurship, our findings also suggest a need for institutional support and language training for would-be entrepreneurs who may be challenged by the new linguistic context in which they find themselves.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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