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Does language affect trust in global professional contexts? Perceptions of international business professionals

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Abstract

A characteristic of trust is that it is more easily built in close-knit communities where common ground and a common language are already established. Building trust is, therefore, a challenge for business professionals who use English as a shared working language in the multilingual environment of multinational companies. In this exploratory article, concepts from trust research and principles from the field of interactional sociolinguistics are used to throw light on the interplay of language and trust. Based on an analysis of survey and interview data from business professionals in globally operating companies in several countries, findings indicate that language related factors both inhibit and foster trust building.

The article argues that it is crucial for individuals to develop awareness of the language and communication practices that foster trusting relations. This has implications for training and executive development programmes and reinforces claims that the pragmatic communication aspects of language use should be emphasized.

Introduction

International business operations in global professional contexts are today performed mainly through global networks by individuals working in, for example, multicultural teams, multinational project groups, or global virtual teams. As these units tend to be composed of people who speak different mother tongues, they are also multilingual. This aspect, however, seems to be less emphasized in the literature than the fact that they are multicultural (see e.g DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000; Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000; Earley & Gibson, 2002; Iles & Hayers, 1997).

As Charles (2007, p. 261) has pointed out, only language can enable individuals and companies to communicate, so it is of crucial importance to examine developments in the language and communication through which globalization occurs. These developments include not only a greater diversity of natural languages spoken, but also a greater choice of the channels and means of communication available with ICT (information and communication technologies), making exchanges possible across spatial and temporal boundaries when individuals are geographically dispersed (Wilson, Straus, & McEvily, 2006). Consequently, language differences can pose challenges to those involved in international business operations.

Because of the interdependency of individuals employed in the multinational and multilingual teams and networks, one particular challenge is building relations with co-workers. This is especially difficult in virtual teams working in different geographical locations, and research on teams in internationally operating organizations has shown that language-related issues can have a negative impact on interpersonal relations, trust, and workplace culture (see e.g. Schweiger et al. , 2003; DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000; Lagerström & Andersson, 2003; Iles & Hayers, 1997; Kassis Henderson, 2005). In the international workplace, perceptions of intellectual incompetence and uncooperative attitudes can be caused by divergence in discursive practices (Rogerson-Revell, 2007), and these negative perceptions can, in turn, lead to mistrust. A characteristic of trust is that it is more easily built in close-knit communities where common ground and a common language are already established (Larkey, 1996; Pan Wong, Scollon & Scollon, 2002; Gumperz, 2003). Therefore, building trust is often a challenge for individuals in the multilingual workplace (Holden, 2002; Schneider & Barsoux, 1997; Henttonen & Blomqvist, 2005; Kassis Henderson, 2010).

It is today widely acknowledged that the language predominantly used in global professional contexts is English. However, using one dominant language for communication does not mean that common ground is automatically established, although it is recognized that common ground is indispensable for the building of trust. Professionals in multilingual teams cannot be compared to members of close-knit communities who share common ground and understand each other implicitly; for the latter, there is little ambiguity over the interpretation of signals conveying the trustworthiness of individuals. This is because English as a “lingua franca” is a language that is only shared to a limited extent and can be a misleading source of cues for gauging trustworthiness.

Another reason for the complexity of the language issue in building trust and relationships is linked to the perception of competence and in particular the need to distinguish between technical and behavioural or affective competencies. Individuals see themselves and others with specific language identities as, for example, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, and this gives rise to expectations of competence based on pre-conceived standards using monolingualism as a yardstick (Grosjean, 1985, 2010). Consequently, one problem with trust, (which is assessed in part through the perception of an individual’s ability as we will show later), is that levels of competence tend to be based on the native speaker model. However, each individual communicator is a specific speaker-hearer, whether using one, two, or many languages and has a particular language competence. If competence is assessed according to the ability of an individual to use a specific language system, this can be a cause of misplaced trust as he or she may possess the technical language skills but lack the behavioural and affective competencies required in a multilingual context. Working through English as a shared language thus involves an element of vulnerability and risk, which is not present in interactions between members of the same language community who share social meanings and

interpretations implicitly. In an international community, an individual, therefore, needs to establish his or her competence and reliability before gaining trust.

The aim of this paper is to explore the role of language in building, maintaining, or inhibiting trust in international professional contexts. We specifically focus on the language-trust relationship as experienced by internationally operating business professionals and analyze their perceptions and attitudes related to language use and trust in their daily professional activities. The article also aims to show the importance of addressing the question of how language affects trust in language and intercultural training programmes.

In earlier studies (Scollon & Scollon, 1995; Gumperz, 2003), the concept of “trust” has emerged in research on language and communication in multilingual and intercultural contexts. However, in research on trust undertaken by scholars in the fields of organizational studies and international business, there has been little investigation of language use in multilingual settings. Likewise, in spite of the wide use of ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) in global communication, we have very little research on the possible impact of the various native languages of the speakers and/or their cultural and behavioural norms on ELF communication. Therefore, by directly addressing the relationship between trust and language in global professional communication, this exploratory study aims to fill a research gap.

Literature Review

This section presents earlier research related to language and trust. We first discuss the relationship between language and trust in business contexts and then introduce work on the concept of English as a lingua franca in international professional communication. The section that follows the literature review outlines the theoretical framework that we use in the analysis of our data.

Language and trust in professional business contexts

Research on international management teams has shown that establishing trust and relationships is closely connected with language issues and that language is a particular challenge in connection with socialization processes and less so for the technical aspects of work (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000; Lagerstrom & Andersson, 2003; Schweiger, Atamer & Calori, 2003, p.137; Goodall & Roberts, 2003 as quoted in Kassis Henderson, 2005). Technical competence alone, be it in the domain of language and/or in the field of professional expertise of an individual, is insufficient for building trust in the contexts under investigation in this paper (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995, p.717; Griffith, 2002). However, as is shown below, the role of language in the socialization processes, which are unanimously deemed essential, is often overlooked in spite of the fact that, without language, the various bonding activities that are mentioned, cannot take place.

Lagerstrom and Andersson (2003, p. 94) stress the fact that social interactions, because of the tacit knowledge that resides within individuals, are the core of knowledge management, and information technology has only a supportive function. They show that establishing mutual understanding and trust is closely connected with the language strategy and behaviour of individuals, and they explicitly acknowledge the importance of the language issue in interpersonal interaction. They quote executives who say: “But...we all speak our own kind of English, which means that we need to socialize and spend time together to learn each other’s way of speaking. Therefore you must also be interested in meeting and learning to know new people” (p. 91). The

expression “our own kind of English” is clearly an example of the emerging “emotional solidarity” among ELF speakers, and shows that using English as a lingua franca can be an opportunity to develop common ground and a common language (see e.g. Kassis Henderson, 2010; Lagerstrom & Andersson, 2003; Knapp, 2002; see also Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011).

In a study of trust in global virtual teams, Henttonen and Blomqvist (2005, p. 115) identify the importance of “individual tolerance and experiences, social similarity, forms of socializing, caring talk, personal conversations, storytelling, humour, ritual and ceremony” as elements essential to trust building. They also emphasize the need to create a common culture and procedures (p. 117). They do not, however, raise the question of the language or languages of communication, which would enable all these acts of communication to take place. Similarly, Thomas, Zolin and Hartman (2009) clearly demonstrate the central role of communication in developing and maintaining trust. Their main focus is on the quality/quantity of information and its impact on trust in different professional relationships; “language” is not examined—the word is not even mentioned once in the entire article—but is naturally implicitly present in the concept of communication.

The necessity of investigating the language and communication challenges posed by globalization has been clearly spelt out by Charles, as “only language can enable individuals and companies (and countries) to communicate” (Charles, 2007, p. 261). In the same article, she demonstrates that informal oral communication deserves to be considered of paramount importance in multinational companies (MNC) “as it is essential for networking and for forming bridging and bonding relationships between employees which in turn contribute to knowledge sharing and the accumulation of social capital within the company” (Kalla 2006 as quoted in Charles, 2007, p. 272).

Speaking other languages as well as English is reported to contribute to the development of trust. Individuals who know or choose to learn other languages spoken within the organisation are perceived as more cooperative communicators than monolinguals. Research findings reported by Louhiala-Salminen (2002, p.122), Goodall and Roberts (2003, p.159), and Kassis Henderson (2005, p. 73) show that establishing trust can be achieved through making the effort to speak the language of other team members from time to time in aside communications and in small talk even if it is not the dominant shared working language.

Other studies point to the importance of managing language as a corporate asset, claiming that the true cost of the language barrier can’t be measured in terms of translating and interpreting but in damaged relationships (Feely & Harzing, 2003). As Schneider and Barsoux state: “A relationship must be established before business can be conducted. Without that foundation, how could you trust this person to uphold the contract or perform their jobs” (1997, pp. 36-37).

Research on communication in MNCs has demonstrated that there is often a lack of awareness of what communicating across languages and cultures involves (Marschan, Welch & Welch, 1997). This communication requires specific skills, attitudes, and values and cannot be reduced to the obvious aspect of foreign language capability or a knowledge of cultures, important as these may be (Holden, 2002). In this connection, calls have been made for a broader perspective in the assessment of communication skills of employees, with recommendations that these should not be

tied to an employee's ability to use a specific language system (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002). Indeed, technical language competence without affective and behavioural competencies is acknowledged to be insufficient for relationship development (Griffith, 2002).

The concept of English as a lingua franca in international professional communication

As global professional communication is increasingly conducted in non-native English, it is only natural that the concept of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in international professional communication has recently drawn scholarly attention (see e.g., Vollstedt, 2002; Poncini, 2004; Planken, 2005; Kankaanranta, 2006; Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006). For example, the role of culture, and accordingly behaviour, has been discussed: What is the relationship between language and culture when communication takes place in ELF?

As argued by Smit (2003), participants in ELF interactions, by definition, take part in intercultural encounters. Different stances are taken by researchers towards the cultural and behavioural norms observed by ELF speakers. Some argue for the idea that ELF communication involves the cultural and behavioural norms associated with the use of the English language; others consider ELF as a "culture-free" pidgin-like language, and a third group claims ELF carries a mixture of the participants' linguistic and cultural norms with it. The standpoint taken by most recent ELF research seems to blend these hypothetical extreme options and assume a constructionist view that stresses the particular ELF situation and its participants

For example, the two-dimensional description of ELF as both "linguistic masala" and "language stripped bare" by Meierkord (2002) has been frequently cited and seems to grasp the essential: "language stripped bare" refers to the observations by Meierkord that, for instance, discourse participants only make use of politeness phenomena that are experienced as culturally relatively neutral and impersonal. The "linguistic masala" is created by the heterogeneity of ELF users and is shown as a highly dynamic "communicative hybridity" (Meierkord 2002, p. 124); i.e. the speakers incorporate their own cultural norms and linguistic backgrounds as well as the situation specific requirements into a mixture that works for them, in the particular situation.

Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005; see also Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010) studied ELF encounters within a context of business mergers and introduced the concept of BELF (English as a Business Lingua Franca) to refer to the language that business professionals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds use to conduct their daily work activities. The concept BELF was applied to emphasize the overall communicative goal and the domain of language use. According to Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005, pp. 403-404), the BELF speakers share the *B* (the context of business) and the *E* (English), and, to some extent its discourse practices, but are, at the same time, separated by the previous knowledge and experience connected with their various native tongues, their native discourse practices, and their own, often hidden and implicit rules of communication. From the perspective of trust, the "hidden and implicit rules of communication" are interesting as their role is crucial for trust-building in close-knit communities. However, as was discussed in the previous sub-section, recent research has shown that contrary to these forces that may separate ELF speakers from each other, there are strong implications of emotional solidarity among the various members speaking *ELF* or *BELF* in their global professional activities. This, again, is a factor that helps to establish trust.

Theoretical framework

Defining trust

The topic of trust has engendered a considerable body of research in the field of organizational studies. Scholars in many disciplines have studied the causes, nature and effects of trust and there has been much discussion of the conditions that lead to trust.

The creation of trust depends on two factors: an individual's propensity to trust and the perception of the other party's trustworthiness (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). For the present study, reference will be made in particular to two widely quoted articles from the *Academy of Management Review*: "An integrative model of organizational trust" (Mayer et al., 1995) and "Not so different after all: a cross-discipline view of trust" (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998). They define trust as "a willingness to render oneself vulnerable to another based on confident positive expectations" (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395) regarding the other party's "ability, benevolence and integrity" (Mayer et al., 1995). The authors make an interesting parallel between these three factors, called trustworthiness cues, and Aristotle's *Rhetoric* which suggests that "a speaker's ethos is based on the listener's perception of three things: intelligence, character, (reliability, honesty), and goodwill (favourable intentions towards the listener) (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 717, footnote 1). We will next present the definitions by Mayer et al. (1995, p. 717-718) of these three terms, which will be referred to subsequently in the interpretation of the empirical data.

Ability is defined as that group of skills, competencies, and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain. The domain of the ability is specific because an individual may be highly competent in some technical area, affording that person trust on tasks related to that area. However, the same individual may have little aptitude, training, or experience in another area, for instance, in interpersonal communication. *Benevolence* is the extent to which a trustee (an individual in whom trust is placed) is believed to want to do good to the trustor, aside from an egocentric profit motive or extrinsic reward: "It is the perception of a positive orientation of the trustee toward the trustor" (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 719). In the language used by our respondents and in the interviews reported in this article, benevolence tends to be referred to as emotional solidarity, tolerance and interpersonal trust. *Integrity* refers to the trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable. Such issues as the consistency of the party's past actions and the extent to which the party's actions are congruent with his or her words affect the degree to which the party is judged to have integrity (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 719). In everyday language, this would be referred to as the reliability, honesty, or fairness of the other party. An important distinction made between benevolence and integrity is that benevolence increases as the relationship develops whereas integrity is more salient as a trustworthiness factor early in a relationship (Mayer et al. (1995, p. 722). As our data emphasizes the importance of the time factor in building trust, we will refer more to the cue of benevolence than to that of integrity in our analysis.

In interpreting our empirical data, we do not make the distinction between *trustee* and *trustor* as in their interactions, international business professionals are both trustees and trustors at the same time. Therefore, given the interdependence of individuals working towards common goals, the notion of *relational trust* developed by Rousseau (1998, p. 399) is of particular relevance to this study as it shows the importance of interpersonal interactions. Rousseau defines it as follows: "relational trust derives from repeated interactions over time between trustor and trustee.

Information available to the trustor from within the relationship itself forms the basis of relational

Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization

trust.” As this repeated interaction over time takes place through language practices and strategies, the way in which verbal language is used is critical for building relationships and these relationships, in turn, are critical for establishing trust (Schweiger et al., 2003).

Building common ground and a common language

A process of mutual adaptation needs to take place for trustworthiness to be established, and this is done through finding a common language. For the language to become *common*, common ground has to be built up (Scollon & Scollon, 1995; Pan, Wong Scollon & Scollon, 2002; Gumperz, 2003). However, it is important to note that sharing a language involves more than exchanging messages according to the rules and conventions of a certain lexical, syntactical and phonological system. It implies sharing social meanings and interpretations, which poses a particular challenge when a language is used outside a context in which there is a close identification between speakers (Kassis Henderson, 2005). The discourse practices, conventions, and cultural preferences that form communication cultures are not shared by all individuals who bring into professional interaction their own culture-bound views of how encounters should be conducted but also discourse practices stemming from their respective mother tongues (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta, 2005, p.404). Discussing ELF interactions, Seidlhofer has remarked:

English as a native language, like any natural language, is full of conventions and markers of in-group membership such as characteristic pronunciation, specialized vocabulary and idiomatic phraseology, and references and allusions to shared experience and cultural background. (Seidlhofer, 2001, p. 136)

However, in international professional communities, teams and networks create their own working cultures and related conventions. In those communities, ELF speakers do not aim at emulating native speakers but at creating a common language that works for them, in the particular situation.

Reference has been made to perceptions of intellectual incompetence and uncooperative attitudes caused by different ways of speaking or interacting (Rogerson-Revell 2007, p.118). Co-operative strategies, on the other hand, are illustrated in Poncini’s study of meetings, which shows the participants build solidarity and common ground in different ways to facilitate their shared goals (Poncini, 2003 & 2004). Cooperation implies mutual accommodation, and this has important consequences for the ENL (English Native Language) and ELF debate, as is emphasized by Seidlhofer (2001, p.147):

It may be that situations occur in which ‘unilateral’ approximation to native speaker norms and expectations not shared in ELF interaction leads to communication problems and that mutual accommodation is found to have greater importance for communicative effectiveness than ‘correctness’ or idiomaticity in ENL terms.

(For a discussion of the ontological and epistemological premises of conceptualizing ELF, BELF and ENL, see also Rogerson-Revell & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010).

Linking Trustworthiness and Language

Principles from the area of interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 2003; Scollon & Scollon, 1995) are used in the present study to elucidate the interplay of language and trust. This branch of scholarship is concerned with analysing the communicative practice in speech exchanges between

Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization

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individuals in interactions in order to show how the diversity of their cultural backgrounds may affect interpretation. From this perspective, interaction involves individuals both inferring what others intend to convey and monitoring how their own contributions are received (Gumperz, 2003, p. 218). In order to illustrate how the trustworthiness cues discussed in the above subchapter can be applied to the present analysis of multilingual interactions, the following observation of the Scollon and Scollon, reporting on over twenty years of research on intercultural intra-organizational communication, is apt:

Most miscommunication does not arise through mispronunciation or through poor uses of grammar....The major sources of miscommunication in intercultural contexts lie in differences in patterns of discourse as for example the different conventions for placing the main point at the beginning or the end of a conversation, the so-called topic-comment structure of sentences. (Scollon & Scollon, 1995, p. xiii)

Unfamiliar communication patterns or metacommunicative routines influence interpersonal perceptions and attitudes and, therefore, can inhibit trust or foster it. Discourse strategies, which would send signals of trustworthiness in a *home* context, risk being misinterpreted, which can have negative social consequences and result in the speaker being considered uncooperative (Gumperz 1982) and inhibit the development of trust. The individual who has the ability to read discourse patterns can be judged trustworthy in spite of making grammatical errors as s/he has the required aptitude, training, or experience in interpersonal communication in multilingual contexts. Referring to the trustworthiness cues discussed in the above section, this implies that the competent international professional should have the ability as a *hearer* to *read* the discourse structure of another; the benevolence to adopt a positive orientation and be prepared to take the time to listen and build emotional solidarity; and the integrity to be a reliable and fair team-player accepting the principles governing ELF communication (for a discussion on such principles in BELF communication, see Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010, p.207).

The empirical data of the present study will be examined within the theoretical framework described in this chapter. We will look at trust building through the trustworthiness cues of ability, benevolence, and integrity and will refer to the principles of interactional sociolinguistics when interpreting our data. The various dimensions of *common language* and their roles in establishing common ground will also be analyzed.

Data and Methodology

The data of the present study consist of two different data sets. The first set comprises 14 semi-structured interviews with senior executives in a major European company, and the second set of 607 open-ended answers to a survey question.

The interviews were conducted in the course of a research project on the management of language diversity in senior management teams. The objective of the interviews was to identify best practices for managing linguistic diversity and in particular, the consequences of using English as the working language in multilingual contexts. The interviewees were senior executives in a major European company and eight of them were German and six were French; in their respective teams, there were executives from other European countries, among them British and Spanish. Ten of the

interviews were conducted by telephone and four using videoconference technology. They lasted between thirty and fifty minutes and were all conducted in English.

The interview guide which was sent out before the interviews contained the following themes:

- 1) What policies and practices have been adopted to facilitate interaction and cooperation?
- 2) What are the consequences of using English as the working language of a plurilingual, cross-border team?
- 3) What are the factors that hinder productive communication and team-building?
- 4) What particular challenges do native English speakers, and speakers from other specific language communities, face?
- 5) What advice about managing communication processes would you give other management teams operating across cultures and languages?

The second data set, which consists of a total of 607 open-ended survey answers, is part of a larger research project conducted among internationally operating business professionals. The project focused on the *communicative success* of global professional communicators, which was investigated among business professionals in five globally operating companies. The five companies operated in the fields of logistics (Company A), cargo handling (Company B), IT, business intelligence services and consulting (Company C and E), and welding solutions (Company D). Three of the companies (A, B, C) were listed on the NASDAQ OMX Helsinki Ltd in Finland with net sales ranging from EUR 4.7 billion to 1,700 million and with the number of employees ranging from 34,000 to 9,500 in 2009. The two unlisted companies (D, E), although smaller in size, were also global operators. For example, one of them had subsidiaries in 13 countries, personnel numbered 550, and net sales totalled EUR 80 million. The survey respondents altogether represented 31 different native languages.

The data we analyzed for this paper were collected with a survey instrument that as a whole collected both quantitative and qualitative information. The answers analyzed for the present purposes were respondents' reactions to the question: "What makes communication in the global business environment successful?" The answers typically varied from one word (e.g. clarity) to a description consisting of two-three sentences or parts of sentences (e.g. Being polite to everybody; Keep my passion and interest on the business; with responsible attitude).

In the present study, both the interview data and the survey answers were analyzed from the perspective of trust building. Neither the interviews nor the survey question did explicitly address the question of trust, and trust was not a specific subject of inquiry when the larger research projects were designed. However, in all of the interviews, and in a large part of the survey answers, references were made to socialization processes, trust and relationship building. Patterns were identified in our data by the recurrence of these and other key words or phrases such as *trust relationships, time to learn how to interact, mutual respect, cooperation, trusting attitude, sharing understanding, mutual understanding, common understanding, and establishing relations*.

It emerged from the interviews with the senior executives (who are also team leaders) that they are aware of the challenges related to multilingual communication, and they also play a key role as facilitators in the day-to-day communication processes. The way in which they talk about language issues shows how these executives contribute to the trust building process. The survey answers

come from business professionals with international experience at various organizational levels. Their responses also referred to the various dimensions of trust building and were fully in line with the views of the interviewees.

To analyze the combined interview/survey data from the perspective of trust building, we first carefully evaluated the transcripts of the interviews and the answers to the open survey question to find the various comments that could be related to trust building. Three main approaches to trustworthiness and language use emerged, and we organized the data accordingly: the use of ELF, the use of English as a native language, and the use of other languages. The following section will report the findings and present examples of our data according to these categories.

Findings

Our data show that, according to international business professionals, the use of English as a Lingua Franca affects trust in global professional contexts. It is for this reason that we have placed the focus in this section on three elements: common ground in ELF communication, different categories of speakers (native or non-native), and the use of languages other than English in global professional contexts.

Using ELF to find a common language and a shared understanding

The importance of reaching a common understanding through a constructive dialogue was emphasized. A respondent wrote “common understanding what is necessary to get things done—common understanding about objectives—sound understanding about cultural habits and communication differences.” One interviewee said they are sometimes “hurting” the English language, but “the international language is understood by every nation and that’s the main issue.” It was also mentioned that a high level of standard or “Oxford” English is not a requirement as the stress is on a common understanding. Reference was also made to using language creatively as in the following remark:

We built a new English language in that people found some word in order to have a common language between German and French, English language, but I’m quite persuaded it was not a good English language but we didn’t care; that means we found a new word...and during years we have a common English language but which was not real English....it’s a good way to have a common agreement on different words or topics, it means that if we put two people together and if they have the willingness to work together they can find a new language.

This is a recurrent practice in plurilingual teams (Firth 1990) when new words and new ways of speaking are negotiated. An example of this phenomenon and the significance of the *sharedness* of language were given by a respondent who emphasized the “same language between parties (Kemplish);” in other words, the definition of the language, i.e. “Kemplish,” was coined from the name of the company and English.

One underlying theme of particular relevance to building trust was the importance of the time factor; the observation was made that “it takes more time to read behaviour in an international team.” Also, knowing people personally before communicating with them satisfactorily through

information communication technology was emphasized, as e.g. in the following quote from an interview:

A lot depends on how well you know the people you're working with and you need to have teams built up over some length of time. If you know them you can go on a video conference and talk to each other, no problem at all. But if you go to a video conference and you don't know the party on the other side, it is quite difficult.

One respondent emphasized the fact that the process of building what he calls "trust relationships" takes time, as it is important to get to know how the other person communicates and how to talk to him or her. Exactly the same issue was emphasized throughout the survey answers, e.g. "knowing the other person personally, knowing the other persons work;" "build up relationship;" and "knowing others by person makes the communication easier." The empirical data reported here shows the importance of repeated interactions over time for the development of the benevolence that constitutes one of the cues of trustworthiness (see p.5).

The professionals who were interviewed reported that informal interpersonal communication is perceived as being much more difficult than talking about technical issues. One manager commented that

When we have personal or private or specific management meeting...it is also using a lot of very soft words and nuances, because of a problem saying I'm not so satisfied with that or that...in English we have to find the real and good word to avoid any misunderstanding in order not to hurt the people and so we look at our training in school or in the company we are not used to use these special nuances, human nuances and in our job it is necessary.

In the same vein, another claimed that speaking is easy but understanding questions is "sometimes difficult...when you are missing some subtlety in English."

This example shows the difficulty of expressing *human nuances* as opposed to the relative comfort these business professionals feel when dealing with technical issues. The same feeling was expressed in the following way by another respondent: "at the beginning for me it was more difficult to speak informally than formally because the technical aspect was easier than the informal. But now it's the same although for the informal discussion it depends on the topic." However, both the interview data and the survey answers clearly demonstrate that the ability required from these professionals in the global environment consists of both a *technical competence* and *interactional competence*. This holistic ability can be seen to refer to one of the three trustworthiness cues discussed in the section describing the theoretical framework for the study.

Communicating with native English speakers

Our interviewees point to the complicity and the bonding that takes place when English is not the native language of either party. For example when French and Germans form a team together, there is a sense of equality and fairness; the language is "neutral" as one executive put it: "Speaking the same kind of English facilitates the interaction ... and the cooperation because your partners have the feeling they are accepted as they are." In addition, there is an advantage because "the fact you have to speak English helps to break the village or tribal tendency in some teams, which tend to have a closed attitude, a tribal attitude."

Reference to the concern people feel for each other and the *emotional bonding* of ELF speakers shows their benevolent attitude, as in the following remark. One executive explained how he felt constrained and frustrated by having to use English in particular situations where there is the need to express a feeling or attitude: “but sometimes there are situations when I want to express... a very comprehensive feeling or attitude.... and I’m looking then for the right expressions & words....and in this action sometimes I feel a little bit constrained.” He goes on to say that it is sometimes frustrating, but all his international colleagues in the rest of the world have the same feeling at times, so they help each other

Via a common dialogue they take then this concern...because ok can express this concern and try and elaborate together and to participate in the discussion at least normally we come to a result and come to a common meaning and attitude to this.

In contrast, some respondents referred to possible tensions between NS and NNS speakers of English, as e.g. in “We have to deal with some users who are native English speakers but are still unable to communicate effectively,” and “with native English speakers the problem is that they use a lot synonyms” (for more on in-group and out-group attitudes in the context of ELF usage, see Kassis Henderson 2010). An observation was made by one executive about different attitudes to English between ENL and ELF speakers:

It also seemed to be that the British colleague was annoyed by the way the French or German were talking. They have a lot of difficulty not to teach the others how to use the English language rather than concentrate on common work....It is difficult if there is a group of colleagues and just one is speaking his native language. The other ones are speaking English as the common one. In our position we’re better off as we have the same starting position. It is more difficult for the native speaker as he is more or less isolated from us with our continental English.

This suggests that some native speakers may be perceived as being less trustworthy.

One respondent mentioned the efforts made by some native speakers who adopt a more co-operative attitude and adapt the way they speak: “Usually our English is not so bad and the English people are polite enough if we are in discussion and communication to be a little bit careful with their language, pronouncing quite well and not too fast.” But this is not always the case, as an interviewee reported: “they speak very quickly using words normally you never heard, for them it’s difficult to adapt and take into account the other guys are not native speakers.” The difficulty of understanding native English speakers, the British and Americans, came up frequently in the interviews. Their speech is “too fast, too unclear,” “their accents are difficult to understand,” and “they use words nobody knows.” On this issue, one executive commented that it is a problem if the speaker is unaware of the difficulties the partners may have to understand him, because, for example, of the speed of speech, low voice, or use of slang expressions.

Based on the data in reference to the trustworthiness criteria of ability and benevolence (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman 1995, p.717), it appears that some native speakers are not trusted as concerning ability, for they have insufficient aptitude, training or experience in the area of interpersonal communication with speakers of English as a lingua franca, and native speakers are

perceived as being “unaware.” Concerning the trustworthiness cue of benevolence, the monolingual non-initiated native English speakers may not be able to empathize with the other party as they lack the experience of appreciating the predicament of speaking a foreign tongue and they show no emotional solidarity. The use of the expression “isolated from us” shows they are perceived as being outside the ELF community and of not sharing the common language that is being built up in the team or network. Consequently, they are considered less trustworthy.

Speaking languages other than English

Concerning the role of other languages, one German executive explained that personal relationships with the French team members can be built up more quickly if you speak each others’ language as well as English: “I recognise due to my knowledge of French there are different ways of understanding; if I didn’t speak French I would have had many more problems.” He explained that personal relationships are formed more quickly with the other party’s language, French, and that he could form “working friendships:”

If a normal neutral relationship....I would see the problem Monday morning but if there’s a friendship he will phone me this evening already to prepare that there will be a problem next morning. We try to exchange a lot of people to create a network; for months, a year or few years. Exchange programs to send people to other sites, to create personal relationships.

Another German regretted he did not speak French as well as speaking English, saying that “English is not enough in Europe, with our global companies it’s more likely we’ll work with foreign colleagues.”

The following two quotes from the survey data convey a similar message:

Not only “broken English” but other foreign languages are very important, i.e. in France and Italy you can't be successful with English only. My contacts in South European countries are successful because I speak other languages than English and German. I am able to hear messages “between the lines.”

And “Speak a little in the other's native language. Learn multi-cultural skills - habits, culture and language.”

Our data show that it is an advantage for team members if they speak the language of the people they are working with, even if English is the language of communication and the language of a “normal neutral relationship.” The term *neutral* was used by the interviewees, for example, when the English language was referred to as “a neutral basis” as one person put it. However, “it is always good to try and talk in the other language if there is the possibility....it is helpful to give the sign.” This comment shows a receptive attitude and mutual adaptation, hence benevolence.

In our data, the point was often repeated that the professionals that work in the same team, company or network all share the same transnational, technical, or corporate culture, and this facilitates working together when they are focused on the job. However, for building relationships and communicating outside the job, this technical competence and the English language alone are not sufficient. For socialization, it helps if they speak the language of their partners at least to some extent, French or German for example, as is shown in the following:

The technical language is better known in English by everybody even if he is Italian, Spanish, German. Out of the job we try and speak French which is a pleasure for the German colleagues. There are some discussions in French out of the job, when it is a technical aspect we discuss again in English.

In conclusion, technical competence alone, be it in the domain of language and/or in the field of professional expertise of an individual, is an insufficient basis on which to build trust. The above extracts from our data again illustrate the ability, benevolence, and integrity, which are the necessary conditions for establishing trust.

Discussion and Implications

The propensity of an individual to trust can be attributed to many factors, such as features of personality or national culture. Some individuals are more trusting than others due to their psychological characteristics and personal background. Also the propensity to trust differs from one cultural environment to another due to differences in institutional, religious and social traditions. Countries have been classified into high and low trust in the cross-cultural literature (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). In addition, trust is built in different ways in different cultures, for example through demonstrating technical knowledge for the Germans, or through being friendly and informal for citizens of the United States (Schneider & Barsoux, 1997, p. 196). However, knowing these facts does not necessarily mean that an individual will perform successfully in interpersonal interactions in multilingual contexts.

The analysis of our empirical data points to the importance of the language factor in socialization processes, which lead to the creation of trust. The examples of practices and strategies contributing to trust building can be interpreted with reference to the trustworthiness cues presented above. Through their replies, the informants show that they are well aware of the requirements they need to meet in global professional communication; they have the ability to manage interpersonal communication in a multilingual setting; the benevolence to be open to diversity in language use and to show emotional solidarity; and the integrity to accept the principles inherent in ELF communication. This could be summed up by saying they have understood and accepted the rules of the *game* of working in ELF as a common language.

As this article suggests, whether or not a given individual has a propensity to trust, people who have gained awareness through experience in multilingual settings seem to be more prone to trust others and to be trusted. This suggests that ELF speakers are at an advantage as, by definition, they speak at least two natural languages (their mother tongue and English), whereas native speakers who are monolingual, and who have no experiential or intellectual exposure to other languages than their own, may be at a disadvantage in the international business arena of today.

The positive impact of foreign language ability on cross-cultural behaviour has also been explored by Neyer and Harzing (2008, p. 332):

Our research has shed light on the still understudied role of language in cross-cultural behaviour...One could hypothesize that people who are fluent in more than one language are able to adapt more easily to differences in cultural behaviour than monolinguals are.

Their increased language ability allows them greater scope to fully experience cultural differences through closer interaction with people speaking these languages.

The same researchers (p. 332) go on to suggest that this has implications for the design of cross-cultural training, which tends not to include a language component and that “HR practitioners may want to design integrated language-culture training, to make use of the positive relationship between language fluency and cross cultural experience.”

Linking the above remarks with trust development, we propose that a focus on language as manifested in concrete speech events between individuals in interaction is a more productive approach for learning to build trust than much cross-cultural training, which tends to focus on abstract differences between different national cultures. Nickerson, likewise, has recommended a shift in focus in ESBP (English for specific business purposes) research, to an increasing concern with language strategy, which she defines as “a concern with identifying those strategies that can be associated with effective communication in business, regardless of whether the speaker/writer is a native or non-native speaker” (Nickerson, 2005, p.2).

This article argues that it is crucial for individuals to develop awareness of the language and communication practices that help to foster trusting relations. This has implications for training and executive development programmes and reinforces claims that the pragmatic communication aspects of language use should be emphasized (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005, p. 419; Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002). Consequently, communicators “should be encouraged to be aware of their own and of their co-workers’ discourse practices, conventions and cultural preferences” and they should “learn to appreciate a range of communication cultures” (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005, p. 421).

However, in their study of trust in cross-cultural business relationships, Möllering and Stache (2007, p. 36) have shown that it is not enough to become more aware of cultural differences, trust and performance. They conclude it is necessary to be more creative in responding to the apparent barriers and dilemmas encountered, which they explain in the following way: “this involves a genuine interest in understanding the other, questioning one’s own assumptions and searching for common aims and rules for initial interactions that produce positive mutual experience from which a trustful relationship can grow.”

One conclusion to be drawn from this discussion is that ways of establishing trust through language practices should be included as an additional dimension in training programmes. There exists however an important caveat. Möllering, quoting Ukrainian experts, reports that “active trust development loses its functionality when it is openly called that. As soon as the business partner feels that regular meetings are arranged just to build up trust in order to get a better deal, this can have counterproductive effects” (2007, p. 34). Therefore, in line with the argument put forward in this article, developing practices and strategies for building trust could be an important by-product of language and communication training aiming at what could be called *global communicative competence*.

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