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Developing shared communication practices: A study of BELF in multinational team meetings

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Abstract: A growing number of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) adopt English as their official corporate language. Research on English used as a business lingua franca (BELF) in such contexts shows how its use is negotiated, context dependent, and influenced by cultural and linguistic diversity. Multinational teams (MNTs) are legion within MNCs, and need to find efficient ways of communicating across their diversity, in particular in demanding and complex interactions such as meetings. This case study uses non-participant observation and interviews to study how one MNT has developed shared BELF communication practices for meetings. It examines the BELF communication practices in both the MNC context and at the team level. The analysis of the data shows that team members were highly aware of the challenges posed by cultural and linguistic diversity, and how they developed their local communication practices by processes of developing common ground, building trust, and good leadership.

Keywords: BELF; communities of practice; corporate language; English as a business lingua franca; international business meetings; multinational teams

Sammendrag: Et økende antall multinasjonale selskaper bruker engelsk som sitt offisielle konsernspråk. Forskning på bruk av engelsk som lingua franca i næringslivet (BELF), viser hvordan bruken er gjenstand for forhandling, er kontekstavhengig, og er påvirket av et kulturelt og språklig mangfold. Multinasjonale team er vanlige i multinasjonale selskaper, og disse trenger å finne kommunikasjonsmåter som tar hensyn til dette mangfoldet, særlig i forbindelse med krevende og kompleks samhandling som for eksempel i møter. Dette case-studiet bruker ikke-deltakende observasjon og intervjuer for å undersøke hvordan et multinasjonalt team har utarbeidet delt BELF-kommunikasjonspraksis både for konsernkonteksten og på team-nivå. Analysen av dataene viser hvordan

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deltakerne i teamet var veldig klare over de utfordringene som kulturelt og språklig mangfold fører med seg. Analysen viser også hvordan de utviklet sin lokale kommunikasjonspraksis gjennom prosesser som innebar utvikling av et felles referansegrunnlag, tillitsbygging og god ledelse.

Nøkkelord: Engelsk som næringslivsspråk, internasjonale forretningsmøter, multinasjonale team, konsernspråk, praksisfellesskap

1 Introduction

English is the most widely used language in the world of international business, with many MNCs (Multinational Corporations) choosing it as their official corporate language, with the many challenges this entails. Studies of English used as a lingua franca (ELF) and business lingua franca (BELF), have revealed that such communication is typically very fluid, variable, and highly context dependent. Meaning is continually negotiated and constructed locally in processes, with speakers drawing on various communicative strategies and multilingual resources (Jenkins et al. 2011; Kankaanranta et al. 2015). Indeed, Gunnarson stresses that "[d]iscourse in real life occurs in situated professional events, which in turn take place in a complex set of contextual frameworks" (Gunnarson 2009: 4). Today, these frameworks are often both local and global at the same time, while Blommaert (2010) claims that in our globalized world with people constantly interacting across borders in person or through technology, we should think of languages as mobile resources that are used differently depending on the context. Further, research in the field International Business (IB), has found that in the MNC context, when English is used as a business lingua franca by multinational teams (MNTs), relative differences in English proficiency have been found to have negative effects on understanding, emotions, and trust formation (Aichhorn and Puck 2017; Tenzer et al. 2014). These challenges are most keenly experienced by non-native speakers of English in demanding and complex interactions such as business meetings (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010; Neeley 2013; Rogerson-Revell 2008, 2010). Yet, meetings are indispensable in the daily operations of most multinational teams. Thus, improving our understanding of the complex communication practices of MNTs in business meetings using English as a business lingua franca can yield valuable knowledge about how this communication works.

Several (B)ELF studies have focused on the language use in small groups that meet regularly and develop their own, local communication practices (e. g. Cogo 2016; Ehrenreich 2010), and these researchers stress that studying such contexts can yield rich knowledge as there are few studies of this kind. In Norway, English has gained an important role in internationally oriented businesses, especially those with subsidiaries abroad (Harzing and Pudelko 2013; Hellekjær 2012). In his extensive survey of the English use and needs in Norwegian export businesses, Hellekjær (2012) found that tasks like meetings were considered challenging and called for a high level of English proficiency. Further, Hellekjær (2012) called for qualitative studies to understand more about the complexity of English use in these and other demanding situations. This entails investigating the characteristics of the BELF discourse in general, as well as the processes guiding the development of local BELF practices. Consequently, the present case study focuses on the English use of an MNT in a meeting at a large Norwegian MNC and uses observation and interviews to explore: "How does a multinational team develop shared practices for the use of BELF in team meetings?"

1.1 Literature review

The present case study draws upon literature from International Business (IB) and (B)ELF research. In the field of IB, there has been a growth in language-sensitive research over the past couple of decades (Tenzer et al. 2017), with several studies focussing on language use in MNCs and MNTs. However, many of these studies do not address actual language use, and their conceptualization of language is different from the field of (B)ELF (Karhunen et al. 2018). Languages in IB research are often seen as formal, bounded systems, and competence is "measured against the native-speaker yardstick" (Karhunen et al. 2018: 988). Further, IB literature tends to focus on the problematic effects of linguistic and cultural diversity in the MNC context (Karhunen et al. 2018). In (B)ELF research, on the other hand, language is considered an emergent, situated social practice that is embedded in layers of context, and competence is related to "the ability to use language in a specific situation" (Karhunen et al. 2018: 996). Thus, while IB research on English as a corporate language offers insights that will be used in the discussion of findings in the present study, the English use of the team in the present case study is conceptualized as BELF, English used as a Business Lingua Franca, "a flexible, variable and hybrid resource that is highly context-bound and which both constitutes and is constituted by the community using it" (Komori-Glatz 2018: 56).

1.1.1 (B)ELF studies

Many BELF studies mention the impact of other languages and cultural differences on communication practices (e. g. Cogo 2016; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005).

Jenkins (2015) stresses how ELF is inherently multilingual, and (B)ELF research has discovered many different uses and functions of multilingual resources in (B)ELF communication. Such functions can be to include or exclude someone (Franceschi 2017; Poncini 2004), to signal identity, or to enhance meaning making and understanding (Cogo 2018). Given the importance of culture for BELF interaction, it will here be defined as "sociopragmatic interactional principles," a concept from interactional sociolinguistics developed by Spencer-Oatey and Jiang (2003: 1635). These principles refer to how people's different sociocultural backgrounds affect their preferences for language use, and consequently their interpretation of the language use of others. In this light, culture is inherently part of the equation in (B)ELF interaction; English used as a lingua franca is not cultureless (Baker 2016), nor is its use simply governed by the sociopragmatic norms of native speakers of English (Kassis Henderson 2005; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005). In fact, Baker claims that the relationship between language and culture in ELF communication is as fluid, situated, and emergent as ELF itself (Baker 2016: 74).

In (B)ELF interactions, the negotiation of meaning is local, thus the context in which communication takes place can provide important support. In light of this, Étienne Wenger's (1998) concept "Communities of Practice" (CoP), a theory of social learning in professional contexts, has been employed by some (B)ELF researchers (e. g. Cogo 2016; Ehrenreich 2010). The CoP concept provides a unit of analysis that can be expected to be relatively stable over time and allows for a study of both local characteristics of BELF use as well as of how communication practices are locally developed. According to Wenger, a CoP must be characterized by three dimensions: "mutual engagement" between people who regularly interact, that have a "joint enterprise," tasks to accomplish, and a "shared repertoire" which includes languages and ways of doing things (Wenger 1998: 72–85, 124–126). Moreover, he also stresses that in CoPs meaning is social and negotiated, and that members develop their shared repertoire of practices to suit their communicative needs (Wenger 1998: 47). Ehrenreich claims that this concept is ideal for the study of lingua franca interaction since it "enables socially situated explorations and analyses" (Ehrenreich 2018: 38), while Cogo maintains that it allows us to understand "how repertoires are co-constructed and emerge in this interaction" (Cogo 2016: 370). Cogo's study in Italy showed that members of the CoP shared terms and procedures, a "shared pool of resources" (Cogo 2016: 374), and that language and intercultural accommodation were equally important. Ehrenreich's (2010) study in a German MNC revealed how English use was closely connected to contextual parameters, and that communication practices were learned through participation in the CoPs. Similarly, in this article the CoP concept will provide a lens for the analysis of the local BELF communication practices, in which the MNT will be considered a CoP. The CoP's communication practices might be considered part of their local repertoire, as team members shared a "joint enterprise" and interacted regularly. Finally, the way in which team members use BELF and develop shared practices may be considered an aspect of a "teaming" process, where a team is regarded as a work in progress, and there is an "on-going making or re-making of it," including how they "make sense of their team environment" (Einola and Alvesson 2019: 3).

(B)ELF studies of interaction have found that crucial factors for communication were the building of trust, the development of common ground, as well as cultural and linguistic accommodation. These studies have looked at (B)ELF in MNTs (Kassis Henderson 2005; Kassis Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen 2011), meetings (Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005; Poncini 2004; Rogerson-Revell 2008, 2010), as well as a close study of the negotiation of meaning at a micro-level (Räisänen 2012). Kassis Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen (2011) claimed that intercultural accommodation, trust building through social interaction and developing common ground were essential for (B)ELF communication. Kassis Henderson (2005) also suggested that an MNT must negotiate their own, hybrid, cultural conventions with regard to language use, for example the forms of address and politeness norms. Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) noted how culture had a strong impact on English use in meetings, and also on the perceptions of interlocutors. Further, Poncini (2004) studied ELF in international meetings, and showed how interpersonal relations were a crucial factor, and that participants built common ground using shared specialized lexis, personal pronouns like "we," and a positive evaluative language. In her study of ELF in European meetings, Rogerson-Revell (2008, 2010) discovered that there was a widespread use of accommodation strategies to include non-native speakers in terms of both language use and meeting procedures, especially by the chairs. Furthermore, Räisänen's (2012) study of English use at work detailed how speakers accommodated each other, negotiated the meaning of shared terms, as well as how closely ways of doing tasks were connected to how they used English. Last, the design of the present case study drew on the above-mentioned studies, and findings do, to a great extent, match these.

1.1.2 International business (IB) studies

Studies in the field of IB have demonstrated that introducing a common corporate language is not a simple and straightforward matter, and that its use needs to be better understood (Fredriksson et al. 2006). While several (B)ELF studies have claimed that "communicative success" can be achieved despite low linguistic proficiency (e. g. Ehrenreich 2010; Kankaanranta and Planken 2010), low proficiency can still have a strong emotional impact on non-native speakers, and can lead to feelings of disempowerment and anxiety (Aichhorn and Puck 2017; Neeley

2013; Takino 2017). Common reactions are communication withdrawal and avoidance (Aichhorn and Puck 2017; Neeley 2013), as well as switching to their L1 (Aichhorn and Puck 2017; Tenzer et al. 2014). The latter is often considered problematic in this literature, whereas in a number of (B)ELF studies, the use of multilingual resources is considered positive for meaning making (Cogo 2016; Poncini 2004). Further, language proficiency, actual and perceived, can also affect trust building (Kassis Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen 2011; Tenzer et al. 2014), and power distribution, undermining the formal influence of leadership and expertise (Neeley 2013; Piekkari et al. 2014; Takino 2017; Tenzer and Pudelko 2017). An important point is that these negative effects are often about a *relative* difference in proficiency levels between interlocutors in a situation or team (Takino 2017; Tenzer et al. 2014; Tenzer and Pudelko 2017). For example, even very fluent nonnative speakers (NNS) might be intimidated by native speakers (NS) (Aichhorn and Puck 2017), others by NNS they consider more fluent (Takino 2017). Thus, leaders of MNTs could take these types of challenges and perceptions into account and try to make diversity a strength, not a hindrance (Tenzer and Pudelko 2017).

To sum up, the aim of this case study is to investigate the use of English as a business lingua franca in the meetings of an MNT in a Norwegian MNC and to explore processes of how they develop shared communication practices. One aim is to contribute to BELF research by adding to the growing body of context-sensitive studies on BELF communication in CoPs. The study also aims to contribute to IB research by including a discussion of actual language use in an MNT to discover how the participants have negotiated linguistic and cultural team diversity as something positive, drawing on and creating shared resources.

2 Methods

This case study employs a combination of non-participant observation (Cohen et al. 2007) and semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015) to explore the characteristics and development of a local repertoire of BELF communication practices. This cannot easily be explored through interviews alone, since much of it is likely tacit knowledge. Instead, Ehrenreich suggests combining qualitative methods that focus on the participants' emic perspective together with discourse analytic methods to "capture the multidimensional realities of ELF use" (Ehrenreich 2018: 45). Finally, the study and both research instruments were piloted in two meetings and one interview at a different MNC in the same sector.

The case company is a Norwegian MNC with global operations and offices in more than 100 countries, headquartered in Norway. According to the interviewees, British English was the official corporate language, and the ability to carry out work tasks in English was stressed when hiring employees.[1] This case can therefore be regarded as an instance of "theoretical sampling" (Strauss and Corbin 1998) to fit certain criteria: that of an MNT in a large MNC which has regular meetings, multinational and multilingual members, and uses English as a business lingua franca. The case study focuses on one of the multinational middle management teams, with members who have different professions, which has a support function for top management at HQ, coordinating the work of a large division. The team has meetings approximately every second week, mostly using Skype for those who do not work at HQ, but about four times every year they meet face-to-face. The team will, as mentioned above, be conceptualized as a Community of Practice in this study.

The researcher was allowed to observe one routine meeting at the HQ in Norway. In the meeting observed, eight people took part, four at HQ in Norway, and four online through a Skype call without video. Those present in Norway were three Norwegians, "Martha," "Magnus," and "Kine," as well as "Shirin," who has a background from the US and the Middle East. Online, there were two Dutch men, "Bart," team leader, and "Theo," as well as "Ewan" from the UK and "Søren" who is Danish. This article is based on observation notes from the meeting and three subsequent interviews with the following meeting participants: "Magnus," Engineer, "Martha," Human Resources, and "Shirin," Communications. The identities of the interviewees and the organization are protected for ethical reasons.

The observation and the interviews were semi-structured and used an observation form and an interview guide (Appendices 1 and 2). The observation form had three categories – lexis, accommodation, and interaction – and field notes were referred to in the interviews in order to understand the participants' own reflections about the practices observed. Other questions in the interview guide pertained to the specific meeting, communication and meeting practices of this CoP in general, as well as English use in the wider MNC organizational context. A number of researchers have combined interviews and observations to study (B)ELF communication, and many of the categories and questions were inspired by these (e. g. Cogo 2016; Ehrenreich 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005; Poncini 2004; Rogerson-Revell 2008, 2010).

In Figure 1 the procedure of the study is outlined, and Figure 2 illustrates how the interview data was coded. The interview data was analysed using qualitative content analysis (Dörnyei 2007), which involved careful reading of the interview transcripts, inductively generating a total of seven descriptive codes based on the

1 Unfortunately, the researcher has not had access to any official documents from this company regarding their language policies.

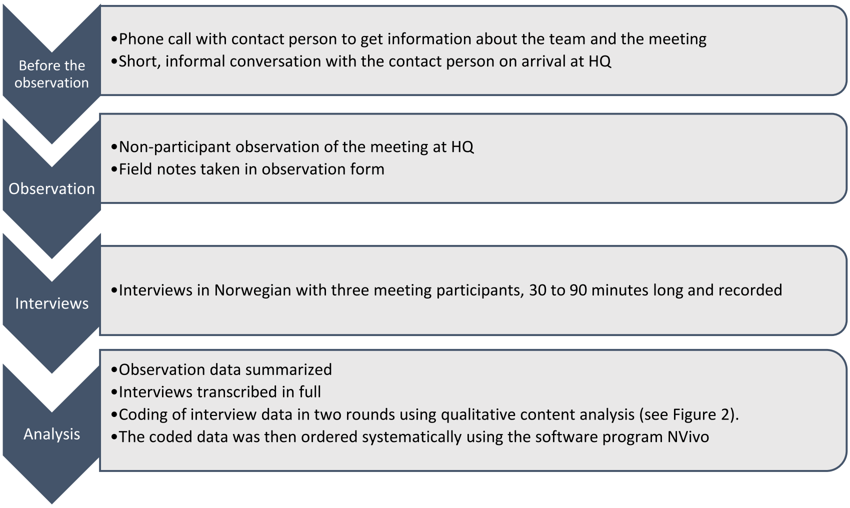

Figure 1: An overview of the research procedure.

topics addressed: "company speak", "Norway and Norwegians", "cultural differences", "corporate language", "team development", "team language use", and "team meeting practices". Later, these codes were collected in two main content categories according to whether the communication practices were found in the MNC context as a whole, or were particular for this team. Figure 2 provides examples of the coding process for both main categories. Last, since all interviews

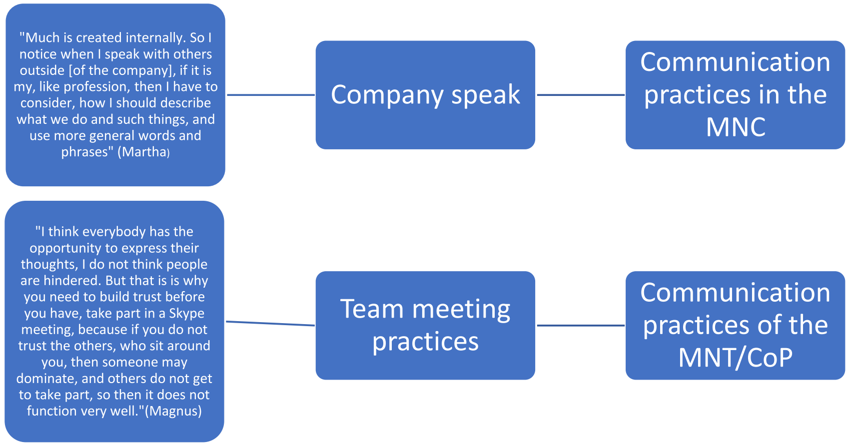

Figure 2: Examples of interview coding.

were conducted in Norwegian, with some comments being in English, quotes used in this article have been translated by the author.

With regard to validity, the presence of the observer might create a reactivity effect, and she might have experienced selective attention and expectancy effects (Cohen et al. 2007). However, triangulating the observation data with recorded interviews with participants should offset some of these problems. Moreover, since this is a case study, no claims for generalization may be made, although Wenger says that some CoPs have practices that are so similar that they can be said to be part of larger "constellations" of similar practices; and that CoPs may share "related enterprises," "overlapping styles or discourses," and "similar conditions" (Wenger 1998: 127). Ehrenreich (2018) suggests that as more studies of CoP ELF communication practices accumulate, trends might emerge, and these might then be perceived as such constellations. Indeed, Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) state that patterns across cases may further develop emergent theory in a field, and (B)ELF theory is, as mentioned, always emergent as this language use is constantly changing.

3 Findings

The findings presented below are based on field notes from the observation of one meeting of an MNT conceptualized as a CoP (see Appendix 1), and follow-up interviews conducted with three meeting participants, Magnus, Martha, and Shirin (Appendix 2). In addition to the interview guide, specific observations were addressed during the interviews. The first section addresses interview findings on English use in the organization in general, whereas the second will present observation and interview findings about the communication practices of this particular CoP.

3.1 English use in the MNC

This sub-section will address general English use in this corporation regarding language policies, proficiency requirements, "company speak," and the impact of sociocultural differences on internal communication.

Martha and Shirin stated that the official corporate language of this company is British English, although other languages would also be used in subsidiaries and with local markets. English was used for nearly all written material, both internally and externally, and in almost all meetings. However, the company's website is available in many languages, and Magnus, who had worked in Angola, and

Martha, who had worked in France, contended that Portuguese and French were widely used in these subsidiaries; in France "there was not much English in meetings" (Martha). They also claimed that knowing those languages would have been a considerable advantage. At HQ in Norway, Norwegian use decreased further after a recent large international merger, but its use could become an excluding factor, for instance in meetings officially conducted in English where the majority could speak Norwegian: "the real meeting is not in the meeting […] they have a sub-meeting or a follow-up without the person who does not speak the language" (Shirin).

While English proficiency was stressed in the hiring process, proficiency levels could vary, and could affect trust in expertise, power, and respect. In general, people hired by this MNC were required to have "good business English" (Shirin), and "it is important that you can express yourself in both writing and orally" (Magnus). Martha, who works in HR, said that candidates would often be interviewed in English, given standardized tests to "test your level of English", and "very often we also ask someone to give a presentation in English". However, Shirin was troubled by the attitude of some Norwegians that a "good enough" level of English was sufficient. She mused that this attitude was surprising, since she found that if a person who spoke quite good English made grammatical errors, this could make her distrust their professional abilities: "Oh, how can he make such a basic mistake?" and then, "the rest of what he is saying, is it bullshit?". Shirin also claimed that in her experience, British colleagues would sometimes consciously dominate conversations, "speaking a bit more jargon and fancy, to show, to take that leadership position", that they consequently got "a bit like, undeserved respect and attention", and that they were "one step ahead in terms of getting respect". Still, she also noted that the advantage British speakers gained this way was less effective now than when she started in the business because "you also have to deliver […] you must have real knowledge".

There were some ways in which English was used internally that were regarded as specific, either to professions like Engineer or Economist, or to the company, as in "company speak". Examples of the latter were local neologisms, or "buzzwords" (Magnus), which would not make sense to outsiders; sometimes because they were coined by "our Norwegian leaders […] who pick a word here and there, that often means something completely different than in the rest of the world" (Shirin). In addition, common business terms would have local meanings, "many of these are also used elsewhere […] but our meaning with them is defined by our usage" (Magnus). Moreover, both Shirin and Martha stressed that they used an unusual amount of abbreviations in this company, "when starting to work here, it's a nightmare, because everything is abbreviated!" (Shirin), but not always in the way the same words would be abbreviated elsewhere. One example of the latter was how some employees insisted on abbreviating “sales order book” into “SOB”, “even if they know what it means […] because in their experience, it is not negative” (Shirin).

Sociocultural differences were thought to have an important impact on interaction in this business, for instance on verbal politeness norms and body language. First of all, language use and culture were considered closely intertwined, and Martha stressed that while many employees had high linguistic proficiency in English, this did not mean “that everything is understood in the right way, or, in a shared way”. Shirin pointed out that “the language is just the key to get started”, and “it is about culture and the way of thinking, that you understand several ways of thinking, living and behaving”. Second, they indicated that verbal politeness norms and body language in particular could vary a great deal. For instance, Magnus suggested that Norwegians, Danes and Dutch people could eschew politeness and small talk to the detriment of their relationship with others; Martha added that this was particularly problematic in e-mail communication, “some Norwegians are extremely rude, and they can start with just ‘do this, do that’”. Another example was the flat hierarchy and informality typical of Norwegian culture, “we address the CEO by his first name” (Magnus). Shirin was sensitive to body language herself, but said some Norwegian colleagues “maybe walk right past and think that everything was nice and great about that meeting, and then the others were actually really offended”. Consequently, accommodating others in terms of both culture and language use was considered essential. To accommodate, Shirin would constantly change both her behaviour and English use, “I automatically adjust to be understood”. Both Martha and Shirin noted as problematic that some colleagues did not accommodate others, and “used the same way of communicating and the same English with everyone” (Shirin). However, if you wished to accommodate non-understanding of language, it must be handled discreetly, Shirin might “repeat in a different way”, but would never ask directly, as that is a “big nono […] I have to tell other colleagues who do that”, because it could cause a loss of face. To sum up, cultural diversity was seen as complex to navigate, but the interviewees thought that if it was handled well, it could be a strength, and in this company they “depend on each other’s strengths, and we help each other come into markets, right?” (Martha).

3.2 English use in this CoP

This sub-section presents observation and interview findings about the communication practices of this particular team, such as their perception of good teamwork, and their shared repertoire of meeting and language practices. Interviewees were also asked about the researcher's observations from the meeting she observed (see Appendix 1 for a full summary of observation notes).

3.2.1 Prerequisites for good teamwork in this CoP

According to these three interviewees, Martha, Magnus, and Shirin, leadership and trust building were essential for good teamwork in a multinational team. This team had a relatively new leader whose style had changed the team dynamics, "this team two years ago, it was not very direct and such, that has a lot to do with the style introduced by the new team leader" (Shirin). Further, getting to know each other was considered crucial for building trust; "we know each other quite well, that is very important" (Magnus). Among the positive effects of this were that they felt comfortable around each other, that it was safe to make mistakes, to ask for help, and to deal with conflicts since there were trust and goodwill in the team, and Shirin and Martha said that they had worked hard to develop a "we"-feeling. Moreover, they all believed new team members needed to meet the others early, "it is a good idea to meet people face-to-face once or twice, then everything works more smoothly" (Martha), and "we have to connect with that person, and then we can work the way we work" (Shirin). For example, a new member from Asia was at first shocked by the "super casual and relaxed atmosphere", but after the first day "he also started to speak, because the first day, like, he said almost nothing" (Shirin). Martha also said that trust building also had to do with the attitudes of individual members, "I think people genuinely […] I call it goodwill, you want to be a team". To sum up, Martha suggested that this team had managed to make diversity a strength, which in their experience was not always the case for MNTs. For example, Shirin said that it could depend on how diverse the team was, and she gave an example of an unsuccessful MNT where too many members had similar sociocultural backgrounds: "they started to behave like in their own countries, with those hierarchies and ways, while in the setting they were in, they were, it was the wrong mix […] and it was not just about language, everyone spoke English" (Shirin).

While this team comprised people from many different sociocultural backgrounds, Shirin nevertheless stressed that they shared a lot of "common denominators" which made teamwork easier. For instance, many of them had been educated abroad, and had had international careers. While team members had different professional backgrounds, they shared functions such as supporting top management by coordinating the work of a large division. Last, according to these three interviewees, the team members had similar English proficiency levels, "everyone speaks English quite well" (Shirin), and they did not think that conducting meetings in English was problematic. Indeed, the observer noted that the turn taking seemed smooth, and that everyone took part in the meeting.

3.2.2 CoP meeting practices

A salient aspect of their meeting practices concerned the structure, like the agenda and chairing. The meeting observed had no formal agenda, but according to Martha there was a tacit "shared understanding of what we will talk about". However, she said that when they meet for longer formal meetings, they always have clear objectives for the meeting. The team leader, Bart, led the observed meeting and acted as chair, "it is his meeting" (Magnus). Magnus also added that if the team leader dominated a meeting too much, which Bart did not do, that would have led to a breach of trust, making the next meetings, especially on Skype, less efficient. In the observed meeting, Bart invited speakers to comment, such as "shooting over to Theo", expressed affirmations and delegated responsibility. Shirin later commented on this and said that he typically behaved like a sports coach who "perceives the whole set-up as a sort of team game".

Conducting meetings using Skype was thought to create challenges such as parallel conversations and a lack of body language, and all stressed that trust must be established prior to such meetings. There was an internal conversation in Norwegian at HQ, as noted in the observation, and Shirin thought it was to ask each other for clarification without bothering their colleagues on Skype, and Magnus mentioned that interrupting might be harder on Skype, too. Related to this was the problem of not observing facial expressions and body language since they did not use video:

> That is, facial expressions, and it is hard enough when there are different cultures and ways of communicating, but when you do not even see them […] and maybe you rather think negatively, "this is not good, there is a pause in the conversation". (Shirin)

However, they all agreed that the most important prerequisite for a successful Skype meeting was that the participants trusted each other, and had met in person previously:

> For these meetings to work with Skype, you have to have a few face-to-face first, to get trust, that is important […] you notice really soon with a Skype call if there is no trust and things do not work. (Magnus)

Finally, this team had been meeting face-to-face approximately four times every year; however, they were now to meet less often and conduct more meetings online and it was as yet unclear how that would affect trust building and communication.

3.2.3 CoP language practices

The team's language practices, that is, the ways in which they used English, were characterized by local specialized lexis, polite interaction, and various idiosyncrasies of the individual members. First, the team's use of language was "very internal" (Magnus), a "tribal language" (Shirin), which had developed over time. For instance, in this meeting they used a great deal of "business and marketing and sales language" (Shirin), which had become more common with the new team leader, Bart. They distinguished this team's language use from that of the "company speak" of the MNC, even if they also used company-specific lexis in this meeting, such as the current "buzzword". Second, they believed they were verbally polite, especially in e-mails, more so than was common in the wider company. They reported that they had also tried to foster the use of positive language; "thank people for their efforts [...] and also that we use words that have positive connotations" (Martha). The interviewees also confirmed that their use of affirmative answers that was observed, such as "that's a great idea", was an example of that. Moreover, they were observed using a lot of backchanneling, like "yeah", "uhm", and asking for confirmation, "that's my action, right?". Moreover, in the interviews they claimed that they cooperated to negotiate understanding, drawing on their multilingual resources, for instance:

> You get help from your colleagues to find the right one [word], then we sort of always come up with something that makes sense [...] some will say it in Norwegian, then a colleague will help you find the right word in English. (Magnus)

> I think it helps us that we have many native speakers of different languages, if you know the specific characteristics of that language you can more easily understand how they speak. (Martha)

> There is a sort of common, shared, language, and I do not think we bother so much about whether it is right or wrong, as long as we understand each other, it is quite generous. (Martha)

Further, the observation showed that the team joked a great deal, sometimes about language, commenting on someone using "shall" in an e-mail as being given "marching orders", and in the subsequent interviews Shirin and Martha both said that joking was common in these meetings. Last, some language practices were linked to specific members, for instance that the Norwegians Kine and Martha were thought to have very calm communication styles, while the Dutch members were more direct, and that Shirin, Søren and the Dutch spoke American English in contrast to the British Ewan. The researcher also observed that Kine, in particular, used Norwegian words like "ja" ("yes") and "altså" ("that is") while speaking English. Interestingly, the team could adopt the idiosyncrasies of new members into their shared practices, like Shirin said about Søren's jokes:

> He uses an American cowboy approach, and in the beginning we were a bit, "oh, okay, that's rude", and then it was just funny […] he has really contributed many such funny things… (Shirin)

4 Discussion

The research question asked in this paper was "How does a multinational team develop shared practices for the use of BELF in team meetings?" The findings reported above give an indication of characteristics of use, and even more interestingly, provide information about the processes of how this CoP has developed their shared BELF repertoire. The characteristics of these communication practices are summed up below, before being discussed in further detail.

In short, in this MNC English was used for most internal written and spoken communication, and the company required employees to have good Business English skills. Moreover, the English used was to a certain extent local, a "company speak." Sociocultural differences and multilingual resources were considered to have a vital impact on interaction, and the ability to accommodate others both in terms of language and culture was stressed. Next, the members of this team had developed a shared repertoire of language use and meeting practices. MNT members who were interviewed claimed that these practices worked well, and they believed that the team had managed to turn their diversity into a strength. This begs the question of how they had developed these practices. In the data, all interviewees used the word "trust" many times when describing their teamwork, and they also referred to features team members had in common or had developed together, as well as the good leadership of the current team leader in meetings. Hence, the team's processes of developing BELF communication practices that worked for them will be discussed along those lines of thought: developing common ground, building trust, and good leadership.

4.1 Developing common ground

Common ground can be based on many factors. The members of this CoP share some common denominators in terms of international experience, as well as shared interactional goals. First, as far as experience is concerned, they all have international educations and careers, albeit not professions, and they all claimed that their English proficiency levels are quite high. According to Takino (2017), Tenzer et al. (2014) and Tenzer and Pudelko (2017), it is the *relative* difference in English proficiency levels within a team that matters the most. Hence, this MNT, with little difference in proficiency, along with the other shared denominators, would have a good starting point for negotiating a repertoire of shared practices.

Second, the team's function within the MNC is to support management, and their interactional goals would then be to fulfil this function well. This is an example of a contextual parameter, that of professional roles, that influences language use (Ehrenreich 2010), since their shared goal makes it likely that they will strive to cooperate in these meetings, as opposed to more competitive communicative events like negotiations or sales (Takino 2017).

In their seminal work on how politeness manifests itself in language use, Brown and Levinson indicated that people might claim common ground by referring to shared goals, as mentioned above, or stress shared in-group membership by for instance using certain forms of address, jargon or jokes (Brown and Levinson 1987: 103–124). When people from different cultures interact in a team, they cannot assume these shared in-group practices already exist, but must develop their own (Baker 2016; Cogo 2016; Kassis Henderson 2005). Thus, in this CoP, their common ground comprises how they have found "idiosyncratic ways of engaging with one another" and "developed a repertoire for which outsiders miss shared references" (Wenger 1998: 113), that is, their shared language and meeting practices. These are local for the CoP but are also influenced by the wider MNC context as well as individual members. Hence, while the MNC "company speak" and language requirements influence practices, those of the CoP are even more local. These practices had developed through interaction over time, at the same time as they were considered highly mutable. When a new member joined the CoP, s/he would gradually be inducted into working and using language the way they did, starting with getting to know them, which is in accordance with Wenger's (1998) thoughts of social learning in CoPs. According to Wenger (1998), the practices evolve through participation, the negotiation of meaning and repetition, although the practices are constantly emergent. In this CoP, it seemed that some practices were consciously developed, such as using a positive language, whereas other practices were perceived as gradually changing depending on the various members' sociocultural backgrounds and personal communication styles; a new member could for instance contribute to changes in practices.

Salient aspects of the team's language practices are word choices, jargon, cultural influence on language use, drawing on multilingual resources as well as the adoption of idiosyncrasies of members' communication styles. Like in Poncini's study (2004), the members of this CoP try to create a "we"-feeling, and to use positive language and specialized lexis. The meaning of the words and abbreviations is often very local and negotiated (Räisänen 2012), originating both in the MNC and the CoP. The interviewees stressed the importance of cultural sensitivity, and ability to accommodate cultural differences, including interpreting non-verbal cues (Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005). In this CoP, it seems as if they, like Kassis Henderson (2005) noted, have negotiated shared hybrid cultural practices for language use, such as informality of address and verbal politeness by combining various aspects of members' sociocultural and linguacultural backgrounds. Further, they would use their multilingual resources to help negotiate understanding (Cogo 2018), although they had observed how colleagues sometimes used other languages to exclude people. Moreover, they had adapted to and incorporated aspects of idiosyncratic communication styles of members, for instance, Søren's brand of humour.

Räisänen claims that "ways of speaking business English are inevitably linked to ways of doing business" (Räisänen 2012: 327), thus the meeting practices described in this case study are closely linked to the language practices. Like Cogo's CoP (2016), this MNT had agreed upon shared procedures, for instance for how they conducted meetings, including how they used technology like Skype. The use of Skype without a video link, like in the meeting observed, makes meeting across languages and cultures even more complicated, as they lack access to gaze and gestures, which could be experienced as more problematic by some of the cultures represented. This would make it necessary to adhere to some unspoken "rules" for interaction, and the interviewees even indicated how such "rules" would be breached if, for instance, a leader was to dominate too much, or if they had not spent enough time building trust first. Some of these "rules" were more or less formalized, such as meeting face-to-face with new team members, while other "rules" for behaviour seemed to be based more on mutual understanding that was unspoken. Thus, both trust and leadership were held to be essential factors for their practices to function effectively.

4.2 Building trust

Wenger stresses how a CoP is not just about the instrumental pursuits they conduct together, but also social engagement, "community maintenance" (Wenger 1998: 74). However, Tenzer et al. (2014) and Kassis Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen (2011) found that building trust across languages and cultures is harder than with more homogenous groups. Therefore, it is interesting to note the extent to which the interviewees in this study repeatedly mentioned the importance of spending time building trust. They did so, as mentioned, by developing common ground and negotiated practices. Essentially, however, they felt that trust must be established before these negotiations could begin, preferably by meeting face-to-face. If there was trust, they found, they tolerated more and extended goodwill to fellow team members. This is in keeping with Mayer et al.'s definition of trust as being willing "to be vulnerable to the actions of another party" (Mayer et al. 1995: 712). Still, in teams with more relative difference in English proficiency, there could be less trust in both leadership and expertise (Tenzer and Pudelko 2017), and of other team members in general (Tenzer et al. 2014). For example, Shirin did mention that nonstandard use of English might make her doubt someone's abilities, and that British speakers could get "undeserved respect" due to their language proficiency, which could negatively affect trust formation (Neeley 2013).

4.3 Good leadership

Like trust, good leadership, both at the MNC and the MNT levels, is also vital for the success of an MNT, where a good team leader must "leverage the creative potential of their diversity" (Tenzer and Pudelko 2017: 51). That encompasses diversity in terms of both culture and languages, as well-managed language diversity "is a key factor contributing to team building and group cohesion" (Kassis Henderson 2005: 67). In this case study, the team leader, Bart, was seen to actively encourage participation, give positive affirmations and directives while chairing the meeting. In fact, this is a good example of the role Rogerson-Revell (2008, 2010) suggests a good chair could play in encouraging participation in international meetings. Their practice of how to "do" leadership and meetings, then, could be seen as part of their repertoire of how the CoP "does" business. Finally, mandating the use of a corporate language from the top is not enough (Fredriksson et al. 2006); people must be made aware of potential pitfalls and strengths, especially team leaders, and try to encourage and lead the development of a set of negotiated norms and conventions for communication that takes into account the diversity of multilingual resources, proficiency levels and sociocultural backgrounds.

5 Conclusion

While this team had developed shared communication practices that worked for them, they were also quite aware that this was something they had consciously worked towards. In fact, the interviewees' high level of awareness about these issues came as a surprise to the researcher. Although the shared practices of a CoP are typically learned gradually through social learning, in this team it was clearly an advantage to have both high linguistic proficiency in the corporate language, as well as the willingness and ability to accommodate others with regard to culture and language. However, the interviewees suggested that not everyone in the wider organization shared these abilities, nor their awareness. Indeed, a wealth of research in both (B)ELF and IB has established the many emotional and cognitive difficulties language can create in MNTs (e. g. Aichhorn and Puck 2017; Takino 2017; Tenzer et al. 2014), in meetings in particular (e. g. Neeley 2013). Moreover, it is clear that the impact of sociopragmatic cultural differences on interaction needs to be taken into account when studying communication in MNC and MNT contexts, as these remain, and are likely to remain, local and global at the same time (Kassis Henderson 2005; Kassis Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen 2011).

Diversity can clearly be a strength for businesses, but this requires knowledge of how to make it so. This study suggests that the processes of creating common ground, and building trust as well as good leadership, were essential components for the development of shared BELF communication practices for this team. Therefore, the processes of the team in the present study might serve as an example of good practice, of how an MNT may develop shared BELF practices. Knowledge of such processes is arguably more useful to theory development than only studying examples of their language use, since BELF meaning is local and negotiated and highly dependent on particular individuals, contexts, and situations. Moreover, "teaming" processes (Einola and Alvesson 2019) and communication practices are, as the phenomenon BELF itself, constantly evolving and emergent, and cannot be captured by any easy descriptive labels, whereas studying the processes that lead to apparently well-functioning practices may have a wider impact.

This case study contributes to (B)ELF research by adding to the knowledge about specific language practices in a business context, to IB research by including a discussion of actual language use, and combining the perspectives of (B)ELF and IB research opened up for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. While the present case study is limited to one team in one MNC, it yields concrete, valuable knowledge about language use that a wider lens could not have done. Similar studies should be carried out in other CoPs in Norway and other countries, especially in teams where the relative English proficiency differs more than it did here. Then, as Ehrenreich (2018) suggests, patterns might emerge which could indicate that these are parts of "constellations" of BELF CoPs that have a number of practices in common. In fact, since the findings in the present case study are similar to those of other studies (e. g. Cogo 2016; Ehrenreich 2010; Kassis Henderson 2005), it could be argued that such a constellation is already forming. This could have implications for teaching, since the practices of such constellations of BELF users could be studied by using examples from this research. Another avenue of ELF research could be the concept of CoP "in its educational dimension is still waiting to be discovered and explored," if it is possible to be "socialized into the appropriate uses of English as a multilingual and multicultural lingua franca" (Ehrenreich 2018: 48) in an educational setting. Perhaps student CoPs could be created, in which students can learn to develop their own local practices after learning about such practices from research such as the present case study. After all, Wenger (1998) claims that there can be no real learning without participation. Finally, the present study suggests that if handled right, with the conscious and careful development of practices such as those outlined here, English used as a business lingua franca may serve to enhance, not hinder, international business interaction.

Appendix 1

Observation form with summary of findings. Study of English lingua franca use at a meeting.

Focus	Observations
Lexis: “tribal language,” specific technical/professional terms, use of other languages	– Use of financial terms like “KPI”, “commoditized services”, “diversified portfolio” etc., and terms specific to the company – Some use of Norwegian between those in the room, as well as Norwegian words like “ja” (‘yes’) and “altså” (‘that is’) while speaking English – Quite a lot of idiomatic English was used, e. g. “local flavour”, “shoot from the hip” – Jokes about language were made, e. g. “make this business great again”, and the use of the word “shall” as being “marching orders”
Accommodation: strategies to enhance understanding and adjust to others	– The four in the room spoke to each other in Norwegian, seemingly to get clarification – They used a lot of positive affirmation, e. g. “that’s a great idea”, and backchanneling, e. g. “yeah”, “uhm”, when others said/suggested something – They asked for confirmation from others and invited comments, e. g. “that’s my action, right?” – Potential criticism was expressed carefully, e. g. “I really like graphs, I don’t understand exactly what is going on?”
Interaction: turn taking, participation, potential problems to articulate/lack of nuance in language	– The team leader, “Bart,” chaired the meeting, introduced the agenda, asked for comments, e. g. “shooting over to ‘Theo’ and ‘Søren’”, expressed affirmations and summed up who would do what – They looked at a PowerPoint together much of the time – Polite interaction, yet informal address – Gestures and gaze, e. g. to indicate confusion, were not verbalized, thus only reached those present at HQ – Some technical problems with the computers affected interaction – There was a good flow in the conversation, and turn taking seemed to work – There were side conversations, one in the room in Norwegian, and one online in English

Appendix 2

Interview guide for follow-up interviews after observation of the meeting:

- Name, age, nationality, mother tongue, education, role/title at company

Questions on the specific meeting that I have observed:

- **Thoughts about this meeting?**
  - Goals achieved? Using English in this meeting?
- **BELF characteristics**
  - The use of specific terms/company speak
  - The use of other languages/linguacultural elements
  - Accommodation
- **Interaction/participation**
  - What do you think about your own participation in this meeting? Turn taking? Did you find the words and expressions needed / express what you wanted to?

Questions on English in these types of meetings in general

- **Shared enterprise and repertoire; the "B" of BELF:** What would you say you have in common / share with the other participants in these meetings?
- **Personal experience with the use of BELF in these types of meetings;** thoughts about using English, how well do you think you manage. Advice to me about the use of English in these meetings if I was a recently hired employee here?
- **Thoughts on**
  - English use in this business?
  - With Norwegians?

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