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Cross-fertilising Expatriate and International Business and Management Research

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An outline for an integrated language-sensitive approach to global work and mobility: Cross-fertilising expatriate and international business and management research

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An Outline for an Integrated Language-Sensitive Approach to Global Work and Mobility: Cross-Fertilising Expatriate and International Business and Management Research

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this conceptual literature review is to investigate how language factors have been studied in the expatriate literature, and how cross-fertilisation with the broader language-sensitive international business and management field may facilitate integrated research of language in global work.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on a thematic review of expatriate research and international business and management literature. The findings are structured through Reiche *et al.*’s (2019) three-dimensional conceptualisation of global work, after which two frameworks are developed to conceptualise how language connects the three dimensions – actors, structures and processes.

Findings – The literature review demonstrates that language-related topics are yet to gain status in the expatriate tradition, and the majority of studies, which do consider linguistic factors appear largely dissociated from the growing community of language research in the broader international management and international business fields. However, once consolidated, the literature reveals that language is present in all dimensions of global work. A processual view of corporate language management highlights the central role of human resource management (HRM), while a dynamic multi-level perspective indicates that language may form bidirectional relationships between the three dimensions of global work.

Originality/value – Due to the segmentation between language-sensitive research in the expatriate and international business/management traditions, few studies have considered the HRM implications of global mobility and the multifaceted nature of language at work. This conceptual literature review brings both perspectives together for a more contextualised and holistic view of language in international workforces.

1. Introduction

The increasingly common phenomena of international employee mobility and global forms of work (Andresen *et al.*, 2018; Bader, 2017; Reiche *et al.*, 2019) push language and multilingualism towards the core of international human resource management (IHRM) (Tietze *et al.*, 2014) and international business (IB) (Luo and Shenkar, 2006). Domestic and international enterprises must be aware of how transferring business activity between contexts, while transcending languages, influences the daily activities of diverse and mobile workforces (Holden and Michailova, 2014) and requires conscious alignment between HR practices and corporate policies concerning language and the linguistic landscape of the MNC (Tietze *et al.*, 2014). Given that international workforces performing global work are likely to operate in multilingual settings, scholars and practitioners alike would benefit from recognising that language permeates multiple dimensions of global work.

The intersection between the IHRM expatriate literature and the broader IB and management research of language is one alternative for exploring the nexus outlined above. However, these traditions have developed separately, and although scholars share interests in similar phenomena, there are few examples of collaboration and referencing between the domains. As a consequence of this segmentation, studies have mainly explored the influential role of language in separate domains of global work, such as individual linguistic characteristics, corporate policy and HR practices, and employee interaction. In order to consolidate the segmented literature, this conceptual literature review is structured in terms of Reiche *et al.*'s (2019) three-dimensional conceptualisation of global work (Figure 1, section 2).

Thus, this conceptual review has a twofold agenda. Firstly, to promote and update language research in the expatriate sub-field of IHRM, and secondly, to facilitate future cross-fertilisation between the expatriate literature and language-sensitive IB and management fields, while encouraging novel multi-level and multi-method research. Further research of the interdimensional relationships of language in global work would facilitate theoretical advances in corporate language management. The outlined agenda resonates with recent accounts of the segmentation between IHRM and IB in studies of language (Tenzer *et al.*, 2017) and global work (Reiche *et al.*, 2019), as well as with encouragements to consider "the complexity of linguistic influences" through integrating concepts and methods from different academic disciplines (Tenzer *et al.*, 2017, p. 817). While sections 3 and 4 present thematic reviews of the main findings in language-sensitive expatriate, IB and management research, section 5 consolidates the literature and outlines how integrated future language-sensitive research may explore the relationship between language factors in different dimensions of global work.

2. Methodology and theoretical framework

2.1. Conceptual literature review

The aim of this conceptual review is to suggest theoretical avenues for cross-fertilisation based on a body of thematically selected literature (Gilson and Goldberg, 2015), as recent literature reviews (see Karhunen *et al.*, 2018; Tenzer *et al.*, 2017) have already systematically mapped language research in international business and management. This article conceptualises through synthesising perspectives from two segmented bodies of literature. Although quantity has not been emphasised in the current literature gathering process, 181 publications have been identified and reviewed based on their theoretical contributions. Unlike many systematic reviews, in addition to journal publications, this review also considers books, chapters and theses, as these sources give breadth and provide additional perspectives on the role of language in global work.

The specific focus on expatriate research emerged after discovering that only a handful of expatriate studies of language are cited in existing reviews of language-related research in IB and management. Through an initial title and abstract keyword search (‘expatriate’ AND ‘language’ AND ‘business OR management OR MNC OR human resource OR corporate’) on the Ebscohost cross-database search engine, a larger body of literature emerged. Manual reference tracking yielded further relevant publications. Still, comparatively few publications focused solely or explicitly on language. In order to expand the scope of the expatriate literature section, the inclusion criteria were extended to include texts which make a substantial claim about language, even when not explicitly focusing on the matter. However, after expanding the criteria, publications which only mention language in bypassing in one or two sentences were filtered away. Thus, the expatriate literature section features a total of 68 publications. This approach has contributed to a more comprehensive impression of how language is addressed as a phenomenon in the expatriate literature.

The aim of the IB and management section is to supplement the expatriate literature, particularly in conceptualising the role of language in the dimensions of global work. Therefore, rather than being systematic and exhaustive, the focus lies on mapping out the field’s state of the art in publications with innovative angles to expatriate research interests. Ebscohost title and abstract keyword searches (‘corporate OR business OR management OR MNC’ AND ‘language AND/OR policy’) as well as reference tracking and existing reviews (Karhunen *et al.*, 2018) were used for this section as well. Furthermore, psycholinguistic perspectives of the individual implications of foreign language use have been added as a proposed source of theoretical inspiration for future integrated language-sensitive research. This approach has amounted to a total of 113 publications in the IB and management section.

2.2. Analytical framework: A three-dimensional approach to global work

Each publication in the final sample has been thematically categorised through Reiche *et al.*’s (2019) three-dimensional conceptualisation of global work (Figure 1). This framework has been chosen because it is flexible and integrates IB and HRM perspectives in order to map three dimensions of global work – *actors, structures* and *processes*. Here, the *actors* dimension covers individual level factors, such as linguistic abilities or cognitive processes. The *structures* dimension contains contextual corporate factors, such as corporate policy or HR practices, while *processes* are seen as any workplace interaction involving communication. Although the original framework places language in the *actors* dimension, the revised framework derived from the consolidated literature and developed in this paper (Figure 2, section 5) illustrates how language permeates and connects all three dimensions – including *processes* and *structures*. Due to the interconnected nature of the dimensions, in several cases, publications contain findings and theoretical claims which belong in more than one dimension. Therefore, the structure presented here is not the only alternative for arranging the literature.

*** *Insert Figure 1 about here* ***

A key strength of Reiche *et al*.'s (2019) conceptualisation is that it facilitates the analysis of the three dimensions' interconnectedness. Therefore, the discussion in this conceptual review develops two models, which aim to conceptualise potential bidirectional dynamic relationships between the three dimensions of language in global work. The first model (Figure 3, section 5) presents a static segment of a linear top-down corporate language management process, while the second (Figure 4, section 5) illustrates a dynamic multi-level framework of an organisational language ecosystem.

3. Language in Expatriate Research

Although the expatriate research academic community acknowledges the importance of language, the review demonstrates that the majority of this literature lacks explicit focus on the organisational and interactional implications of language management in mobile workforces. Furthermore, the reviewed contributions appear largely concentrated on the individual agent-oriented analytical level, dissociating the phenomenon from relevant layers of context. The review follows Cooke *et al*.'s (2017, p. 198) definition of expatriate research as:

"studies of expatriates, including self-expatriates, across different countries conducted at the individual level *without examining the MNC in which they work for*". Focusing on the study of international employees and assignees, the expatriate literature is a tradition within IHRM, which has concentrated on issues related to employees (mostly highly qualified) working in countries other than their country of origin. Although the broader IHRM field has been characterised as fragmented (Brewster *et al*., 2016), and in some respects disintegrated from the broader IB research (Reiche *et al*., 2019), this section aims to aggregate studies which feature language and expatriates as unifying factors and identify their main tendencies.

3.1. Local Language as an Individual-Level Tool and Antecedent to Expatriate Assignment Outcomes

The first and largest category of language-sensitive expatriate research investigates the role of expatriate local language proficiency in positive assignment outcomes, focusing on the position of language in the *actors* dimension of global work. A significant portion of this literature draws on psychology theory of individual reactions to new environments, mostly through the prism of cross-cultural adjustment (CCA). In this group of studies, language is mainly a tool aiding expatriates in adjusting to new cultures. Several statistical analyses argue for a positive relationship between expatriate local language proficiency and Black *et al*.'s (1991) three-dimensional model of sociocultural adjustment (general adjustment, interaction adjustment and work adjustment).

Local language proficiency has been found to have a positive effect on general and interaction adjustment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al*., 2005; Huff, 2013; Selmer and Lauring, 2015), only interaction adjustment (Kim and Slocum, 2008; Kraimer *et al*., 2001; Peltokorpi, 2008; Ravasi *et al*., 2015; Shaffer *et al*., 1999), work-related adjustment (Froese *et al*., 2012; Takeuchi *et al*., 2002; Taylor and Napier, 1996[1]), all three of Black *et al*.'s dimensions of cultural adjustment (Freeman and Olson-Buchanan, 2013; Puck *et al*., 2008; Selmer, 2006), sociocultural adjustment of accompanying spouses (Ali *et al.*, 2003), or no influence at all (Min *et al.*, 2013). The positive impact of expatriate local language proficiency has been argued to prevail in hostile environments (Paulus and Muehlfeld, 2017), and interrelate with third variables, such as relationship-building with locals (Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2002) and cultural intelligence (Haslberger and Dickmann, 2016; Huff, 2013). However, local language proficiency may exacerbate the negative influence of role conflict on adjustment (Shaffer *et al.*, 1999), or limit adjustment altogether, when expatriates experience unmet high expectations caused by linguistic similarity between home and host country (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2001).

In addition to adjustment, language-sensitive expatriate research has found local language proficiency to positively influence other criteria or antecedents of success, such as expatriate effectiveness[2] (Salgado and Bastida, 2017), job performance (Mol *et al.*, 2005), career success (Traavik and Richardsen, 2010[3]), intercultural effectiveness (Cui and Van Den Berg, 1991), interpersonal skills (Wang *et al.*, 2014) and identification with the subsidiary (Ishii, 2012). Notably, Mol *et al.* (2005) find no effect of English language proficiency on job performance in their meta-analysis. Furthermore, Freeman and Lindsay (2012) differentiate between work situations, and find that expatriates would benefit from local language proficiency more on an ethnically diverse shop floor than in more “professionalised” management work settings.

Also at the individual *actors* level, scholars have found that local language proficiency may influence expatriate career choices, turnover intentions (Froese *et al.*, 2016), and perceptions of international assignments and willingness to take them (de Eccher and Duarte, 2018; Dickmann *et al.*, 2008; Haines III *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, local language skills are a highly rated asset by expatriates (Clegg and Gray, 2002; Feng and Pearson, 1999; Fish, 2005; Neupert *et al.*, 2005) and managers/employers alike (Graf, 2004; Shin and Gress, 2018), although not always merited in organisations (Furusawa and Brewster, 2015).

Although expatriate research of language as an actor level characteristic underlines the importance of local language proficiency, several questions remain. Firstly, the quantitative studies use a scattered selection of dependent variables, while CCA is the only recurring concept. The results appear inconclusive (Hippler *et al.*, 2015), and do not indicate which CCA facet relies the most on local language proficiency. Recent critique of Black *et al.*'s (1991) CCA model suggests that neither scales of self-assessed local language proficiency, nor the outdated CCA model "fully capture the influence of host country language proficiency on expatriate adjustment" (Zhang and Peltokorpi, 2016, p. 1450). Scholars have proposed to revise the CCA model and attribute language and cognition more prominent roles (Haslberger and Dickmann, 2016; Hippler *et al.*, 2015). There have also been calls to include the previously neglected perspective of the host country nationals (HCN) (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, the predominant use of CCA consistently groups language with cultural adjustment. Without denying the intrinsic link between language and culture, persistently grouping the two phenomena together in research may conceal the independent influence of language (Welch *et al.*, 2001; Welch *et al.*, 2005). Zhang and Peltokorpi (2016) support this notion in their qualitative study, where they find that higher local language proficiency improves work- and non-work-related adjustment through deeper interactions between expatriates and HCNs.

Secondly, the majority of expatriate research on language as an actor dimension variable does not differentiate between types of expatriation, although recent research indicates assignment outcomes may vary across the categories (Andresen *et al.*, 2014; Tharenou, 2015). Due to longer stays in the host country, self-initiated expatriates[4] (SIE) might achieve higher degrees of local language proficiency, and therefore higher degrees of interaction compared to their assigned expatriate[5] (AE) counterparts (Froese and Peltokorpi, 2013). On the other hand, for SIEs employed by foreign-owned organisations, host country language ability has been found to negatively correlate with job satisfaction (Selmer *et al.*, 2015). Although context is frequently omitted in this category of expatriate research, the latter example underlines the significance of organisational factors in the analysis.

Finally, this category primarily analyses the influence of local language proficiency, but omits other relevant languages, such as English, the corporate language or the headquarter language. Furthermore, only analysing language through individual proficiency as an attribute implies a mechanistic perspective on language use and extracts the phenomenon from relevant processes and structures. As the IB and management literature in section 4 shows, the interaction between different languages and people at the workplace set proficiency as only one of several relevant language factors.

3.2. Language-Sensitive HR Practices as Antecedents to Expatriate Assignment Outcomes

The second category of expatriate literature features analyses of language-sensitive institutional HR practices and falls within the *structural* dimension of global work. While some scholars have found some MNCs to include language classes in pre-departure cross-cultural training (CCT) (Kang and Shen, 2014; Kang *et al.*, 2015; Tung, 1982) and supported the potential positive effects (Bhatti *et al.*, 2013; Dowling *et al.*, 2013; Suutari and Brewster, 1998; Wang and Tran, 2012) on CCA dimensions (Wang and Tran, 2012) or performance (Ko and Yang, 2011), the empirical results of CCT effectiveness are mixed (Puck *et al.*, 2008; Wurtz, 2014). Scholars have argued that the variation between expatriate profiles, assignment destinations and tasks require differentiated training, also in terms of language (Potter and Richardson, 2019).

The role of language in recruitment is another HR practice of interest in language-sensitive expatriate research. Research indicates that even though technical competencies are usually emphasised, local and corporate (Dowling *et al.*, 2013) language skills may play a role in expatriate selection criteria (Tung, 1982; Zeira and Banai, 1984), and that this can positively associate with work adjustment and job performance (Furusawa and Brewster, 2016). Scholars have further supported including language as an expatriate selection criterion, even when corporate language policies appear to mask the necessity, based on empirical links between host country language proficiency and CCA (Caligiuri *et al*., 2009) or intercultural communication (Jordan and Cartwright, 1998). However, it is important to note that the perceived importance of language skills in selection may vary across countries, linguistic contexts (Furusawa and Brewster, 2015; Tung, 1982) and levels of management (Brewster, 1988), and in some cases, language skills may even be completely disregarded in selection (Tahir, 2018).

The benefits of language-sensitive HR practices may vary according to contextual factors and some contributions provide recommendations for language-sensitive HR practices based on an assessment of what roles language may play in different assignments. By referring to the wider management and IB literature, Tenzer and Schuster (2017) develop a framework for assessing expatriate language requirements based on a taxonomy of their functions and roles, and the various impacts language may have in an international workplace. The framework draws on expatriate research on categories of international assignments and management research on language and emotional impact, social identity formation, trust formation and power relations. Malul *et al*. (2016) reiterate the importance of supporting staffing strategies with language policy, as linguistic differences and features may undermine the success of expatriate staffing in subsidiaries. These examples stand out from the abovementioned literature, as they illustrate the interconnectedness of language management and HR. Sections 4 and 5 demonstrate, that this is a particularly promising arena for integrating language-sensitive expatriate research with relevant international business and management research.

3.3. Language in Expatriate Interaction Dynamics

The final category of language-sensitive expatriate literature examines linguistic influence on expatriate interactions with colleagues. Although not representative of the entire literature, this part of expatriate research demonstrates the most explicit focus on language, most interaction with wider language-sensitive management research, and therefore, most promise for future cross-fertilisation.

Zhang and Harzing (2016) indicate that in order to form harmonious relationships with the host country nationals, it is crucial for expatriates to possess both willingness to learn and ability to practice the host country language. If one or both are missing, distant or even segregated relationships may form. Zhang *et al.*, (2018) further show that the national context of the MNC unit has a significant influence, as in the case of China, where local language(s) are tightly linked with national identity and expatriate local language proficiency influences how locals perceive their expatriate colleagues.

A few examples of in-depth language-sensitive research in this category crosses into business communication studies, where the central role of linguistic issues in at-work communication dynamics is established. These studies show that language issues in expatriation go beyond host country language proficiency, and indicate that challenges caused by language differences may be mitigated through conscious management. Through case-study on-site observation, Babcock and Du-Babcock (2001) derive a model of communication zones (further developed by Peltokorpi (2010)) shaped by the speakers' choice of language and proficiency. In zones where language proficiencies do not match, the participants use their linguistic resources to adapt to the situation. Further research has found that expatriates may experience the formation of language-based in- and out-groups and use intermediaries and informal interaction as coping tactics (Peltokorpi, 2007; Peltokorpi and Clausen, 2011). Language barriers have also been found to cause role ambiguity (Okamoto and Teo, 2011, 2012), exclusion (Goodall *et al.*, 2006), culture shocks at the workplace (Shi and Wang, 2014) and difficulties in high-risk operations (Fisher and Hutchings, 2013).

4. Language in International Business and Management Research

Without attempting an exhaustive review of language-sensitive research in international business and management (see Karhunen *et al*., 2018; Tenzer *et al*., 2017), this section draws on contributions which may complement the expatriate individual level and HR perspectives with further insights from all three dimensions of global work. The study of languages in international business has grown to become an influential field with scholars explicitly studying the multifaceted role of language in MNCs. Language has been identified as a central aspect of international business as early as 1975 (Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975). However, the field first gained momentum in the late 1990s with Marschan *et al*., (1997) raising awareness of language as "the forgotten factor in multinational management" and Feely and Harzing (2002) with their paper "Forgotten and Neglected – Language: The Orphan of International Business Research". No longer forgotten, nor an orphan, language has been the special issue topic of five journals[6]. While scholars in the early stages of language-sensitive management and IB research aimed to raise awareness of the strategic importance of language in MNCs, the field has matured with calls to consider the complexity and contextuality of language (Brannen *et al*., 2014; Janssens and Steyaert, 2014; Piekkari and Tietze, 2011; Piekkari and Zander, 2005) and draws on relevant disciplines, such as sociolinguistics (Angouri and Piekkari, 2017) and organisational studies (Piekkari and Westney, 2017).

4.1. Language in the Actor Dimension

Language at the individual level of global work has been explored in the expatriate literature as a component in cultural adjustment and successful international assignments. However, the international management and business literature (with links to various strands of linguistics) can supplement these findings with perspectives on the implications of working in a second language (L2[7]), and the potential limitations of host country language proficiency. The understanding that proficiency is a linear concept, where higher levels automatically unlock successful collaboration is here challenged by the literature nuancing the specificities of L2 functioning.

In global work, individuals are often faced with L2 interaction, through English (or another L2) corporate language use, communication with foreign subsidiaries, or other multilingual scenarios. Psycholinguistic and neuropsychological research has argued that cognitive processes in L2 scenarios may alter individual behaviour, judgement and responses (Corey *et al*., 2017; Costa *et al*., 2014; Dewaele, 2008; Dylman and Bjärtå, 2019; Opitz and Degner, 2012). Volk *et al*., (2014) introduce these considerations to management research arguing that L2 use strains employees' working memory, negatively affecting (depending on foreign language proficiency) their ability to exercise judgement and various forms of self-regulation. Neeley and Dumas (2016) further found that the duration of L2 documentation tasks could be significantly longer compared to similar L1 tasks. Using an experimental design, Akkermans *et al*., (2010) show that foreign language use may prime individuals into behaving in a manner associated with the language/culture in question. Van Mulken and Hendriks (2015) demonstrate the impact of language constellations on successful work collaboration, where L1-L2 pairs use more varied strategies than L2-L2 English pairs, where strategies are more parsimonious.

Furthermore, research has shown that the challenges associated with working in a foreign language may trigger emotional reactions which L1 use would not elicit. Although neuropsychological research has found individuals to be less emotional and more direct and pragmatic in L2 reasoning (Dewaele, 2008; Dylman and Bjärtå, 2019; Opitz and Degner, 2012), IB and management scholars have argued that foreign language difficulties provoke emotional reactions in both L1 and L2 speakers. L2 speakers of the working language have been found to experience apprehension, shame, embarrassment, stress, anxiety, frustration and indebtedness, when they feel that their language competences do not match the situation (Neeley, 2013; Reiche and Neeley, 2019; Tenzer and Pudelko, 2015; Wang *et al*., 2018). It is also important to highlight the role of interaction with native speakers of the working language. Fully proficient speakers of the working language have been found to react with anger, resentment and frustration to code-switching demonstrated by L2 speakers (Wang *et al*., 2018). In parallel, employees may adjust by choosing leaner communication formats, such as e-mails, in order to avoid potential misunderstandings (Klitmøller and Lauring, 2013; Klitmøller *et al*., 2015), or avoiding communication altogether (Aichhorn and Puck, 2017a).

Another key *actors* dimension aspect which foreign language use may influence is identity and identification. In addition to cognitive and emotional reactions to second language use, and given that language is strongly tied to individual and group identity, scholars have argued that foreign language use may influence employees' identification. Research provides evidence of resistance to the introduction of a corporate language other than the local language, if employees perceive it as a threat to their language identity and believe the local language should dominate the workplace (Bordia and Bordia, 2015; Lønsmann, 2017). Bjørge *et al*. (2017) add that native and non-native speakers of the corporate language may have different opinions of the importance of corporate values, indicating organisational identification could be weaker in an L2. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that employees may also value other identity markers, such as honour and professional competence over language, thus being more open to embracing a foreign corporate language. Furthermore, social constructivist and interpretivist language-sensitive research of identity questions viewing identity as a fixed individual or group trait. Scholars have proposed viewing identification as a continuing process where actors construct their identities situationally and contextually (Zølner, 2019).

4.2. Language in Global Work Processes

The strength of global work as a concept lies in its consideration of processes. As the IHRM field (expatriate research included) has focused less on global work processes, this is a domain where IB and management research, with contributions from sociolinguistics and business communication, may supplement the expatriate literature in considering language. Given that language is a phenomenon closely tied to interaction (here understood as an intrinsic part of *processes*), research aiming to explore language influence on global work and international workforce management would benefit from considering how language may shape processes, rather than merely understood as a communication medium or tool.

A sizeable share of IB and management language research has focused on how language differences may create barriers between organisational units and individuals. The research on language barriers has advanced the understanding of how the lack of a shared language or insufficient proficiency in the corporate language may negatively influence employee dynamics within an MNC. On an intra-unit level, language barriers have been found to cause expensive bottlenecks in communication (Andersen and Rasmussen, 2004; Harzing *et al*., 2011; Harzing and Pudelko, 2014) and superfluous subsidiary control (Harzing and Feely, 2008). Such language barrier-induced negative cognitive and emotional reactions fragment according to language, nationality (Kulkarni, 2015; Tenzer and Pudelko, 2015; Tenzer *et al*., 2014), social identity/categorisation (Klitmøller *et al*., 2015; Lauring, 2008), or generations (Blazejewski, 2008). These faultlines may form language-based clusters or shadow structures (Marschan-Piekkari *et al*., 1999), where inter-cluster communication is diluted or rendered "thin" (Lauring and Tange, 2010; Tange and Lauring, 2009). Simultaneously, employees who do not share a language have been found to experience difficulties developing trust (Barner-Rasmussen and Björkman, 2005; Neeley *et al*., 2012; Tenzer *et al*., 2014). Some scholars have suggested that a shared or corporate language coupled with facilitating factors, such as adequate levels of employee proficiency (Barner-Rasmussen and Björkman, 2005) or shared social knowledge (Buckley *et al*., 2005), may aid in overcoming language barriers, increasing knowledge transfer (Peltokorpi, 2015; Peltokorpi and Yamao, 2017) and improving trust formation (Lauring and Selmer, 2010, 2012). HRM research strengthens the potential benefits of a corporate language, as scholars have argued that recruitment based on corporate language proficiency may increase knowledge transfer (Peltokorpi and Vaara, 2014) and subsidiary absorptive capacity (Peltokorpi, 2017).

In addition to the IB and management literature highlighting the potential barriers which language diversity may entail, scholars in these fields have also engaged with the phenomenon of language and the multilingual reality of international business. Although common language use and single language policies have been proposed as potential solutions to poor communication, the disintegrative effects of relying on a corporate language in the absence of employee language proficiency (Hinds *et al*., 2014; Kroon *et al*., 2015; Lagerström and Andersson, 2003; Vigier and Spencer-Oatey, 2017), or acceptance (Piekkari *et al*., 2005) have also been observed. Research has also questioned the possibility of managing language on a corporate level (Bellak, 2014). MNCs have been characterised as multilingual (Steyaert *et al*., 2011) and the language practices of employees argued to rather rely on the linguistic landscape of the MNC and its units, than top-down policies (Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio, 2011). The extant literature provides further nuance to the potential of common corporate language policies (CCL) and shared languages to facilitate knowledge transfer, by illustrating that a common language may ease the leverage of explicit knowledge, but not necessarily tacit knowledge (Reiche *et al*., 2015; Zølner, 2013).

The above-mentioned shortcomings of common language policies illustrate the difficulty of managing a complex phenomenon like language. Furthermore, the findings contribute to a view where language does not merely feature as a variable and potential barrier in global work processes, but rather constitutes a resource for actors in shaping these processes. The proponents of this view in the IB, management and, to some extent, sociolinguistics literature, see language as a phenomenon which does not exist *a priori*, but emerges *in situ* in practice and interaction between participants (Karhunen *et al*., 2018; Steyaert *et al*., 2011). Labelled "the multilingual turn" (Cohen and Kassis-Henderson, 2017), this perspective shifts the focus from language-induced barriers and the challenges of multilingualism, to the practice-oriented study of actors, who mobilise their linguistic resources, while shaping discursive practices at the workplace. Viewing language as a social practice has allowed these scholars to investigate the multilingual realities of MNC processes, thus illustrating the complex relationship between language policy and practice.

Research accounting for the multilingual and practice-dependent nature of language in global work can be roughly summarised into three main postulates. Firstly, employees are actors whose language use depends on more than ability and proficiency. Actors may adapt, negotiate, compromise and improvise language use according to their resources and aims, and the nature of the situation and interaction (Aichhorn and Puck, 2017b; Steyaert *et al*., 2011). Flexible employee linguistic agency may even alleviate cases where the corporate language policy does not match the MNCs linguistic reality (Angouri, 2013; Sanden and Lønsmann, 2018). These contributions provide valuable input to inquiries of workforce management in global work processes, where HR practices can consider the dynamic linguistic landscape of the workplace. Secondly, business communication research highlights the specificity of English use in business contexts, where business English lingua franca (BELF)[8] is an amalgamation of English, other present languages and business terminology/jargon produced by (predominantly) non-native speakers of English through interaction (Kankaanranta, 2006). BELF may be characterised by a highly specialised vocabulary, yet simplified in terms of grammar, idioms, as users prioritise "to get the job done" (Charles, 2006;

Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta, 2012). Considerations of business English use may nuance assumptions that global use of any single language is uniform.

Some IB and management scholars have also suggested alternatives to investigating language use in MNCs as an encounter between static national languages. A more fluid and situated conceptualisation of language shifts focus away from national borders as the main tension-inducing barriers, to the more complex use of linguistic repertoire in the MNC context (Janssens and Steyaert, 2014; Karhunen et al., 2018). Similarly, scholars have questioned the notion of culture as a nation-bound phenomenon which, together with, national language differences, is the dominant cause of barriers at the workplace (Brannen et al., 2014). These views are alternatives to the perspectives expressed in expatriate and IB/management studies which examine the relationship between local (national) language proficiency and adjusting to the local (national) culture.

Finally, research bridging IB, sociolinguistics and translation studies has argued that translation is more than a mechanistic process, which simply transfers meaning from one language to another. Scholars have shown that the process involves a series of choices, which serve the purposes of the translator. Thus, the process can also be seen as cultural, where the original message, the interpreter/translator and the reader cannot be isolated from their socio-cultural contexts, or a political process, where the relationship between the source and target influences the translation (Chidlow *et al*., 2014; Janssens *et al*., 2004; Usunier, 2011). Studies of the translation of corporate values or concepts which do not have a direct equivalent in the target language illustrate the potential use of cultural or political interpretations of translation (Blenkinsopp and Pajouh, 2010; Kuznetsov and Kuznetsova, 2014; Tietze *et al*., 2017; Tréguer-Felten, 2017; Zølner, 2013).

Hierarchy and various manifestations of power are considered as another element of global work processes. Research on the inextricable link between language and power illustrates that employees performing global work could be embedded in language-dependent power structures. Scholars have argued that official language choices in MNCs are rarely neutral (Boussebaa and Brown, 2017; Lønsmann and Mortensen, 2018; Tietze, 2004), as native speakers or highly proficient employees will gain position and have the opportunity to utilise their linguistic resources to gain an upper hand over their less proficient colleagues (Beeler and Lecomte, 2017; Neeley, 2013; Tenzer and Pudelko, 2017). In inter-unit relations, language policy has also been proposed as an element of subsidiary control (Björkman and Piekkari, 2009), which may however be countered through subsidiary translation practices (Logemann and Piekkari, 2015). Furthermore, language policies could provide career advancement opportunities, but also constitute a barrier for vertical and horizontal career mobility (Itani *et al*., 2015; Latukha *et al*., 2016). However, individual agency and use of linguistic resources within power structures has also been proposed as equally influential in determining the final power outcomes (Gaibrois and Steyaert, 2017).

4.3. Language in Corporate Global Work Structures

Although language features as an individual characteristic in the *actors* box of Reiche *et al*.'s (2019) model, this sub-section argues that English CCL policies can also shape *structures* of global work. The IB and management literature shows that language is not merely an antecedent individual proficiency trait with consequences for employee functioning, but also a matter of corporate policy. As MNCs risk facing reduced efficiency and language barriers in their international activities and coordination of global supply chains, organisations would benefit from a conscious approach to language in line with their strategic orientation (Feely and Harzing, 2003; Luo and Shenkar, 2006). Scholars have argued that companies could turn language into a strategic asset through context-informed policy (Sanden, 2014, 2016), or even treating corporate language choice as a financial portfolio or investment (Dhir, 2005). Without compatibility with the organisational circumstances and suitable supporting measures, language policy might even do more harm than good (Sanden, 2018). However, single language mandates, such as English CCL policies, are not the only solutions to facilitate communication in a multilingual environment (Bellak, 2014), since other languages than English could suit the MNC better (Maclean, 2006), or policies, such as functional multilingualism, could allow efficient use of multiple relevant languages (Feely and Harzing, 2003). Finally, the role of language policy in the structures of global work may depend on how it interlinks with other MNC policy areas, such as internationalisation strategy (Luo and Shenkar, 2006), CSR (Selmier II *et al.*, 2015), communication policy (Simonsen, 2009), mergers and acquisition strategy (Cuypers *et al.*, 2015; Malik and Bebenroth, 2018), or emerging and increasingly relevant topics, such as IT or e-HRM implementation (Heikkilä and Smale, 2011).

Viewing language policy as an element of global work structures requires research to go beyond discussing the alternatives to CCL policy and its strategic importance, and raise questions of how it practically performs in the various layers of an organisation's context. Given that language use does not occur in a vacuum, some IB and management scholars have been calling for, and conducting, contextualised language research (Brannen, 2004; Janssens and Steyaert, 2014; Karhunen *et al.*, 2018; Peltokorpi and Vaara, 2012). The efforts to contextualise language policy and practices have illustrated the lack of panaceas across contexts. At the organisational level, several characteristics may determine how a language policy may frame global work. The economic sector of a corporation determines the activities of its employees, meaning language use and needs may vary between sectors (Sanden, 2015). A unit's function within the MNC (HQ, subsidiary etc.) and relationship with other company organisations are further examples of factors which influence the compatibility between language policy and context (Peltokorpi and Vaara, 2012). Even within a single unit, responses to language initiatives may vary depending on corporate level or employee function (Tange, 2009). Furthermore, the wider extra-organisational context comes into play, as different organisations of the same MNC may exist in completely different national and linguistic contexts, requiring some degree of policy flexibility between units (Dhir and Gòkè-Paríólá, 2002; Harzing and Pudelko, 2013; van den Born and Peltokorpi, 2010). Finally, as in other policy areas, the language-sensitive IB and management literature has documented that a mismatch between policies and the field may result in disparities between policy and practice, where insufficient skills or desire to use the CCL among employees may lead to continued local language use (Fredriksson *et al*., 2006; Swift and Wallace, 2011).

5. Language as a Glue between Dimensions of Global Work: Future Directions

From a linguistic perspective, the portfolios of MNC employees become international and multilingual the moment their tasks require communication across borders or languages. Considering this complexity, this article supports examining an international workforce in terms of global work. Global work as a concept, although used loosely in the past, has the flexibility to account for multilingual collaboration, which would not fall within categories, such as self-initiated expatriates or assigned expatriates. Here, global work can function as an umbrella term including increasingly common arrangements, such as global (virtual) teams and global domestic work (Reiche *et al*., 2019). In their original conceptualisation (Figure 1, section 2), Reiche *et al*. (2019) draw on role theory to differentiate between *actors*, *structures* and *processes*. By following and revising the framework in terms of language factors, this conceptual review argues that language may feature in *structures* (HR practices and communicative policy and guidelines), *actors* (language proficiency and individual implications of foreign language work) and *processes* (knowledge sharing, collaboration and other interaction between actors). Thus, language in international workforces may be extended beyond the limits of a personal characteristic, and into *structures* and *processes*, as shown in Figure 2.

**** Insert Figure 2 about here ****

Based on the conceptual literature review, Figure 2 provides a visualisation of the current distribution of topics between the global work dimensions. Although a simplified and, in some respects, crude representation, it illustrates a tendency where the expatriate literature has mainly emphasised the importance of local language proficiency as an individual characteristic in the *agent* dimension, while *processes* and *structures* other than recruitment and training policies, have received less attention. Through two alternative frameworks for language in global work, this section argues that expanding research to consider all three dimensions and the intersections between them may bridge between expatriate and IB research. Although multidisciplinary and multi-method collaboration across the divide would be the optimal outcome of the proposed cross-fertilisation, more nuanced and contextualised analytical models in the expatriate field informed by insights from the IB and international management literature, are also welcome development.

This section aims to bridge between traditions and illustrate how extant studies complement each other and scaffold towards a framework of language linkages between the three dimensions (Figures 3 and 4 below). While language factors are present in each dimension of global work, it is the interfaces between them which present the most promising avenues for future language-sensitive research. In setting an agenda for future research, this paper also aims to raise the status of language research in the expatriate and IHRM field as a phenomenon which can be studied in its own right outside the "culture box" (Welch *et al.*, 2001, 2005).

The present review reveals that there are several possibilities of viewing language in global work. By combining the insights from the various strands of research, the following linear processual framework illustrates how researchers interested in the effects of corporate language choices may trace the process back to HR practices (Figure 3).

**** Insert Figure 3 about here ****

The different stages of the proposed process are merely examples of how the phenomenon may be conceptualised. As the discussion of the dynamic and continuous multi-level framework demonstrates (see Figure 4), their order may be alternate. Nonetheless, the categories in Figure 3, and the relationship between them, are representative of what may be deduced from the combined insights of language-sensitive research.

The expatriate IHRM literature underscores the role of HR practices, where language-sensitive employee selection and training are fundamental in determining the linguistic composition of a given workforce. Including or omitting language requirements in recruitment criteria is one of the factors determining what language profiles join a company. Similarly, language classes can be a post-recruitment tool (although limited) in managing the linguistic profile of the employees already recruited. Thus, *structures* as language-sensitive HR practices can be seen as a crucial initial step in determining who the *actors* are and their individual linguistic characteristics. An important caveat here is that, in practice, a multitude of factors determine the final workforce composition. For instance, technical abilities usually overshadow language requirements, and international mergers may introduce new employees who would not have joined the MNC in pre-merger recruitment procedures. However, if an MNC aims to influence which languages their employees know and how proficient they are, HR tools are among the key options. Furthermore, internal corporate mobility practises accentuate the fluidity of a workforce. Practices concerning international assignments vary greatly between companies, where some facilitate the movement of employees between organisational units, and others prefer to hire international employees on local contracts. Incorporating the expertise of the expatriate research domain clearly strengthens the study of the abovementioned intersections, as theories of corporate HR and mobility practices may supplement linguistic perspectives with insight to the mechanisms behind HR structures as well as their effects.

On the *actors* level, in line with recent contributions (Reiche and Neeley, 2019), research could converge on investigating and comparing individual cognitive and psychological reactions in different contexts to various forms of language use and policy (local language/s, MNC official language, or third languages). Extending the ambitions of cross-fertilisation to the field of linguistics and psycholinguistics mentioned in section 4.1 would allow scholars to consider the complex individual cognitive reactions to foreign language use when assessing HR and language policy on the *actors* level. Through their taxonomy of expatriate roles and linguistic influence, Tenzer and Schuster (2017) provide an excellent starting point and insight to possible factors which influence the relationship between expatriates/international employees and their linguistic environments.

Figure 3 illustrates that corporate language policy encapsulates the entire process. Language-sensitive HR practices, individual linguistic agency and employee interaction all exist within the context of formal and informal corporate approaches to language. This means that the structural dimension influences all stages of the process. From a practical perspective, the proposed processual framework in Figure 3 highlights the importance of aligning corporate language measures. Having a certain language policy does not guarantee the desired outcomes, if the MNC does not select employees who are capable of comfortably functioning in line with this policy. Scholars aiming to investigate why employees in an MNC use language in a specific way, or why a language policy is not respected could benefit from tracing the process back to HR practices determining who actually works in the company. Thus, a potential point of intersection between the traditions is between two elements within the *structures* dimension – HR practices and language policy. Van den Born and Peltokorpi (2010) point out that the alignment of MNC strategic orientation, HRM practices and language policy is challenging to achieve in practice, especially considering the dilemma between local embeddedness of subsidiaries and global integration with headquarters. Nonetheless, the interlinkage between the two policy areas is evident and could be a domain for further exploration. Integrated research of language in global work could therefore investigate in detail the nature of language policy (e.g. formulations, specification and implementation), and explore the match or mismatch with HR and global mobility practices affecting global work structurally (e.g. recruitment and training) in the specific context of various MNCs. Over time, typologies of how various circumstances require certain policy adaptations could emerge.

The proposed framework in Figure 3 is merely an example of a segment in a sequential account of how the dimensions of global work might interact. Although useful for tracing the process back to HR (recruitment and training), the overview is over-simplistic in its lack of accounting for two-way interaction, and while processual, is nevertheless static. The present review suggests that relationships between the dimensions of language in global work could be bidirectional and that the process could be continuous rather than linear. In Reiche *et al*.'s (2019) visual conceptualisation of global work (Figure 1), a line connects the three dimensions, indicating their inter-connectedness. This review not only establishes the presence of language in all dimensions, but also indicates how language may connect them. Figure 4 thus supplements the processual view in Figure 3, with a framework focusing on interconnectedness rather than linearity. The overview accounts for bidirectional relationships, whereby a more dynamic interplay between dimensions constitutes a continuous process without an end-point. Whereas the framework in Figure 3 serves as a model where expatriate research, IB and management studies could meet within and between dimensions, Figure 4 takes a more holistic and dynamic multidimensional perspective.

*** *Insert Figure 4 about here* ***

This alternative framework allows future research to investigate previously unaccounted bidirectionality between dimensions. Firstly, the framework indicates that *structures* do not have a one-way influence on *actors* and *processes*. Acknowledging the possibility of a reverse influence allows researchers to inquire how the linguistic landscape of an MNC in the form of *actors* and *processes* could influence the shaping and re-shaping of corporate language policy or language-sensitive HR practices. Although many inquiries reveal a unidirectional corporate language policy influence on processes and interaction, or HR influence on actors, fewer have accounted for the emergence of MNC' approaches to language. Tenzer *et al*. (2017) call for more multi-level research of emergent processes and synergies on the group- or organisational level arising from individual skills and actions. Considering the rich literature illustrating the individual implications of working in a foreign language, and how multilingualism coupled with fluid linguistic agency influences processes and employee interactions in global work, the complex field in which policy operates is evident.

Although the expatriate literature has covered some language-sensitive HR practices, bridging the *actors* and *structures* dimensions in a reverse fashion as proposed above, is rarely discussed. Piekkari and Tietze (2012, p. 553) strengthen this perspective by arguing that "the scope of the HR function should be extended from organizing language classes in preparation for expatriate assignments to reaching the 'deepest layers' of the workforce in order to support integration and cohesion within the MNC." Following calls in language policy research for a bottom-up approach (Sanden and Lønsmann, 2018), where the MNC' linguistic landscape and actual language practices inform research on policy, future research of language in global work may explore this relationship further.

Secondly, the reverse relationship between *actors* and *processes* is evident in cases, where the individual language characteristics of actors may change subsequent to processes and employee interactions. For instance, language proficiency could improve without language classes, as increased exposure and daily L2 use with colleagues could increase both confidence and competence (Leow, 2011). On the other hand, research of individual responses to language barriers demonstrates (Tenzer and Pudelko, 2015) that language challenges at the workplace may also decrease both L2 confidence and use among individuals. A continuous bidirectional framework reveals thus further opportunities for cross-fertilisation.

Finally, the framework proposed in Figure 4 is suitable, when scholars aim to examine language in business as a continuous and recurring process without and end result (Langley and Abdallah, 2011). An MNC language policy or language practices on the ground are not necessarily finite and are more likely to change over time, as the corporate context and the linguistic landscape changes over time. Non-linear dynamic perspectives are advantageous, since changes could occur even on a short-term basis in cases of drastic structural changes in policy and practice, or sudden changes in the workforce composition resulting from downsizing or mergers. The perspective in figure 4 is thus consistent with the conceptualisation of language as a social practice (Angouri and Piekkari, 2017; Janssens and Steyaert, 2014; Karhunen *et al*., 2018) and could take language-sensitive expatriate research further.

6. Conclusion

The present conceptual review of language-sensitive literature yields several conclusions. Firstly, the review indicates that there is a fragmentation between the language-sensitive expatriate literature and the larger domain of language studies in international business and management. However, the scientific contributions complement each other in demonstrating the influence of language within and between all three domains of global work: *structures, actors* and *processes*. It is necessary to acknowledge that expatriate IHRM studies, often, by definition (Cooke *et al*., 2017), and due to scholarly interest, are situated on the individual level with a focus on personal traits and characteristics and their relation to HR practices. However, this review posits that expertise in the link between HR and individual level outcomes can enrich accounts of language practices and policies at the workplace. Equally, the expatriate research perspectives would benefit from considering that language is a fluid and highly context-dependent phenomenon where individual cognitive and social processes interact with complex situational circumstantial factors found in companies.

Secondly, the two frameworks (Figures 3 and 4) deduced from the extant literature are examples of a processual and continuous view of global work. In a processual view, corporate structures in the form of language-sensitive HR practices may be seen as fundamental in shaping the workforce and corporate linguistic landscape. On the other hand, each dimension may influence the other two through a bidirectional relationship, as indicated in Figure 4. With the combined perspectives of scholars from the communities included in this review, the role of language in each dimension and the relationship between them could be investigated more comprehensively than at present. The proposed bridge between traditions could answer calls for multidisciplinary, multi-method and multi-level approaches to global work (Reiche *et al*., 2019) and language in management (Tenzer *et al*., 2017; Tietze *et al*., 2014), partly facilitated by increased communication between IHRM and IB research. Such integration might even lead to methodological and conceptual innovation, where research strategies look beyond variance and temporal compressions and rather than final outcomes of processes, perform processual inquiry of why and how linguistic influence permeates different global work dimensions at a certain time or period of an ongoing process (Langley and Abdallah, 2011). Therefore, it is the author's hope that these examples may set an agenda for future research and discussion of the connections between employee management and language.

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[1] Taylor & Napier find that female expatriates' speaking ability relates to work adjustment, admitting the role of language is more complex than initially assumed.

[2] Here understood as expatriates' ability to complete the assignment's entire duration and show high cross-cultural adjustment and job performance.

[3] In a sample of female expatriates in Norway, Traavik & Richardsen found that local language proficiency aided subjective career success, while English language fluency related positively to both subjective and objective career success.

[4] Employees who find work abroad on their own initiative.

[5] Employees sent on an expatriate assignment by their employer.

[6] International Studies of Management and Organization 2005, Journal of World Business 2011, Journal of International Business Studies 2014, International Journal of Cross Cultural Management 2017, European Journal of International Management 2017.

[7] In this paper, L2 refers to any language learned after a first language (e.g., L3, L4, Ln).

[8] English as a common language, where the business context and vocabulary, together with the multiple languages present, influence the practice of English.

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