

<b>Zeitschrift:</b>	Bulletin suisse de linguistique appliquée / VALS-ASLA
<b>Herausgeber:</b>	Vereinigung für Angewandte Linguistik in der Schweiz = Association suisse de linguistique appliquée
<b>Band:</b>	- (2017)
<b>Heft:</b>	106: Overcoming barriers, bridging boundaries and deconstructing borders in multilingual professional settings : une perspective comparative
<b>Artikel:</b>	Between language wars and paving ways : how metaphors of multilingual encounters contribute to construct and transcend language boundaries
<b>Autor:</b>	Gaibrois, Claudine
<b>DOI:</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-978720">https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-978720</a>

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# **Between language wars and paving ways: how metaphors of multilingual encounters contribute to construct and transcend language boundaries**

**Claudine GAIBROIS**

University of St. Gallen

Research Institute for Organizational Psychology

Girtannerstrasse 6, 9010 St. Gallen, Switzerland

claudine.gaibrois@unisg.ch

Forschung zu Mehrsprachigkeit im Internationalen Business hat sich bei der Untersuchung der Frage, wie Sprachbarrieren überwunden werden können, bislang vor allem auf mehrsprachige Individuen konzentriert, und deren Aktivität als Quelle von individuellem Einfluss interpretiert. Dieser Beitrag richtet im Gegensatz dazu den Fokus darauf, welche Rolle bei der Überwindung von Sprachgrenzen die Perspektive von Mitarbeitenden auf Sprachenvielfalt spielt. Basierend auf einer Fallstudie, die in zwei mehrsprachigen Unternehmen in der Schweiz durchgeführt wurde, untersucht dieser Beitrag, auf welche Sichtweisen von Interaktion in mehrsprachigen Kontexten sich Mitarbeitende von mehrsprachigen Firmen beziehen, und was die Konsequenzen dieser Sichtweisen für die Konstruktion oder die Überwindung von Grenzen zwischen Mitarbeitenden unterschiedlicher Erstsprachen sind. Die Ergebnisse zeigen erstens, dass Aktivitäten zur Überwindung von sprachlichen Barrieren nicht auf Individuen mit Kenntnissen in mehreren Sprachen beschränkt sind. Vielmehr findet sich eine Reihe von kollektiven Bemühungen, Grenzen zwischen Mitarbeitenden unterschiedlicher Erstsprachen zu überwinden. Zweitens erweist sich die Überwindung von Sprachgrenzen nicht primär als Quelle individuellen Einflusses. Zwar sind Sprachkenntnisse für verschiedene Formen der Überwindung von Sprachgrenzen unabdingbar. Die Mitarbeitenden der untersuchten Firmen schildern jedoch nicht, dass die Nutzung dieser Kenntnisse in verschiedenen Sprachen der betreffenden Person eine machtvolle Position verleiht. Vielmehr legt dieser Beitrag den Schluss nahe, dass Aktivitäten zur Überwindung von Grenzen zwischen Mitarbeitenden unterschiedlicher Erstsprachen die Schaffung von Möglichkeiten zur Partizipation und zur konstruktiven Zusammenarbeit zum Ziel haben.

**Stichwörter:**

Mehrsprachigkeit; Internationales Business; Sprachbarrieren; Überwindung von Grenzen zwischen Mitarbeitenden unterschiedlicher Erstsprache; kollektive Bemühungen; Sprachkenntnisse; Partizipation; konstruktive Zusammenarbeit.

**Keywords:**

Multilingualism; international business; language barrier; overcoming boundaries between employees of different first languages; collective efforts; language proficiency; participation; constructive collaboration.

## **1. Introduction: the perspective of International Business on overcoming boundaries in multilingual companies**

In the era of globalization, migration and the spread of communication technologies, companies are "multilingual realities" (Brannen et al. 2014: 496). However, somehow surprisingly, language for a long time was a "forgotten factor in multinational management" (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1997), and the "orphan of international business research" (Feely & Harzing 2003). It was only

around ten years ago that language was put on the "international management map" (Piekkari & Tietze 2011). Today, the study of language diversity has established itself as a field in its own right, distinct from cross-cultural management or intercultural communication (Brannen et al. 2014).

Much of the language-sensitive research in International Business has tended to address language as one of the potential boundaries within organizations – or barriers, as they are often called (e.g., Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999; Feely & Harzing 2003; Harzing et al. 2011). However, more and more, scholars have started to investigate how these boundaries can be transcended. More specifically, research has addressed how individuals having skills in various languages can contribute to overcoming boundaries between employees of different language backgrounds in multilingual organizations. These "boundary spanners" have recently been defined as "individuals who engage in and facilitate significant interactions between two groups" (Barner-Rasmussen et al. 2014: 887). Earlier, they have been called "bridge individuals" (Harzing et al. 2011) or "language nodes" and "language mediators" (Piekkari et al. 1999).

However, most research has interpreted transcending boundaries in multilingual organizations as a source of individual power, even if Barner-Rasmussen (2015) and Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014) have highlighted the positive effects of individuals' boundary spanning activities for organizations. As Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999) in their case study of a Finnish multinational corporation (MNC) proposed, people with relevant language proficiency have "the capacity to influence the formal communication lines and even threaten the intended functioning of the formal organization structure" (p. 437). In their study of a merger of a Swedish with a Finnish bank, Vaara et al. (2005) concluded that "the power position and influence of many (...) [bilingual persons, i.e., those speaking Swedish and Finnish] grew far greater than their official position would have implied" (p. 610f.). Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014) agree that people with superior language capabilities are often able to accumulate considerable informal power and suggest that power might be a possible outcome of possessing the resources that enable boundary spanning. Also Peltokorpi & Vaara (2014) described "language nodes," in their case national middle managers in MNC subsidiaries, as "able to gain power by controlling knowledge flows across language boundaries" (p. 611). At the same time, they emphasized that those national managers reinforce existing hierarchies in the subsidiaries to protect their own power position.

Thus, research on overcoming language boundaries in multilingual organizations has mainly focused on the role of individuals with multiple language skills, and their boundary spanning activities have been interpreted as a source of individual influence. The present article proposes to shift the focus from individuals' language skills to the role people's perspective on language diversity plays in transcending language boundaries. It investigates how the

employees' view on communicating in a multilingual context contributes to both overcoming and constructing boundaries between speakers of different first languages. In a case study of two linguistically diverse companies based in Switzerland, the study explores which perspectives on multilingual encounters employees of multilingual companies draw upon, and what the consequences of these views for constructing or overcoming boundaries are.

In the following sections, I will first introduce the discursive approach as a conceptual framework for the study of the role employees' perspective on language diversity plays in constructing or transcending boundaries between employees of different language backgrounds. After that, information on the case study set-up, the data collection and the data analysis will be provided. In the findings section, I will present the six discursive resources or interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell 1987; Wetherell & Potter 1992) people draw upon to describe how they experience communication in multilingual organizations, which were identified in the analysis. Finally, I will discuss how people's perspectives on language diversity contribute to constructing or to overcoming boundaries between speakers of different first languages.

## **2. Conceptual framework: constructing or overcoming boundaries as a discursive construction**

In order to investigate the construction or transcending of boundaries between speakers of various first languages, this article adopts a discourse analytical approach based on the social constructionist premise that language constitutes worlds as much as it represents them (Berger & Luckmann 1967; Gergen 1985; Gergen & Thatchenkery 2004). From a discursive perspective, social practice is organized by discourse, which can be defined as "language in use" or "human meaning-making" (Wetherell 2001a: 3). Discourse builds objects, worlds, minds and social relations (Wetherell 2001b). One source of regularity is the discursive practices which "people collectively draw on to organise their conduct" (ibid.: 18). These regular ways of doing things in talk – practices – guide people and order discourse. In short, to "do" social life is to "do" discourse. The study of discourse therefore provides insight into human meaning-making, into the meanings that events and experiences hold for social actors (Wetherell 2001a).

The notion of the interpretative repertoire is one way to conceptualize the discursive regularities people draw upon. Interpretative repertoires can be defined as "recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena" (Potter & Wetherell 1987: 149). They consist of "clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images" (Wetherell & Potter 1992: 90) and serve as "resources for making evaluations, constructing factual versions and performing particular actions" (ibid.). For the analyst, the notion of the

interpretative repertoire offers "a way of understanding the content of discourse and how that content is organized" (ibid.: 90f.).

Importantly, discursive regularities such as interpretative repertoires are not a "set of hard and fast rules which people follow like social dopes" (Wetherell 2001b: 20). Rather, they represent flexible and creative resources. A discursive space is therefore a place of argument, "an argumentative texture or a discursive fabric that brings together many different threads which can be combined and woven differently" (p. 25). At the same time, "[a]s accounts and discourses become available and widely shared, they become social realities to be reckoned with; they become efficacious in future events" (p. 16).

From a discourse analytical perspective, people construct or overcome language boundaries in multilingual companies by drawing upon various interpretative repertoires on experiencing communication at linguistically diverse workplaces. These interpretative repertoires represent linguistic resources organizational members draw upon to organize their conduct. Speaking about experiences with multilingualism at work thus has an effect on social relations in multilingual organizations. It represents a constitutive part of constructing or transcending boundaries.

### **3. Case study set-up, data collection and analysis**

#### *3.1 Case study set-up and data collection*

The present study is based on data collected in two multilingual companies based in Switzerland, which both produce consumer goods. The multinational corporation 'Globalos' (pseudonym) has its headquarters located in the French-speaking part of Switzerland and employs around 300,000 employees worldwide. The Swiss company 'Maximal' (pseudonym) is also headquartered in the French-speaking part of Switzerland and employs around 2500 people. Besides its headquarters, 'Maximal' has around 15 production and distribution centers that are located throughout Switzerland, in all of the country's four linguistic regions. The two companies strongly differ with respect to the languages that are used in the workplace, and especially, regarding their degree of "Englishization" (Dor 2004). According to employees, staff from a myriad of language backgrounds works at the multinational 'Globalos', and increasingly uses English as 'common platform'. At the Swiss company 'Maximal' on the other hand, the two national languages German and French are described as the most relevant ones. In addition, English was gaining importance due to an IT standardization project going on at the moment of data collection. In the wake of this change, English usage, especially in written communication, increased significantly and the linguistic complexity in the organization grew.

In both companies, semi-structured interviews (Holstein & Gubrium 1995) were conducted in order to collect employees' accounts of experiences with language

diversity. Interviewing for data production is an appropriate strategy for investigating my research topic because, as Alvesson (2003) emphasized, accounts in interviews can be explored as organizational discourse. The account is then viewed as a "discursive act" which constructs a particular form of subjectivity, and not as "mirroring the feelings and thinking of the interviewee" (Alvesson 2003: 29). In general, from a social constructionist perspective, interviews represent reality-constructing occasions for making meaning (Holstein & Gubrium 1995).

The interview guide covered different aspects of language use in everyday work. Organizational members accounted for their experiences and practices of using and adopting one or more languages. After asking interview partners about their position in the company and their everyday situation at work, the linguistic context in which they move was addressed: Which language is used in interactions between employees of different linguistic backgrounds and why? How are such language choices made and by whom – if they are made explicitly at all? When and why does English come into play?

At 'Globalos', I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with employees working at the company headquarters. Of the 14 employees that were interviewed at 'Maximal'<sup>1</sup>, 11 were based at the headquarters in the French-speaking part of Switzerland and three at one of the subsidiaries in the German-speaking part. On average, the interviews lasted 60 minutes. In order to capture the perspectives of employees in different organizational positions and occupations, systematically, organizational members of lower hierarchical levels were included in the samples. Contrary to linguistics (e.g., Angouri 2013; Angouri 2014; Lonsmann 2014; Gunnarsson 2014; Jansson 2014), much research on multilingualism in organizations in the field of International Business has mainly collected data on the managerial level so far (e.g., Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio 2011; Harzing et al. 2011; Heikkilä & Smale 2011; Zander et al. 2011; Neeley 2013; Harzing & Pudelko 2013; Logemann & Piekkari 2015). The studies by Hinds et al. (2014), Lauring & Klitmøller (2014) as well as Peltokorpi & Vaara (2014) represent some of the more recent exceptions, suggesting a shift away from a mostly managerial scope.

At 'Globalos', the following categories of occupational functions are represented in the proportions stated: four middle managers (one Human Resources manager; one sales and distribution manager; the head of the pension fund; one regional manager for Asia); seven task-related, expertise-based functions, which do not include a leadership position (one finance and controlling

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<sup>1</sup> At 'Maximal', eight interviews have been conducted by members of a research project from the Research Institute for Organizational Psychology of the University of St. Gallen I participated in. The research project was carried out within the research program Nr. 56, "Language diversity and linguistic competence in Switzerland" thanks to a grant of the Swiss National Foundation (SNF). I have completely re-analyzed the interviews for the sake of this study.

employee; one marketing adviser; one controller; one engineer involved in the development of new products; one graphic designer; one employee in charge of standardizing payment processes; one Human Resources employee); six employees on an assistant level or similar (four assistants; one commercial apprentice; one Human Resources coordinator); five members of service departments (one cafeteria employee; the administrative director of the cleaning department; one directors' canteen chef; one corporate hotel receptionist; the co-head of the dishwashing facility in the self-service restaurant). It is important to note that service department employees in leadership positions were grouped in the service department category in the process of analysis, because I considered that belonging to internal services was more relevant than their leadership position in the context of linguistic diversity. That is, I assumed that their experiences with linguistic diversity would be closer to those of other employees without leadership positions in the service departments than to those of middle managers in the company's 'core' sectors.

Within the 'Maximal' sample, the following categories related to occupational functions were represented in the proportions stated: one top manager and board member (the supply chain manager, who is also a board member); four middle managers (the IT standardization project director; the head of recruitment; the customer service director; one distribution manager); nine task-related, expertise-based functions, which do not include a leadership position (the corporate communications manager; one marketing employee; the IT superuser and internal communication manager; three IT standardization employees; one SAP specialist; one Human Resources employee; a local employee for the IT standardization project based in one of the subsidiaries in the German-speaking part of Switzerland).

In both cases the participation of people from different linguistic and national backgrounds was made sure. The choice of participants was driven by the wish to include people from a broad variety of native languages. At 'Globalos', the sample comprised employees with a French, English, Italian, Swiss German, German (from Germany), Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish and Arabic language background. In the case of 'Maximal', staff with Swiss German, French, Italian, English, Russian, Portuguese and Flemish as first language were included in the sample.

Interviews were conducted in English, French, Swiss German, Standard German and Spanish. They were all recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim in four different languages: English, French, German (interviews conducted in Swiss German were translated to standard German, since standardized written Swiss German does not exist) and Spanish. In the findings section, quotations will always first be presented in their original language and then in the English translation, although I am aware of the limitations of the technicist view of translation associated with the equivalence paradigm, which has been criticized

by translation studies (Chidlow et al. 2014). The original quote is included in order to make the linguistic diversity of the data clearly visible in the findings, thus answering Steyaert & Janssen's (2013) call to make the multiplicity of multilingual scholarship visible. In interview excerpts, bits that were left out in order to reduce the length of statements will be represented by "(...)", in instances where the loss of richness of data is minimal. The numbers (e.g., "126-129") indicate the line numbers of the excerpts that are quoted from the transcripts.

### 3.2 Data analysis

The first step of analysis involved identifying the interpretative repertoires on interviewees' experiences of language use in multilingual organizations. Starting with 'Globalos', I went through every account searching for these "clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images" (Wetherell & Potter 1992: 90), in a careful and detailed reading process. Stemming from my research interest in how members of multilingual organizations experience linguistic diversity, I focused on metaphorical descriptions of language use and choice in multilingual encounters and, more generally, in organizational contexts. This process was facilitated by feeding the interview transcripts into the electronic data processing program ATLAS/ti to organize, compare and categorize recurring accounts of language use.

At this early stage, I created a generous number of categories, in the form of codes, to insure that as many potentially interesting elements as possible were included in the analysis. In order to collect the many metaphors and lively images I encountered, and to represent the linguistic variety of the accounts, I also created codes which would wind up containing the quotation which gave the code its name, be it in English, French, German or Spanish. Other codes were more general and overarching. On the whole, during this first coding stage, I tried simultaneously to represent the breadth of the empirical material and to put some order to it. For this reason, I did not hesitate to label quotations in transcripts with several codes when this seemed to make sense. While categorizing, I also strictly avoided creating codes which involved any judgements which were not clearly contained in the accounts. As one important example, I created the code "Anglosaxon dominance" only after I had encountered that formulation in a transcript; in the course of further analysis, I assigned this code to a quote only when an interviewee used the label. Out of this initial analytic process, 490 codes emerged for 'Globalos'.

In the next step, I gradually reduced the number of codes by grouping them several times, looking for similarities in meaning. In order to increase reliability, I consulted external sources like dictionaries and lists of existing metaphorical

expressions<sup>2</sup> to "check individual intuitions regarding the conventionality and potential meaning(s) of a particular metaphorically used word or expression" (Cornelissen et al. 2008: 17). Out of this long concentration process, six interpretative repertoires resulted: 1) The military repertoire; 2) The competition repertoire; 3) The control repertoire; 4) The equality repertoire; 5) The participation repertoire; 6) The harmony repertoire.

In analyzing the interviews conducted at 'Maximal', I kept these repertoires and their key metaphors in mind, without, however, limiting myself to them or forcing the analysis of the Maximal case into the 'scheme' that emerged from analyzing 'Globalos'. Initially, I created 858 codes which I gradually reduced afterwards, using the same method as with 'Globalos'. The six repertoires identified at 'Globalos' were also found at 'Maximal'. However, in some cases, they appeared with different features.

The second step of analysis consisted of analyzing the implications of these interpretative repertoires for constructing or transcending language boundaries. The focus was on how the various understandings of communication in multilingual contexts help construct or transcend boundaries between employees with different language backgrounds. Since English frequently serves as 'common platform' at 'Globalos' and is increasingly used at 'Maximal', special attention was paid to the role of English throughout the analytical process.

#### **4. Findings: six interpretative repertoires on experiencing communication in multilingual organizations**

In the following section, six interpretative repertoires on experiencing communication in multilingual organizations, which were identified in the analysis of the 'Globalos' and the 'Maximal' companies, will be presented: 1) The military repertoire; 2) The competition repertoire; 3) The control repertoire; 4) The equality repertoire; 5) The participation repertoire; 6) The harmony repertoire. Using quotes from the interviews as illustrations, the understandings of multilingual encounters underlying the various interpretative repertoires will be introduced.

##### *4.1 Military repertoire: multilingual encounters as fights between speakers of different language backgrounds*

The military repertoire is organized around the central metaphor of the fight. It presents communicating in a multilingual context as an act of combat, and the interactions between speakers of different languages as meetings of adversaries on the battlefield. I distinguished two versions of the military

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., Oxford Dictionary, Larousse (in French, German, English and Spanish), Das Digitale Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Collins English Dictionary.

repertoire. One concentrates on rhetorical battles, the other on battles between territories. The following quote introduces the core metaphor of the repertoire, and at the same time illustrates its rhetorically oriented variant. It is an excerpt from an interview with a graphic designer with German (from Germany) as a first language. The statement describes experiences in meetings held in languages other than the person's first language:

Man kann ja auch verbal dann einfach niedergemacht werden, ne. Das ist dann auch einfach ein Kampf der Wörter, und da unterliegt man einfach (Globalos 11, 15)

*You just can get bashed verbally. It is simply a fight of words, and you are just defeated. (Globalos 11, 15; my translation)*

In its other variant, the military repertoire draws a connection between a language and a territory. The battle is presented as occurring between languages which are, in this case, defined as linguistic "terrains." In the following example, a supply chain manager from 'Maximal' with French as first language draws upon the territorial variant of the military repertoire in order to describe interactions with people having English as first language, or Anglophones:

Interviewer: [E]st-ce que les gens qui participaient, les Anglophones, des fois ils se (...) rendaient compte [de vos difficultés] ou ils essaient de vous expliquer un peu (...) ?

Maximal 6 : Non, rarement (rigole). (...) Rarement. Et en terrain conquis.

(Maximal 6, 126-129)

*Interviewer: The people who participated, the Anglophones, did they sometimes notice your difficulties or tried to explain to you a little bit?*

*Maximal 6: No, rarely (laughter). Rarely. And in conquered terrain.*

(Maximal 6, 126-129; my translation)

In sum, the military repertoire portrays interactions between people with different linguistic backgrounds as fights. In one variant of the repertoire, the adversaries meet on the rhetorical battlefield, as in this statement by the graphic designer whose first language is German (from Germany):

In Präsentation teilweise ist eine Sprache auch eine Macht. Besonders, wenn man mit Engländern zu tun hat. Oder es wird einfach vorausgesetzt, dass Englisch die Sprache, die Businesssprache ist. Und wenn man nicht perfekt ist und nicht die Nuancen versteht, dann empfinde ich das teilweise als Macht. (Globalos 11, 13)

*In presentations, language sometimes also is power. Especially, when you have got to do with British people. Or it is just supposed that English is the language, the business language. And if you're not perfect and don't understand the nuances, then I sometimes perceive this as power. (Globalos 11, 13; my translation)*

In the other, territorially oriented variant, people are presented as "representatives" of languages defending their languages against others. The following excerpt from the interview with the administrative director of the cleaning services at 'Globalos', whose first language is French, provides an example:

On [service nettoyage] est un des rares départements où on se bat pour notre français.  
(Globalos 12, 19)

*We [the cleaning services] are one of the few departments who defend our French.  
(Globalos 12, 19; my translation)*

Also with specific regard to English, the military repertoire is therefore organized around an understanding of interacting as fighting. Analogous to the general features of the repertoire, people with different degrees of English proficiency are described either as involved in rhetorical battles, or as 'owners' of a specific language threatened by English.

#### *4.2 Competition repertoire: multilingual encounters as games between people of different language backgrounds*

The competition repertoire conceives of communicating as a game involving various participants. This might include several types of games, as its core metaphors indicate. Communication is sometimes portrayed as "play with words" (Globalos 8, 263-265), but even more often as a "power game" ("Machtspiel;" Globalos 11, 109). Therefore, language skills are presented as "trumps" ("atouts") that everyone "has to play" ("chacun doit jouer") (Globalos 6, 190).

Accordingly, people's 'position' in the game of words is not the same if their proficiency in the language used in the interaction differs, as this quote by the graphic designer, whose first language is German (from Germany), suggests:

[Ich] empfinde (...) das auch als Machtpotential, eine Sprache zu beherrschen. Und dann ist man einfach in einer schwächeren Position, wenn man das nicht gut kann. (Globalos 11, 15)

*I also perceive it as a power potential to master a language. And then you just are in a weaker position, if you don't do [master the language] well. (Globalos 11, 15; my translation)*

The consequences of being in the stronger position thanks to better "trumps" (Globalos 6, 190) in the interactional game are discursively constructed as follows by a marketing adviser from 'Globalos' whose first language is French:

[J]e trouve toujours désagréable qu'un type puisse arriver et en fait avoir un avantage de par la langue. (...) [P]arce que quand on a un contrôle total de la langue, c'est plus facile de transmettre ses idées, plus facile de convaincre les gens (...). On a un meilleur contrôle de son audience, simplement. (Globalos 6, 184-190)

*I always find it nasty that a guy can come and have an advantage by virtue of language. Because when you have a total control of the language, it's easier to transmit your ideas, to convince people. You simply have a better control of your audience. (Globalos 6, 184-190; my translation)*

Conversely, 'poor' language skills – in this example in English – are constructed as 'losing cards' in the organizational game. As a Human Resources manager from India working for 'Globalos' who was educated in English, puts it by drawing on the game metaphor:

If [people] are not able to converse in English as well as it's needed (...), they lose out.  
(Globalos 1, 153)

Also at 'Maximal', English skills are presented as increasingly important "trumps" – if not 'entry cards'. The following quote from an interview with a supply chain manager, whose first language is French, gives an example:

Je recrute beaucoup de gens chaque année. Pour moi l'anglais, c'est même pas une question, c'est exclu que dans n'importe quel rôle j'engage quelqu'un qui parle pas l'anglais. J'y pense même pas. (Maximal 6, 137)

*I hire a lot of people every year. For me English is not even a question, no way that I hire someone for any role who doesn't speak English. I don't even think about it. (Maximal 6, 137; my translation)*

In sum, the competition repertoire presents communicating as a game of words. Frequently, this game is portrayed as a contest between people who are in different starting positions. In this perspective, language skills represent "trumps" in competitions on the rhetorical level. Also with specific regard to English, language skills as "trumps" are one of the core themes of the competition repertoire. However, the consequences of not having specific language skills are presented more drastically than in the competition repertoire in general. Those who do not speak English are described as "losing out" in the organizational game, or not getting employed at all.

#### 4.3 Control repertoire: multilingual encounters as issue of mastering the situation

This interpretative repertoire is organized around the central notion of "control" of an interaction. Mastering the situation might comprise "being at ease" as much as trying to influence how one's utterances are received. The following statement by a controller from 'Globalos', whose first language is Turkish, gives an example which refers to English. The quote introduces the core term of the interpretative repertoire:

Sometimes I feel "okay, my English is not really that good," (...) I have this feeling so that you know you want to control what you're saying and choosing the... - how do you say? - sophisticated words other than explaining something in an easier way, you want to (...) making it richer you know. (Globalos 8, 249-251)

When it comes to keeping or gaining a certain level of rhetorical control, people emphasized again and again the relevance of feeling comfortable in interactions ("the comfort level;" Globalos 1, 133). Also here, one's proficiency in a language is brought into play as a decisive factor. The following quote from an IT employee at 'Maximal', whose first language is French, emphasizes the importance of understanding others to feeling comfortable:

J'aime bien comprendre ce que les gens disent autour de moi. (...) [J'aime bien me sentir à l'aise. Je me sens à l'aise si je comprends ce que les gens disent autour de moi. (Maximal 9, 158)

*I like to understand what people around me say. I like to feel at ease. I feel at ease when I understand what people around me say. (Maximal 9, 158; my translation)*

In sum, the control repertoire presents interacting in a linguistically diverse context as an issue of being or not being master of communicative

constellations. It portrays a lesser command of a language when compared with other interaction participants as hindering one's ability to influence the communication process and its outcome. With respect to English specifically, the control repertoire highlights a remarkable double-sidedness. In some cases, the use of English is portrayed as a means or, at least, an attempt to control communication processes. This especially applies to written exchanges, especially in the context of e-mail communication. The central concern here is the lack of influence on whether a message might be forwarded to other people. The following quote from the interview with a supply chain manager at 'Maximal', whose first language is French, gives an example:

Dans des (...) e-mails (...), moi j'utilise très généralement l'anglais, parce que je ne sais jamais si mon e-mail va être copié à quelqu'un d'autre qui lui ne parle pas français. Peut-être que mon premier interlocuteur, lui il comprendra mon e-mail en français, mais si il doit renvoyer ça à quelqu'un d'autre, j'ai pas envie qu'il soit obligé de traduire mon idée ou de la simplifier ou même de l'envoyer comme ça à quelqu'un qui va pas le comprendre. (Maximal 6, 41)

*In e-mails, I very generally use English, because I never know whether my e-mail will be copied to someone else who doesn't speak French. Maybe my first interlocutor will understand my e-mail in French, but if he or she has to forward that to someone else, I don't want the person to have to translate my idea or simplify it or even forward it just like it is to someone who won't understand it. (Maximal 6, 41; my translation)*

In other cases, people emphasize the negative influence of the use of English on being at ease, as already illustrated in the first quote introducing the control repertoire. This statement by a local responsible for the IT standardization project at 'Maximal', whose first languages are Italian and Swiss German, provides another example:

Die Hauptmeetings [des internationalen IT-Standardisierungsprojekts] (...) [werden] auf Englisch abgehalten (...). Und die [Sitzungen der] Abteilung [des Standardisierungsprojekts] innerhalb, (...) die machen wir jetzt auf schweizerdeutsch. (...) [W]ieso soll man vier, fünf Leute auf Englisch plagen, wenn es auf deutsch einfacher geht? (...) Da muss man ja keinen Umgang machen. (Maximal 12, 292-301)

*The main meetings of the [international IT standardization project] are held in English. And the meetings of the internal department of the [IT standardization project], we do them in Swiss German. Why should one annoy four, five people by talking in English when it's easier in German? There is no need to make a detour. (Maximal 12, 292-301; my translation)*

Thus, on the one hand, using English is portrayed as making some feel uncomfortable, because of their limited English skills. On the other hand, if the interlocutor understands English, especially in written communication, the content of the interaction need not be translated. Therefore, the control repertoire at the same time describes using English as facilitating the control of one's utterances.

#### *4.4 Equality repertoire: multilingual encounters as issue of being on equal terms*

The equality repertoire is organized around the central metaphor of equilibrium. Its central theme is fairness in interactions between people with different

linguistic backgrounds – in verbal exchanges between individuals, and on the general organizational level. The following statement by an assistant with French as a first language who works for 'Globalos' illustrates the equilibrium idea by suggesting a balance of efforts by the involved speakers:

[En Suisse alémanique] on a été chez des gens dans un restaurant où ils ne parlaient pas le français. Et cette dame a été charmante, parce qu'ils nous ont parlé en bon allemand [et pas en suisse allemand] tout le temps (...) Donc ils ont fait un bout de chemin et nous, on l'a fait aussi. (Globalos 9, 239)

*In the German speaking part of Switzerland, we went to a restaurant where they didn't speak French. And the lady was charming, because they talked Standard German [and not Swiss German] to us all the time. So, they went part of the way, and we did, too. (Globalos 9, 239; my translation)*

Imbalance on the other hand is a frequent topic when it comes to the practice of switching to English when a participant does not understand the language of the other participants. This quote from a responsible for the standardization of payment processes at 'Globalos', whose first language is Spanish, gives an example focusing on people with English as first language specifically:

Puede haber una reunión con 25 personas y todas hablan español y una no, entonces la reunión es en inglés. Porqué una cosa que sucede - y no es [Globalos], que noto mundialmente - es que las personas de habla inglesa, de origen habla inglesa, no hacen el esfuerzo en general de aprender otras lenguas. (Globalos 13, 279)

*There can be a meeting with 25 people and all speak Spanish and one not, then the meeting is in English. Because what happens – and that's not just Globalos, it's something I notice worldwide – is that people who speak English, native English speakers, in general don't make the effort to learn other languages. (Globalos 13, 279; my translation)*

Another aspect of imbalance with respect to English is addressed in statements which emphasize the implications of the widespread use of English at the multinational corporation 'Globalos' for employees who do not speak English. In the following statement, the co-head of the dishwashing facility, whose first language is Spanish, cites the example of the welcome day. The interviewee, who chose French as interview language, describes the consequences of holding this information event for new employees in English only instead of both in French and English, as it used to be in the past:

[L]a journée d'accueil (...), je sais que mes collègues [n'y] vont pas, hein. C'est plus d'actualité, ça, pour nous. (...) Je sais qu'avant, ils allaient comme moi, je suis allé. C'était en français. Puis après, il y a une ou deux collègues qui sont allées il y a quelque années et puis qui disaient « Ah, tu vois, c'est en anglais, on comprend rien ». (Globalos 21, 345)

*The welcome day, I know my colleagues don't go. It's no longer of interest for us. I know that previously, they went, as I did. It was in French. And afterwards, one or two colleagues went a few years ago and said "Oh, you see, it's in English, we don't understand anything." (Globalos 21, 345; my translation)*

In short, the equality repertoire is concerned with fairness issues around the use of language in multilingual encounters. These are, on one hand, understood as interactions between linguistic groups. In this case, the underlying question in many cases is the relation between linguistic majorities and minorities. On the individual level, on the other hand, the equality repertoire emphasizes a person's

effort to achieve a balance of efforts. With respect to English, the equality repertoire highlights the adaptation to English speakers who do not master another language which could be a common language. The equality repertoire also stresses that the widespread use of English in official internal communication might have the consequence that employees on the lower levels who do not speak English are not on equal terms with other employees.

#### *4.5 Participation repertoire: multilingual encounters as issue of taking part in interactions*

The participation repertoire is organized around several similar or complementary metaphors and core terms. Not to master a language is presented as having the effect of "being blocked" ("être bloqué"; Globalos 12), and speaking a language thus means to "participate" ("sich beteiligen"; Globalos 22) or even to "integrate oneself" (Globalos 8).

Making it possible for other people to temporarily join conversations is a recurrent theme within the participation repertoire. Choosing a common language is presented as one means to facilitate everybody's contribution to a discussion, as this excerpt from the interview with a regional manager for Asia working at 'Globalos', who has Swiss German as a first language, suggests:

Man sagt: "Du, schau, der versteht die Sprache nicht, dann nehmen wir die Sprache, wo alle verstehen, und dann kann er sich beteiligen an der Diskussion", oder. (Globalos 22, 382)

*We say: "Look, that one doesn't understand the language, then we take the language everyone understands, and then he can participate in the discussion," right. (Globalos 22, 382; my translation)*

Furthermore, the repertoire comprises elements which emphasize participation on a more permanent level. In the following section, the controller with Turkish as a first language working for 'Globalos' argues for adapting to the language of the place where one lives by introducing the integration argument:

I believe personally that if you are working in a different country, you need to do as much as you can, you know, to learn the language. (...) It's just because of the integration, because you have to integrate. (...) I mean you are living here and you are sharing an environment with them. (Globalos 8, 129-131)

In sum, the participation repertoire presents the lack of language skills as barriers in communication. These can be overcome either by a group of people adopting, at least temporarily, another person's first language in order to facilitate his/her participation, or by individuals learning the local language in order to participate long-term, that is, to integrate. This repertoire also strongly emphasizes the various and contradictory facets of English for participation. The following excerpt emphasizes the positive side of using English in interactions between people of different language backgrounds. The statement from an interview with the head of recruitment at 'Maximal', whose first language is French (with whom the interview was conducted in English, however), draws on an example from the private sphere:

Our friends are (...) people [from] all different countries and English helps us to have a common platform. Then (...) I can communicate with people where French is not the main language. (...) I think this is a great chance, otherwise we could not communicate with each other. (Maximal 3, 187-189)

At the same time, other accounts highlight the drawbacks of the widespread use of English for people who do not master it well or not at all. This statement by a Human Resources coordinator from 'Globalos' whose first language is French, serves as an illustration:

[O]n a (...) une nécessité de connaître l'anglais dans certains domaines de l'entreprise, eh bien, c'est clair que ceux qui ne connaissent pas l'anglais auront bien sûr plus de mal à s'adapter ou à être embauchés peut-être. (Globalos 20, 262)

*There is a need to speak English in certain parts of the company, so it's clear that those who don't speak English will have difficulties adapting or being employed. (Globalos 20, 262; my translation)*

Thus, on one hand, English is portrayed as a "common language" which makes it possible to "include everyone" ("inclure tout le monde"; Globalos 4, 52). On the other hand, not being proficient in English is presented as a reason for encountering obstacles when it comes to climbing professional ladders or being employed or, as in other interviews excerpts, for being "blocked" or not being able to participate when information is distributed.

#### *4.6 Harmony repertoire: multilingual encounters as matter of cooperation between people of different language backgrounds*

The core theme of the harmony repertoire is good relations among people, as shown by terms such as being "very conciliatory" ("très conciliants"; Globalos 6, 160) or "always being patient" ("toujours avoir de la patience"; Globalos 9, 350) in interactions with co-workers of other language backgrounds.

One element of the harmony repertoire consists of helping, for instance by "coming down to the level of language" (Globalos 8, 265) of the interaction partner. Another form of helping consists in offering people whose proficiency in a language is lower active help, as in this excerpt from the interview with a responsible for the standardization of payment processes at 'Globalos', whose first language is Spanish:

[Mi jefe que es de habla inglesa] le facilita a uno el camino. (...) Por ejemplo, si (...) él se da cuenta que estoy buscando las frases, él empieza a preguntar. (...) "Es por esto?", "por esto?", "por aquello?". "No". "Entonces que quiere decir, que esto, esto, esto?". Y yo: "Sí, por esto es". (Globalos 13, 239-246)

*My boss who is an English native paves you the way. For instance, if he realizes that I am struggling with sentences, he starts to ask: "Is it because of this?" "Of this?" "Of that?" "No." "Well, what is it you want to say then, that it is this, that, that?" And I [say]: "Yes, it is because of that." (Globalos 13, 239-246; my translation)*

Mixing languages represents another element of the harmony repertoire. It emphasizes the priority of finding a way to express what one intends to say over following the (unexpressed) norm of monolingual talk, as this quote by a finance and controlling employee at 'Globalos', whose first language is Italian, illustrates:

[C']est vrai que parfois voilà je devais chercher des mots, « comment dire ça en italien, comment dire ça en italien », et puis voilà, c'était des phrases où on y rajoutait des mots soit en anglais carrément soit en français. (Globalos 5, 35)

*It's true that sometimes I had to search for words, "how do I say that in Italian, how do I say that in Italian," and then, there were sentences where we added words directly in English or in French. (Globalos 5, 35; my translation)*

Not being afraid of saying something is another theme of the harmony repertoire with specific regard to English. In the following quote, the controller from 'Globalos', whose first language is Turkish, describes his experiences in internal training sessions:

[We have] (...) our [internal] training center (...). They organize courses - for a week or for two weeks. So people come from many countries. And the first thing the lecturer says when he kicks off the training, that "language is broken English." (...) So you don't need to be shy, because your accent, the way you try to explain, is not really good. So feel free. Feel free. (Globalos 8, 406-412)

In short, the harmony repertoire is characterized by its emphasis on good interpersonal relations among employees of different language backgrounds. Supporting people with limited language skills, mixing languages or encouraging the use of 'broken' languages represent some of the elements of the harmony repertoire. Even the creation of language forms which do not follow the usual rules of grammatical 'correctness' are included in the repertoire. An example is provided in this excerpt by an IT standardization project employee at 'Maximal', whose first language is Portuguese:

I think now (...) the boundaries of the languages are becoming thinner, becoming narrow, more subtle (...). For us who work in that whole [IT standardization project], you have what we joke as the [IT standardization project language], which is jargon, which is sometimes ['Maximal'], sometimes [IT] system (...). And then you use that as a verb, you use that as a noun, as an adjective, you kind of throw those [IT standardization project language] words into the thing, and then it crosses all the boundaries. I mean you use that in German, in French, or whatever. (Maximal 10, 116-117)

Using the newly created IT standardization project language is discursively constructed as providing employees with more possibilities to interact than if they stick to natural languages. Also regarding English in particular, being tolerant towards errors and mixing languages is the harmony repertoire's general theme. The emphasis is on making sure that everyone understands each other rather than on the accurate use of English.

## 5. Discussion

The present study has investigated the consequences of employees' perspective on language diversity for constructing or overcoming boundaries between employees of various language backgrounds. Adopting a discursive approach, interviews with employees of two multilingual companies based in Switzerland were analyzed with respect to the understanding of multilingual encounters people draw upon when accounting for their experiences with communicating in their everyday worklife. Six interpretative repertoires, or

"recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena" (Potter & Wetherell 1987: 149), on experiencing communication in multilingual companies emerged from the analysis: 1) the military repertoire; 2) the competition repertoire; 3) the control repertoire; 4) the equality repertoire; 5) the participation repertoire; 6) the harmony repertoire.

These six interpretative repertoires have very different implications for constructing or transcending boundaries. These differences significantly depend on the role language proficiency plays in them. In the military repertoire, interactions are conceived of as fights on the rhetorical battlefield between people with various skills in the interaction-relevant language, or between 'representatives' of languages which belong to a terrain and to a group of people. Similarly, the competition repertoire portrays multilingual encounters as competitions between employees with various degrees of language proficiency, in interactions or regarding career progression and employment. Drawing on the military repertoire and the competition repertoire when accounting for everyday communication in multilingual organizations thus clearly contributes to constructing boundaries between employees of different language backgrounds. Although based on a less drastic metaphor, the control repertoire also does little to overcome boundaries. Given that speaking in a multilingual context is understood as an issue of mastering the situation, showing weaknesses in the interaction-relevant language is described as problematic.

The equality repertoire with its concern about fairness, however, shows a less one-sided perspective on communication at linguistically diverse workplaces: while underscoring unequal possibilities for speakers to choose the language of an interaction, it offers the option of a balance of efforts. Choosing a language which is no one's first language is presented as a possibility to meet on 'neutral ground', which therefore is discursively constructed as one possibility to overcome boundaries between employees whose first language is not the same. Going a step further, the participation repertoire, which frames multilingual encounters as an issue of taking part suggests possibilities for overcoming such boundaries. While lacking language skills is portrayed as an obstacle when information is distributed or when it comes to climbing professional ladders or being employed, various options for facilitating participation in multilingual settings are proposed. These include choosing a language which everybody understands or adapting to the local language in order to integrate. Additionally, in the harmony repertoire, communicating in multilingual contexts is understood as matter of cooperation, contrary to the military, the competition and the control repertoire especially. By suggesting to support people with limited language skills, mix languages or encourage the use of 'broken' languages, it relativizes the importance of language proficiency and focuses on good interpersonal relations. It thus strongly contributes to transcending boundaries.

These examples show that employees in some cases describe language skills as an important factor in constructing or overcoming boundaries in linguistically diverse companies. In competition-oriented notions of communicating in multilingual contexts, 'good' language skills represent important 'trumps' in the rhetorical and organizational 'game'. However, they become much less relevant in perspectives that focus on participation and especially on cooperation. Not to compete on the level of language proficiency or, in other words, not to compete based on a 'native speaker' ideal, thus offers more possibilities for transcending language boundaries. At the same time, a certain level of language skill is considered important in most interpretative repertoires and the elements they comprise. Mixing or using 'broken' languages from the harmony repertoire for instance is still based on a certain level of language competence. Facilitating participation, as suggested by the participation repertoire, or helping from the harmony repertoire requires even more proficiency in the interaction-relevant languages from the people who span boundaries.

The study thus shows that transcending language boundaries in multilingual companies is more multi-faceted than it has been described in language-sensitive research on International Business to date. First, it suggests that boundary spanning activities are not limited to individuals with multiple language skills. Research on "boundary spanners" (Barner-Rasmussen et al. 2014), "bridge individuals" (Harzing et al. 2011), "language nodes" or "language mediators" (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999) has concentrated on the role of individuals with multiple language skills to date. However, various interpretative repertoires that I identified comprise aspects of overcoming boundaries which are not mainly based on individuals' language proficiency. Examples include choosing a language which is no one's native language, using 'broken' languages, mixing languages or the creation of language forms which do not follow the usual rules of grammatical 'correctness'. These forms of language use do not consist of individuals bridging boundaries thanks to their extensive language skills. Rather, they consist of collective endeavours to overcome language barriers, involving both highly skilled and unskilled language speakers.

Second, in this study, interviewees did not mainly construct transcending boundaries as a source of individual influence, contrary to what has been suggested by several studies in the field (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch 1999; Vaara et al. 2005; Barner-Rasmussen et al. 2014; Peltokorpi & Vaara 2014). While language skills are needed in several forms of overcoming language barriers, using one's proficiency is not presented as putting the respective person in a powerful position. Rather, according to the accounts of the employees interviewed for this study, boundary spanning activities are oriented towards creating participation possibilities and constructive cooperation. Therefore, individual and *collective* efforts of boundary spanning

could be interpreted as contributing to empowering all employees involved, but also to organizational success.

## 6. Conclusion

This contribution investigated how employees' perspective on communicating in a multilingual context contributes to constructing or overcoming boundaries between speakers of different language backgrounds. The present case study of two multilingual companies based in the French-speaking part of Switzerland has shown that in such perspectives, transcending boundaries is not limited to individuals with multiple language skills, contrary to what language-sensitive research in International Business has emphasized to date. Rather, overcoming language boundaries is partly discursively constructed as a collective endeavor. Second, while language skills are needed in several forms of overcoming language boundaries, using one's proficiency is not presented as putting the respective person in a powerful position. Rather, this study suggests that transcending boundaries need not be interpreted as a source of individual influence, as International Business research has argued so far. Rather, such activities are also oriented towards creating participation possibilities and constructive cooperation and could thus represent an important organizational resource at management's disposal.

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