

# THE UNEXPECTED UPSIDE OF HIGH LANGUAGE DIVERSITY: SOCIAL INTEGRATION THROUGH A LANGUAGE ADVICE NETWORK

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## INTRODUCTION

Multinational corporations (MNCs) have increasingly adopted a common corporate language, a lingua franca to manage language diversity and create a common platform for communication in operations across foreign markets. However, the effective use of a corporate lingua franca does not take into consideration differences in lingua franca fluency among employees and the potential negative implications for social and work dynamics in MNCs. Extant research demonstrates that lower lingua franca fluency affects the level of stress, status, and performance of less fluent speakers (e.g., Aichhorn & Puck, 2017). Additionally, language diversity is shown to limit employees' social relations due to language boundaries that manifest in social groups along language clusters (e.g., Mäkelä, Kalla, & Piekkari, 2007). The objective of this research is to investigate the interplay of social and work dynamics in a highly multilingual organization, the headquarters of a large MNC in the energy sector located in the Arabian Gulf, where English is the mandated lingua franca and there is wide variation in the command of English with the majority at a low level of fluency. We are interested in what new constructs or theories, if any, may be needed to fully explain the social and work dynamics in such a context, and to what extent our findings may be indicative of future trends in workforce language diversity and the use of corporate language in MNCs.

We investigate these issues in three studies utilizing a mixed-methods approach and longitudinal design. In Study 1, through analyzing rich qualitative data collected from participant observation and interviews, we discover an emergent phenomenon that we term the *Language Advice Network* (LAN), an informal network in which individuals voluntarily and spontaneously seek and offer language-related advice in multilingual organizations. In Study 2, using quantitative surveys, we corroborate the existence of the LAN through the analysis of network features and find that network ties often span different language clusters, thus promoting connections between individuals of different language groups. Further, we discover that the degree of language advising in the LAN, although not formally part of the performance rating criteria, is positively related to annual performance ratings. In Study 3, through follow-up interviews with Study 1 participants four years later, we find strong support for Study 1 and Study 2 results. LAN advising, a central feature of network engagement, continues and is recognized and rewarded by the organization.

Our research makes several contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on language in MNCs by focusing on the use of corporate lingua franca in an understudied region of the world with a context of high first-language diversity and relatively low levels of lingua franca fluency. In contrast to many previous studies, we show that lingua franca positively contributes to social integration which allows for wider knowledge sharing in the organization. Second, our research demonstrates that not only lingua franca competency *per se* but also the “sharing” of language-related knowledge contributes to career progression, extending previous research (e.g., Itani, Järilström, & Piekkari, 2015; Peltokorpi, 2023). Finally, our research bridges the language and knowledge literature by demonstrating the importance of language-related knowledge-seeking and sharing for individual and firm performance.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Language Clustering and Homophily**

A prominent challenge faced by MNCs with a multilingual workforce is language clustering, “a grouping of people owing to their tendency to interact more with those with whom they share a common native language in multilingual workplaces” (Ahmad & Widén, 2015: 431). The underlying mechanism of language clustering is homophily (Mäkelä, et al., 2007; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), which is the tendency for people to interact with similar others, based on surface-level or deep-level characteristics (Ibarra, 1995; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987), including gender, race, and ethnicity (e.g., Brass, 1995; Ibarra, 1993; Lee & Reade, 2015; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987). In a highly multilingual context, speaking a common language is one of the primary criteria for friendship and socialization (e.g., Ahmad & Widén, 2015; Manev & Stevenson, 2001; Remennick, 2009), forming a basis for homophily.

Speaking a common language facilitates interaction and sharing of ideas, opinions, and knowledge between individuals (Henderson, 2005; Reiche, Harzing, & Pudelko, 2015), through “shared perspective” (Levin & Walter, 2019) and “shared cognition” (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). At the same time, however, homophily is generally shown to negatively affect the free flow of knowledge between members of different groups in the organization (Ibarra, 1993). Homophily has been shown to affect patterns of knowledge seeking (Haas & Cummings, 2015) and knowledge sharing (Dalkir & Liebowitz, 2011) between individuals. Because most day-to-day work is carried out through the collaborations that emerge from informal relationships, any constraints in social networks resulting from homophily will have an important bearing on knowledge sharing (Noorderhaven & Harzing, 2009; Tortoriello, Reagans, & McEvily, 2012), which in turn will affect individual and organizational performance (Bruning, Sonpar, & Wang, 2012; Ertug, Gargiulo, Galunic, & Zou, 2018; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

### **Lingua-Franca Fluency and Performance**

The language-research stream in international management has largely focused on the negative aspects of the lingua franca as a monolingual strategy, highlighting that a common corporate language, while aiming to unite people and organizations, may be divisive (Charles, 2007). For non-native speakers, lingua franca is typically portrayed as an impediment (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, D., & Welch, L., 1999), an obstacle (Henderson, 2005), or a barrier (Harzing & Feely, 2008) to performance and career progression. Others have referred to the

lingua franca as a disruptive element (Tenzer, Pudenko, & Harzing, 2014) and a source of friction (Bhagat, Kedia, Haveston, & Triandis, 2002) between fluent and less-fluent members. Scholars show that non-native speakers experience discomfort and reluctance to speak the lingua franca (Bordia & Bordia, 2015; Neeley, Hinds, & Cramton, 2012), which often leads to miscommunication (Harzing & Feely, 2008) and conflict (Henderson, 2005) with others, and even lowers their confidence and status in the workplace (Neeley, 2013).

On the other hand, a high level of lingua-franca fluency facilitates communication (Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2007) and helps aid career mobility (Itani, et al., 2015) and career success (Peltokorpi, 2023). Evidence also shows that employees with high lingua-franca fluency are often viewed as more competent and powerful than others (Lauring & Klitmøller, 2015) because they act as a “language node,” taking on intermediary roles such as information gatekeepers and translators for less-fluent colleagues (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999). All in all, employees commanding high lingua-franca fluency are highly valued, thus language fluency is increasingly seen as a form of career capital in the MNC (Itani, et al., 2015; Latukha, Doleeva, Järnlström, Jokinen, & Piekkari, 2016).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

Our research setting is the HQ of a large, state-owned multinational corporation in the energy sector located in the Arabian Gulf. The HQ of Gulf-Co (a pseudonym) houses around 2,500 employees comprised of nationals (a numerical minority at 18%), expatriates (39%) from the West, and migrants (43%) predominantly from Asia. First languages spoken include Arabic, English, French, German, Hindi, Tagalog, and Urdu. We adopt a mixed-methods approach with a longitudinal design spanning three studies. Study 1, our main study, entails participant observation and interviews. Study 2 is based on survey data and performance data to corroborate the qualitative results of Study 1. Study 3, conducted four years later, is based on follow-up interviews. The data collection period for the first two studies lasted ten calendar months during which time the first author interned as a researcher at Gulf-Co.

### **STUDY 1**

Data collection took the form of participant observation and interviews. The first author attended meetings and performed weekly administrative tasks for 8 hours per workday over 10 consecutive months. Such intense exposure at the HQ provided valuable opportunities to informally observe, and engage with, employees during their working hours and breaks. In addition to direct observations, numerous conversations with employees were summarized in a small notebook that was always kept handy in a pocket, forming the basis of the fieldnotes. In the first few months, an interesting phenomenon became apparent, what we term a ‘language advice network.’ To further explore this phenomenon, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 individuals across all departments at the HQ. The interviewee selection was done through a snowballing technique. Specifically, we wanted to know: 1) if the interviewees actively engaged in this ‘language advice network’ and, if so, whether the interviewees took the role of language advisor or advice seeker; 2) how they initiated the language advice, and to whom they went for the advice; and 3) what were the primary motives and benefits of giving and seeking informal language advice.

Following grounded theory standards, we interrelated data collection, analysis, and literature reviews to ensure an integrative theory-building process (Suddaby, 2006). We conducted thematic data analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Corbin & Strauss, 1990), which enabled the contexts, conditions, causes, and consequences to be identified concerning language advice seeking and sharing. It also allowed the identification of the reasons for engaging in the language advice network and career implications.

***Emergence and key features of the Language Advice Network (LAN).*** We identify the existence of an informal network in which individuals with *low*- and *high* levels of English fluency *seek* and *share* language-related advice at work. We observe that a LAN emerges from at least three conditions: a strict one-language policy in the firm, a generally low level of lingua franca fluency in the workforce, and when significant asymmetry in lingua franca fluency exists among the members. We also find that LAN engagement is highly informal and spontaneous, as and when the needs arise daily.

***LAN engagement fosters social integration.*** We discover that the advice seekers not only approach colleagues from their friendship group of the same language cluster but often approach colleagues from a different language cluster. The language advisor and seeker thus create a new layer of relationship based on differences in language fluency, bridging colleagues who are not within the same language cluster or friendship networks.

***LAN advising is recognized and rewarded in the organization.*** LAN advisors provide language-related advice and receive positive returns in the form of both intangible and tangible rewards. This includes recognition and approval from the management and leadership, as well as respect and admiration from colleagues. Tangible rewards include monetary awards, high performance ratings, and in some cases, a salary increase.

## STUDY 2

A social network survey was administered to corroborate non-homophilous advice-seeking and to confirm whether LAN advising activities were in fact associated with performance ratings as the qualitative data indicated. Completed surveys numbered 106, representing a 92% response rate. Respondents were given the names of all employees in their department and asked respondents to rate the frequency of their interaction with each employee (in a month, on average) for both language advice and general advice. We asked about language advice and general advice separately because we wanted to examine the structural and relational differences between language- and general advice networks. Two further measures were obtained for the 106 individuals who participated in the survey: English language fluency ratings and annual performance data. The Key Performance Indicator (KPI) scores were obtained from the HR record.

Social network analysis was used to compare whether the advisor-advisee dyads are more frequent between individuals of the same language cluster. We conducted social network analysis for each department, and mapped interactions in the LAN and general advice networks using the software R. We employed Exponential Random Graph Modelling (ERGM) (Snijders, Pattison, Robins, & Handcock, 2006), and examined the structural and relational mechanisms of the two networks. In addition, we ran multiple regression analysis to test the link between LAN advising scores and performance ratings of individuals. We used the LAN advising scores (in-degree centrality) as an independent variable and the annual performance rating score as the dependent variable.

Our analysis shows that the LAN is distinctive from the general advice network in terms of its structure and dyadic relations. Reciprocity was not significant for the LAN, indicating that the advisor gives advice but is unlikely to ask for advice back from the same person; whereas they were significant for the general advice network, indicating that the advisor gives advice and is likely to ask for advice in return from the same person. To discern whether advice seekers tend to approach advisors based on language homophily, we compared the number of edges that cross language clusters and the number that stay within the same language cluster. In the LAN, we found that the number of crossing edges far exceeds the number of non-crossing edges, opposite of what was found in the general advice network. This comparison corroborates our finding in Study 1 that individuals frequently seek advice from others who are not from the same language cluster even if there are fluent English speakers who are part of the same language cluster, and further shows that language advice seeking occurs more frequently across language clusters than within language clusters.

The results of multiple regression analysis show that the KPI score is positively and significantly explained by the LAN advising score. This confirms that even if language advising *per se* is not part of the formal performance criteria, LAN advising activities are positively associated with annual performance ratings, underscoring Study 1 findings that suggest these activities are recognized by management for contributions to organizational performance.

### STUDY 3

We conducted follow-up interviews with participants of Study 1 four years following the initial interviews to further triangulate the findings of the original study. Twenty-five of the original 42 interview participants still worked in the organization and agreed to meet again for the follow-up interviews. Interviewees were asked about their current role in the LAN if they are advisors or advice-seekers and their own assessment of career progression over the past four years if their career progression was average, slower, or faster, in comparison with other colleagues of a similar level; and in what ways they feel that LAN engagement has been beneficial to them. Additionally, we had access to the HR data on the current job roles/ positions and accumulated performance data of the 25 participants over the previous four years. In this way, we could see the career progression made by each interview participant over the past four years, and the average performance rating received. We compared these data with the interviewees' self-assessments of their performance and career progress.

Our analysis shows that individuals continue to seek advice on English language knowledge to complete their daily tasks and that language advisors generally make better career progress compared to non-advisors. For the language advice-seekers, we found that language skills have significantly improved for those who actively sought advice over four years, and some transitioned to a language advisor role to help others whose language skills are weaker.

The continued existence of the LAN four years later was evident despite the turnover of many of the network participants who had been originally interviewed, thereby making connections with new network participants across language clusters. Some of the seekers took up the role of advisor after four years, indicating their willingness to “payback” the help they received in the past to newcomers and less fluent English speakers. Management also continued to recognize and reward the language advisors, underscoring their pivotal role in sustaining informal language advice networks in the organization.

## DISCUSSION

Our research provides new insight into the role of language in MNCs where the corporate lingua franca is not the native language for the majority of employees and where there is high diversity in the languages spoken. Drawing on multiple sources of data across three studies, we discovered and confirmed the existence, characteristics, and value of what we term the Language Advice Network (LAN). Specifically, we discovered that the lingua-franca mandate and the asymmetry in the lingua-franca fluency among employees provide an opportunity for low- and high-fluency English speakers to engage in language-based knowledge sharing in the LAN. We particularly note that the generally low level of English fluency among the majority of employees is a key boundary condition for the less-fluent speakers to be motivated to actively seek language advice from fluent colleagues. Because they are not in the minority and there are people to whom they can go for help, employees of low fluency are instrumentally motivated to widely seek help to complete their daily tasks. Second, our analyses show that engagement in the LAN often crosses native language boundaries. The LAN thereby facilitates the forming of ties between individuals of different native languages, thus enhancing social integration in the organization. This is an unexpected benefit as individuals' strong need for language advice counters homophilous social interactions. We argue that it is our research context of generally low lingua franca fluency among the majority of the workforce that drives individuals to instrumentally seek interactions with fluent speakers of other language clusters who otherwise would have been outside their social networks, resulting in making connections between individuals of different language clusters. Third, it is important to highlight that the voluntary and informal English advising activities are rewarded; the advisors receive intangible rewards in the form of respect and admiration from peers and leadership, and tangible rewards in the form of monetary rewards, performance ratings and promotions. Such incentives (note: the language advising is not part of the annual performance review) facilitate the creation of a learning and helping culture in the organization, which, in turn, reinforces social integration in the workplace. As we argue in the paper, English fluency is a form of knowledge and English advising is thus a knowledge-sharing activity. While organizations benefit greatly from active knowledge sharing among employees, sharing knowledge is risky for individuals as it might dilute their value and the return from sharing is often uncertain (Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Yamagishi & Cook, 1993). In our research setting, for example, when fluent speakers are asked for English help, they are unlikely to receive returns from advice seekers who have fewer resources. We propose the generalized exchange perspective (Molm, 2003; Takahashi, 2000) to understand why advisors would share English knowledge, which draws on "collective reciprocity" and involves indirect reciprocation of resources involving three or more individuals in the community (Molm, 2003; Yamagishi & Cook, 1993).

Our research is an initial step to bridge the research streams of lingua franca and language diversity and the knowledge-sharing literature by explaining when and why voluntary language-related knowledge-sharing may be fostered. Our research points to the role of MNCs which can help create an environment where individuals of different language clusters and of varying levels of lingua franca fluency can all gain benefits.

## REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS