

Leading Across Language Barriers: Strategies to Mitigate Negative Language-induced Emotions in Multinational Corporations

Helene Tenzer

Department of International Business
Tübingen University
Melanchthonstraße 30
72074 Tübingen
Germany
Tel: +49 7071 2975437
Fax: +49 7071 295534
helene.tenzer@uni-tuebingen.de

Markus Pudelko

Department of International Business
Tübingen University
Melanchthonstraße 30
72074 Tübingen
Germany
Tel: +49 7071 2974150
Fax: +49 7071 295534
markus.pudelko@uni-tuebingen.de

Version April 2013

Accepted for the Best Paper Proceedings of the Academy of Management 73rd Annual Meeting

Copyright © 2012-2013 Helene Tenzer, Markus Pudelko. All rights reserved.

Leading Across Language Barriers: Strategies to Mitigate Negative Language-induced Emotions in Multinational Corporations

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the first to build on and link three streams of literature: the literature on language in international business, on emotions in organizations and on leadership. Despite the challenges language barriers pose to the efficiency of MNCs (Harzing & Feely, 2008), they have long been neglected both by researchers and top managers (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013). Only recently have international business studies taken a “linguistic turn” (Tietze, 2008) and started to investigate the impact of language differences on different areas of organizational behavior.

Like the effects of language on international business, the impact of emotions on organizations has long escaped scholarly attention (Dutton et al., 2006). However, since the “emotional turn” in organization studies in the 1990s emotional climate is seen as a “central key element of organizational life” (Tran, 1998: 101). Recent studies particularly highlighted the disruptive potential of negative emotions and the need to understand and control them (see e.g. Mooney et al., 2007; Little et al., 2012).

Surprisingly, the connection between emotions and language barriers in organizations has been established only recently (see e.g. Harzing & Feely, 2008; Neeley et al. 2012). These pioneer studies demonstrated that language-induced emotions can erode collaborative efforts and lead to losses in productivity and performance in MNCs. Our paper studies employees’ various negative emotions induced by language barriers. More importantly, it is the first to systematically investigate solutions to these issues. Given that emotion management has been established as an important component of effective leadership (Pirola-Merlo et al., 2002; Thiel et al., 2012), we focus on the tactical measures leaders have at their disposal to mitigate their subordinates’ negative language-induced emotions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The impact of language barriers on MNC employees' emotions

Given that research on language in organizations is still in its infancy (Neeley, 2012), MNC employees' emotional reactions to linguistic diversity have only very recently attracted scholarly interest. Pioneer studies in this area have shown that language barriers can negatively influence the emotional climate in MNCs, i.e. employees' perception of their psychological environment (Jones et al., 1979), in two different ways. First, given that emotions are very difficult to express and interpret in a foreign language (Henderson 2005), which makes it difficult to resolve emotional issues by talking about them (Glinow et al., 2004), language barriers can substantially aggravate existing emotional friction in a multilingual workforce. Second, language barriers may also be a source of negative emotions in themselves. Neeley et al. (2012) found that language barriers lead to emotional conflict between native and non-native speakers of the working language, as the latter experience apprehension, anxiety, embarrassment, stress, shame and frustration, feel restricted in their communication skills, reduced in their professional standing and fear negative performance appraisals or job loss (also see Harzing & Feely, 2008). As a consequence, non-native speakers of the working language tend to perceive native speakers as arrogant, to resent and to mistrust them. They cope with these negative feelings by frequently switching into their mother tongue and avoiding situations that require use of the working language. As a result, native speakers of English often feel excluded, devalued, disrespected, and isolated and leave meetings in protest (Neeley et al., 2012). This conflict further impedes effective communication and can produce, in the worst case, a vicious cycle of negative emotions. Code-switching may produce similar emotional conflicts between non-native speakers of the working language, who do not share a mother tongue. With respect to HQ-subsubsidiary communication, these dynamics can hamper strategic decision making on a global scale and impede effective global integration and control (Harzing & Feely, 2008). On the team level, language-induced negative emotions can introduce inefficiencies, impede collaborative efforts and lead to losses in productivity and performance (Neeley et al., 2012).

The above mentioned studies made an important contribution in bringing the momentous emotional impact of language barriers to the fore. Following their general thrust, the present study examines these effects with the goal to systematize the kaleidoscope of negative language-

induced emotions which were previously showcased. More importantly, however, we take the logical next step and search for solutions to these issues.

Emotion management through leaders

Emotion management is defined as managing the antecedents to one's own or others' emotions or manipulating own or others' emotional responses (Little et al., 2012: 407). Whereas psychological research mainly focuses on self-regulation (for an overview see Gross, 2007), an increasing number of studies has recently been dedicated to the management and regulation of others' emotions (see e.g. Williams, 2007; Niven et al., 2009). Given that employees in lower ranks of an organization usually have little scope to influence their colleagues' emotions, the latter studies mostly focused on leaders managing their subordinates' emotions (see e.g. McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002; Pirola-Merlo et al., 2002; Ozcelik et al., 2008). Consequently, emotion management has emerged as an important component of effective leadership (Goleman, 1998; Pirola-Merlo et al., 2002; Thiel et al., 2012).

The plethora of leadership measures available to address employees' emotions (for a review see Niven et al., 2009) can be condensed into four central emotion management strategies. The first and most proactive strategy to counteract negative emotions lies in *altering the situation* (Williams, 2007) of the affected person by modifying or removing some or all of its emotion provoking elements (Little et al., 2012: 409; Gross & Thompson, 2007) and giving practical help (Niven et al., 2009). The second strategy aims at *altering attention* by distracting attention away from the negative emotion-provoking situation (Williams, 2007). This may be done by leading employees' attention away from those elements of a situation that are perceived as harmful while focusing on its non-threatening aspects (Little et al., 2012; Niven et al., 2009; Gross & Thompson, 2007). A third possible strategy aims at *altering the cognitive meaning of the situation* which caused the negative emotional responses by encouraging employees to reappraise or reinterpret the situation as being less harmful (Little et al., 2012; Thiel et al., 2012). A final and rather superficial strategy lies in *modulating or suppressing subordinates' emotional responses* by interrupting current emotional outbreaks (Little et al., 2012; Williams, 2007).

Whereas emotion management generally constitutes a challenging leadership task, multilingual work environments are characterized by a particular tension: On the one hand, language-induced negative emotions need to be mitigated to enable smooth cooperation (Neeley

et al., 2012). On the other hand, language barriers make it very difficult to discuss negative emotions (von Glinow et al., 2004) and consequently render emotion management particularly challenging. Our study is the first to address this tension and investigate how leaders can most effectively mitigate language-induced emotions in a multilingual workforce.

METHODOLOGY

Given that the relationship between language barriers, MNC employees' emotions and emotion management strategies has not yet been systematically investigated, an explorative approach was considered most appropriate. For the specific purpose of our investigation, we defined multilingual work groups with a designated leader as the relevant level of data collection. More specifically, multinational teams (MNTs) provide a particularly fruitful context, not only because they rapidly gained in importance over the last years (Zander et al., 2012) and are characterized by higher linguistic diversity compared to regular hierarchies, but also because they are considered "cauldrons of bubbling emotions" (Goleman, 1998: 101).

To focus our analysis on the phenomena under study, we excluded industry and home country effects by conducting all our investigations in three German automotive MNCs. In each of the three corporations, we selected five MNTs with a maximum degree of linguistic diversity and the highest possible interdependency and interaction between their members. To capture the influence of particular language practices on MNC employees' emotions, we also sampled teams which followed different language policies (adopting English or German as their working language or allowing members to switch between languages at discretion).

Our dataset consists of 90 semi-structured and problem-centered interviews. We interviewed 67 members of the selected MNTs, who provided us with in-depth accounts of their language-based emotions and outlined how leaders addressed these issues, respectively how they expected leaders to address them. We also interviewed all 15 leaders of the MNTs under study, who provided us with insights into their experiences with managing employees' language-induced emotions. Finally, we spoke to eight senior managers who gave us comprehensive accounts of best practices in emotion management. To obtain diverse perspectives on the issues under study, we included informants from 19 nationalities, speaking 14 different mother tongues. We furthermore sampled informants with different levels of English and German proficiency.

The interviews with German or English native speakers were conducted in their mother tongue. Team leaders and members of other nationalities were interviewed in either German or English or in a mix of both languages, depending on which option they felt most comfortable with. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in their original language following the conventions formulated by Bryman and Bell (2007).

The content analysis of our interviews was already initiated during the data collection phase in order to enable iterating between data, emerging concepts and the existing literature. In this first stage of analysis we followed the process of “open coding” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001), in which we studied every passage of the interview to determine what exactly has been said and labeled each passage with an appropriate code. In the subsequent step of analysis, we brought together different first-order codes that linked together through higher-order categories. In the final step of analysis we arranged these “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2003; Myers, 2008) into a set of core findings explaining how leaders can moderate the subordinates’ negative emotional reactions to language barriers.

FINDINGS

Defining the problem: Two categories of negative emotional reactions to language barriers

Language-based anxiety: Our investigations demonstrated that language barriers gave rise to substantial negative feelings, which can be subsumed under two categories: self-directed anxiety and other-directed resentment.

In terms of self-directed emotions, interviewees of all nationalities, who judged their proficiency in the shared language as unsatisfactory, associated communication in a foreign language with “insecurity”, “embarrassment”, “feeling threatened”, “showing weaknesses” and “having no self-confidence”. Taken together, these emotions create a pervasive language-based anxiety. Our data suggest that an employee’s language-based anxiety is negatively correlated with his or her relative proficiency level compared to colleagues. Team members facing language-based anxiety try to disguise their plight and sustain outward countenance, which leads to a high degree of emotional labor (Lively, 2000; Neeley et al., 2012). Therefore, it is of utmost importance for leaders to address these language-induced emotions.

Language-based resentment: Whereas we observed self-directed anxiety mostly among low- and, to a lesser degree, among medium-fluency employees, we found other-directed resentment induced by language barriers to occur independent of fluency levels. However, low- and high-proficiency speakers of their team's working language tended to resent different aspects of their situation. Employees with low fluency levels in the working language often resented the fact that they had to conduct meetings in a foreign language and disliked native speakers' ability to dominate meetings. In contrast, highly proficient or native speakers of the working language resented the fact that their less proficient colleagues frequently switched into their mother tongues during meetings, effectively excluding colleagues who did not speak this language.

As highlighted by Ostell (1996), negative other-directed emotions have a highly disruptive influence on personal relations within a group. In line with the principle of emotional contagion (Barsade, 2002), MNT members feeling language-based resentment may address others aggressively and thereby trigger resentment from their counterparts' side. These negative effects need to be counter-acted by team leaders.

Finding the solution: Emotion management strategies for leaders

In the course of our data generation we identified a series of tactical measures leaders have at their disposal to mitigate their subordinates' negative language-induced emotions. Through our coding process we discovered that these measures can be classified into three general emotion management strategies.

Reducing the impact of language barriers: The most effective leadership strategy aims to reduce the negative impact of language barriers on employees. Once the leader succeeds in diffusing the actual problematic situation, negative emotions are less likely to occur. Moderating subordinates' code-switching between languages emerged as one important tactical measure to achieve this goal. Given that code-switching is resented by those who are excluded from the side conversations, effective leaders need to keep it to a minimum.

Besides acting as a moderator for code-switching, our data suggest that the leader can also reduce the impact of language barriers on subordinates by actively allocating speaking time to less fluent employees. Enabling low-fluency employees to gain voice in a foreign-language conversation emerged as an effective remedy for the anxiety they experience.

To complement these measures, leaders also need to remind native speakers of the working language to speak “international English” with a reduced lexical variety (Henderson 2005: 76) and to decrease their speaking speed. Frequent repetitions and paraphrasing of important arguments by the team leader emerged as another important measure to enhance the clarity of communication and thereby reduce the negative impact of language barriers.

Redirecting employees’ attention away from the language-induced emotional burden: Not in all cases can leaders alter the situation in a way that the impact of language barriers is diffused. In those instances where this strategy is not well applicable, we found that leaders still have the opportunity to mitigate detrimental language-induced emotions. One strategy towards this end lies in leading subordinates’ attention away from the emotional burden. In line with Niven et al. (2009), who state that joking can shift people’s attention, our interviewees mentioned the use of humor as one measure to relax or lighten emotionally burdensome situations. However, this emotion management technique may be challenging to implement, since humor requires a high level of language proficiency.

Highlighting the similarities of individual team members and their common goals emerged as a second frequently mentioned technique to positively redirect employees’ attention. Leaders may bring their team closer together and disperse language-induced resentment by emphasizing common professional goal. If the members of a multilingual work group focus on these commonalities, language differences retreat into the background.

Changing perceptions of linguistic diversity: As a third general leadership strategy, our findings demonstrate that leaders can mitigate negative language-induced emotions by helping their subordinates to perceive linguistic diversity as less threatening. To achieve this, a supportive climate needs to be created in the team. Two major leadership techniques to create such a positive climate emerged from our interviews. First, it is very important for team leaders to convey appreciation of everyone’s contributions. We found language barriers to appear much less threatening if leaders give everyone the impression that their contribution is valued, even if it is expressed in an imperfect or slow manner.

As a second technique to improve subordinates’ perceptions of linguistic diversity, leaders can encourage open team discussions about the effects of language differences. This meta-communication raises the capacity of each individual employee to recognize their colleagues’ emotions. If high- and low-fluency speakers of the working language try to see the

situation from each other's point of view, agreed-upon procedures can be defined to deal with linguistic challenges and vicious cycles of negative emotions can be prevented.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical significance

Our study has established an important link between the literatures on language in international business, emotions in organizations and global leadership. Besides, it also makes important contributions to each of these areas. It contributes to research on language in international business by lending strong support to the emerging view that the traditional, “instrumental” concept of language as an easily managed, neutral code is becoming outdated (also see Janssens et al., 2004). It advances research on emotions in organizations by supporting previously established emotion management models (see e.g. Williams, 2007; Niven et al., 2009; Gross & Thompson, 2007) and contextualizing them for multilingual environments. Interestingly, our exploratory investigation only provides support to those emotion management strategies which Gross and Thompson (2007) and Little et al. (2012) characterize as antecedent-focused, i.e. aiming to address the cause of negative emotions. It yields no evidence for the effectiveness of those leadership strategies, which merely suppress negative emotions, but leave their cause unaffected. These findings refute traditional organizational research, which has long argued that emotions need to be suppressed in the workplace (for a review see Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). Finally, our study also contributes to the research on global leadership by outlining the previously neglected emotional challenges multilingual bridge-makers are facing and by suggesting strategies to address these challenges.

Managerial implications

Our investigation of the emotional challenges arising in multilingual teams highlights the importance of leaders reflecting on the emotional impact of language differences. Given that emotion management processes fall within a very sensitive realm, leaders often need to rely on indirect cues and closely observe their subordinates' behavior to recognize language-induced emotions. Our study furthermore highlights the necessity for leaders to actively regulate negative language-induced emotions and outlines a set of concrete measures enabling leaders to do so.

The language-specific emotion management tactics which we presented and classified into various strategies can prevent negative emotional spirals like the ones described by Harzing and Feely (2008) or Neeley et al. (2012).

The present study also demonstrates that emotional intelligence, defined as the ability to recognize, understand, facilitate and regulate one's own and others' emotions (Mayer et al., 2004; Salovey et al., 2008), constitutes an important characteristic of effective cross-lingual leaders. Consequently, MNCs need to carefully select emotionally intelligent candidates for leadership tasks in multilingual environments. In addition, leaders should be sensitized for the distinctive impact of language barriers on cooperation in MNCs. To achieve this, the scope of diversity training, which has so far mostly focused on cultural, racial, generational or gender differences (Bezrukova et al., 2012), needs to be expanded to include *cross-lingual* sensitivity.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS