NEITHER ARABIC NOR ENGLISH: TRANSLANGUAGING AS A FRONTLINE LANGUAGE PRACTICE IN A GULF-BASED MNC

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ABSTRACT

While much has been written on English lingua franca policy in MNCs, less is known about how indigenous factors shape its practice. Through a 10-month ethnographic study utilizing participant observation of naturally occurring conversations in an Arabian Gulf-based MNC with an English lingua franca mandate, we develop a conceptual framework of Gulf-specific translanguaging practices identified between employees of different language groups and among Gulf nationals. We further conceptualize the strategic use of these translanguaging types in formal and informal contexts at the HQ and at the plant. Our findings challenge the reliance on a single standard language as lingua franca for communication in a linguistically diverse workforce, and indicate the value of indigenous forms of translanguaging for enhancing communication and linguistic inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of a common corporate language, often English, is a prevalent strategy of multinational corporations (MNCs) aimed at creating a platform for communication across a diverse workforce (Luo & Shenkar, 2006). Yet, a standardized language policy created by top management that emphasizes employees' competence in a particular lingua franca often neglects the linguistic reality in subsidiaries, or how the lingua franca is actually practiced based on local, contextual factors (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012; Sanden, 2020). This underscores the tension between a top-down lingua franca policy and its practice, which suggests a bottom-up process (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012). Less is known about the bottom-up process, that is, how contextual conditions or indigenous factors shape the enactment of lingua franca and, in turn, how this may shape corporate lingua franca policy.

The Arabian Gulf provides a rich context for examining the interplay between English lingua franca policy and its practice given the high number of expatriates and attendant language diversity in the region (e.g., Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Al-Seghayer, 2023; Nickerson, 2015). We are interested in whether there is an indigenous, Gulf-specific way of enacting English lingua franca among frontline employees in a MNC, not only between employees of different language groups but also among Gulf nationals. Our research question is: How is English as a lingua franca practiced among frontline employees in Gulf-based MNCs?

Through a qualitative, ethnographic approach, the first author, a native of the Gulf region, spent ten months in a Gulf-based MNC in the energy sector that mandates English as a lingua franca. Access was provided to both the headquarters and the plant. Data collection consisted of fieldnotes, transcripts of informal conversations, email correspondence, and organizational policies. We found that employees engage in various forms of translanguaging with the use of the English language. While Pidgin and Arabizi are relatively well-documented translanguaging practices in the region (e.g., Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2014; Bakir, 2010), we identify other forms of translanguaging.

This study challenges the traditional research focus on language in international business and management as a static national construct (Tietze, Holden, & Barner-Rasmussen, 2016). Our findings indicate that communication in the Gulf is not solely through the Arabic or English languages, but rather through various forms of translanguaging, adding to the sparse literature on

how context shapes lingua franca practice as a bottom-up process that can inform lingua franca policy (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012). The study provides a nuanced exploration of fluid and hybrid language practices within organizations (e.g. Angouri & Piekkari, 2018), and questions the assumption that proficiency in a single language is sufficient for effective workplace communication. Management implications regarding corporate lingua franca policy is that, as language diversity grows in MNC units across the world, imposing just one language, or one version of that language, is not enough. Acknowledging and accommodating contextual and indigenous factors to create plural language strategies can enhance communication effectiveness and foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English as lingua franca and linguistic inclusion

Although a corporate lingua franca such as English provides a platform for communication across linguistic boundaries (e.g., Neeley, 2017), non-native speakers have varying degrees of lingua franca fluency which presents barriers to communication and potential roadblocks to career advancement for those who are less fluent (Steyaert, Ostendorp & Gaibrois, 2011). Additionally, the English language is considered by some to represent linguistic hegemony over a multitude of other languages due to the marginalization of languages and peoples outside of the Anglo-centric world as a result of colonialism/imperialism (Phillipson, 2017). Some scholars, however, contend that the global use of business English as a lingua franca (BELF) (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta, 2005) breaks down linguistic hegemony (Nickerson, 2015) due to its simplified form mixed with business and professional terminology (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010), and thus its usage implies a greater democratic and inclusive alternative to standard English. However, BELF relies on one standard language, English. We question whether one, or even two or more, corporate lingua francas are enough to foster linguistic inclusion where all employees can effectively participate in organizational discourse. We consider that translanguaging may offer an alternative to foster a more democratic and linguistically inclusive workplace since it privileges non-dominant as much as dominant language groups (Ciuk, Sliwa & Harzing, 2023) and allows employees to draw on their full linguistic repertoire to communicate.

Communication accommodation and the role of translanguaging

Communication accommodation theory (CAT: Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991) explains when, how, and why individuals make interactional adjustments with others. Accommodation is typically observed between two individuals of different social status, power, or occupation where gaps exist in terms of knowledge or commonality. CAT scholars suggest several accommodation strategies that individuals may use consciously or unconsciously while engaging in communication, including *convergence*, *divergence*, and *attuning*. *Convergence* occurs when people's speech patterns become similar to those of their communication partners, which may foster a sense of psychological closeness with one another. By contrast, *divergence* can be observed when individuals adopt a non-convergent approach toward others to maintain their distinctive speech practices and accentuate interpersonal differences (Bourhis, 1979).

Attuning strategies are purposeful adjustments made to improve comprehension by, for example, considering the partner's lack of language proficiency. We consider that translanguaging is the lever for communication accommodation in a linguistically diverse workplace.

Translanguaging is defined as a communicative practice where speakers do not stick to conventional grammatical rules but rather draw on their entire linguistic repertoires, including different national languages and dialects, to make themselves understood in specific contexts (García, 2009). Speakers creatively combine and adapt linguistic elements from their repertoire (Langinier & Ehrhart, 2020). In MNCs, translanguaging captures the "intertwining of global and local influences on language practices" (Langinier & Ehrhart, 2020: 80), especially where employees often lack lingua franca fluency. The primary objective of translanguaging is effective communication—ensuring that the receiver understands the intended message, even if this means deviating from standard grammatical rules or vocabulary accuracy (e.g., Barner-Rasmussen & Langinier, 2020). A notable outcome of translanguaging is the creation of hybrid language practices (e.g., Auer, 1999). We see this linguistic phenomenon across the world that reflects unique cultural, social, and historical contexts, such as *spanglish*, a blend of Spanish and English, prevalent in the United States and Latin America (Otheguy et al., 2015;). Similarly, translanguaging is observed in the Middle East where Arabic, English, and sometimes French are used simultaneously in various settings. Two types of translanguaging in the Arabian Gulf have been identified in previous studies, Gulf Pidgin which is commonly used by Arabic speakers when communicating with the unskilled expatriate population from developing countries (e.g., Bakir, 2010), and Arabizi, a linguistic form used among Arabic speakers that derives from mixing both Arabic and English, such as adding an Arabic inflection or ending to an English word or vice versa (e.g., Alsadeqi, 2010).

METHOD

The research setting was the HQ and plant of a large Arabian Gulf-based MNC in the energy sector that utilizes English as the corporate lingua franca given the company's reliance on highly skilled expatriate labor from many countries (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2014). The HQ and the plant together consist of approximately 6000 employees, representing over 65 nationalities, 8% of whom are Gulf nationals. 41% are white-collar high skilled employees located in the HQ and the remaining are blue-collar employees working in the plant. Arabic comprises 24% of all languages spoken. Other native languages include Hindi, Urdu, Tagalog, English and French. Our data is derived from participant observation of naturally-occurring conversations. We consider this method a suitable means of data collection to uncover the nuances of translanguaging in day-to-day interactions in the workplace (e.g., Gabrois, 2018). These observations lasted for 10 consecutive months. The first author, a Gulf national, spent five working days each week at the organization. The degree of involvement varied, ranging from a 'full participant' by actively engaging in the field to a 'complete observer,' passively present (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). In all instances, the first author was able to engage in and observe naturally occurring conversations between superiors and subordinates, between blue- and white-collar employees at the plant with wide variation in lingua franca proficiencies, between peers in formal and informal settings (e.g., meetings versus canteen or coffee breaks), between natives of a given language, and between speakers across language groups. The first author wrote descriptive notes and reflective observations in real time and later expanded them

into fieldnotes to avoid interrupting the observation process (Bernard, 2017). The fieldnotes were descriptive and interpretative to capture the depth of observed interactions (Emerson et al., 2011). Conversations were documented, most with verbatim quotes, producing transcripts.

We used NVivo software (version 14) with open coding to investigate the evidence of communicative activities that organically emerged from our data without predefined codes (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). We grouped codes into broader 'first-order categories' from the data (e.g., recurrent expressions describing words and phrases used in blending languages). With an iterative process of reading relevant literature and deepening our understanding of the observations, we categorized our observed translanguaging practices into four different types. The next stage of our analysis involved organizing the different types of translanguaging into the different contexts in which the translanguaging was used: between HQ employees and workers at the plant, formal meetings at the HQ, and informal conversations at the HQ between Arabic native speakers, between Arabic and non-Arabic speakers, and between native English speakers. We applied communication strategies (CAT; Giles et al., 1991) to elucidate the reasons why different types of translanguaging occurred among different pairs of communicators and in what communication contexts. We conducted axial coding to group our first-order categories (which were data-centered) into theory-driven 'second-order themes' (e.g., "Arabizi," "informal conversation") until reaching theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) and leading to aggregated dimensions (e.g., "convergence strategy").

FINDINGS

Our key finding is that employees enacted the English lingua franca flexibly in the workplace through four distinct types of translanguaging practices. Communication strategies appeared to differ by setting.

Types of Gulf translanguaging

Gulf Pidgin. Many Gulf MNC employees are blue-collar employees from South- and Southeast Asian countries. They speak multiple native languages, such as Hindi, Urdu, Tagalog and Tamil, and their English proficiency is low, as well as their Arabic proficiency. Blue-collar workers thus rely on a collection of vocabularies and/or expressions from their limited knowledge of English and Arabic vocabulary and grammar. The result is the so-called Pidgin language, where sentences are typically comprised of words from multiple languages with an inaccurate grammatical application. For example, a frequent expression is "*Yalla, jaldi* [Come on, hurry up]," where *Yalla* is Arabic and *jaldi* is Hindi.

Arabizi. This type of translanguaging is widely spoken among Arabic speakers in the Middle East. The most common understanding of Arabizi is the "Arabic chat alphabet," where English letters are used to spell out Arabic words on electronic media platforms. This practice originated from the introduction of social media platforms, initially with only Roman alphabets being available to use. The use of numbers represents additional letters that are not found in the English language. For example, the English spelling of the name 'Ahmed,' would result in a mispronunciation. Spelling the name 'Ahmed' with the number 7, or 'A7med,' results in the correct pronunciation. Even after an Arabic keyboard became available, Arabic speakers continue to use the English keyboard as they find it faster (Farrag, 2012).

Gulf BELF. We define Gulf BELF as a region-specific BELF. Due to the unique linguistic nature of Arabic, BELF incorporates many local Arabic expressions that add richness to the meaning, which would otherwise be challenging to convey. As a result, BELF in the Gulf region has a twist of local Arabic cultural flavor, and is commonly used by individuals of all religious and linguistic backgrounds. For example, the use of *Inshallah*, translated literally as "if God wills," is incorporated into all important sentences, such as "Complete it by tomorrow *Inshallah,"* with the common understanding that there is a strong will for its completion.

Gulf Tone. We labelled the fourth type of Gulf-specific translanguaging as Gulf Tone, which is characterized by a fusion of English and Arabic nouns and grammar that defies the rules of standard English or Arabic. In some cases, the word's origin is traceable to either Arabic or English. For example, *halalify* is a hybrid word which combines the Arabic word "halal," meaning permissible under Islamic jurisprudence, and the English suffix "-ify" to indicate making compliant with halal standards. In other cases, it is difficult to trace the origin of hybrid words that have evolved over time in the everyday language of Gulf nationals.

Translanguaging as communication accommodation

Our analysis shows that each of the three CAT strategies can explain why individuals engage in translanguaging in a particular communication context.

At the plant. The common communicative language is Gulf Pidgin. Even the HQ employees or supervisors with good English proficiency make adjustments when communicating with the plant workers, such as not speaking in full sentences with correct grammar. The communication strategy adopted is typically *attuning* where "broken" Arabic and "broken" English improve interpretability for the communication partners, resulting in effective communication.

At the HQ: formal meetings. Gulf BELF was found to be used in formal meetings. Speaking Gulf BELF by employees of different backgrounds creates a common ground for understanding the implied meaning, which is often richer and more nuanced than plain English. BELF with a local Gulf flavor indicates a *convergence* communication strategy whereby individuals' communication patterns become similar.

At the HQ: informal conversation. Unlike the formal meetings where individuals adhere to Gulf BELF as the communication norm, observations of informal conversations revealed that individuals mix and match different types of translanguaging, depending on the language background of the conversation partners. All three forms of accommodation strategies were observed. For example, when a British native English speaker communicates with an American native English speaker, their distinctive accents highlight the sociolinguistic *divergence* between the two parties.

DISCUSSION

We conceptualized four distinct types of Gulf-specific translanguaging practiced by frontline employees in an MNC where English is the mandated corporate lingua franca. We show that the Gulf-specific practice of lingua franca involves fluidly mixing different types of translanguaging under different contexts. Our analysis also identified three communication strategies, namely, *convergence*, *divergence*, and *attuning*, that explain why and in what context individuals engage in translanguaging. These strategies elucidate employee usage of

translanguaging, which underscores the importance of understanding the types and functions of translanguaging in MNCs.

Our study contributes to the literature on language in international business by offering an alternative way of viewing the relationship of MNC language strategy and employee's practice of lingua franca, through translanguaging. A key challenge of a mandated lingua franca relates to less proficient lingua franca speakers becoming marginalized despite high task-related competence, knowledge, and skills. Scholars have suggested a multilingual policy as a way to partly neutralize the domination of native lingua franca speakers often observed with the monolingual lingua franca language strategy. Nevertheless, whether multiple official languages will foster linguistic inclusion is yet to be seen. Possible challenges include the power stratification according to the language fluency in the two (or more) official languages which may engender division between the native speakers of the lingua franca languages.

Our study also contributes to the translanguaging literature by offering four conceptually distinct Gulf-specific translanguaging practices. While Arabizi and Gulf Pidgin are well known in the literature, the other two types – Gulf BELF and Gulf Tone – are novel entries to the Gulf translanguaging literature. We further distinguish the four types of translanguaging along two dimensions, the degree of linguistic fusion and adherence to grammatical rules, which can be applicable to the use of language in other regions and contexts to help differentiate many and varied locally embedded translanguaging practices. Translanguaging has been extensively researched in linguistics, and the predominant context of investigation has been the educational context. By providing our examples, we extend the translanguaging literature to the business context.

Our study brings together the translanguaging and communication strategy literature by providing evidence of three communication strategies in the multilingual business context. An empirical demonstration of communication strategies in a multilingual business context is rare due to the challenge of data access (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2017). Our study offers an exciting opportunity to test and corroborate the effectiveness of translanguaging practice in a non-educational setting, as well as to verify how different communication strategies contribute to workforce inclusion. corroborates the communicative accommodation theory (Giles et al., 1991).

Practical implications suggest that MNCs would do well to consider a translanguaging-sensitive language policy regarding how employees' lingua franca proficiency should be evaluated and utilized. There is an opportunity for MNCs to re-evaluate the HR policies relating to the employee lingua franca proficiency, especially in the context where the majority of workforce is not fluent in the mandated corporate lingua franca, and to recognize the value of linguistic inclusion.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS