NHH

INTERNATIONAL INTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE: A TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

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Scientific environment

This doctoral thesis has been produced at the Department of Professional and Intercultural Communication at the Norwegian School of Economics (NHH), in Bergen, Norway. The thesis has been supervised by Professor Sunniva Whittaker (main supervisor) from the Norwegian School of Economics, Associate Professor Anne Kari Bjørge (co-supervisor), from the Norwegian School of Economics and Professor Helen Spencer-Oatey (external supervisor), from the University of Warwick.

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Abstract

The globalisation of business has created new corporate structures where employees from different national backgrounds and mother tongues may become colleagues and need to communicate effectively in the same company. Successful communication among colleagues is essential but challenging. It can be even more challenging in this context where these employees are required to interact in English, used as a lingua franca, in which they may be less competent than in their mother tongues. Therefore, international internal communication, understood as the communication that takes place in the same company but involving employees from different national backgrounds, is an important phenomenon to study. The present doctoral thesis aims to investigate how international internal communication between Northern European (in this context: Norwegian, Swedish and German) and Asian (in this context: Chinese and Korean) employees unfolds in the workplace.

The research questions can be expressed as follows:

Q1: What are the key challenges facing employees when they communicate with their international colleagues and what methodological approach can be used to investigate these issues?

- *Q2: How do employees belonging to the same community of practice and working at the same level of hierarchy make sense of culture differences and communication practices in the workplace?*
- *Q3: How do Northern European employees write internal emails in English to express request, criticism and disagreement to their Asian colleagues?*
- *Q4: How are these emails perceived by their Asian colleagues?*
- *Q5: What research methods can be used to investigate language in the workplace?*

This thesis is based on data collected in a Norwegian company that works internationally. It is composed of three papers (two empirical studies and one methodological paper) that interact and complete each other, in the sense that taken together, they offer a methodological triangulation and a transdisciplinary attempt to answer the complex and multifaceted overarching research question Q1. The first paper, entitled "Making sense of communication

and cultural differences in the workplace: the case of Sino-Scandinavian collaboration" aims to answer Q2. The paper explores the way Chinese and Scandinavian (Norwegian and Swedish) engineers working together on transnational projects perceive and make sense (Vaara 2000; Weick 1995) of their work collaboration with regards to cultural differences and communication practices. Based on 14 interviews, the study, of an exploratory nature, shows that national cultural differences did not particularly hinder work collaboration. However, the lack of internal procedures, as well as the BELF competence of the employees made it challenging to communicate difficult messages, particularly when writing face-threatening emails in English.

The findings of this study lead to the second paper, entitled "Internal email communication in the workplace: is there an "East-West divide?" The study aims to analyse the way Northern European employees (Norwegians, Swedes and Germans) formulate three different speech acts (request, criticism and disagreement) when writing internal work emails to their Asian colleagues (Chinese and Korean) (Q3) and second, to examine the way these emails are perceived by the Asian employees, in terms of politeness, friendliness and clarity (Q4). The data consists of 182 elicited emails produced by Northern European employees using role enactment and 33 perception questionnaires collected in different Asian business units of an international company. The analytical procedure to analyse the elicited emails is inspired by the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989) while the questionnaires are analysed following sociolinguistics studies.

Last, the final paper, "Getting access to language data in the workplace: role enactment as a data-generation method" examines methods used to collect data in the workplace context (Q5). It first discusses naturally occurring data and interviews and argues in favour of the use of role enactment as a method to generate reliable and representative language data in the workplace. The use of role enactment is also discussed, with regards to the type of insights it may yield either used alone or in combination with other methods (methodological triangulation).

The thesis contributes to existing knowledge, from theoretical, methodological and practical perspectives. By refining the analysis at the level of a community of practice (engineers), the two empirical studies nuance existing theories that have emphasised the importance of national cultural differences and communication styles in the workplace. They also problematise the concept of culture, illustrate the challenges related to BELF and participate in theoretical discussions on the "East-West divide" in norms of linguistic politeness. Furthermore, from a methodological perspective, the thesis develops an analytical framework to look at the level of directness of three different speech acts and implement role enactment. As a whole, the thesis exemplifies how methodological triangulation can be carried out. Last but not least, practical contributions include a discussion on how communication in the workplace can be improved and suggestions for the workplace are made.

1. Introduction

1.1. Topic and rationale

The present doctoral thesis aims to investigate how intercultural interactions between Northern European (in this context: Norwegian, Swedish and German) and Asian (in this context: Chinese and Korean) employees unfold in the workplace. The globalisation of business has created new corporate structures where employees from different national backgrounds and mother tongues may become colleagues overnight and need to communicate effectively in the same company.

Existing theories that look at intercultural interactions and that are relevant for the workplace (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980, 2001; House et al. 2004) mainly frame these interactions in terms of national cultural differences. Based on these theories, Northern Europeans and Asians are usually described with diametrically opposed cultures and communication styles. In the GLOBE study (House et al. 2004) for instance, the investigated countries are placed in a circle divided into cultural clusters. While the Nordic and the Germanic Europe clusters are close to each other, reflecting a proximity in their cultures, the Confucian Asia cluster (that includes Kina and Korea) is placed at the opposite side of the circle. Likewise, in terms of communication style (Hall, 1976), Germans and Scandinavians are described as low-context communicators while Chinese are the opposite, i.e. high-context communicators. Thus, when people from these cultures meet, misunderstandings, difficulties and cultural shocks are expected to arise. If the national cultures and communication styles are so different, however, how can Northern European and Asian employees understand each other and collaborate effectively in the workplace?

Successful communication among employees working in the same company is essential but challenging in any circumstances. Additional issue arises when the employees are from different national and linguistic backgrounds and are required to interact in English, used as a lingua franca for business purposes, hereafter named BELF (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005), in which they may be less competent than in their mother tongues. Therefore, international internal communication, understood as the communication that takes place in the same company but involving employees from different national backgrounds, is an important phenomenon to study. This is because it is the key to effective collaboration in the workplace; because it is a relevant issue that concerns more and more companies due to the globalisation of business; and because it is a complex phenomenon that encompasses relatively new forms of communication, such as emails. Except for a few studies (Kankaanranta, 2005; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012) however, little has been done to identify, document and conceptualise international internal communication as a problematic and relevant phenomenon.

This thesis addresses this phenomenon based on data collected in a Norwegian company that operates internationally. Over the years, misunderstandings and tensions had arisen among employees from Northern Europe and Asia and created challenges in the work collaboration among these colleagues (mainly working as engineers). The company took measures to address these issues (see 4.3.1.), and between 2012 and 2014, I worked as a cross-cultural manager in the company (see 4.3.1.). To have a better understanding of the situation, I carried out a pilot study (see 4.2.4.). The first analyses revealed two paradoxes. First, while the management thought that the challenges were caused by cultural differences across nations, the employees that I talked with (mainly engineers) felt that communication (that takes place in English while the informants are non-native speakers of the language) was actually more problematic than national cultural differences. This could be explained by the fact that most of the informants belong to the same community of practice (Wenger, 1998) (see 3.4.). Second, while the company provided employees with courses to deal with national cultural differences led by a freelance "interculturalist" (Dahlén, 1997) (see 3.2.), little was said on communication and particularly international internal communication.

I, therefore, decided to examine international internal communication in this company. Most of the employees in the company work in transnational group projects, defined as "temporary structures designed to achieve one goal and which result from the search of horizontal collaboration in organisations" (Chevrier, 2003: 141). Thus, I have chosen to focus on transnational communication among employees working at the same level of hierarchy. In other words, I have limited the present study to interactions among employees from the same community of practice (engineers) and with the same hierarchical status (I do not examine interactions among managers and subordinates for instance). Further, my findings indicated that internal email communication was perceived as challenging, especially when "difficult" messages, or face-threatening speech acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987) (see 3.6.) such as criticism and disagreement had to be expressed in English. On this background, it seems clear that an analysis of the way these speech acts were expressed and perceived in internal email communication was needed. Due to the complexity of the phenomenon, the investigation could not be tackled using solely theories on cultural differences across nations.

1.2. Research propositions and questions

Given the existing theories on national cultural differences, the tensions in the company and the management's interpretation of the events, I expected to hear accounts of events or situations that could be explained by these national cultural differences. When I started my pilot study (see 4.2.4.), I expected the following propositions to be confirmed:

- Based on Hofstede (2001) and the GLOBE project (House et al., 2004), interpersonal conflicts based on national cultural differences are likely to affect work interactions between Northern European and Asian colleagues.
- Based on Hall's (1976) communication framework, Northern Europeans are low-context and Asians are high-context communicators. Thus, one may expect challenges and misunderstandings in the way they communicate with each other.

The findings from the pilot study, however, indicated that national cultural differences were not perceived as a major hindrance in work collaboration among engineers across cultures. Rather, international internal communication was a relevant phenomenon to be addressed and examined. Thus, in this doctoral thesis, I specifically investigate the present overarching question:

Q1: What are the key challenges facing employees when they communicate with their international colleagues and what methodological approach can be used to investigate these issues?

More specifically, I will try to answer the following questions:

- *Q2: How do employees belonging to the same community of practice and working at the same level of hierarchy make sense of culture differences and communication practices in the workplace?*

- *Q3: How do Northern European employees write internal emails in English to express request, criticism and disagreement to their Asian colleagues?*
- *Q4: How are these emails perceived by their Asian colleagues?*
- *Q5: What research methods can be used to investigate language in the workplace?*

1.3. The structure of the thesis

This doctoral thesis is based on three papers, preceded by the present cover article that provides the reader with an overview of the topic, research frameworks and methods. The papers are independent but they interact and complete each other, in the sense that taken together, they offer a methodological triangulation and a transdisciplinary attempt to answer the complex and multifaceted overarching research question Q1. I also define and problematise the concept of national culture (see 3.2.), which is a central concept in the present doctoral thesis. I answer Q2 in paper 1 where I examine the way the employees of the company perceive and make sense of communication and cultural differences. In order to do so, I resort to the concepts of sensemaking and community of practice, which I define and discuss in 3.3. and 3.4. respectively. I tackle Q3 and Q4 mainly in paper 2, where I investigate email communication in the workplace, looking at the production and the perception of these three speech acts. I draw on politeness theory (see 3.5), analyse speech acts (see 3.6.) and frame the discussion in BELF competence (see 3.7). Last, I address Q5 mainly in paper 3 and in the present cover article where I illustrate how methodological triangulation can be carried out (see 4.4.).

In this section (1), I have described the topic and presented the research questions. I will now position my work as phenomonon-driven (1.4.1) and transdisciplinary (1.4.2.). In the following section (2), I give an outline of the articles that compose this thesis. Then, in section 3, I problematise the theoretical foundations and the key concepts used in this thesis. The research methods and data are described in section 4. I discuss the findings, present some limitations and suggest further research directions in section 5. After a list of references (6), the three articles are presented in section 7. A list of appendix (8) closes this thesis.

1.4. Positioning in a discipline?

1.4.1. A phenomenon-driven research project

For many researchers, it is relatively straighforward to position their work within a specific, clearly delineated theoretical framework, thus enabling them to address a research gap that has been previously identified and spelled out. In the present doctoral thesis however, existing theories could not adequately explain the phenomenon of international internal communication. This is mainly due to three reasons.

First, the findings from the pilot study (observation and interviews), as detailed in 4.2.4. showed that the employees perceived and decribed the intercultural encounters in a different way than what we would expect from theories in cross-cultural management (mainly Hofstede (2001) and the GLOBE project (House et al. 2004), as explained in the overviews by Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson (2006) and Portugal Ferreira, Li, Rosa Reis, & Ribeiro Serra (2014)). That is, the employees were aware of the national cultural differences between Northern Europe and Asia but they did not perceive them as a hindrance to collaboration in the workplace. Similarly, in terms of communication style, the engineers felt that communication across business units was direct, contrary to Hall´s (1976) national categorisation of communication styles. Second, the use of computer-mediated communication (e.g. through emails for example) is a relatively novel organisational occurrence that has changed the way employees across borders communicate. Third, the globalised corporate structures and the new ways of communicating in the workplace have created a complex environment that the existing theories could not encompass. It is this complexity, partly caused by the new modes of communication, which could be perceived as challenging by the employees of the company. Therefore, I decided to focus on and investigate this organisational issue, and adopted a phenomenon-driven approach.

The concept "phenomenon-driven research" originally comes from the field of organisational change (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014). It promotes research that takes a phenomenon as the starting point: "rather than constructing gaps in existing theories, such research is inductively framed with a goal to understand the phenomenon that the researchers had either observed in organizations or which bugged them enough to undertake research and which could not be explained through existing theory" (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014:10). Theories, however, are not set aside or neglected; empirical data are used as the starting point and several theories are drawn on eclectically and integrated to describe and explain the phenomenon.

In the present thesis, I have investigated the phenomenon of international internal communication, taking the observation of the phenomenon as a point of departure and drawing on an eclectic set of theories, such as sensemaking (Vaara, 2000; Weick, 1995), politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and BELF (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005) to identify, capture, document and conceptualise its key issues. The theories I have drawn on, however, belong to different disciplines, which is a topic that I address in the next part.

1.4.2. Positioning in a discipline: a difficult endeavour

I have found it challenging to position the present doctoral thesis in a clearly demarcated discipline. There are three reasons that I detail below: the complexity of the investigated phenomenon, the nature of the disciplines I draw on and the approach that I adopt.

First, the investigated problem is complex by nature as it covers different aspects that include, among other things: the collaboration imperative in the workplace context (Q1); the employees' own perceptions of the problems (Q2); the management's interpretation of the events and action implemented (Q2); the actual way these employees communicate (Q3); the perception of the communicative event by the receivers (Q4); the use of emails (Q3 and Q4) and the use of English as a lingua franca by non-native speakers of English (Q2, Q3 and Q4). To tackle these research questions, I have drawn on concepts and theories that originally come from different disciplines, but that I have applied to the international workplace context, while these concepts and theories originally investigate monocultural environments (see figure 1 for an overview). For instance, in order to examine the perceptions of the employees, I have used sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) that initially derives from organisational theory and that has later been applied to cultural differences in mergers and acquisitions (Vaara, Risberg, Søderberg, & Tienari, 2003; Vaara, 2000). In addition, to look at the realisation of the language in the internal emails, I have drawn on pragmatics, examining speech acts applied in an intercultural setting (intercultural pragmatics). Further, to discuss the findings of this study, I have also framed the discussion of one of my papers in politeness theory that derives from pragmatics and that initially describes politeness norms in a monocultural setting. I have borrowed the theory and applied it to an intercultural context, discussing how different national norms of politeness may or may not collide in the workplace setting. To account for the fact that the informants are communicating in a language that is not their mother tongues, I have drawn on ELF, originally derived from sociolinguistics, but that is now set in a new context, the business setting, becoming a BELF (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005) issue.

Second, the phenomenon that I wish to investigate is initially situated at the crossroads of intercultural communication (IC), intercultural business communication (IBC) and cross-cultural management (CCM). These are, in turn, informed by several disciplines (for a discussion on the multidisciplinary nature of these disciplines, see Spencer-Oatey & Franklin (2009) for IC, Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson (2003) for IBC and Primecz, Romani, & Sackmann (2009) for CCM). All three disciplines look at interactions among people from different cultures, usually understood as national cultures (see 3.2). IBC is directly informed by IC but examines interactions in the work context. Since the object of my thesis is limited to interactions in the workplace setting, it would be rather positioned in IBC than in IC (that is grounded in a body of theory but has little application to business culture according to Beamer & Varner (2001)) and in CCM, even though I also draw on researchers working with IC. On the other hand, IBC and CCM are closely related and one can therefore wonder what differenciates these two disciplines. Kristiansen (2004) offers a “checklist” that can be used to investigate the autonomy status of a discipline, looking at the sociological and epistemological characteristics of the disciplines. A survey of the epistemological characteristics of IBC and CCM demonstrate that the disciplines are relatively similar: they share the same research object, i.e. cultures in organisations/workplace settings, they use a common terminology, and the methods of empirical investigations can also be similar (observation, interviews). One could imagine that the research interests of IBC and CCM are different. Given their prefixes, one may expect that IBC investigates cultural behaviours and values in interaction (inter-), while CCM examines them comparatively (cross-). In reality, one finds comparative studies in IBC and studies of interactions in CCM (see definition below). They also traditionally resort to the same positivist paradigm, starting from the assumption of distinct cultural groups and that members of these groups “have a culture” (Piller, 2007, 2011), often understood as national culture. Looking at sociological criteria, we can notice that many associations and conferences in IBC and CCM at the international level have overlapping interests and topics. Cases in point are GEML (Groupe d’Étude Management et Langage, a French research group on management and language); the

Association for Business Communication (ABC); and IALIC (International Association for Language and Intercultural Communication), which organised a conference on language and intercultural communication in the workplace in 2012. To my understanding, what distinguishes IBC and CCM is the approach adopted to study culture in a workplace setting: while IBC scholars look at language and communication, CCM researchers take a business and management approach. IBC may be described as a relatively emergent discipline (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2003) which focuses on the work context and studies discourses produced in business settings, or "business discourses" (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2007). IBC did not include linguistic studies until the work of Ehlich & Wagner (1995), but since then, numerous studies looking at language in business settings and using naturally occurring data have been published (for an overview, see Spencer-Oatey, 2010). CCM, on the other hand, is defined as "the compilation of research and practice of cross-national comparisons, intercultural interaction and multiple culture studies, including research that focuses on culture at the national, organisational and sub-organisational levels" (Primecz et al., 2009). This difference of focus, language versus management, may be explained by the fact that the core group of researchers in IBC are mainly trained as linguists, while CCM researchers usually have a business background and/or work in business schools.

Third, the term "discipline" originates from the Latin words "discipulus", which means pupil, and "disciplina", which means teaching. A common understanding of discipline, then, is that of a subject of study in a college or university. I am formally trained in organisational sciences and in linguistics[1], so I am influenced by these two disciplines, seen as the parent disciplines (see figure 1). In this perspective, there is no denying that I perceive and investigate the phenomenon of international internal communication through my disciplinary lenses. Therefore, I draw on linguistics and more specifically on pragmatics and on organisational behaviour. I refer to the figure 1 below for an illustration of how the disciplines and theories interact with each other.

[1] I have a master´s degree in international management (SKEMA Business School, France) and a master´s degree in French language and linguistics (University of Bergen, Norway)

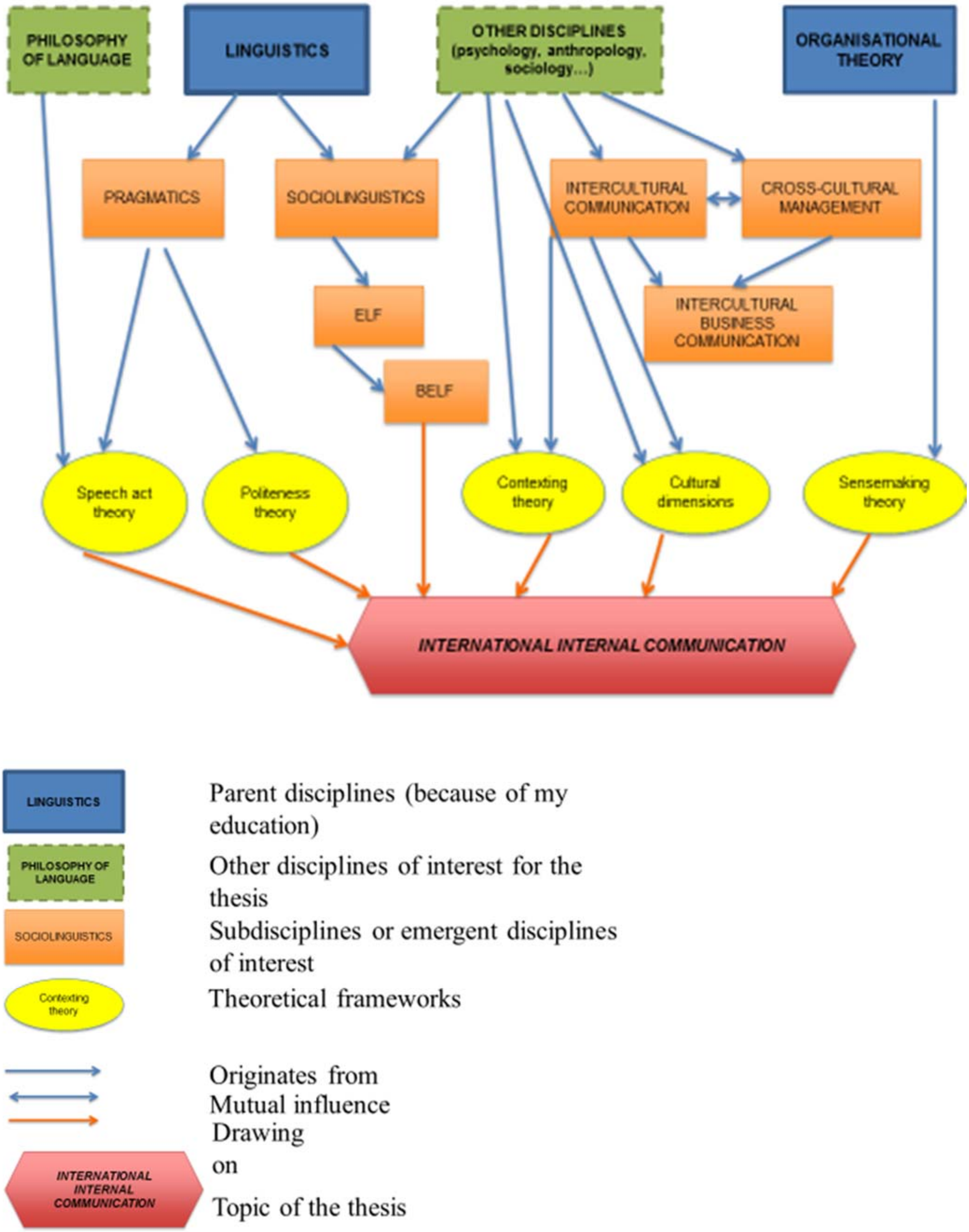

Figure 1: Disciplines and theories used in this thesis

As I have shown in this part, my thesis is motivated by the analysis of a phenomenon, international internal communication. To do so, I draw on theories that originally come from different disciplines. In doing so, I have adopted a transdiciplinary approach and framed my work in a new form of knowledge production (Mode 2) that I describe below.

1.5. Mode 2 production of knowledge and the transdisciplinary nature of my work

As stated in the previous part, research contributions have traditionally become academic knowledge through a clearly demarcated theoretical framework and discipline. More recently however, a new form of knowledge has emerged alongside the traditional one, that Gibbons et al. (1994) have named Mode 2. In their book, *The New Production of knowledge* (1994), the authors reflect on and discuss the existing mode of knowledge production (Mode 1) and identify the features of the new mode of knowledge production (Mode 2). The attributes of Mode 1 and Mode 2 are summed up in the table below:

Mode 1	Mode 2
Academic context	Context of application
Disciplinary	Transdisciplinary
Homogeneity	Heterogeneity
Autonomy	Reflexivity/social accountability
Traditional quality control (peer review)	Novel quality control

Table 1: Attributes of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production

To shed light on the different aspects of this complex phenomenon, I have therefore adopted a transdisciplinary approach and framed my thesis in Mode 2 (Gibbons et al., 1994). The notion of Mode 2 has received enormous visibility: it has been referred to in over 1000 scientific articles and the number of references per year has been and still is increasing (Hessels & van Lente, 2008). Some of the initial attributes exposed in 1994 have furthermore been refined in 2003 (Nowotny, Scott, & Gibbons, 2003).The details of the reception of the notion, as well as its criticisms go beyond the scope of this part and will therefore not be described further.

Mode 2 is particularly relevant for the present thesis, especially for three of its main attributes: context of application, transdisciplinarity and reflexivity. First, knowledge is produced in a context of application, and is "intended to be useful to someone whether in industry or government, or society more generally and this imperative is present from the beginning. Knowledge is always produced under an aspect of continuous negotiation and it will not be produced unless and until the interests of the various actors are included" (Gibbons et al., 1994: 4). This is the case here, as the starting point is a need stemming from a company (see 1.1). Furthermore, the present thesis is phenomenon-driven (see 1.4.1.), and the topic of international internal communication, (which was perceived as challenging by the employees of the company), is the starting point of the investigation.

Second, the attribute of transdisciplinarity[2] is relevant for my thesis. Coined by Piaget in the early 1970s (Balsiger, 2004; Klein, 2004; Ramadier, 2004), the concept of transdisciplinarity is rather new and represents a new development in disciplinary thinking. Balsiger defines the concept as follows:

> A scientific problem transgressing the boundaries of scientific disciplines arises when: (a) the problem is generated in an extra scientific field (economics, politics, the living world); (b) a solution to the problem is urgently required in this field; (c) public opinion considers these fields relevant; and (d) when it is brought to science in an institutional way (research tasks, financing of project).
>
> Balsiger 2004: 412-413

It should be noted that numerous definitions coexist (Lawrence & Després, 2004; Ramadier, 2004). Most of the definitions, however, have several shared aims and I detail some of them below. First, transdisciplinarity is a problem-oriented approach (Balsiger, 2004; Gibbons et al., 1994). These problems are complex, heterogeneous, and are partly due to economic and technical globalisation. As Bill and Klein (2001) point out, "because they are complex, the

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[2] I make a distinction between three related concepts: multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary. Following the work of Balsiger (2004), I briefly define the three concepts as follows. In *multidisciplinary* projects, contributors from several disciplines work on a given theme (for instance, a sociologist, an economist and a psychologist examining the theme of unemployment) but collaboration among the participants and the disciplines is not necessary and no problem resolution is required. If a solution is intended however, then collaboration among scientists is needed. If the solution aims to be a purely scientific one, then it is an *interdisciplinary* form of collaboration. On the other hand, "if the striven solution is explicitly meant to consider experiences from affected persons (…) collaboration is requested not only among disciplinary scientific programs but also among scientists and individuals who represent the group of affected persons" (Balsiger 2004; 412), then, we deal with *transdisciplinarity*. I do not further discuss the distinction between these three concepts but refer to the work of Klein (1990, 2000, 2004), Balsiger (2004) and Våge (2011) for a more comprehensive definition of the three concepts.

problems can only be solved through the cooperation of many sectors of society and, in today's globalized world, with an intercultural attitude" (Bill & Klein, 2001: 25). Second, transdisciplinarity is necessarily based on disciplinary practices. It is, however, based on the assumption that these practices must evolve to match the complexity of the issues facing today´s scientific community (Balsiger, 2004; Ramadier, 2004). Third, in doing so, transdisciplinarity knowledge develops its own theoretical structures, research methods and mode of practice (Balsiger, 2004; Gibbons et al., 1994; Klein, 2004).

Last, the attribute of reflexivity relates to the researcher becoming more aware of the societal consequences of his/her work and to the dissemination of the results: "In Mode 2 sensitivity to the impact of the research is built in from the start. It forms part of the context of application" (Gibbons et al., 1994: 7). As a phenomenon-driven research project, the primary target audience are both academics and practitioners, "by generating insights about problems that are sourced by or relevant to managers" (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014:13). Such an approach, by contributing to increasing knowledge within a field rather than to a particular theory may produce research that has immediate implications for practice (see 5.4.). In the present thesis, the communication of the results was an integrated part of the culture project in the company and one of my main tasks was to communicate the results in seminars that I was organising. The results were presented in simple, non-academic language, formulated as a practical guide to help employees communicate better in the company. In addition, I have also presented the findings of my study in my academic work, through presentations in international conferences, publication of research articles in peer-reviewed journals and of a doctoral thesis. The applied nature of my study (context of application) and the growing awareness of and interest in communication issues in international companies have also played an important role in increasing its visibility and the interest of a non-academic audience for my work. In this perspective, I have had the chance to present my research results in different arenas and to different audiences.[3]

In the present thesis, the problem originates from the need of a company and the knowledge produced is bounded to a specific context of application. Furthermore, this problem is

[3] I have for instance been interviewed on the radio, have written a column in a national business newspaper; have had various consulting missions, and have been invited to give talks addressed to various audiences. I have also participated in a PhD national communication competition (Forsker Grand Prix) in 2015.

complex by nature as it covers different layers and includes several actors. I argue that it should be investigated using different research methods and using theories and frameworks coming from different disciplines (see section 1.4.2.). In line with existing projects that involve researchers from the humanities, the social sciences and actors outside the academic sphere,[4] I have therefore adopted a transdisciplinary approach.

In this section, I have presented the topic, the research questions and the phenomenon-driven approach. By doing so, I have framed my thesis in Mode 2 production of knowledge. In the next section, I offer an outline of the three articles that compose this dissertation.

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[4] See for instance the LINGCLIM Project, (http://www.uib.no/en/project/lingclim) based at the University of Bergen that looks at the linguistic representations of climate change discourse and their interpretations, and at the Health, Media and Society Project (http://www.healthmediasociety.net/) based at the University of Ghent that examines how news media construct health issues.

2. Outline of the articles

2.1. Article 1: Making sense of communication and cultural differences in the workplace: the case of Sino-Scandinavian collaboration[5]

The first paper explores the way Chinese and Scandinavian[6] (Norwegian and Swedish) engineers working together on transnational projects in an international company perceive and make sense (Vaara 2000; Weick 1995) of their work collaboration with regards to cultural differences and communication practices. The research questions are threefold and expressed as follows: 1) Do national cultural differences affect and hinder work collaboration among Chinese and Scandinavian colleagues working on transnational projects? 2) What other factors may affect effective collaboration in the workplace? And 3) How do the actors'of transnational project groups make sense of cultural differences?

The classic view of culture often sees cultural differences across nations as a source of conflicts and misunderstandings. This paper however, is informed by a socio-constructivist tradition and looks at the way the actors of the interactions actually perceive and understand these differences. Based on 14 interviews of Norwegian, Swedish and Chinese engineers working in the same company, the present paper, of an exploratory nature, shows that national cultural differences did not particularly hinder work collaboration. This is explained by the fact that the informants (all engineers) belong to the same community of practice: they have a common technical background, use the same technical terminology and resort to international drawings. Their communication style is also described as direct. The study also shows that factors that could actually hinder work communication include the lack of internal procedures, as well as the BELF competence of the employees, which made it challenging to communicate difficult messages, particularly when writing face-threatening emails in English. The paper also discusses how the term "cultural differences", used by the informants, is vague

[5] I am the sole author of this article. It is forthcoming in a special issue of the Chinese Journal of Communication, edited by Fred Dervin and Regis Machart.

[6] A clarification about the empirical data: The starting point of the study and of my mission in the company was to look at intercultural problems between Chinese and Scandinavian employees. Later on however, I was asked to extend the workshops to Germany and Korea. This allowed me to collect more empirical data. I address this issue when I present the informants in 4.3.2.

and encompasses lack of internal procedures, poor English proficiency and how it is actually used as an excuse not to get things done.

The findings of this study lead to the second paper that looks at the production and the perceptions of three speech acts in internal email work communication.

2.2. Article 2: Internal email communication in the workplace: is there an "East-West divide"?[7]

The aim of this second article is twofold: first to analyse the way Northern European employees (Norwegians, Swedes and Germans) formulate three different speech acts (request, criticism and disagreement) when writing internal work emails to their Asian colleagues (Chinese and Korean) and second, to examine the way these emails are perceived by the Asian employees, in terms of politeness, friendliness and clarity. The data consists of 182 elicited emails produced by Northern European employees using role enactment and 33 perception questionnaires collected in different Asian business units of an international company. The analytical procedure to analyse the elicited emails is inspired by the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) while the questionnaires are analysed following sociolinguistics studies. Last, the discussion of the results is partly anchored in the ongoing debate on the East-West politeness debate (Leech, 2005).

[7] This paper was published in March 2016: Ly, A. (2016): Internal e-mail communication in the workplace: Is there an "East-West divide"? *Intercultural Pragmatics*. Volume 13, Issue 1, Pages 37–70. I have been granted permission to use the article for my thesis by the publisher, Mouton de Gruyter, in an email dated 26.04.2016.

2.3. Article 3: Getting access to language data in the workplace: role enactment as a data-generation method[8]

The final paper examines methods used to collect data in the workplace context. It first discusses naturally occurring data and interviews (that have been used for the first paper). These methods, however, present limitations that are described here, particularly with regards to access, time and control of variables. This paper argues in favour of the use of role enactment (that has been used to collect the data for the second paper) as a method to generate reliable and representative language data in the workplace. Role enactment is then defined and argued for, as the method allows high control of contextual variables and comparability across cultures. Last, the use of role enactment is discussed, with regards to the type of insights it may yield either used alone or in combination with other methods (methodological triangulation).

[8] This paper was published as a book chapter in October 2015: Ly, A. (2015): Getting access to language data in the workplace: role enactment as a data-generation method In G. Alessi & G. Jacobs (Eds.), *The Ins and Outs of Business and Professional Discourse Research Reflections on Interacting with the Workplace* (pp. 63-80). Palgrave Macmillan. I have been granted permission to use the article for my thesis by the publisher, Palgrave Macmillan, in an email dated 27.01.2016.

3. Theoretical foundations and key concepts

3.1. Section outline

In this section, I present the theoretical foundations and key concepts that I use in my thesis. I define and problematise the concept of national culture (3.2.), which is a central concept in the present doctoral thesis. Then, I discuss the theory of sensemaking[9] (3.3.) and the concept of community of practice (3.4.) that are used to answer research question Q2 (How do employees belonging to the same community of practice and working at the same level of hierarchy make sense of culture differences and communication practices in the workplace?). To investigate Q3 (How do Northern European employees write internal emails in English to express request, criticism and disagreement to their Asian colleagues?) and Q4 (How are these emails perceived by their Asian colleagues?), I draw on politeness theory (3.5), speech act theory (3.6.) and frame the discussion in the concept of BELF competence (3.7).

3.2. The concept of national culture in CCM

The term of national culture is central to the study of intercultural interactions and yet, there is a lack of consensus in CCM on how it should be conceptualised. Different actors, with different agendas, contribute to this complexity: on the one hand, intercultural trainers, or "interculturalists" (Dahlén, 1997) and on the other hand, researchers with divergent views on culture.

Interculturalists[10] are consultants who deal with intercultural training sessions geared towards company employees. As explained by Mahadevan & Mayer (2012), they are influenced by market pressures and need to "sell their expertise as those who enable others to overcome societal cultural differences" and by doing so, they "might need to exaggerate cultural difference in order to sell themselves as the experts who can help overcome it" (Mahadevan and Mayer, 2012:8). The more differently another culture is presented, the better the need for

[9] I adopt Weick (1995) and Vaara's (2000) spelling of sensemaking (one word).

[10] One may argue that it is unusual to describe the work of the "interculturalist" in a doctoral thesis, as their work is not research-based. It is important here, however, as they have an influence on the way the employees perceived cultural differences in the workplace (see research question Q2 and paper 1).

the interculturalist is justified and this may result in the tendency to present cultures such as China as more alien than they actually are (Dervin, 2015). In the seminars they organise and in the books and handbooks written by the interculturalists, Northern Europeans and Asians are depicted as diametrically opposed in their cultural values and communication patterns (see the example provided in the introduction of paper 1). The encounter with the distant national other is described as a shock: when cultures meet, misunderstandings, conflicts and "collisions" (Lewis, 2006) arise. To help the participants cope with these challenges that cultural differences represent, the interculturalists offer a simplistic description of national cultures, setting aside cultural paradoxes (Osland & Bird, 2000) inherent to all cultures and provide a list of Dos and Don´ts that are easy to understand and relate to, particularly to the busy employees looking for a quick survival guide. Beamer and Varner compare these lists to a snapshot from a movie: "It is accurate, but without the context of the movie´s story line, character development, or even a specific episode, the snapshot´s significance may not be understandable" (Beamer & Varner, 2001:11). The knowledge they communicate is generally built on personal observations rather than research-based (or, if it is based on research, it is predominantly on Hofstede´s cultural framework). Most of these intercultural trainers conceptualise national culture in a simplistic and essentialist way, providing stereotyped portrayals of culture and "quick fixes" to solve cultural differences across nations. This simplistic knowledge is often the one that is communicated in company seminars, shaping employees' understandings and perceptions of cultural differences. I come back to this point in 3.3.

On the other hand, academic researchers in CCM who investigate the effects of national culture in organisational settings have divergent conceptions of national culture, either positivist or socio-constructivist (or socio-constructionist[11]). The definitions and an overview of these two conceptions can be found in the theoretical framework of paper 1. The positivist conception of culture, mainly represented by Hofstede's (1980, 2001) framework still dominates in CCM studies (Kirkman et al., 2006; Kittler, Ryg, & Mackinnon, 2011; Portugal Ferreira et al., 2014). Over the last twenty years, however, an increasing number of voices have challenged the traditional view on culture and the validity of the notion of national culture (Chevrier, 2003; Fang, 2012; Primecz et al., 2009; Sackmann & Phillips, 2004;

[11] The terms constructivist and constructionist have slightly different meanings (see for instance Ackermann, online). To my knowledge however, they tend to be used interchangeably.

Søderberg & Holden, 2002; Tung & Verbeke, 2010). These researchers claim that the concept of national culture is outdated for dealing with the cultural complexity the transnational companies are facing. Therefore, some of them advocate for a multiple culture perspective, including organisational, regional, professional (see for example Sackmann & Phillips, 2004) and political (Chevrier, 2003) cultures, while others propose looking at culture from a socio-constructivist perspective (Gertsen, Søderberg, & Torp, 1998; Kleppestø, 1998; Søderberg & Holden, 2002).

The origins of socio-constructivism are difficult to trace (Burr, 2015) but according to Gudykunst, Lee, Nishida, & Ogawa, (2004) it was first introduced by Applegate & Sypher (1983, 1988) in IC. Given the permeable boundaries of IC, IBC and CCM as disciplines, we may infer that it has spread further. In CCM, Kleppestø's (1998) contribution is, to my knowledge, the first to mention this approach. Socio-constructivism opposes what is referred to as positivism and argues that "the ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific" (Burr, 2015:4). Therefore, the main stance of socio-constructivism is that culture is not given or determined in advance but comes "into existence in relation to and in contrast with other cultural communities" (Søderberg & Holden, 2002:112). I provide an overview of the studies that have used this approach in CCM in paper 1.

These two approaches oppose each other at the ontological and epistemological levels. Little however is said on how the employees actually perceive communication and cultural differences in the workplace. As set above, some employees may have been influenced by the interculturalist discourse, which may have, in turn, changed their perceptions of the "other" and of the interactions with the "other" (Dervin, 2012, 2013, 2015).

In order to go beyond this contradiction between positivist and socio-constructivist conceptions of culture, I raise three points. First, I argue that culture possesses a part of regularity and a part of variability and, following Spencer-Oatey (2008), I adopt the present definition of culture: a "fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour" (Spencer-Oatey 2008b:3, cited in Spencer- Oatey & Franklin, 2009:15). Second, following Sackmann and Philipps (2004) who urge to critically examine the concept of national culture and to choose an appropriate level of analysis and context in research studies, I focus on the influence of culture in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) (see 3.4.). Last, to integrate my conception of culture and the employees' interpretations of cultural behaviour, I resort to the sensemaking (Weick, 1995) framework that I explain below.

3.3. The concept of sensemaking in organisational studies

The concept of sensemaking in organisational theory was introduced by Weick (1995), as an alternative approach to the conventional ways of looking at the process of organising outcomes. Instead of a focus on organisational outcomes (Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010), sensemaking provides insights into how individuals give meaning to experience and events. First developed as a set of explanatory ideas, the concept of sensemaking has been refined and has become, over the years, a theoretical framework that has had an enormous influence on organisational studies, particularly in strategy and organisational crisis (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Weick's framework is composed of seven explanatory features that can be used to study the process of organising and finding explanations of key events: it is (1) grounded in identity construction, (2) retrospective, (3) enactive of sensible environments, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues, (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995: 17). I refer to Weick's work (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005; Weick, 1995) and to meta-studies on sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Mills et al., 2010; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) for a detailed explanation of the features. There are two aspects of the process that are particularly relevant for the present study: first, that the effort of sensemaking occurs when "the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious way to engage the world" (Weick et al., 2005: 409); in other words, when there is a disruption in people's routines, a shock that forces individuals to make sense of things differently. Second, the process of sensemaking takes place through language, talks and narratives (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick et al., 2005), meaning that individuals make sense of events and experiences while talking about them.

The framework of sensemaking has been further applied to cultural differences in organisations by Vaara (2000) who examines the constructions of cultural differences in post-merger processes.[12] In short, Vaara's work looks at the way cultural differences are used as explanations of organisational problems following mergers. He adopts the sensemaking concept defined as a "rational activity where the actors develop understanding of specific phenomena" (Vaara 2000:87) to uncover the different understandings and narratives on cultural differences in the organisation. Instead of opposing the positivist and socio-constructivist perspectives on cultures (see 3.2), he argues that the two perspectives highlight different epistemological layers and should be used together; that "a dialectic understanding of organizational cultures should take into account both the real manifestations of these cultures and the reflexive processes where the actors make sense of their cultures" (Vaara, 2000: 82). He adds the following:

> By pointing to the actors' interpretations, the sensemaking perspective also means taking such issues as cultural stereotypes seriously because their (re)construction and use is a significant part of social life (…). The perspective consequently does not undermine the "real" differences in beliefs and practices but rather focuses attention on the processes where the organizational actors construct their (simplified) conceptions of cultural differences.
>
> Vaara 2000: 86-87

Recent studies have looked at actors' cultural sensemaking in the organisational context and I provide an overview of these in the theoretical framework of paper 1. To the best of my knowledge however, no prior study has looked at cultural sensemaking in organisations among Scandinavians and Chinese employees. Such investigation can be interesting as the existing corporate narratives (see the narrative of the interculturalist in 3.2) depict these cultures as diametrically opposed. One may therefore wonder how the employees, working as engineers, actually perceive the role of cultural and communication differences in their work collaboration. One of the findings that I further discuss in paper 1 is that there are different sensemakings in the organisation. That is, while the management interpreted the existing conflicts between Northern European and Chinese employees as being problems linked to cultural differences and implemented measures, the employees (working as engineers) that I have interviewed explained the problems by differences in communication and in BELF competence. This may be explained by the fact that these employees belong to the same community of practice.

[12] I detail and use his framework in paper 1

3.4. The concept of community of practice

The concept of community of practice (hereafter CoP) was coined by Lave and Wenger (1991) in the field of knowledge management and has been further developed by Wenger (1998, 2011). A CoP is defined as a group "of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2011:1). Such groups can be exemplified by a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques or a group of engineers working on similar problems. Three identifying characteristics are crucial for the CoP to emerge: a domain, a community and a practice. First, a CoP has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest, in which members commit to and possess a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. Second, members engage in joint activities and discussions, share information, build relationships that enable them to interact and learn from each other, forming a community. Third, members of a CoP develop a shared practice, consisting of a shared repertoire of resources, experiences, tools, among other things (Wenger, 2011). The concept of CoP has been widely used in organisations, and to my understanding, mainly with a focus on how knowledge should be managed.

The informants of my thesis are trained or work as engineers in the same multinational company and are required to collaborate across national borders. They are doing intercultural engineering, defined as "any intercultural social or corporate field that is characterized by a high importance of technology and specialized knowledge of those working with this technology. We name those working in such fields engineers. We understand the term engineers broadly, as including any type of technical expert, project leader or manager, be it with regard to computer science, electronical engineering, mechanical engineering or other related fields" (Mahadevan & Mayer, 2012: 5). I adopt the definition of engineer mentioned above. These engineers share a domain of interest, having the same educational background and sharing competences that distinguish them from other groups. In this perspective, the technological complexity of engineering projects has been pointed out in previous studies (Chevrier, 2003; Mahadevan, 2011; Tukiainen, 2010). Furthermore, through their work projects, they engage in joint activities and discussions, and are required to interact and build relationships (this is addressed in section 3.5), forming a community. Last, they have a shared repertoire, which consists, among other things, of a shared technical language and of international drawing standards. According to Wenger's definition, they belong to a CoP.

Culture and cultural differences are too often analysed at the level of a nation (see 3.2). I follow Sackmann & Phillips' (2004) recommendations to draw on different levels of analyses when studying culture in the new workplace. Informed by sociolinguistics that use CoP as a social variable, I draw on the concept of CoP to nuance and refine existing portrayals of Northern European and Asians in interactions in the workplace. One may wonder if the CoP creates a sense of belonging that goes beyond national cultural differences. To my knowledge, only very few studies look at the perception of cultural differences in CoP across nations (Mahadevan, 2011), let alone focus on communicative practices in CoP. In Mahadevan's study, German and Indian engineers regarded engineering as a "global profession that is not impacted by national cultural differences" (Mahadevan, 2011: 93), and that from the engineering perspective, "culture in general was perceived as something out of one's own work practice" (ibid). I therefore investigate how communicative practices in this CoP is perceived and how members of this CoP actually communicate with each other.

3.5. Politeness theory

As stated above, the employees of the company need to interact with each other in the workplace and build work relationships with their colleagues. In the present thesis, I look at how Northern Europeans write emails in English to their Asian colleagues (research question Q3) and how these emails are perceived by the Asian colleagues (Q4). I investigate this drawing on politeness theory and I more particularly look at linguistic politeness. In the following section, I draw on three understandings of politeness: politeness (in general), linguistic politeness and "commonsense notions of politeness" (Haugh and Kádár, 2013), which I define below.

To start with, politeness can be defined as follows:

> A key means by which humans work out and maintain interpersonal relationships. Many of us have been educated how to behave politely since childhood (...). However, politeness is not limited to conventional acts of linguistic etiquette like formal apologies, so-called "polite" language and address terms, even though it includes all of these acts. Rather, it covers something much broader, encompassing all types of interpersonal behaviour through which we take into account the feelings of others as to how they think they should be treated in working out and maintaining our sense of personhood as well as our interpersonal relationships with others.
>
> Haugh & Kadar, 2013:1

Language is an important part of the interpersonal relationship and of the interaction, and linguistic politeness has been defined as “discursively strategic interaction, i.e. linguistic devices perceived as having been used in order to maintain harmonious relations and avoid conflict with others” (Holmes, 2012: 208).

Politeness has become the object of systematic scientific research the last 40 years. Earliest theoretical frameworks include politeness maxims (Leech, 1983) and the seminal work of Brown and Levinson (1987). In *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Brown and Levinson aimed to provide a framework to model politeness (politeness strategies) as implicated through forms of linguistic behaviour, based on the notions of positive and negative face. I introduce their framework and some of the criticisms in paper 2. In spite of various critiques, Brown and Levinson’s approach continues to be regarded as the definitive work on linguistic politeness (Haugh & Kadar, 2013).

I raise three points that are relevant for my thesis. First, the framework applies in a cross-cultural perspective (for a discussion on the difference between cross- and inter-, see 1.4.2.), meaning that norms of linguistic politeness are compared across cultures and not studied in interactions. There is a need to look at the communication processes in these intercultural and interlanguage encounters (Kecskes, 2012), as “politeness could be considered the heart of successful intercultural communication. Getting one´s message across effectively, and without causing unintended offence to interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds, entails familiarity with a range of communicative norms, and the ability to draw on them appropriately “(Holmes 2012: 206).

Second, Brown and Levinson’s framework has focused on the production of politeness strategies that they set as norms and little has been said on the perceiver’s perspective (Eelen, 2001). More attention needs to be devoted to the evaluation of politeness strategies, particularly in intercultural interaction settings.

Third, in politeness theory, the concept of culture is traditionally understood as national culture and studies tend to draw generalisations about politeness and impoliteness norms of particular language groups. However, cultures are not homogeneous and within each culture there are different views of what constitutes polite and impolite behaviour. Thus, norms of appropriateness or inappropriateness depend on contextual factors and may also vary across communities of practices (Kádár & Mills, 2011).

In the present thesis, I investigate how linguistic politeness unfolds in the international workplace from the producer's perspective. In paper 2, I analyse the level of directness and the mitigation strategies used by the Northern European employees when they write emails on the one hand, and examine how these strategies are perceived by their Asian colleagues. In terms of perception of politeness, I look at "commonsense notions of politeness", defined as the "various ways in which politeness behaviour is perceived and talked about by the members of sociocultural groups" (Haugh & Kadar, 2013: 5). I focus my study at the level of a CoP in a particular work context (horizontal collaboration) and in international internal communication (intercultural study), where the employees use English as a Business Lingua Franca (see 3.7).

3.6. Speech acts

To examine how linguistic politeness unfolds in the workplace, I analyse the realisation of speech acts in internal email communication. In linguistics and philosophy of language, the concept of speech acts was initially introduced by Austin (1962) and further developed by Grice (1975) and Searle (1979). Briefly put, speech acts theory is based on the idea that an utterance is regarded as an action, particularly with regards to its intention, purpose or effect. Austin, Grice and Searle discussed and proposed different taxonomies of speech acts in English (monolingual environment) that have been used in the field of pragmatics.

In order to investigate the nature of variability of these classifications across cultures and languages, it is essential to examine the realisation of these speech acts in a variety of situations, in cross-culturally comparable ways. In this perspective, the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989) in cross-cultural pragmatics has examined cross-cultural and intralingual variation in the realisation of requests and apologies, with native speakers of eight languages. The aim of the project was to establish native speakers' patterns of realization with respect to these two speech acts. To do so, a discourse completion test (hereafter DCT) has been developed to assess the way respondents of different nationalities and mother tongues set in similar communicative situations express a speech act. The CCSARP approach has been widely used in cross-cultural pragmatics and in interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). I elaborate on the CCSARP and its applications in paper 2.

There are many studies that take the CCSARP's framework as a point of departure, as detailed in paper 2. These studies, however, mostly examine the way requests are expressed in terms of directness level in a specific language. To my knowledge, no prior study has compared the realisations of different speech acts uttered by the same individuals, interacting at the same level of hierarchy. In the present thesis, I investigate the way the employees of the company express three different speech acts (request, criticism and disagreement) that have an increasing threat to face (Brown & Levinson, 1987), allowing a comparison of the level of directness used by the same informants. Moreover, the CCSARP has developed a framework of analysis that applies to requests and apologies in DCT. I have further developed the framework to the analysis of criticisms and disagreements that I have applied to email communication. The process as well as the framework are detailed in paper 2.

3.7. Business English Lingua Franca

The present thesis also raises the issue of language use in international internal communication. In a globalised business context, the use of English as a shared language among employees and as a corporate language has become common but not unproblematic.

The concept of English has a lingua franca (ELF) originally comes from sociolinguistics (see for instance the work of Jenkins 2000, 2007, 2009) and focuses on the use of and the implications of using English by non-native speakers for teaching. ELF interactions concentrate on communicative efficiency (getting the message across) among non-native speakers of English rather than on grammatical correctness (proficiency). The concept has been further developed and applied in the business context and the term Business English Lingua Franca (BELF) has been coined by Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005) and is defined as follows: "BELF refers to English used as a 'neutral' and shared communication code. BELF is neutral in the sense that none of the speakers can claim it as her/his mother tongue; it is shared in the sense that it is used for conducting business within the global business discourse community, whose members are BELF users and communicators in their own right - not ‘non-native speakers’ or ‘learners’” (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005: 403-404).

Language issues have been relatively forgotten in multinational companies (Bjørge & Whittaker, 2014; Heynderickx, Dieltjens, Jacobs, Gillaerts, & de Groot, 2012; Marschan, Welch, & Welch, 1997; Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 2014; D. Welch, Welch, & Piekkari, 2005) and company management often tends to consider language differences among subsidiaries and employees as a minor managerial issue (D. Welch et al., 2005). However, studies have shown that the choice of English as a business lingua franca may affect horizontal communication between subsidiaries (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005), particularly when these subsidiaries are located in non-English speaking countries and international internal communication (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012).

Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) argue that “BELF speakers bring into business interaction their own culture-bound views of how encounters should be conducted but also discourse practices stemming from their respective mother tongues” (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005:404). In line with them, one may wonder how employees from cultures that are traditionally depicted with different communication styles (such as in the present thesis), perceive communication practices in English in the international workplace. Empirical studies on the perceptions of BELF by employees are many (see an overview in Nickerson, 2005 and more recent studies such as Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012; Lønsmann, 2011). However, only a few studies look at the perceptions of BELF by employees with culturally distant backgrounds such as Europeans and Asians (Du Babcock, 2013; Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013). The present thesis intends to contribute with new insights.

Having presented the different frameworks, I now describe the methods used to collect data for the present thesis.

4. Research methods and data

4.1. Section outline

In this section, I give an account of the journey of the dissertation: I present the initial topic, discuss the challenges and opportunities that I have met, present my research paradigm and the pilot project. Then, I describe the data and explain my research design, based on methodological triangulation. Last, I present and discuss the three methods that I have used to collect my data (interview, role enactment and perception questionnaire).

4.2. The journey: initial research topic, challenges, opportunities and pilot project

The present thesis is the result of a research process that started in 2011 when I wrote a project proposal to apply for a PhD position at NHH. The initial project and research design have changed much, influenced by the inputs I have received in different arenas (PhD courses, conference presentations, supervisors, colleagues) and by the challenges and opportunities that I have met along the way. Following researchers who argue for more transparency when describing the research process (Macdonald & Hellgren, 2004; Silverman, 2010; Zalan & Lewis, 2004), I give an account of my research journey.

4.2.1. The initial research topic: face and facework in business interactions

The initial project aimed at investigating the linguistic manifestations of face and facework in business interactions. More specifically, I wanted to examine how power distance (Hofstede, 1980, 2001) was reflected in language in business interactions among French, Norwegians and Chinese. I chose these three countries because of the knowledge I have of these three cultures[13] and because it was also interesting from a research perspective, as these three

[13] I have a good knowledge of three cultures: the French one, the Chinese one and the Norwegian one. This can be explained by the fact that I was born, raised and educated in France but my family

cultures are representative of their differences in Hall's (1976) contexting model and in Hofstede's power distance index. Data collection would involve naturally occurring data of small talk, supported by follow-up interviews of the participants so that they could comment on their language practices. I planned to build an intracultural and an intercultural corpus to be able to contrast the findings. However, the initial research topic developed during the first year. This can be explained by the the theoretical and methodological journey that I have made, the challenges that I have met along the way when trying to get access to data and the opportunity that I was offered through my position in the company. I detail these points in the next sections.

4.2.2. The theoretical and methodological journey

In this part, I describe the reflections and the process around methodologies and theoretical frameworks used in the present work. Following the distinction by Zalan & Lewis (2004), I use the term methodology here, as I refer "to the general study of methods and (...) discussions about which methods are appropriate" (Zalan & Lewis, 2004: 508). In the initial project description, I wanted to collect naturally occurring data as such data can provide in-depth, rich insights into specific interactions and their contexts (Spencer- Oatey & Franklin, 2009) that I wanted to combine with interviews. I soon realised that these two methods also present challenges and limitations. I present these limitations in general in paper 3 and refer to it for more information. In the following, I focus on the limitations that are relevant for the present thesis. Access was a major challenge that I had underestimated: companies were not willing to grant me access to record their interactions, even though it was "just small talk". Other challenges in collecting naturally occurring data for my research project that were addressed were: technicalities, time and my positioning as a researcher. First, recording technicalities issues were raised in a course on qualitative methods: I wanted to record small talk interactions during lunches and breaks. As has been pointed out in a doctoral course, the quality of my data would be compromised by external noises (plates, cutleries, other people talking at the same time etc...): I needed to find a way to reduce the polluting noises. Second, recording, transcribing and analysing naturally occurring data is time-consuming, and

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traditions and culture are rooted in China. I grew up with these two languages and cultures. I moved to Norway in 2006 where I have lived and worked since.

represents a limitation when dealing with naturally occurring data, as I detail in paper 3. It would have been challenging for a student to manage these tasks alone within the 4-year frame that the PhD stipend allows. This challenge was solved after a discussion with one of my supervisors who suggested that I could use role-play instead, as this simulation method allows to provoke the desired speech act and better control the contextual variables. For my thesis, I have used role-enactment, which is a type of role-play where the participants play their own role in a familiar situation. I explain in detail what role enactment is, its benefits and limitations in paper 3 and give a concrete example of how it can be carried out in paper 2. The third challenge deals with my positioning when collecting naturally occurring data, both physical and ethical. I wanted to be an invisible observer of small talk interactions. However, how could I record such data without the informants paying attention to my presence or altering their interactions? It was suggested that I could introduce myself as a researcher-translator. This role, however, would lead to an ethical issue of misrepresentation (Berg, 2008): to what extent could I mask my real research interest or my identity as a researcher? And how much information should the informant know about the project so that they may not alter their behaviour?

Using interviews also presented a challenge that I had to reflect on and that I was not aware of when I started my research project: positioning. My identity, in terms of work identity - being a researcher and an employee of the company; being a student and at the same time coming from the headquarters and reporting directly to the management, and personal identity in terms of gender, race and nationality - may have played a role in the data collection process. I develop this point in section 4.4.1.

The challenges noted above were also partly solved in the spring 2012 when I started my position as a cross-cultural manager in the investigated company, which also granted me partial access to the company employees. My role in the company, in turn, shaped and influenced the research topics and theoretical frameworks.

Changes in the theoretical frameworks have also occurred from the initial research project, illustrating a theoretical journey that I have made. I initially planned to use Hofstede's framework, as it is the most commonly used in international business (Kirkman et al., 2006; Portugal Ferreira et al., 2014). I have however taken a critical distance towards his work for two main reasons. First, I have found methodological flaws in his assessment of the power distance index, and I particularly question how he actually calculated the power distance index for China. Second, I have taken some distance with his essentialist approach of culture (see the discussion in section 3.2), seen as a software that determines values and behaviours. I develop these two points in an analysis that I have conducted for a theory of science course and I refer to this paper (Ly, 2013) for further details.

I have also shifted from an interdisciplinary to a transdisciplinary approach. I started my PhD project with a purely scientific aim and aimed to combine two theoretical frameworks (Hofstede and politeness theory). The project became transdisciplinary when, influenced by the company case, I changed the initial topic and framed my study in the context of application (see 1.4).

The form of the dissertation itself has also changed. To my knowledge, doctoral dissertations in linguistics are mainly written as monographs and I initially intended to do so, too. Fairly early, however, I realised that this would be a challenging endeavour, as I resorted to more than two theoretical frameworks. This can be partly explained by the phenomenon-driven research project and the transdisciplinary approach that I have adopted but also by the feedback that I have received from colleagues working in different disciplines. During the first two years of my doctoral stipend, I have presented my project in different arenas: international conferences, PhD courses in different disciplines,[14] and seminars in a research group.[15] This made me realise that my research topic could be studied from different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives that could enlighten the complex aspects of my research question. An article-based dissertation therefore seemed more adequate to this eclectic approach, with articles from different disciplines[16] but that, taken together, would converge to give an answer to the research question.

Last, the nationality of the targeted informants has also been modified. The investigated company was mainly working with Norwegian, Swedish, German and Chinese employees, but no French. To start with, I planned to collect data with French nationals in another

[14] The topics of the international conferences include, among others: political sciences with a focus on Asia (NIAS Conferences 2011, 2012), intercultural communication (NIC 2011, IALIC 2012), sociolinguistics (PhD course in Bergen, 2011), international business (Ying Yang perspective on culture conference in 2012), international management (FIBE Conference 2012).

[15] I am a member of the Future Oriented Corporate Solutions (FOCUS) (http://blogg.nhh.no/focus/) research group at NHH.

[16] Paper 1 draws on frameworks in CCM and organisational theory while paper 2 is positioned in intercultural pragmatics and paper 3 is a methodological paper in business communication.

company. Yet, in order to keep a certain unity of the data collected, I decided to focus on one company, setting aside the wish to work with French nationals for future projects.

4.2.3. Research paradigm

In this part, I describe the research approach that I have adopted for the dissertation. The approach depends of my ontological stance on how I perceive reality. Reality can be considered as an objective nature and external to the individual (positivist approach) or as the product of individual cognition (socio-constructivist approach). In the present thesis, I have adopted a socio-constructivist paradigm. This approach investigates how people perform, ascribe and resist identity, and how identity is produced in talk and text of all kinds. In other words, I argue that identity does not depend on a predetermined essence, which reduces the individual to an exponent of a national culture, but is socially constructed in a given cultural context. Individuals have different identities that are more or less prominent in a specific situation, as I illustrate when describing my different "identities" or positionings that I negotiated during the social interactions that the interviews represent (see the discussion about my different identities in 4.4.1.).

I use qualitative methods and resort to three research methods to collect the data: interview, role enactment and perception questionnaire. Qualitative data have been criticised for "its lack of objectivity, replicability, validity and generability" (Zalan & Lewis, 2004). To increase the reliability of the data, I use these three methods in combination, drawing on methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978) to enlighten and answer a research question, and refer to paper 3 for more details. Further, the aim of the present thesis is to shed light on a specific research question, based on a real company case and not to generalise the findings to other industries or to the level of a nation. I also raise this point when dealing with the limitations of my thesis in section 5.5.

4.2.4. The pilot project

I got in contact with the vice-president of the investigated company in the spring 2012. He granted me access to the company so that I could collect some data. He also offered me a part-time position as a cross-cultural manager. This position allowed me to get in touch and discuss with key actors of the company and attend a meeting that would have been closed to outsiders. I further discuss my positioning (as an insider and an outsider) in section 4.4.1.

The pilot project took place in two stages: in July 2012 and in January 2013. I 2012, I was invited to attend and observe a strategic meeting of the marine division in Shanghai, where the management of the main European and Asian business units were gathered. I was not allowed to record the meeting but I could observe, take notes and discuss with the participants. Observation of real data is a good place to start a research project (Silverman, 2010), as I could get a first picture of the interactions and of the possible intercultural challenges. The observation of the meeting, as well as the discussion with the participants made me realise that first, face-to-face communication among participants went rather well, in spite of the different levels of BELF competence. Furthermore, it was also clear that most of the interactions were horizontal.

In the second stage of the pilot study, I conducted 6 face-to-face interviews with Norwegian (2) and Chinese (4) employees working in China and to acquire another perspective the intercultural interactions among the employees.

The pilot project has allowed me to refine my research project and questions. First, the interviews seemed to confirm the idea that most of the interactions in this company were horizontal (same level of hierarchy). Second, the analysis of the first interviews showed that national cultural differences were not perceived as particularly problematic among engineers who were working with horizontal collaborations. I decided to conduct more interviews to see whether this idea would be confirmed or not and the interviews constitute the data base for paper 1. Third, the Chinese informants stressed the heterogeneity and the complexity of the culture and refused to be categorised by their national label. In the interviews, they stressed the fact that they were different from the other Chinese. For instance, when I asked the Chinese informants whether they were indirect, one informant replied the following: “I think the traditional Chinese is very indirect but for me I’m a direct person. It depends you know. Some typical, it depends. The people are different. For me, I’m more direct”. This complexity made me reflect on my own conception of culture and has in turn, modified the theoretical frameworks that I wanted to use (see the methodological journey described in 4.2.2.). Last, one recurrent topic in the interviews was that email communication across business units could be challenging. Therefore, I decided to examine internal email communication further. However, when I asked the employees of the company to provide me with concrete emails (naturally occurring data), I received no answer. This can probably be explained by the fact that though most people are interested in writing better emails, no one wants to be made a fool of by showing examples of email communication failures. Still, to examine the way these emails were written and perceived, I needed written data, resorting therefore to simulation data (role enactment) that I detail in paper 3.

4.3. Data presentation

4.3.1. The company, my position and the workshops

The company investigated is a multinational company that designs, develops and supplies equipment solutions and services for the marine and the offshore industries. The headquarters are located in Bergen, Norway, but the company operates in many other countries where it has business units (mainly in Sweden, Germany, China and Korea). The company is primarily composed of engineers and technical staff that collaborate on construction or maintenance projects with colleagues located in other business units, mainly abroad. Over the years however, misunderstandings and conflicts have arisen and created frustrations and challenges in the work collaboration between the Chinese and the Northern European (Norwegian, Swedish and German) [17] employees. The management took measures to improve the transnational work collaborations and implemented a "culture project" in the company. The measures consisted of an audit conducted by an external consultant on the challenges caused by cultural differences across cultures; the implementation of seminars on intercultural

[17] A clarification about the empirical data: The starting point of the study and of my mission in the company was to look at intercultural problems between Chinese and Scandinavian employees (see the description of the pilot study in section 4.2.4 where only Chinese, Norwegians and Swedes were interviewed). Later on, however, I was asked to extend the workshops to Germany and Korea. In paper 2, I examine data produced by German, Norwegian and Swedish employees on the one hand and perceptions by Korean and Chinese employees on the other hand. The analysis of the production of speech acts (paper 2) showed no clear differences in the strategies the informants used among the three nationalities so I decided to group them together. Similarly, the perception study was initially designed with Chinese employees as the target recipients. However, Korean employees were later invited to express their perceptions in the questionnaire and I have found no clear national difference in the results. Further, the assimilation of the Chinese and Korean cultures into one group can be justified by the fact that they are culturally close (Kádár & Mills, 2011), belonging to the same cultural cluster, Confucian Asia (see House, et al. 2004).

communication addressed to managers by a freelance "interculturalist" (Dahlén, 1997) (see 3.2) and the elaboration of a booklet on how to do business with Asia and with Europe. Between 2012 and 2014, the management also hired an internal cross-cultural manager. This was a part-time job I was offered while pursuing my PhD study at the Norwegian School of Economics (NHH). My multicultural profile, my multidisciplinary background and previous work experience both in teaching and in companies was seen as a valuable asset for the position. My mission in the company was twofold: first, to investigate the challenges related to communication and cultural differences that employees could face while working with their Chinese colleagues (in the business units in Norway, Sweden and Germany) and with their Northern European colleagues (in the business units in China and South Korea) and second, to create and implement a training programme addressed to these employees to deal with differences in culture and communication (the workshops). Employees could also contact me if they were experiencing ad hoc challenges to work across these cultures. As a part-time researcher, I could also collect data for my own thesis.

One of my main tasks in the company was to implement, organise and lead two workshops on intercultural communication in the main business units of the company. The workshops were geared towards European employees in contact with their Chinese colleagues (in Europe) and Chinese employees in contact with their European colleagues (in China). The workshops were promoted on the intranet of the company and later on, I sent an invitation by email to the manager of each business unit who forwarded it to the relevant employees. Participation was voluntary and in accordance with their schedule.

The following table gives an overview of the date, the location and the number of participants for the workshops:

	Date	Country	City	Number of participants
Workshop 1	November 2012	Norway	Bergen	40
	November 2012	Norway	Kristiansand	15
	December 2012	Sweden	Gothenburg	40
	December 2012	Germany	Hamburg	15
	December 2012	Germany	Bremen	25
	January 2013	China	Shanghai	20
	January 2013	China	Dalian	12[18]
Workshop 2	March 2013	Norway	Bergen	25
	March 2013	Norway	Kristiansand	10
	April 2013	Sweden	Gothenburg	43
	June 2013	Germany	Bremen	39
	June 2013	Germany	Hamburg	8
	May 2013	China	Shanghai	14
	May 2013	China	Dalian	4
	May 2013	Korea	Busan	15

Table 2: Workshops: dates, locations and number of participants.

4.3.2. The informants

With a very few exceptions, most of the informants are recruited locally and therefore usually hold the nationality of the location (Norwegians in Norway, Swedes in Sweden...). Exceptions include the first workshop in China where two Norwegian expatriates also joined the workshop in Shanghai and where four South Koreans, as well as the German manager participated to the workshop in Dalian. To have a better picture of the participants of the workshop, a questionnaire was handed in during the seminars, together with the role enactment activity in Northern Europe and with the perception questionnaire in Asia. The results, based on the questionnaires that were handed in, show the following: in Northern Europe, about two thirds of the participants were men, reflecting the gender imbalance in the

[18] Included also Korean colleagues and the German manager

European business units. The participants were mainly engineers (at least 45 out of 63 respondents) indicated that they had a background in and or were working as engineers, naval architects or in technical positions[19]. Other positions were also represented in the workshops, with participants working in purchasing or in human resources management. Further, 95% of the participants had at least a year's experience working with Asian colleagues. The majority had worked with Asia between 5 and 10 years as shown in the table below:

	Number of participants	%
Less than a year	3	5%
Between 1 and 5 years	25	40%
Between 5 and 10 years	30	48.5%
More than 10 years	4	6.5%
Total	62[20]	100%

Table 3: Northern European informants: Experience with working with Asian colleagues (number of years).

The age range varied from 25 to 65 years old, with about two thirds of the participants between 35 and 55 years old.

Age range	Number of participants	%
25-35	18	28.5%
35-45	23	36.5%
45-55	19	30.5%
55-65	2	3%
65+	1	1.5%
Total	63	100%

Table 4: Northern European informants: Age range.

[19] The information is collected from the question on "education" and "position" from the information sheet the respondents have filled in. However, not all the respondents filled in these categories and some were vague in their answers, such as " Msc", or " University". Only those who have specifically mentioned that they were trained as or working as engineers, architechts or technical employment were taken into account for the calculation.

[20] One person did not answer this question, so the total sum is 62 instead of 63

In China and Korea, 33 employees participated in the workshops and 31 of them handed in the perception questionnaire and the information form.

In terms of professions and education, most of the informants were engineers, but other positions were also represented, such as a human resource staff, an accountant and a secretary. Further, around 70% of the participants had at least a year's experience working with European colleagues, as shown in the table below:

	Number of participants	%
Less than a year	3	9.5%
Between 1 and 5 years	7	22.5%
Between 5 and 10 years	12	39%
More than 10 years	2	6.5%
No answer	7	22.5%
Total	31	100%

Table 5: Asian informants: Experience with working with European colleagues (number of years).

In Asia, the gender distribution was balanced. The age range varied from 25 to over 65 years old, with about two thirds of the respondents being between 25 and 35 years old.

Age range	Number of participants	%
25-35	21	67%
35-45	7	23%
45-55	3	10%
Total	31	100%

Table 6: Asian informants: Age range.

4.4. Research design: Methodological triangulation

I use methodological triangulation to increase the validity of the findings and shed light on different aspects of my topic and research questions. I develop this point further in paper 3.

This is in line with other transdisciplinary projects that use a multi-methods approach (see for instance the overview of previous studies and the analysis of news management by Jacobs & Tobback, 2011). The data used in this thesis are summarised in appendix 8.1. Below, I briefly describe and discuss the research design.

4.4.1. Interview

Interviews were conducted in an explorative stage of my research project. Such a research method is appropriate (Kasper, 2006) at this stage and when finding out how the informants perceive their language use.

I conducted 16 face-to-face interviews[21] for the thesis. Prior to the second workshop, I sent an email to employees who were planning to join and invited them to contact me if they were interested in being interviewed. Those who volunteered were then further contacted to set a date. In addition, two Chinese resource managers were interviewed for the research project but their data were not taken into consideration for paper 1, as they did not belong to the same CoP. An overview of the location, the nationality of the informants and the duration of the interviews can be found in appendix 8.1.

In paper 1, I explain the choice of interview as a research method, the procedures and ethical aspects. I have also discussed the fact that access to the informants was facilitated by my position in the company and language issues that can be raised when conducting interviews (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, Penttinen, & Tahvanainen, 2004; C. Welch & Piekkari, 2006; Wilkinson & Young, 2004). In the following, I reflect on my positioning when conducting the interviews.

As stated by Lønsmann (2015:13) when reflecting on positionality in her ethnographic investigations, "what we see – or what we are allowed to see – depends on where we stand and who we are at the moment". Her work is influenced by the way she presented herself to the company, as well as the way she was perceived by the people of the company and these roles were dynamic and negotiated in interactions. In the present thesis, similarly, different positioning and identities needed to be negotiated and have influenced the data collection

[21] See appendix 1 for a detailed information about the interviews

process. I have distinguished three identities that I detail below: the cross-cultural manager, the researcher and the non-local.

As a cross-cultural manager in the company, I was considered as an employee, and therefore an insider, having knowledge of the company structure and power relations. I also had knowledge of some of the struggles the company was dealing with. I had an office at the headquarters and have met many of the colleagues in the corridors, or at the cantina. In the other business units, I was also seen as an insider, being sent by the headquarters and I had therefore access to the offices and employees. This role clearly helped me when I contacted the interview informants. I was perceived as a colleague and communication was also, to some degree, of a high-context and informal nature. At the same time, this role was double edged: in some business units abroad, I could also be considered as the "spy" coming from the headquarters, being assigned a mission by the director of the operations (i.e. the boss of their bosses). This identity was not clearly expressed by any informant but it must be kept in mind in the present thesis and may be presented as a limitation (see the discussion in Søderberg & Worm (2011)).

I also tried to position myself as a researcher. In doing so, I wanted to convey the idea that I was a neutral party, to gain credibility and to downplay the influence of the headquarters. When I conducted the interviews, I deliberately started by giving my university business card (and not the company business card) to stress my position as an outsider; someone the informant could talk to while at the same time remaining anonymous. Also, the status of a PhD student varies greatly from country to country: while in Scandinavia I have often been given high credibility by the fact that I am doing a PhD in a renowned business school, in China or in France I am often perceived as a student (and in that case, an old student who is still not finished with her studies!). To increase my credibility in China, I have therefore insisted on my identity as a researcher. Similarly, while I have some knowledge of Mandarin, I decided to conduct my interviews in China in English, as I imagined that my "broken" Chinese would not have contributed to giving me status.

Last, I also positioned myself and was positioned as a non-local. I am neither Chinese nor Norwegian. I perceive the fact that I am a French national as an advantage in this research project as I felt that this neutral identity would make the informants less hesitant to criticise the other national groups, without thinking that I was "one of them". At the same time however, I speak Norwegian and some Mandarin.[22] I also look Asian and I am usually addressed in Mandarin when I am in China. I also have a fair understanding of the Chinese and the Scandinavian cultures. This could also create a proximity with the informants. In China, though I conducted the interviews in English, small talk took place in Mandarin and I apologised for the fact that I could not conduct the interview in Mandarin. They also knew that I had a digital dictionary and that they could say or write a word in Mandarin that I could look up. Sometimes, I used Mandarin when I was not sure the informants had understood a question. Some researchers claim that mastering Mandarin is essential when doing fieldwork in China (Stening & Zhang, 2007; Sæther, 2006; Thøgersen & Heimer, 2006; Tsang, 1998). In line with Thøgersen (2006) however, I argue that one can have a fair understanding of Mandarin (the official language of China) and still be kept as an outsider. During the strategy meeting in Shanghai in July 2012, I introduced myself in Mandarin to the Chinese colleagues, which eased small talk. At some point during the meeting however, the Chinese colleagues, who had started to discuss an issue in Mandarin, looked at me, and shifted to the dialect of Shanghai, which purposely excluded me from the conversation.

These identities may have influenced the outcomes of the interviews, leaving some controversial topics out for instance or minimising issues and challenges. Furthermore, conducting interviews only give access to the informants' perceptions of their behaviours. Thus, I have used different research methods to look at the research question from different perspectives and have resorted to role enactment to examine the way employees of the company actually write emails to each other.

4.4.2. Role enactment

I have used role enactment to elicit three speech acts (request, criticism and disagreement) in email communication. When focusing on the production of speech acts, simulation data are appropriate (Houck & Gass, 1996) as they allow the research to control the contextual variables and make the desired speech act emerge. In short, role enactment is an elicitation technique related to role-play in which the participants play a role that is part of their

[22] The term 'Chinese' used to refer to the language used in China is too vague, as China has an official language, Mandarin, based on the dialect of Beijing and several dialects that are mutually intelligible. For instance, my mother tongue (Teo Chew or Chao Zhou) is a Chinese dialect from the South of China that is completely different from Mandarin and Shanghaiese. Here, I deliberately adopt the term 'Mandarin' to refer to the official language of China.

everyday life and personality in a familiar situation. This method allows the researcher to control the contextual variables and to give direct access to the informant's experience. Further, role enactment scenarios can be easily and rapidly distributed to a large sample of participants, creating a corpus of data that can be compared across cultures. I detail the definitions, advantages and limitations of role enactment in paper 3 and give a practical example of how the method is carried out in paper 2. The scenarios used in this thesis are presented in appendix 8.3.

The role enactments were collected between March and June 2013 in the seminars in Northern Europe that I organised in the company. The participants of the workshop were offered three scenarios (to elicit a request, a criticism and a disagreement) (see appendix 8.3.) and were invited to write three corresponding emails as if they were writing to their Chinese colleague (see 4.3.1.). The results from the analysis were presented in the spring 2014 in a seminar on communication in the company. Out of the 130 informants who participated in the seminar, 63 allowed me to use their written production, as shown in the table below.

Country	Number of participants	Number of email sets collected	Response rate
Norway	35	18	51.5%
Sweden	43	21	49%
Germany	52 (planned[23])	24	46%
Total	130	63	48.5%

Table 7: Northern Europe: Number of workshop participants, email sets collected, and response rate.

This research method allowed me to carry out a linguistic analysis of the level of directness used when expressing request, criticism and disagreement and the results (see paper 2) nuance the interview findings where the informants portrayed themselves as direct. Indeed, the results of the linguistic analysis revealed that the Northern European informants were rather indirect when expressing a criticism and clearly indirect when they uttered a disagreement. Thus, the findings show that there is a discrepancy between the perception of the informants'

[23] For logistical reasons, the role enactment activity was sent to the employees who planned to join the workshop beforehand and by email. The employees were invited to fill in the document and to send it back to me, by email.

communication style (collected through interviews) and the way they actually expressed criticism and disagreement in the work context (role enactment). This discrepancy stresses the relevance of methodological triangulation as a method to shed light on a research question from different perspectives (perception of communication style versus production of speech acts).

4.4.3. Perception questionnaire

In order to grasp the perception of the emails by the Asian colleagues of the company, I made a questionnaire after I had roughly analysed all the elicited emails. For each speech act investigated, I chose four emails as being representative of the different strategies used by the informants. For each speech act, the Asian informants were asked to choose which email they liked the most, which one they liked the least and, using a five-level Likert scale, describe the email they liked the most with the following characteristics: polite, clear, friendly, short and well-written (see appendix 8.5.). The data were collected in May 2013 in a seminar on intercultural communication in three business units: two in China (Dalian, Shanghai) and one in Korea (Busan). The details of the procedures, the data collected and a discussion of the response rate can be found in paper 2 and in the appendix 8.1.

	Number of participants	Number of questionnaires collected	Response rate
China	18	17	95.5%
Korea	15	14	93.5%
Total	33	31	94%

Table 8: Asia: Number of workshop participants, questionnaires collected, and response rate.

In the methodological triangulation, this method allowed me to shed light on the perception aspect of linguistic data, and particularly with regards to what is considered polite[24] (or not) in intercultural work interactions among engineers.

In the next part, I briefly[25] describe how the data were analysed and explain the challenges that I have met in the process.

[24] Understood as "commonsense notions of politeness", as explained in 3.5.

4.5. Data analysis

4.5.1. Interview

Following a data collection protocol, I explained the nature and the objectives of my thesis and presented an informed consent form that the informants were invited to sign. All informants were guaranteed anonymity for the purpose of the study but also regarding company management. In accordance with the data protection[26] regulations stipulated by the Norwegian center for data research (www.nsd.no), the data were anonymised and stored in my personal computer.

The interviews were tape-recorded and about a half of them were transcribed verbatim on F4 software as soon as possible after the interview. They were coded according to the topics of the interview guide[27] (pre-set codes), but also more freely (emergent codes), when topics emerged in the conversation. As I explain in paper 1, the pre-set codes and the interview guide were strongly influenced by my role in the company. That is, I was hired to identify what cultural differences were actually problematic and needed the informants to spell them out. I was, however, open to new insights from the informants, which led to new topics and new codes (emergent codes). After the the first half of the interviews were fully transcribed and coded however, some recurrent topics clearly emerged, such as "drawings", "cultural difference- excuse" and "English level- problem". In fact, the very idea of this study emerged after it became apparent that cultural differences were not perceived as particularly problematic, contrary to what the management had told me. The second half of the interviews were partially transcribed or notes were taken and coded according to the existing codes (pre-set and emergent) when relevant for the present study. After the analysis of the 16 interviews, I realised that the same themes were recurring and no new topic emerged. Therefore, I felt that I had achieved theoretical saturation and did not conduct further interviews. I did not encounter major challenges in analysing the interviews, except for some small and rare technical problems (the quality of the sound sometimes not good enough to hear what the informant had said). An example of transcription and coding of the interviews is presented in appendix 8.2.

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[25] I refer to paper 1 for a detailed description of the analysis of the interviews and to paper 2 for a description of the analysis of role enactment and of the perception questionnaires.

[26] The research project was reported to NSD, which gave me advance approval to collect the data.

[27] See appendix of paper 1

4.5.2. Role enactment

I aimed to analyse the role enactment data based on the coding scheme provided by the CCSARP. However, many challenges emerged during the analysis as detailed in paper 2. In short, the challenges were of two types that I explain below. First, I experienced challenges in the linguistic analysis of the actual emails, as it was not always easy to identify the head acts and categorise them into existing strategies. To solve the problem, new strategies were created when necessary to fit the specificity of the data (emails), as explained in paper 2.

The second challenge that I have experienced is the lack of similar coding schemes for the analysis of the three speech acts (request, criticism and disagreement). The coding scheme implemented by the CCSARP which looks at directness strategies, was originally designed to analyse requests. To analyse the speech act of criticism, I have used the coding scheme made by Nguyen (2005) as a point of departure and added new strategies to fit my data when necessary. I detail the procedure and the coding scheme in paper 2. As for the analysis of the speech act of disagreement, several coding schemes were found in the literature but were not used in the present study, as they do not distinguish strategy types from mitigation devices. To maintain a coherence in the analysis of the three speech acts I have used the labels offered by previous studies on disagreement, classified them into strategy types and added more strategies that were found in my data. I refer to paper 2 for a detailed analysis of the role enactments in terms of level of directness and I provide an excerpt of the analysis of the head acts in appendix 8.4.

4.2.3. Perception questionnaire

The perception questionnaires were gathered, stored and classified in an Excel document. Given the limited number of questionnaires and of parameters, I simply counted the occurrences (email the Asian informants liked the most /email they liked the least) and resorted to the filter function to look at the characteristics of the emails (see appendix 8.6.). I have not experienced any major challenges when analysing the perception questionnaire data but I would have wished to have had more data to corroborate or nuance my findings.

5. Overall contributions and implications

5.1. Section outline

The objective of this section is to highlight how the present thesis contributes to knowledge, to present its limitations and to describe some directions for future research.

5.2. Theoretical contributions

First, one of the most profound findings is related to the perception of cultural differences in the workplace. While previous theories have emphasised the importance of cultural differences in the workplace, the results of the empirical studies (papers 1 and 2) nuance these statements. In my thesis, I have found that the informants perceived cultural differences as less problematic than expected in horizontal work collaborations among engineers. The informants did recognise the existence of national cultural differences, but they were not perceived as a hindrance in horizontal work collaboration. In this perspective, the findings are in line with a recent study that has looked at collaboration and communication between Chinese and expatriate (mainly Nordic) workers and which claims that "some previous studies of cross-cultural management in China have overemphasised cultural differences between nationalities and toned down other important cultural differences between generations, professions, companies and industries" (Søderberg and Worm, 2011:59).

Second, the thesis has focused on the phenomenon of international internal communication at the level of the CoP. By doing so, the findings show that collaboration among engineers was facilitated by the fact that the informants have a common educational background and resort to a common terminology and to drawings when they communicate (see paper 1). This is in line with the findings of a study on the perception of cultural differences among Indian and German engineers by Mahadevan (2011). In her study, she shows that national cultural differences were not affecting collaboration among engineers. Rather, professional cultural differences were affecting collaboration between the management and the engineers. Both studies thus indicate that using a CoP as the object of analysis (rather than looking at the level of the nation) can be fruitful to refine the nature and the understanding of international internal communication and collaboration.

Third, the thesis nuances previous theories in IC (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Hall, 1976) which claim that Europeans are direct while Chinese are indirect and value indirectness. The interviews (paper 1) show that the informants (from Asia and Scandinavia) perceived their communication style as direct. Further, the results described in paper 2 demonstrate that a preference for directness or indirectness depends on the speech act expressed, on the work context and on the BELF competence. In this perspective, the thesis is in line with (Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013), which shows lines of convergence in Chinese and Finnish professional communication.

Fourth, the thesis contributes to the field of BELF, both in terms of perceptions of challenges and issues of implementing BELF in a company (paper 1) and also by examining the linguistic production and perceptions of emails written in English by non-native speakers of English (paper 2).

Fifth, the findings of paper 2 allow for participation in the ongoing theoretical discussions on the “East-West divide” in norms of linguistic politeness. To my knowledge, previous studies that have engaged in the discussions dealt with cross-cultural studies and no previous work has looked at intercultural interactions in the workplace.

Sixth, paper 2 offers a study that compares the production of three speech acts produced by the same informants. To my knowledge, such study has not been carried before. By resorting to the same informants to express three speech acts, one can examine and compare whether these informants adapt their directness strategies to the speech act expressed. The study indicates that the more face-threatening a speech act is, the more indirectly it is expressed.

Seventh, the present thesis problematises the concept of culture that has often been taken for granted in several disciplines. In linguistics for instance (see 3.5 and 3.6), culture often equates to language (Schneider, 2016), while in CCM, culture often equates to nation (see 3.2 and 3.3). I raise and discuss these issues in the cover article, in paper 1 and paper 2.

Last, the present thesis exemplifies how phenomenon-driven research can be carried out in pratice. By drawing on different theoretical frameworks (see section 3), and by positioning the phenomenon of international internal communication in a context of application, the thesis contributes to transdisciplinary studies that combine social sciences and linguistics disciplines, in line with existing transdisciplinary research projects that have been described above.[28]

5.3. Methodological contributions

The present thesis also offers methodological contributions.

First, the present thesis exemplifies how methodological triangulation can be carried out and what contributions it may bring to a research problem. I have used three different research methods that have shed light on different perspectives. Drawing on interviews, I have had access to the informants´ perceptions of their communicative behaviours, while role enactment allowed me to get access to their actual production of speech acts. By combining these two methods, I have found a discrepancy between what the informants said about their own communication style and how they actually wrote their emails. That is, while the Scandinavian interview informants claimed to be direct, the analysis of the emails written by the Nordic European employees demonstrates a general tendency to be indirect and clearly indirect when expressing respectively a criticism and a disagreement. Likewise, by combining the interviews of the Asian informants and the results of the perception questionnaire, I have found interesting insights on their communication preferences. While the Chinese informants told me that they valued directness at work (in the interviews), the perception questionnaires showed that the Asian informants (those who answered the perception questionnaire) actually liked criticism and disagreement emails to be expressed in an indirect way. These are interesting results that could only be found using methodological triangulation.

Second, the thesis develops, discusses and implements role enactment, a simulation method that allows the researcher to control contextual variables and to give direct access to the informants' linguistic productions. Moreover, role enactment scenarios can be easily and rapidly distributed to a large sample of participants, creating a corpus of data that can be compared across cultures. This method is also perceived as less confidential, since it is a simulation, and data may therefore be easier to collect, particularly in the workplace context.

Last, in the study on internal email communication (paper 2), I have developed an analytical framework to examine the level of directness of three different speech acts. The framework is

[28] See footnote 9

based on the CCSARP coding scheme but has been further developed to code the speech acts of criticism and disagreement.

5.4. Practical contributions

The present thesis is framed within Mode 2 production of knowledge and communication of the research results is an integrated part of the project. As explained in section 1.5., the results were communicated in workshops on intercultural communication in the investigated company. The results may, however, also be partly relevant to other companies, as international internal communication is a phenomenon that concerns an increasing number of companies, due to the globalisation of business (see 1.1.). The present thesis contributes to a discussion on how we can improve communication in the workplace and across cultures, and more specifically, demonstrates that some companies may benefit from considering the following points:

First, “perfect” communication in English among international employees should not be taken for granted and the thesis shows that many misunderstandings and much frustration were due to lack of BELF competence of the employees. In line with Charles & Marschan-Piekkari (2002), I argue that non-native speakers should be offered corporate language training programs aimed at improving horizontal communication in the company.

Second, email communication has become the most used communication means in the global workplace. The lack of explicit conventions and etiquette in email writing, however, can make the endeavour challenging, and people may therefore spend more time to find the right tone and the right level of formality with their interlocutors. This is especially true in the international work context where the interlocutors do not share the same politeness conventions and communicate in BELF. This is a topic that could be addressed in companies. For instance, the management could take measures to implement procedures in internal and external communication, where the topic of email writing conventions would be addressed. These procedures could be conveyed to the employees in seminars on communication. In these seminars, employees could be sensitised to email writing and email perception across cultures. I suggest implementing role enactment and perception questionnaires as carried out in paper 2 in such seminars and discuss the results in groups to raise awareness of cultural or professional preferences among employees.

Last, the topic of cultural differences and similarities across cultures could be addressed in the workplace. To my knowledge, this is a topic that has generally been overlooked in company training programmes or only taken into account after conflicts have arisen. Such awareness programmes (through seminars or workshops for instance) could be provided beforehand to company employees, so that they may anticipate potential misunderstandings and avoid conflicts. These programmes could be part of a training package addressed to new employees of the company and repeated on a regular basis. In terms of content, the existing seminars have mainly focused on cultural differences across nations (see 3.2 and the role of the interculturalist), providing lectures that emphasise cultural stereotypes and quick fixes. Rather, I suggest that companies provide courses to develop the intercultural competences of the employees. These courses could implement activities such as role-play and business cases in order to develop the employees´ skills in observation and in handling complexity that cannot be explained by simplistic theories on cultural differences. Moreover, instead of focusing on cultural differences, I suggest that these seminars also highlight the similarities among cultures.

5.5. Limitations

The present thesis has some limitations: the data were collected in a single company and the limited number of informants may not be representative of the interactions taking place in other companies or industries. More experiments (and potentially other experimental designs) are needed to confirm or nuance these results. To compensate for the lack of data and in order to increase the validity of the results, I have used methodological triangulation. The latter, in addition to highlighting different aspects of the research question, allows the researcher to cross-check the findings.

One may argue that it is difficult to generalise from the findings of the thesis. On the other hand, the objective of the present thesis has been to examine issues of international internal communication that had arisen in a specific company (context of application in Mode 2 production of knowledge), and the practical findings are primarily intended to be relevant for the investigated company. The approach that I have adopted, however, (integrating transdisciplinarity, methodological triangulation, and the use of an eclectic set of theories) is fruitful and may be applied to another company case.

One may also claim that the sampling of the informants (for the interviews and the role enactments) is biased. That is, the participants were sampled mainly during a seminar on intercultural communication and may therefore have been primed or sensitised to cultural differences in communication. In this perspective, they may have shifted their writing styles accordingly. This point can be related to the positioning of the researcher that has been dealt with in 4.4.1. In my research paradigm (section 4.2.3), I have positioned my study in a socio-constructivist tradition in which interactions are co-constructed and co-negotiated. In this perspective, and given the way the data has been collected, I agree with Silverman (2010) that no data is objective. Whether in the data collection or in the analytical process, the data is always interpreted by a researcher that is positioned in a discipline, in a tradition or that is influenced by his research questions and hypothesis.

It has also been argued that variables needed to be disentangled and used in variation and in combination (using a combinatorial approach to isolate their unique, additive and interactive effects). This is a task that can be further conducted in future research, using for instance role enactment, but that could not be carried out in the frame of this doctoral thesis.

5.6. Directions for future research

As concluding remarks, I address how this thesis should be considered as a first step in looking at intercultural interactions in the workplace. Future research could pursue a multitude of avenues, and I discuss four of them below.

First, as mentioned above, more data could be collected in the company to validate or nuance the results of the present study. In this perspective, an effort could be made to disentangle the variables and to refine the interview guide and the role enactment scenarios.

Second, since coding schemes have been elaborated to analyse requests, criticisms and disagreements in email communication, it would be possible to continue such work by collecting more data (real or simulated), and examining and comparing the level of directness of such speech acts in different contexts.

Third, the findings of the present thesis are relevant to team and teamwork research. Recent research has been conducted on horizontal work group (Sverdrup, 2012) and on multicultural teams (Vigier, 2015). To my knowledge however, little has been said on communication practices and politeness in intracultural and in intercultural settings.

Fourth, this thesis is positioned in Mode 2 (Gibbons et al., 1994) (see 1.5.) where knowledge has been produced in a context of application in a company. This has enabled solution to a real company problem and has produced applied knowledge in academic research. Such an approach could be adapted to other companies that are facing the challenges of globalisation. I believe that more transdisciplinary research should be conducted, involving researchers from different disciplines.

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7. Articles

Article 1

Ly, Annelise (forthcoming): Making sense of communication and cultural differences in the workplace: the case of Sino-Scandinavian collaborations, *Chinese Journal of Communication*

Making sense of communication and cultural differences in the workplace: the case of Sino-Scandinavian collaborations

Abstract

The present paper explores the way Chinese and Scandinavian (Norwegian and Swedish) engineers working together on transnational projects in an international company perceive and make sense (Vaara 2000; Weick 1995) of their work collaboration with regards to cultural differences and communication practices. The research questions are threefold and expressed as follows: 1) Do national cultural differences affect and hinder work collaboration among Chinese and Scandinavian colleagues working on transnational projects? 2) What other factors may affect effective collaboration in the workplace? and 3) How do the actors of transnational project groups make sense of cultural differences?

The classic view of culture often sees cultural differences across nations as a source of conflicts and misunderstandings. This paper however, is informed by a socio-constructivist tradition and looks at the way the actors of the interactions actually perceive and make sense (Vaara, 2000) of these differences. Based on 14 interviews of Norwegian, Swedish and Chinese engineers working in the same company, the study, of an exploratory nature, shows that national cultural differences did not particularly hinder work collaboration. This is explained by the fact that the informants (all engineers) belong to a community of practice: they have a common technical background, use the same technical terminology and resort to international drawings. Their communication style is also described as direct. The study also shows that factors that could actually hinder work communication include the lack of internal procedures, as well as the English competence of the employees, which made it challenging to communicate difficult messages. The paper also discusses how the term "cultural differences", used by the informants, is vague and encompasses a lack of internal procedures, poor English proficiency and how it can actually be used as an excuse not to get things done.

1. Introduction

The present paper explores the ways Chinese and Scandinavian (Norwegian and Swedish) engineers working together on transnational projects in an international company perceive and make sense of their work collaboration with regards to cultural differences and communication practices.

Successful communication across nations involves the understanding of cultural differences and communication styles. The number of books and handbooks explaining how to work in organisations and deal with people from different cultures has increased dramatically since 2000 (Piller, 2011). Mainly based on Hofstede's research (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Hofstede, 1980, 2001), these handbooks (see for instance Gesteland, 2002; Lewis, 2006, among others) offer a simplistic and essentialist view on culture, understood as nation-bound categories. In these handbooks, China on the one hand, and Sweden and Norway on the other hand, are portrayed with cultural traits and communication styles that are diametrically opposed. In Gesteland (2002) for instance, Swedes are "direct in the way they communicate" (p.311), "Norwegians are used to frank, straight forward language" (p.293) while the Chinese "often employ indirect, vague, oblique language wherein the meaning is ambiguous rather than clear and explicit" (p.173). For the authors of these books, the existence of cultural differences across nations can only be a source of conflicts, misunderstandings and "collision" (Lewis, 2006).

At the same time, the globalisation of markets leads workers of different nationalities and backgrounds to work together and collaborate on common projects. These transnational project groups, defined as "temporary structures designed to achieve one goal and which result from the search for horizontal cooperation in organisations" (Chevrier, 2003: 141), have been flourishing in various business contexts. For these transnational collaborations to succeed however, any misunderstandings and conflicts arising from cultural issues must be dealt with.

To understand how national cultural differences may actually affect transnational work and communication practices, it is therefore essential to look at how the main actors of the collaboration (the employees) actually perceive and make sense (Vaara 2000; Weick 1995) of these differences.

Based on 14 interviews of Norwegian, Swedish and Chinese[1] engineers working in the same company, the present paper, of an exploratory nature, will thus strive to answer the following research questions:

- Do national cultural differences affect and hinder work collaboration among Chinese and Scandinavian colleagues working on transnational projects?
- What other factors may affect effective collaboration in the workplace?
- How do the actors of transnational project groups make sense of cultural differences?

The paper is structured as follows: first, a critical review of the concept of culture is set out and language issues in the workplace context are problematised (Part 2), then, the method and

[1] The term of nation is socially constructed (Billig, 1995) and has met much criticism. It is however easily understandable, particularly when dealing with the informants. In this paper, the author identifies her informants with the nationality they hold, as a convenient term, but does not suggest that they belong to the same national culture.

material are described (Part 3). Further, the findings are presented (Part 4) and discussed (Part 5).

2. Critical review of the concept of culture and language issues in the workplace

In this part, I first briefly present and critically examine the two main conceptions of culture in the field of cross-cultural management, and suggest, in line with Vaara (2000), a way to go beyond the two opposing conceptions, adopting a sensemaking[2] approach to cultural differences. Last, I describe some issues linked to language use in horizontal project collaboration.

There is a lack of consensus in research on how to define the concept of culture (see the overview in Dervin, 2012, 2013), how it should be treated epistemologically and how cultures should be studied. As set out by Gertsen, Søderberg, & Torp, (1998) among others, two main views on culture dominate cross-cultural management research: the classic concept of culture and the socio-constructivist concept of culture.

The classic concept of culture sees “culture as objectively identifiable and well-defined entities, which may be compared” (Gertsen, Søderberg, & Torp,1998: 21). Cultures, generally understood as national cultures, are, in this view, well-defined entities that are homogeneous (no cultural variation within a country), stable over time and that can therefore be compared. This conception of culture, mainly based on the work of Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980, 2001), represents mainstream thinking in the field (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004).

[2] I adopt Weick (1995) and Vaara (2000)´s spelling of sensemaking (one word)

For Hofstede, each nation possesses a unique combination of values that could be categorised according to a set of universal value dimensions. In this framework, the Chinese and Scandinavian cultures are described as diametrically opposed, as the scores in the table below indicate:

	Power distance	Masculinity	Individualism
China	80	66	20
Norway	31	8	69
Sweden	31	5	71

Source: (Hofstede, 2001)

Similarly, for Hall (1976) who has observed the importance ascribed to context in communication, Scandinavian cultures are low context cultures, where meanings are explicitly stated through language, while China, "possessor of a great and complex culture" (Hall, 1976:91), is a high-context culture where the communication style is usually indirect and ambiguous.

In other words, according to these authors, the Scandinavian and Chinese cultures are diametrically opposed in terms of communication styles and cultural dimensions and one may therefore wonder whether it is at all possible to collaborate in transnational group projects.

Following the frameworks mentioned above, numerous empirical studies have been carried out in organisational settings (see the overviews provided in Cardon, 2008; Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006) and competing frameworks have been produced by Trompenaars & Hampten-Turner, (1997) and by the GLOBE project (House et al., 2004).

These classic conceptions of culture, as well as the frameworks they build on, have however been met with research-based criticism. The main criticisms include judgements that such conception of culture is essentialist (see among others, Dervin, 2012; Fang, 2006; Piller, 2011), homogeneous in spite of the diverse regions (McSweeney, 2002; Piller, 2011; Stening & Zhang, 2007), exclusive (a culture is either categorised as collectivist or individualist, see Fang, 2012; Osland & Bird, 2000), and does not take the divergent subcultures and contexts (Fang, 2012; Osland & Bird, 2000) or interactions into account (Sackmann & Phillips, 2004; Søderberg & Holden, 2002). Methodological flaws have also been highlighted (Fang, 2003; Ly, 2013; McSweeney, 2002).

Still, this classic conception of culture is dominant in business schools where cross-cultural management courses are mostly taught in an essentialist and simplistic way (Ly & Rygg, (forthcoming); Osland & Bird, 2000) and in intercultural training firms addressed to company employees (Dahlén, 1997; Mahadevan & Mayer, 2012). In these courses, lecturers often present intercultural interactions as problematic, as a source of conflicts.

Opposing the classic view of culture, the socio-constructivist perspective on culture focuses on communication processes and situations, as well as the construction of social identities (Kleppestø, 1998). Originally coming from the field of sociology, the concept of socio-constructivism deals with how persons and groups, interacting in a social system create mental representations of each other´s actions that in turn influence the interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This approach builds on the idea that cultures are dynamic, constantly evolving constructs that are produced and constructed in interaction and in a specific context. Cultures then, are not given or determined in advance, but "come into existence in relation to and in contrast with other cultural communities" (Søderberg & Holden, 2002:112).

Rejecting the 'rigid boxes' of national culture (Fang, 2006) that the classic conception of culture imposes, an increasing number of works have been published in recent years arguing for a renewal of cross-cultural thinking and arguing in favour of a socio-constructivist view on culture (Dervin, 2012; Holliday, 2011; Piller, 2011). However, as Vaara (2000) notes:

> There are significant differences among these constructionist[3] standpoints. A milder version emphasizes the role of interpretative processes as mechanisms through which cultures are created and recreated. A radical constructivist view is to claim that the cultures and cultural differences only exist when people become conscious of them in social interaction.
>
> Vaara 2000:82

Several empirical studies have looked at cross-cultural interactions in the workplace (Clausen, 2010; Søderberg & Worm, 2011; and see Tukiainen, 2015 for an overview) with this socio-constructivist conception of culture, offering therefore a renewed and more refined view on cultures and cultural differences.

The opposition between the essentialist and the socio-constructivist perspectives on culture are of an ontological and epistemological nature that mostly preoccupies researchers. In order to understand how culture and communication actually affect intercultural interactions in the workplace, I argue that one should rather focus on the employees' understandings and perceptions. To do so, one should take into account the manifestations of the cultures and the reflexive processes where the informants make sense of their own and of the other´s culture. In line with Vaara (2000), I adopt a sensemaking approach to cultural differences. Inspired by the work of Weick (1995), Vaara defines sensemaking as "a rational activity where the actors develop understanding of specific phenomena" (Vaara 2000: 87) and adds the following:

> Essential in cultural sensemaking processes is that they are grounded in identity construction. Cultural sensemaking processes are thus quests for cultural identity characterized by such questions as "Who are we?" and "Who are the others?" This identity construction is situation-specific in the sense that the actors 'identities are

[3] The terms constructionism and constructivism are different (Ackermann, online), but to my knowledge, they tend to be used interchangeably, as in the present quote.

> always related to the identities of others (…). By pointing to the actors' interpretations, the sensemaking perspective also means taking such issues as cultural stereotypes seriously because their (re)construction and use is a significant part of social life (…). The perspective consequently does not undermine the "real" differences in beliefs and practices but rather focuses attention on the processes where the organizational actors construct their (simplified) conceptions of cultural differences.
>
> Vaara 2000: 86-87

In this perspective, a sensemaking approach to cultural differences "extends the essentialist understanding by adding another layer and treating cultures and cultural identities as multi-dimensional products of the actors' sensemaking and behavioural processes, catalyzed by the interaction with different cultural groups" (Tukiainen, 2010:27).

Recent studies have looked at actors' cultural sensemaking in workplace interactions. Vaara, Risberg, Søderberg, & Tienari (2003) for instance, examine the constructions of cultural stereotypes of Swedes, Finns, Danes and Norwegians in a Nordic bank merger setting, Nordea. In this study, the authors examine how senior executives use stereotypes when presenting themselves and describing the other national groups involved in the bank merger. They show that the national stereotypes conveyed by the informants - Swedes are consensus driven, Finns are action oriented, Danes are negotiators and Norwegians are straightforward - play an important role in the identity building and sensemaking processes within multinational operations and have an explanatory power towards previous and current experiences. Other studies include the work of van Marrewijk (2010) looks at the construction of Dutch-Indian cultural differences in global IT projects and Tukiainen (2015) studies sensemaking of managing cultural differences in a Finnish-Polish project using sensemaking and critical discourse analysis. However, to the best of my knowledge, no studies have looked at the way Chinese and Scandinavians (Swedes and Norwegians) make sense of cultural differences in horizontal project interactions.

In a multinational context, language use and language competence can be a challenge and should therefore be problematised. However, language issues have been relatively forgotten (Marschan, Welch, & Welch, 1997) and company management often tends to consider language differences among subsidiaries and employees as a minor managerial issue (Welch, Welch, & Piekkari, 2005). For many companies, the adoption of a designated company language, often English, is seen as a solution. However, as Welch et al. wonder: "Does a common company language guarantee effective communication between the various units in diverse language environments?" (D. Welch et al., 2005:11). The choice of English as a business lingua franca, or BELF (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005) in companies may affect horizontal communication between subsidiaries (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002), particularly when these subsidiaries are located in non-English speaking countries. Studies that have analysed the role of language in internal communication in the global context (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012, among others), have shown that foreign language is actually the main source of communication problems.

In the present paper, a sensemaking approach to cultural differences between Chinese and Scandinavian employees working on horizontal transnational group project is adopted. Such study, which takes the actors' understandings and reflections on communication and cultural differences as the starting point, can be fruitful in the endeavour of refining the existing cultural portrayals of Scandinavians and Chinese in interaction. While the management of the investigated company understood cultural differences as a source of conflicts and misunderstandings, it is interesting to see whether the employees actually agreed with this point of view.

Further, the choice of language of the investigated company, as well as the competence of the employees in the company corporate language is discussed.

3. Methods and material

3.1. The company

The company investigated is a global supplier that designs, develops and supplies equipment solutions and services to the marine and offshore industries. It has its roots and headquarters in Bergen, Norway. Over the years, the company has expanded abroad and the total workforce, at the time of the research[4], amounts to 1100 employees. The main business units are located in Norway, Sweden, Germany, China and Korea. The company is divided into 3 operating branches: maritime, offshore and energy.

The company established its first joint venture in China in 2001, which was later on acquired 100%. It has now 4 business units in China (2 in Shanghai, 2 in Dalian).

Prior to the research period, the company had made successful acquisitions and signed important contracts in China and was showcased in the newspapers as a company that succeeded in China, even when the Norwegian and the Chinese diplomatic relations were at their worst, following the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Chinese dissident Lu Xiao Bo in 2010. Throughout the years however, a few episodes of misunderstandings and conflicts had arisen among employees of different nationalities and the management of the marine division decided to hire an external consultant to map the situation and propose solutions. In 2010- 2011, the consultant conducted interviews of and held seminars for the employees of the company. Together with the marine division president, the consultant was also holding seminars in other arenas (universities and the Chamber of Commerce of Bergen). The company was then

[4] Time of the research: 2012-2014. Important structural changes have occurred after the research period. Thus, all data mentioned in this paper are specific to the data collection period.

portrayed in the media as dealing with cultural differences and showcased as a model to be followed.

The consultant explained the challenges in the company with reference to the different national cultures and suggested that the company be more focused on intercultural matters. Following this, a former Norwegian expatriate who had lived in China wrote two manuals on how to deal with China and how to deal with Europe. Another action point was to hire someone who could raise awareness among the employees on cross-cultural challenges. I was assigned this task. In 2012-2013, I was hired by the company and in charge of the organisation of seminars on intercultural communication. During this time, and in agreement with the management, I was also allowed to collect data for my own research, but not record business meetings. My role, as an insider and an outsider, as a consultant and a researcher, is discussed below.

3.2 The informants

14 informants were interviewed for this study: 10 Norwegians, 2 Chinese and 2 Swedes. All the informants are trained as or work as engineers, all from the same company. They are therefore exposed to the same corporate values. In addition, they all work in cross-cultural horizontal projects with either Chinese or Swedish and Norwegian colleagues. The informants were thus doing intercultural engineering, defined as "any intercultural social or corporate field that is characterized by a high importance of technology and specialized knowledge of those working with this technology. We name those working in such fields *engineers*. We understand the term engineers broadly, as including any type of technical expert, project leader or manager, be it with regard to computer science, electronical engineering, mechanical engineering or other related fields" (Mahadevan & Mayer, 2012:5). In this study, I adopt the definition of engineer mentioned above.

The technological complexity of international engineering projects has been pointed out in previous studies (Chevrier, 2003; Mahadevan, 2011; Tukiainen, 2010) and the fact that they share a common technical competence and language should be stressed. We can therefore assume that they are members of a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998).

It should be mentioned that 16 employees (4 Chinese, 2 Swedes and 10 Norwegians) working in the same company were interviewed as a part of the research project. However, I have chosen to discard two of the Chinese informants for the present study, as they were working in human resource management, which made their tasks, their interactions and challenges with international colleagues quite different from the 14 engineers. By doing so, I have unfortunately reduced the number of Chinese informants but I have, in turn, increased the consistency of the data as the remaining informants belong to the same community of practice and work in transnational, horizontal collaborations.

3.3 Interviews

The choice of interviews as a research method can be explained by the explorative nature of the present study as this method allows raising open questions, following up on interesting comments and potentially discovering topics the researcher had not expected (Kasper, 2006). This method has been widely used in business communication studies, and particularly when looking at cross-cultural interactions. Similar recent works using interviews include the studies of collaboration and communication among Danes and Chinese (Søderberg & Worm, 2011), Japanese and Danes (Clausen, 2010), Finns and Chinese (Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013) and Japanese and Norwegians (Rygg, 2012).

The data for the present study is composed of 14 face-to-face interviews of employees of the company collected during the winter/spring 2013. The interviews took place at the headquarters of the company in Bergen, and in two business units of the company (in Gothenburg, Sweden and in Shanghai, China). The interviews were tape-recorded. They were carried out in a semi-structured form, following an interview guide (see appendix) and supplemented by follow-up questions when relevant. They lasted between 30 and 80 minutes. Following the data collection protocol, I explained the goal of the study and presented an informed consent form that we read together. The form itself was signed at the end of the interview so that the informants had a chance to withdraw their consent or parts of the interview answers if they did not feel comfortable with what they had said. In China, the informants preferred to give oral consent, which was tape-recorded. All informants were guaranteed anonymity for the purpose of the study but also regarding management.

Access to business informants is usually challenging (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, Penttinen, & Tahvanainen, 2004) due to confidentiality and trust issues and this seems to be particularly true in China (Stening & Zhang, 2007). Access was facilitated by the fact that I was working in the company. My position clearly provided opportunities to collect materials more quickly (He, 2006). Thanks to this position, I was allowed to contact relevant employees directly and to ask them whether they would volunteer to participate in my project. The responses were predominantly positive, as the interviews were perceived as a way to give a voice to employees. The time spent in the company, as well as informal meetings that occurred in this context (during lunchtime and coffee breaks for instance or during banquet dinners organised in China) contributed to establishing close rapport with the informants beforehand. Furthermore, my position as an insider and an outsider (see also the discussion in Ybema & Byun, 2009) should be stressed here. I was considered an insider, as I was working in the same company and as I am familiar with the Chinese and the Scandinavia culture. At the same time, I was an outsider, since I am a research scholar working in a university and in terms of nationality, being non-

Chinese and non-Scandinavian. I believe that this position contributed to empathising with the informants while, at the same time, maintaining an analytical and critical distance.

When conducting interviews across languages and cultures, Tsang argues that “communicating in the respondent´s language is of paramount importance” for three reasons: the respondents can “fully express themselves”, it establishes “good rapport” and it enables the interviewer to interpret the informant´s statement with “cultural understanding”(Tsang, 1998:511). However, due to logistic and financial reasons, this was not possible. The interviews were conducted in English with the Swedes and with the Chinese, while the Norwegians were offered the choice to speak either Norwegian[5] or English. To increase the reliability of the data collected, it should however be mentioned that English is the corporate language of the company and that the informants speak English on a daily basis. In addition, the Swedish informants could use words in Swedish anytime (Norwegian and Swedish are relatively close) and the Chinese informants were encouraged to use Mandarin if they could not find the appropriate English word or if they felt that it enabled them to describe their opinion more adequately. I have a fair understanding of Mandarin but did not feel comfortable conducting the interview in this language. However, I could easily switch to Mandarin when necessary, asking questions or saying a word in Mandarin. Sometimes, the informants used a word in their mother tongue or wrote it down and we looked at it together in a digital Mandarin-English dictionary that I carried with me.

The nationality of the informants and language used in the interview are specified below:

Informant	Nationality	Language of the interview
No1	Norwegian	Norwegian
No2	Norwegian	Norwegian

[5] The author is not a native speaker but has a full work competence of Norwegian

No3	Norwegian	Norwegian
No4	Norwegian	Norwegian
No5	Norwegian	Norwegian
No6	Norwegian	Norwegian
No7	Norwegian	Norwegian
No8	Norwegian	Norwegian
No9	Norwegian	Norwegian
No10	Norwegian	Norwegian
Sw1	Swedish	English
Sw2	Swedish	English
Ch1	Chinese	English
Ch2	Chinese	English

The interviews were conducted in an informal way, but structured by an interview guide (see appendix) that had been prepared in advance. Questions included how they perceived collaboration with other nationalities; what was experienced as easy and what was seen as challenging; how they could describe their communication style and their colleagues'. Last, they were asked whether they could recall any personal intercultural critical incident. The way a question is raised can influence its answer during an interview (Maaløe, 2011a, 2011b). With this in mind, I was careful to ask the questions in the most neutral way possible. For instance, I asked: "Do you think that working with other nationalities is easy or difficult?" instead of "Is working with other nationalities difficult?" In that way, I hoped that the answers were as close to reality as possible, though the researcher's presence and identity will always affect the interaction (Silverman, 2010). Furthermore, I asked many follow-up questions, such as "What do you mean?", "Can you explain?", "Can you give an example?" to make the informants elaborate on their statements. This proved to be useful as it forced the informants to reflect on the experiences they had or the concepts they used. I also deliberately repeated some statements, so that they could confirm or adjust their meanings. Some topics, such as the use of interpreters, were introduced by some informants (Sw2, No10) and I have followed up on the topic as I felt that it could possibly be interesting.

The interviews were tape-recorded and the first half transcribed verbatim on F4 software as soon as possible after the interview. During the transcription phase, they were coded according to the topics of the interview guide (pre-set codes), but also more freely (emergent codes), when topics emerged in the conversation. The pre-set codes and the interview guide were strongly influenced by my role in the company. That is, I was hired to figure out what cultural differences were actually problematic and needed the informants to spell them out. I was however open to new insights from the informants, which led to new topics and new codes (emergent codes). Codes from the interview guide include for instance "English level", "Own communication style", "Other communication style", "cultural differences- problem" and emergent codes include for instance "need translator", "cultural differences- excuse", "drawings". Sometimes, several codes could be applied to one utterance. After the first half of the interviews were fully transcribed and coded however, some recurrent topics clearly emerged, such as "drawings", "cultural difference- excuse" and "English level- problem". In fact, the very idea of this study emerged after it became apparent that cultural differences were not perceived as particularly problematic, contrary to what the management had told me. The second half of the interviews were partially transcribed and coded according to the existing codes (pre-set and emergent) when relevant for the present study.

4. Results

In the following, I present the findings that I have classified according to the three research questions mentioned in the introduction. This structure is based on my interpretation of the data and has arisen after I had finished the analysis of the interviews.

Do national cultural differences affect and hinder work collaboration among Chinese and Scandinavian colleagues working on transnational projects?

Some informants mentioned cultural differences between Chinese and Scandinavians, such as differences in the political system or in the cultural values. However, when I asked them to be more specific, they mainly pointed at differences in attitude towards hierarchy that can be related to Hofstede's power distance dimension. A Norwegian informant (No6) explained that Chinese leaders have another relationship to their employees:

> De har en annen måte å oppfatte en lederposisjon i forhold til sine medarbeidere. Ja, det er helt tydelig at når vi er der så er det veldig tydelig at hvis den øverste sjefen sier noe, så sies det ikke noe mer[6] (They (the Chinese) have another way of seeing the role of the leader towards their employees. Yes, it's very clear when you are over there that if the big boss says something, no one says anything else).

A Chinese informant (C1) confirmed this: when I asked him whether he would disagree with his boss, he clearly said "no" followed by an embarrassed laugh. A Swedish informant (Sw1) on the other hand, described a sense of hierarchy that was different for Scandinavians:

[6] The examples are given in the language used by the informants. When the example provided is in Norwegian, it has been translated into English by the author.

"Europeans, specially Scandinavians we are high to the roof. It means like I can go to my boss and say: this is bad and blablabla and he would be fine with it".

It should be noted that other cultural differences were also pointed out that were not at the national level. Rather, some informants stressed differences between generations, between educational backgrounds and among individuals. As one Chinese informant (Ch1) emphasised in his interview, "I think different province, different culture or nature. Actually in the same place, different people and different personal (writing the Chinese character for "nature, personality").

However, when I asked them how these cultural differences affected their project collaboration (where engineers work together at the same level of hierarchy), the informants seemed to agree that it was actually not a problem. In terms of coding, this means that the pre-set code "cultural differences- problem" gave no entry. This can be explained by several factors.

First, Swedes, Norwegians and Chinese depicted their own communication style in transnational project as direct. Chinese and Scandinavians also described their international colleagues' communication styles as direct. This was explained by the work context. When the informants were asked further whether they adapted their communication styles when they communicated with colleagues from other nationalities, they all agreed that they were not doing so. The fact that these engineers did not adapt to intercultural interactions is discussed below.

Then, the informants explained that transnational collaboration was facilitated by three elements: a common background, a similar technical vocabulary and drawings. These topics emerged thanks to the follow up questions I raised during the pilot study and were analysed with emergent codes.

Having the same educational background was seen as essential, whether from the same national culture or not. As a Norwegian informant (No4) explains:

> Med nabokollegaen vi har en veldig felles bakgrunn. Vi har jobbet med de samme ting i veldig mange år og da er det lett å forklare ting. Den personen vet det. Det er ikke alle, uansett nasjonalitet, når du snakker med de, at de forstår 100% hva du tenker på. (With our colleague next door, we really have a common background. We have been working with the same things for many years and then it´s easy to explain things. That person knows what you mean. Irrespective of nationality, it´s not everybody that understands 100% of what you are saying when you talk to them).

In addition, a similar technical vocabulary helped communicating with international colleagues. As another informant (Sw1) explains, "in the marine business, there are words that are very frequent, and they are the same in many languages." A Norwegian informant (No4) clarifies:

> Ingeniører fra alle land snakker relativt lett sammen. Det har å gjøre med en del fagutrykk som en bruker. Det norske fagutrykket bygger gjerne på det engelske, det polske fagutrykket bygger gjerne på det engelske, kinesiske fagutrykket bygger gjerne på det engelske, eller at de vet hva det heter. Dermed blir det lettere å snakke for at man har den samme bakgrunnen. (Engineers from all countries communicate relatively easily with each other. This comes from some of the specific terminology we use. The Norwegian term is based on the English one, the Polish term is based on the English one, the Chinese term is based on the English one, or they know what it's called. So it's easier to talk because we have the same background).

Drawing also plays an important role in technical collaboration. As technical drawing uses the same international standards, drawings were mentioned by most of the informants as being an international language, understood by all engineers. A Chinese employee (Ch1) compared reading a technical drawing to using a mobile phone: “It’s a standard. Every country every design and engineers they have to understand their drawings. Like the mobile phone. Different country. However they cannot understand English they can use the mobile phone”. This statement was however nuanced by other informants who explained that drawings could be used as a useful support, “because you have something to point at and you have something to talk around, and to communicate around” (Sw1). Later on, the same informant added:

> A square bracket will always look like a square bracket. And you measure it the same, it doesn´t matter the nationality as well. And when you´re discussing around that, it is easier. You have like a third dimension to communicate.

What other factors may affect effective collaboration in the workplace?

As mentioned earlier, my starting hypothesis, influenced by what the management had told me, was that collaboration problems were caused by cultural differences. Given the answers I have collected during the interviews, I needed to ask many follow up questions to understand what could actually be perceived as problematic in the international workplace. I describe the findings in this part.

Most of the informants agreed that language competence, and in this case English competence, could be a factor that may prevent effective work collaboration. In the company, English is the corporate language, used for reports and communication across borders and employees hired in the company need to have a fair command of English. At the same time, English is not the mother tongue of any of the employees. The informants explained that communication in English worked fine, in general:

> In most cases, you put one and one together and you understand what they want. But particular grammar things are maybe not so good. The most important is: is the message going through? And in most cases, I understand what they want (Sw1).

However, English competence can sometimes be the problem, as an informant (No4) says:

> Det som er problemet er jo at engelskkunnskapene kan være vanskelig hos en del kinesere. Så de utrykker seg vanskelig og det er ikke alltid like lett å skjønne det de mener (The problem is that English proficiency may be difficult for some Chinese. So they have difficulty expressing themselves and it´s not always easy to understand what they want to say).

The informants also explained that from this perspective, face-to-face communication was always the best way to communicate, thanks to the support of drawings and of body language. Related to the language competence, another factor that can hinder effective communication is the type of message communicated. As an informant (No6) points out, communication, generally speaking, was perceived as fine as long as things went fine. If they had to express a difficult message however, such as a disagreement, things would become difficult:

> Jeg synes, eller for å si det sånn, det er alltid utfordrende når man ikke er enig (…). Når ting går som vi planlegger så er kommunikasjonen grei. Men jeg opplever at de gangene vi står over utfordringer vi må løse sammen da føler jeg at det er vanskelig (I think, or to put it like this, it is always challenging when we do not agree (…). When things work according to plan, the communication works well. But I have experienced that when we are facing challenges that we need to solve together, this is when I feel it's difficult).

How do the actors of transnational project groups make sense of cultural differences?

The process of interviewing, from a socio-constructionist perspective, allows the informant and the interviewer to make sense of experiences though the narrative. When reflecting on the extent to which cultural differences may actually hinder work collaboration at the same level of hierarchy, most of the informants agreed that it was not problematic, sometimes less problematic than they initially thought. A Chinese informant (Ch2) for instance stated: “My opinion cultural differences don´t cause any problem. If they can speak fluent foreigner language, I think many understanding can disappear”. A Norwegian employee (No10) recalled being told by his colleagues that working with Chinese was challenging beforehand, but admitted that collaboration was actually easier than he had expected: “Jeg hadde forespeilet at det ville være vanskeligere enn det egentlig er” ” (I had anticipated that it would be more difficult than it actually is). Another informant (No3) supports this point of view: “tonen er kanskje lettere enn jeg hadde sett for meg (…) den er ikke så langt unna den europeisk måten” (the tone is maybe easier than I had imagined (…) It´s not very different from the European way”.

5. Discussion

According to the classic conception of culture, the Chinese and Scandinavian cultures are diametrically opposed and these cultural differences can only lead to conflicts and ‘collisions’. The management of the company also thought that the misunderstandings across business units were caused by cultural differences. This study however shows that informants experience horizontal transnational work collaboration as rather fine. If they acknowledged national cultural differences in general, they were less relevant in the work context, especially while working in engineering projects, where they work at the same level of hierarchy. This can be explained by the fact that the informants belong to the same company, are exposed to the same corporate culture and pursue the same goals. In addition, the informants work as engineers and belong to the same community of practice, using the same common technical language supported by drawings that aid communication.

While collaboration among engineers generally goes well, it should be noted that perceptions are sometimes coloured by what has been heard beforehand, for example rumours and stories that circulate in the corridors on how challenging it is for Scandinavians to work with their Chinese colleagues. From this perspective, it is interesting to notice that during the interviews, none of the informants could recall any intercultural critical incident (coding critical incident had no token). One can therefore hypothesise that the informants had not personally experienced intercultural conflicts. These past conflicts, related by the management as examples of cross-cultural misunderstandings, may actually be explained by individual misunderstandings rather than intercultural collisions, which confirms the idea that culture is used as an excuse to hide behind when things go wrong. This has also been discussed in Vaara (2000)'s study where problems encountered are often attributed to cultural differences and spread internally in the form of stories. The term of cultural differences is then used to explain failure, as "a convenient attribution target for failures or unsuccessful projects while successes are less clearly associated with cultural conceptions" (2000: 103).

Further, the data shows that there is a clear discrepancy in the way the management on the one hand, and the engineers, on the other hand, make sense of these cultural differences. That is, the management had hired me to solve what they considered to be problems of intercultural communication between Swedes/Norwegians and Chinese, while the actors of these interactions actually thought the collaboration went rather well and that challenges were not caused by cultural differences. Mahadevan, who has examined the collaboration among German and Indian engineers, also highlights this discrepancy in her study and explains that while the engineers had a "firm belief in engineering as a global profession that is not impacted by national cultural differences", "non-engineering managers thought of engineers as being socially and thus interculturally incompetent" (2011:92).

What other factors may affect effective collaboration in the workplace?

One of the main factors that emerged from the interviews is language competence, and in this case, the English competence of the employees. The company uses English as a common corporate language among the business units and employees should show a sufficient command of English when they are hired. The company, however, seems to think that all employees have a sufficient level of English to communicate and, according to some informants and other informal sources, has chosen not to implement measures to improve the level of English of the employees (English courses for example). Moreover, the company had chosen not to resort to translators as it is expensive and problematic for confidentiality reasons. One of the solutions adopted by the employees when the interlocutor could not speak English sufficiently well was to deal with the problem internally as explained by an informant (Sw2):

> Most of the times I have experienced this is usually with a fairly young girl in the marketing department who speaks English and speaks for the whole group. If you're lucky, it's someone with some technical knowledge but quite often someone without any technical language which also makes it much harder to get the message across, when you get into technical details.

This resulted in issues of misunderstandings, as people from different departments do not share the same technical knowledge and thus the same terminology.

One topic that emerged during the interview (through the follow-up questions) was the lack of good internal procedures in the company and lack of internal communication among the different divisions or different subsidiaries. This often created problems that were interpreted as cultural differences. A Swedish informant for instance, blamed his Chinese colleagues for not giving feedback. The Chinese colleagues on the other hand, blamed the Swedish informant for not giving feedback. It appeared that both parties were expecting feedback but no one asked explicitly for it. This created frustration from both sides that was attributed to the lack of professionalism of Swedes and of Chinese while, according to some employees at the seminar, it actually illustrates the lack of internal communication procedures when working on a common project. Another example of lack of internal procedures is the lack of communication among the several sales units of the company. A participant related, for instance, that a client was offered two different prices for the same product, and this was because the business units did not have any common price policy.

Last, the informants also considered expressing difficult messages as challenging. The informants, generally speaking, perceived communication, as fine as long as things went well. If they had to express a difficult message however, such as a disagreement or a criticism, they found it difficult. This is even more challenging when such messages need to be expressed in an appropriate and in a socially acceptable manner (using mitigation devices). This is all the more complicated when email exchanges, written in English, are conducted by non-native speakers of English, "whose English proficiency may not encompass the subtle nuances embedding the cultural identity of native speakers" (Bjørge, 2007: 63).

The findings of this exploratory study show that the concept of culture and of cultural differences should be critically examined. As informant (Sw2) pointed out, the term of culture can be used as an excuse, an alibi: "I also think that some use the concept of culture to hide the fact that they cannot get things done". That the term culture is used as an excuse and that cultural differences have been over-emphasised in empirical studies has also been stated in much recent research (Dervin, 2013; Mahadevan & Mayer, 2012; Mahadevan, 2011; Stening & Zhang, 2007; Søderberg & Worm, 2011; Vaara, 2000). The term is, as Stening and Zhang rightly point out, "a residual variable to which all unexplained variance is attributed" (Stening & Zhang, 2007:136). This may be all the more true when dealing with the Chinese and with the Chinese culture, as China has been portrayed in the West as 'l'altérité par excellence' (Dervin, 2013: 9), the perfect example in the othering process.

6. Conclusion

Based on 14 interviews, the present study has explored the way employees working on transnational engineering projects made sense of cultural differences. The study shows that national cultural differences did not particularly hinder horizontal work collaboration. This can be explained by the fact that the informants are working in the same company and, as most of them work as engineers, they belong to a community of practice. In doing so, they share a common background; use a common technical terminology when they talk about the project, supported by drawings. Their communication style was also described as direct. The study also shows that factors that could actually hinder work communication include the lack of internal procedures, as well as English competence of the employees, which made it challenging to communicate difficult messages.

It is difficult to generalise the results of this study. First, because all employees are from the same company and that the limited number of informants may not be representative. However, by adopting a sensemaking approach, the study offers a renewed and more nuanced portrayal of Chinese and Scandinavians in interaction, which contributes to the on-going discussion and criticism of the classic conception of culture. It also provides insights on how the concept of culture may be misused when dealing with intercultural interactions.

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8. Appendix

Interview guide

Introduction

(1) Thank you for participating in the project.

Small talk.
I introduce myself and my research project; I tell about the interview itself and about the confidentiality and anonymity issues. I ask the participant if he/she has questions. I show and explain the consent form. Then, I ask the permission to record the interview.

Questions

(1) What is your position in the company? What do you do?
(2) How long have you worked in the company? Where did you work before?
(3) Have you worked in other foreign companies before? Have you worked abroad?
(4) What have you studied?
(5) What foreign language do you speak?
(6) Your English: How is your English? On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate your writing skills? Your speaking skills? Your reading comprehension? Your listening comprehension?
(7) How often do you communicate with “foreigners” and what are their nationalities?
(8) What type of communication channel to you use? Face to face, email, and telephone? Why? Is there a difference for you?
(9) Do you think that it is easy or difficult to communicate with the foreigner (I say the nationality) and why?
(10) About communication styles:
    a. How would you describe your communication style? Why? What do you mean?
    b. How would you describe the other’s communication style?
    c. Here is a sheet with 12 words or expressions that could characterise one’s communication style. Could you choose two or three of these words that would best characterise your communication style? The other’s communication style?
(11) Is it easy or difficult…

a. To disagree with the foreigner (nationality)?
b. To ask for explanations
c. To ask for more information?
d. I have heard that the Chinese cannot say no. What do you think about this statement?

(12) Critical incident on communication: Could you read this short text[7] and tell me what you think about it? Have you experienced something similar? If so, could you tell me about it?

Conclusion

(13) I have asked what I wanted to know for now. Is there something more you wish to say?

(14) Thank you for your time

I stop the recording. I give the consent form protocol. We read it together. The participant signs it
Small talk. I leave.

[7] I give a short text (about 15 lines) that describes a critical incident on communication. The incident was taken from the introduction of the book *Culturally Speaking* (Helen Spencer-Oatey, 2004) and was chosen because it depicts an encounter between a British woman and a group of Chinese students.

Article 2

Ly, Annelise (2016): Internal e-mail communication in the workplace: Is there an "East-West divide"? *Intercultural Pragmatics*. Volume 13, Issue 1, Pages 37–70.

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Internal e-mail communication in the workplace: Is there an "East-West divide"?

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Abstract: Westerners are often depicted in intercultural communication literature as direct and Asians indirect when they communicate. If their communication styles are so different, however, how can they understand each other and collaborate in the workplace? The present article looks at internal e-mail communication in the workplace. More specifically, the aim of this article is twofold: first, to analyze the way Western employees formulate three different speech acts (request, criticism, and disagreement) when writing internal work e-mails to their Asian colleagues, and second, to examine the way these e-mails are perceived by the Asian employees in terms of politeness, friendliness, and clarity. The data consists of 182 elicited e-mails produced by Western employees using role enactment and 33 perception questionnaires collected in different Asian business units of an international company. The procedure to analyze the elicited e-mails is inspired by the CCSARP while the questionnaires are analyzed following sociolinguistics studies. Last, the discussion of the results is anchored partly in the ongoing East-West politeness debate.

Keywords: email, workplace, speech acts, request, criticism, disagreement, East-West divide

1 Introduction

To what extent can one talk about an "East-West divide"[1] in communication? In intercultural communication literature (see, for instance, Gao and Ting-Toomey 1998; Gesteland 2002; Hall 1976; Hofstede 2001; Lewis 2006), Europeans are often described as direct and Asians as indirect when they communicate. In the work context, however, where shared understanding is essential, are Europeans

1 Expression borrowed from Leech (2005).

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always direct? To what extent does the level of directness depend on the speech act expressed?

Working internationally has become common for many company employees, and people from different nationalities and backgrounds may become colleagues overnight. Successful workplace communication across cultures involves the understanding of cultural differences and communication styles. Nowadays, some of these differences are explained in intercultural communication literature (see above). In these books, however, the topic of communication is often reduced to the distinction between direct communication style, ascribed to Europeans, and indirect communication style, ascribed to Asians. Empirical research is needed.

Interaction with geographically separated colleagues takes place mostly virtually, through the extensive use of e-mails (Gimenez 2000 and Gimenez 2006; Kankaanranta 2005). Its recent development, however, raises some challenges. First, there are few explicit writing conventions (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Gimenez 2000), and people may therefore need to spend more time finding the right tone and the right level of formality with their interlocutors. Second, e-mail has gradually become more global (Crystal 2004) and thus more complex (Gimenez 2006; St. Amant 2002).

Employees of multinational companies working on common projects often try to maintain good workplace relationships and must therefore overcome these challenges. Throughout their collaborations, however, requests, criticisms, and disagreements may arise. These are face-threatening speech acts (hereafter FTAs; Brown and Levinson 1987) that need to be expressed in an appropriate and socially acceptable manner (using mitigation devices). This is all the more complicated when e-mail exchanges written in English are carried out by nonnative speakers of English, "whose English proficiency may not encompass the subtle nuances embedding the cultural identity of native speakers" (Bjørge 2007: 63).

The present article looks at the level of directness in internal e-mail communication at the workplace. First it analyzes the way European employees (Norwegians, Swedes, and Germans) formulate three different speech acts (request, criticism, and disagreement) when writing internal work e-mails in English to their Asian (Chinese and Korean) colleagues, and second, it examines the way these e-mails are perceived by the Asian employees in terms of politeness, friendliness, and clarity. The data consists of 182 elicited e-mails (using role enactment) produced by European employees, mainly engineers working in an international company in the shipbuilding and maintenance industry, and 33 perception questionnaires collected in the Asian business units working in the same company.

The research questions for the present study can be expressed as follows:

– What is the degree of directness when European employees (mostly engineers in the shipbuilding and maintenance industry) express request,

criticism, and disagreement when writing e-mails in English to their Asian colleagues working at the same level of hierarchy?
- How are the three speech acts mitigated?
- How are these e-mails perceived by the Asian employees of the company, especially in terms of politeness, friendliness, and clarity?

The present paper is structured as follows: After a literature review of relevant previous studies on communication styles and speech-act analyses (Section 2), I describe the methods used in this study (Section 3). Further, I explain the analytical framework (Section 4). Then I present (Section 5) and discuss the results yielded (Section 6).

2 Literature review

2.1 (Business) Communication styles across cultures

Theories on communication styles across cultures are largely inspired by the work of Hall (1976), who studied the importance ascribed to context in communication. He proposed a dichotomy between high-context (HC) and low-context (LC) cultures, where Norway, Sweden, and Germany are at the bottom of the scale (LC) while China is placed at the top end of the scale (HC). According to Hall, HC communication style is usually indirect and ambiguous while in LC cultures, meanings are explicitly stated through language. Hall's model has often been used as an explanatory framework of communication styles across cultures (Kittler et al. 2011) and is one of the most cited in the field of intercultural business communication (Cardon 2008: 413). His theory, however, is based solely on personal observations and lacks linguistic grounds. Intercultural business communication manuals, which describe how to communicate with people from a different national culture in a business context (Gesteland 2002; Lewis 2006), tend to limit their chapters on communication to Hall's framework and also lack empirical evidence.

Several studies have examined communication practices in the workplace and compared Nordic and Asian employees' perspectives (Clausen 2010; Kankaanranta and Lu 2013; Rygg 2012; Søderberg and Worm 2011). These studies are based on local and expatriate employees' interviews and offer valuable insights into the trends and challenges in business organizations. However, with the exception of Rygg's (2012) study, the conclusions of these studies are based solely on informants' perceptions of their communication practices and hence lack linguistic evidence.

To understand the way communication actually operates in the workplace, it is essential to have access to and to analyze language data (spoken or written) produced by the employees themselves in their working environment. Previous studies examining employee interactions include the large-scale Wellington Language at the Workplace project (see, inter alia, Holmes 2003; Holmes et al. 2009), the work on communication in global business organizations by Ladegaard (see, e. g., Ladegaard 2007 and Ladegaard 2011), the recordings of spoken interactions between Chinese and British businesspersons (Bilbow 1995; Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2004), and the analysis of refusals in workplaces in Hong Kong (Schnurr and Zayts 2013). Written interactions, on the other hand, and more specifically internal e-mail communication between Finnish and Swedish colleagues writing to each other in English, have been studied by Kankaanranta (2005) and Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012). These studies are very valuable as they analyze naturally occurring data in the workplace. At the same time, because of the nature of the data, it is also difficult to isolate specific communicative situations, since the speech acts expressed in these studies are subject to many variables (such as the context, the hierarchical and personal relations of the informants, and the urgency of the work to be done, among others) that the researcher cannot control or reproduce.

To sum up, linguistic evidence is essential to understand the way employees communicate in the workplace. Naturally occurring data is a valuable source, but at the same time, it can be challenging to analyze due to the number of variables involved in intercultural interactions. To the best of my knowledge, no study has isolated and compared speech acts produced by the same informants at the workplace. In addition, little research has been conducted on the way different speech acts are perceived by the informants themselves. This suggests the need for a study on the production and perception of different speech acts in intercultural interactions in the workplace. In the present study, I use role enactment to control the variables and to collect language data in a company. In addition, I use questionnaires to capture the informants' perceptions. The methods are further presented in Section 3. I now give an overview of the type of language data I analyze: speech acts.

2.2 Relevant prior research on speech acts

To see how things get done at work, it is important to look at the realization of speech acts. Initially introduced by Austin (1962) and further developed by Grice (1975) and Searle (1979), speech-act theory has since widely been related to politeness theory and particularly to Brown and Levinson's framework (1987).

Brown and Levinson built their theory around the notion of face, inspired by Goffman (1967) and defined as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). In their theory, they explain that some speech acts, such as requests, criticisms, and disagreements, are intrinsically face threatening and thus need to be mitigated. They also suggest that there is a direct link between indirectness and politeness and that the more direct an utterance is, the less polite it is.

Brown and Levinson’s framework is claimed to be universally applicable and has been widely used in pragmatics. Their theory has, however, been criticized by a number of Asian scholars (Ide 1989; Mao 1994; Matsumoto 1989), who claim that the framework cannot be applied to Asian culture. The notion of individual face, for instance, used in Brown and Levinson’s theory corresponds to a Western bias toward individualism but not to the traditional Eastern ethos. It has also been argued that a universal theory of politeness applicable to all cultures and languages is impossible (Wierzbicka 2003). In this perspective, the last 20 years have seen an increase of studies conducted by researchers who have discussed the universality of Brown and Levinson’s theory and underlined the specificities of the Asian culture, showing how its philosophy and history have influenced the norms of linguistic politeness (Kádár and Mills 2011; Lee-Wong 1989; Pan and Kádár 2011). As explained in Chen et al. (2013: 142), many Chinese scholars have thus conducted empirical studies looking at the realization of speech acts such as requests, food plying, and compliment responding. Using discourse-completion tests (inspired by Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) involving Chinese informants expressing themselves in their mother tongues, these studies have concluded in favor of the existence of an “East-West divide” (Leech 2005) in politeness. Lee-Wong (1989: 491), for instance, claimed that “Chinese speakers of the PRC consistently display a preference for direct request form,” going against the link between indirectness and politeness stated by Brown and Levinson.

The discussions on Asian specificities in politeness led Leech (2005) to wonder whether one could talk about an East-West divide. In his article, he offers a restatement of the principle of politeness, initially developed in *Principles of pragmatics* (Leech 1983), to explain pragmatic phenomena such as indirectness, asymmetries of politeness, and battle for politeness, among others. As he explains, it is considered polite in Chinese culture to observe the following invitation/offer sequence: “invitation→ refusal→ invitation→ refusal→ invitation→ accept” (Leech 2005: 9), which would be seen as strange in Western culture. Different cultures express politeness differently, but the different utterances imply the same meaning. Leech therefore concludes that “there is no absolute divide between East and West in politeness” (2005: 3) and creates a framework that includes both Western and Eastern perspectives that he labels "the grand strategy of politeness." The framework offers a modified version of the maxims of politeness initially introduced in 1983 with an increased attention to the "communication of meanings" (Leech 2005: 12). This framework is not used for the linguistic analysis of the present study, because it does not look specifically at the level of directness of utterances, but I will draw upon Leech's theory in the discussion. Leech's position has been supported by Chen's work (Chen 2010; Chen et al. 2013), which defends the *similar position*, as opposed to the *different position*, arguing that the differences in pragmatics in the East and the West can be "accounted for by existing theories or some slight revisions of these theories" (Chen 2010: 170).

The interrelatedness between direct and indirect speech acts and level of politeness was studied by the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). Its aim was to investigate cross-cultural and intralingual variation in the realization of requests and apologies with native speakers of eight languages. To do so, a discourse-completion test (hereafter DCT) was developed to assess the way respondents of different nationalities and mother tongues express a determined speech act in similar communicative situations. The CCSARP offers both an instrument to collect data (the DCT) and a coding scheme to analyze requests and apologies.

As mentioned above, many studies have used the DCT to elicit speech acts. It is mostly requests that have been examined (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984; Lee-Wong 1989; Yuan 2001), but other speech acts have also been analyzed, such as criticism (Nguyen 2005, Nguyen 2008a and Nguyen 2008b) and disagreement (Beebe et al. 1989a and Beebe et al. 1989b) in oral interactions. The method has a clear advantage: DCTs can easily and quite rapidly be distributed to a large sample of participants, and as the speech acts are produced using the same contextual variables, they can be compared with other, similar samples. The instrument has, however, been challenged (Beebe and Cummings 1996; Jucker 2009; Rintell and Mitchell 1989; Yuan 2001), and one of the main discussion points is the fact that some dialogues put the informants into roles (role play) they are not familiar with, which could create unnatural utterances. Indeed, in many studies that resort to DCTs, the informants are students that have to play the role of a professor, a policeman, or a manager, among other situations.

In role enactment, on the other hand, informants play roles they are familiar with. In the present study, I use role enactment to elicit speech acts in the workplace and questionnaires to capture the informants' perceptions in terms of politeness. I present and explain these two instruments below. Later I discuss the results of the present study in light of the East-West debate.

3 Data-collection instruments and participants

3.1 Elicited e-mails

3.1.1 Role enactment

As mentioned in Section 2.1, it is essential to collect and analyze language data to understand what is actually being expressed in interactions. Access to such data in companies can be challenging, as explained by Ly (2015), as institutions are often reluctant to allow any form of observation (Bill and Olaison 2009; Vallaster 2000), and if they do, they may not allow recording (Kasper 2006). To draw conclusions on language use in interactions, most researchers have therefore resorted to using students as informants, using role play. The use of naturally occurring data offers a further challenge to linguistic analysis. Because of the nature of the data, it is difficult to isolate specific communicative situations expressed in specific contexts. To look at a specific aspect of language use and to control as many variables as possible, many researchers have used simulated data (see, e. g., the studies in Ehlich and Wagner 1995) and praised its use (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson 2007; Houck and Gass 1996; Jucker 2009; Kasper 2006; Rintell and Mitchell 1989). Houck and Gass (1996: 47), for example, explain that "when the focus of study is on data production, data elicitation measures such as DCT is the most appropriate means because natural data cannot produce adequate data due to the infrequent emergence of the speech act being studied." A distinction should be made, however, between two forms of elicitation techniques, role play and role enactment. In role enactments, participants perform roles that are familiar and part of their everyday life (Ly 2015). In the present study, role enactment is used, and the informants, who are employees of an international company and are in daily contact with Asian colleagues, are asked to write a routine work-related e-mail, a situation that they are familiar with.

3.1.2 Speech acts studied and elaboration of the scenarios

Requests, criticisms, and disagreements are FTAs that need to be uttered carefully, particularly in the workplace context. As explained in the introduction, employees at the same level of hierarchy working on common projects must try their best to collaborate and maintain good workplace relationships. Thus, failure to express these speech acts appropriately (expressing them too directly or without mitigation devices) may create misunderstandings and prevent cooperation. A definition of the three speech acts is given in Appendix 1.

I created three scenarios to yield respectively a request, a criticism, and a disagreement. The scenarios were inspired by daily routine work in this company and involved European employees working on a common project with Asian colleagues (at the same level of hierarchy) and communicating by e-mail. In accordance with the corporate and the common language to all employees, the e-mails were written in English. The scenarios are formulated as follows:

Role-enactment scenarios[2]

1. You are working on a project with a Chinese colleague in China. Last week, you asked him to send you a report, X, but he did not do it. Write him an e-mail to ask him again.
2. Your colleague in China has eventually sent you the report. You have read it with attention but have found out that some of the data is incorrect. Write him an e-mail informing him that you have received the report.[3]
3. On Monday, you sent a drawing to your colleague in China. This morning, you received an e-mail from him asking you to make modifications to the drawing. You think that the drawing is fine and disagree about making the changes. Write him an e-mail to inform him.

To be able to test and possibly modify these situations, I asked the participants of the first two workshops in Norway to comment on the situations provided. As the situations were perceived as very realistic, they were not modified.

3.1.3 Data collection and informants' profiles

The data was collected during seminars organized for the employees of the company, as an exercise aimed at understanding and improving their intercultural communication skills, particularly toward Asian cultures. At the time of the data collection, I was in charge of the organization of these seminars in the company. In order to address the ethical issues in relation to the study, the

2 The three situations were initially designed with Chinese employees as the target recipients. However, Korean employees were later invited to express their perceptions in the questionnaire. The assimilation of these two cultures into one group can be justified by the fact that Chinese and Koreans are culturally close (Kádár and Mills 2011), belonging to the same cultural cluster, Confucian Asia (see the GLOBE study by House et al. 2004).

3 The situation was created to yield a criticism but is actually formulated as a request for information. I wanted to allow for the possibility of participants not criticizing their colleagues, which would have been impossible if the scenario had been formulated as "criticize his/her work." I wanted to give the participants the choice of not performing the FTA.

informants were informed about the research project, and participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The activity was distributed to the 130 participants of the seminar, and 63 e-mail sets were collected: 18 in Norway, 21 in Sweden, and 24 in Germany. Two sets of e-mails were discarded from the present study: One was written in Norwegian, while the exercise requested the e-mails be written in English, and one was written by a Korean working in Norway.

All the informants were working in the same company, and most of them had the same educational background, trained as engineers. They were members of the same "community of practice" (Wenger 1998). They were in regular contact, most of them weekly or daily, with the business units in Asia, and the large majority had worked with Asian colleagues for more than a year. Most of the informants were recruited locally and therefore usually held the nationality of the seminar location, Norway, Sweden, or Germany. The employees did not receive training on communication or e-mail writing beforehand, and only a few of them had attended a leadership course with a one-day introduction to intercultural communication.

3.2 Perception questionnaires

Written questionnaires have been widely used in sociolinguistics to assess language attitudes and perceptions of informants (see the overviews provided by Boberg 2013; Schleef 2013; Starks and McRobbie-Utasi 2001), but to my knowledge this method has not been used to assess the perception of language in intercultural communication. Inspired by studies in sociolinguistics, a questionnaire was created to assess the perception of the Asian informants. It was elaborated after all elicited e-mails were collected and roughly analyzed in terms of level of directness and mitigation strategies. The questionnaire was divided into four parts: information about the informant, e-mail 1 (request), e-mail 2 (criticism), and e-mail 3 (disagreement). For each e-mail, four examples were selected as being representative of different levels of directness used by the European informants. For the request e-mail, for instance, examples of requests formulated with the imperative, a query preparatory, a hint, and a white lie were selected from the corpus, as shown in Table 1.

For each e-mail, the Asian informants had to choose the example they liked the most from the four proposed, and the one they liked the least. By the term *like*, the informants were asked to choose the e-mail they would react most positively to. In addition, using a five-point Likert scale, they had to consider whether they perceived the example they liked the most as clear, polite, friendly,

Table 1: Request e-mails.

Code	Content
A	Please send me the asked report asap. (*please* + imperative)
B	Can you be so kind and sent me the needed documents for the design start on May 31st. (query preparatory)
C	Could you please resend the report from last week, I might have lost it in my emails. (white lie)
D	Just thought I would get in touch to see how are getting along with the X report we spoke about last week. Is there something you would like to discuss? (hint)

and short. It should be noted that the term *polite*[4] used in the questionnaire is defined in general language, based on the layperson's perception of politeness.

3.3 Distribution of the questionnaires in Asia and oral feedback from the informants

The questionnaires were distributed to the 33 participants of the seminars on intercultural communication held in Asia. The same ethical issues were addressed as in Europe (see Section 3.1.3). At the end of the activity, the participants were asked to share their results and discuss them, thereby providing indirect feedback that I noted down. Seventeen questionnaires were collected in China and 14 in Korea. The informants were local employees working in the Chinese and Korean business units of the company; they all had regular contact with their European colleagues, and most of them had worked with the Europeans for more than a year. The data used in this study is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Data used in the study.

Data	Origin	Number	Total
Elicited e-mails	Norway	16[1]	61
	Sweden	21	
	Germany	24	
Perception questionnaires	China	17	31
	Korea	14	

Note: [1]Eighteen sets were collected in Norway but only 16 were used.

4 The term *polite* is defined as "showing or characterized by correct social usage, marked by an appearance of consideration, tact, deference, or courtesy" in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/polite, accessed 30 July 2014).

4 Analytical framework: speech-act analysis

4.1 Analytical procedures

It is difficult, if not impossible, to create a common coding system that could be used to analyze all speech acts, and to my knowledge, such a system does not yet exist. This difficulty can be explained by the fact that speech acts are expressed through linguistic strategies that are specific to each speech act. Thus, the coding schemes for the three speech acts will be presented separately.

The present study has, however, adopted the same analytical procedure for the three speech acts, based on the CCSARP. It involves first the identification of the head act, defined as "the minimal unit which can realize a request" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 275), in each e-mail. The head acts were then coded in terms of strategy type, or level of directness. They were further classified into direct or indirect strategies.[5]

Moreover, downgraders, defined as devices aimed at softening the speech act, are examined. They can be expressed internally (through the use of lexical/syntactic modification within the head act) or externally (within the immediate context of the head act) (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984; Blum-Kulka et al. 1989).

Hence, in the example below, the request is expressed with an imperative in the head act (bold) and is further mitigated by an internal lexical downgrader, *please*, and an external downgrader, a grounder that justifies the reason for the request:

(1) ***Please send me the asked report*** *[...] because our customer is pushing very much now.*

The example above presents a request that can easily be identified and coded. However, as other researchers (Biesenbach-Lucas 2005 and Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011) also have observed when analyzing their data with the CCSARP coding scheme, many challenges emerged during the analysis, ranging from identifying the head acts, to categorizing them into existing strategy types, to classifying these strategies. The existing coding scheme was therefore modified, and new strategies were created when necessary to fit the specificity of the data.

5 Query preparatories, which are classified as conventionally indirect requests in the work of Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), are here classified as indirect strategies.

4.2 Requests

The present study uses the coding scheme for requests developed by the CCSARP. This scheme was originally created to analyze requests elicited through the use of DCTs but has since been used to examine requests in e-mail communication (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Kankaanranta 2005). This can be explained by the fact that e-mail language can be characterized as a "hybrid medium" (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011), mixing features of written and spoken communication.

The CCSARP coding scheme has thus been revisited to fit e-mail data, and new strategy types have been created, such as need statements (Biesenbach-Lucas 2005; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011), reminder requests (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011), and interrogatives and conditional requests (Kankaanranta 2005). These new strategy types are used in the present study. Furthermore, the initial distinction between strong and mild hints was not relevant here as I found no tokens of mild hints in my study. On the other hand, I did find expressions of white lies, such as in *Could you please resend the report?* (when the report had not been sent). I hence created a new strategy type labeled "white lie" (inspired by Brown and Levinson 1987). The request strategies and mitigation devices used in the present study are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: Strategy types to express requests: definitions and examples.

Strategy type	Definition	Example
Direct		
Mood derivable	"The grammatical mood of the locution conventionally determines its illocutionary force" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 278–279).	Please send the report.
Performative	"The illocutionary intent is explicitly named by the speaker by using a relevant illocutionary verb" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 279).	I kindly ask you to send me the X report.
Interrogative	Categorized as direct strategy type but not explicitly defined by Kankaanranta (2005). Question about when or how the request will be realized.	How soon can you send me the report?
Need statement	Not explicitly defined but exemplified by semantic formulas such as "I will need …" (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007: 67; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011: 3210).	We need your report as soon as possible.

(*continued*)

Table 3: (*continued*)

Strategy type	Definition	Example
Reminder request	"Utterances which serve to remind the hearer about an expected or a prohibited action" (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011: 3210).	Would like to remind you to send me the report.
Indirect		
Preparatory	"The utterance contains reference to a preparatory condition for the feasibility of the request" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 280).	Could you please send me the report by email as soon as possible?
Conditional request	Not explicitly defined but exemplified by semantic formulas such as "If … please contact" (Kankaanranta 2005: 391).	Did you already finish it? If you're done with it, please send it to me.
Strong hint	"The illocutionary intent is not immediately derivable from the locution; however, the locution refers to relevant elements of the intended illocutionary and/or propositional act" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 280).	Is there something you would like to discuss?
White lie	Utterance where the speaker wants to lie rather than damage hearer's negative and positive face.	Could you please send me the report X again, I have not yet received it.

Table 4: Mitigation devices to express requests: definitions and examples.

Downgrader	Definition	Example
Internal		
Embedded if-clause	Exemplified by "I would appreciate it if you left me alone" (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984).	I would highly appreciate if […].
Interrogative	The interrogative is used as a syntactic downgrader when "it is an option with a clear mitigating function" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 281).	Can you please resend it?
Politeness marker	"An optional element added to a request to bid for cooperative behavior" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 283).	Please/kindly/kind
External		
Preparator	"The speaker prepares his or her hearer for the ensuing request by announcing that he or she will make a request by asking about the potential availability of the hearer for carrying out the request" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 287).	Have you has the time to look into the last weeks email regarding report X?

(*continued*)

Table 4: (*continued*)

Downgrader	Definition	Example
Disarmer	"The speaker tries to remove any potential objections the hearer might raise upon being confronted with a request" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 287).	Sorry to push about the report.
Grounder	"The speaker gives reasons, explanations, or justifications for his or her request" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 287).	Because our customer is pushing very much now.

4.3 Criticism

The CCSARP did not develop a coding scheme to analyze the speech act of criticism, and to my knowledge, only one researcher (Nguyen 2005, Nguyen 2008a and Nguyen 2008b) has looked at the realization of criticism in terms of directness. In her study on criticisms and responses to criticism in English by Vietnamese ESL students, Nguyen (2005) developed a coding scheme based on her empirical results and inspired by the CCSARP.

I used her coding scheme as a starting point for my analysis but added new strategies to fit the present data. I have labeled these new strategy types "expression of difference" and "expression of strangeness," both categorized as indirect strategies and defined below. Some strategy types found in Nguyen's work were, however, classified differently in terms of directness/indirectness. The strategy "statement of difficulty," classified as direct by Nguyen, is classified as indirect in my study because I consider informants writing that they do not understand a report as not directly criticizing their colleagues. Likewise, "demand for change," found in indirect strategies in Nguyen's work, has been classified as direct in my study, because the semantic force of the head act structure leads directly to a direct criticism. The strategy types, as well as the mitigation devices used by the European informants to soften the message, are presented in Tables 5 and 6.

4.4 Disagreements

Several challenges arose when the realizations of disagreement were analyzed. First, the speech act of disagreement in oral interactions has been analyzed from

Table 5: Strategy types used to express criticism: definitions and examples.

Strategy type	Definition	Example
Direct		
Negative evaluation	"Usually expressed via evaluative adjectives with a negative meaning or evaluative adjective with a positive meaning plus negation" (Nguyen 2005: 112).	Some data are incorrect.
Demand for change	"Usually expressed via such structures such as 'you have to', 'you must', 'it is obligatory that', or 'you are required', or 'you need', 'it is necessary'" (Nguyen 2005: 113).	I need some changes done.
Indirect		
Expression of difference	Semantic expressions stating that the results of the speaker are different from the hearer's.	We have received different values of this data.
Statement of difficulty	"Usually expressed by means of structures such as 'I find it difficult to understand …', 'It's difficult to understand …'" (Nguyen 2005: 113).	I do not quite understand the figure.
Expression of strangeness	Usually expressed by means of adjectives such as *strange*, *weird*, *odd*.	I […] found some odd things.
Question	"Usually expressed via a question or an indirect question" (Nguyen 2005: 113).	I […] have a question regarding the data on page 2.
Request for verification	"Usually expressed via expressions asking to 'verify', 'confirm' or 'check' the data" (Nguyen 2005: 113).	I would like you to confirm the following data.
Request for further information	"Usually expressed via expressions asking to 'describe', 'explain' the data" (Nguyen 2005: 113).	I would like you to describe in detail […].

different perspectives, and many coding schemes coexist (Beebe et al. 1989a and Beebe et al. 1989b; Garcia 1989; Kreutel 2007; Maiz-Arévalo 2014; Stalpers 1995). Further, the analytical procedures in these studies differ from the CCSARP's in that they do not identify head acts but rather look at the realization of disagreement in speech turns. Thus, the coding schemes offered in these studies do not distinguish strategy types from mitigation devices. For instance, in their study on the realization of disagreement by American and Japanese students, Beebe and Takahashi (1989a, 1989b) find seven major semantic formulas used to express disagreement: criticism, suggestion, positive remark, gratitude, empathy, and token agreement. The authors, however, do not distinguish which formulas are strategy types and which are mitigation devices. Thus, gratitude

Table 6: Mitigation devices used to express criticism: definitions and examples.

Downgrader	Definition	Example
Internal		
Past tense	With present time reference.	I would like you to check […].
Interrogative	The interrogative is used as a syntactic downgrader when "it is an option with a clear mitigating function" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 281).	Is it possible that the point […] is mixed with project […]?
Modal	"All structures showing possibility" (Nguyen 2008a: 771).	There **might** be some incorrect data.
Understater	"Adverbial modifiers by means of which the speaker underrepresents the state of affairs denoted in the preposition" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 283).	**A little bit** unclear, a **little** mistake.
Downtoner	"Sentential or propositional modifiers which are used by a speaker in order to modulate the impact his or her request is likely to have on the hearer" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 284).	It **seems like** the data is incorrect.
Subjectivizer	"Elements in which the speaker explicitly expresses his or her subjective opinion vis-a vis the state of affairs" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 284).	There is a little mistake, **I think**.
External		
Steer	"Utterances that S used to lead H onto the issue he or she was going to raise" (Nguyen 2008a: 771).	I have read this with great interest and **have a few questions regarding x and y**.
Sweetener	"Compliments or positive remarks paid to H either before or after a criticism to compensate for the offensive act" (Nguyen 2008a: 771).	Thank you very much for your well-written report.
Grounder	"The reasons given by S to justify his or her intent" (Nguyen 2008a: 771).	They are looking a bit strange to me.

and positive remarks, described as semantic formulas "that really soften disagreement" (Beebe et al. 1989a: 205), could rather be interpreted as mitigation devices, while suggestion and criticism could be seen as strategy types. In the following e-mail, for instance, the informant starts with an expression of gratitude, but the expression of disagreement in the head act (bold) is actually very direct:

(2) *Thank you for your comments. I discussed your proposal internally and came to the result that* ***it is technically not sufficient****.*

To maintain the coherence of methods in the present study, I first identify and classify the head acts and then look at the mitigation devices. I use some of the labels offered by Beebe and Takahashi as a starting point, classify them into strategy types, and add more strategies that were found in my data. The strategy types are defined and exemplified in Table 7.

Table 7: Strategy types used to express disagreement: definitions and examples.

Strategy type	Definition	Example
Direct		
Criticism or negative evaluation	"Usually expressed via evaluative adjectives with a negative meaning or evaluative adjective with a positive meaning plus negation" (Nguyen 2005: 112).	The modification […] do not make sense in my eyes.
Explicit disagreement	"Usually expressed via such structures such as 'I do not agree' or 'I disagree'" (Nguyen 2005: 112).	I can't agree to this change.
Indirect		
Request for information	"Usually expressed via expressions asking to 'describe', 'explain' the data" (Nguyen 2005: 113).	Can you please clarify why you want me to modify the drawings?
Suggestion to follow the initial idea	Semantic formulas that invite the hearer to follow the initial idea.	We propose no changes to be introduced since original design can be considered sufficient for its purpose.
Request to follow the initial idea	Semantic formulas that request the hearer to follow the initial idea.	Please proceed according to specifications.
Postponing decision	Semantic formulas that delay the final decision.	I will check your concerns and report back later today.
Impossibility to agree	Semantic formulas that express the impossibility to agree with the hearer's suggestion, due to external factors.	I have checked the drawing with our technical manager and we have no problem seeing this from your point […] the drawing is made this way because of approval from NMD. So we have to leave it this way (N36).

To analyze the mitigation devices used by the European informants, I use the coding scheme developed by Stalpers (1995), who makes a distinction between mitigated disagreements (using delays, added supports, or modulation) and unmitigated ones. The same coding scheme was used in a recent study by Bjørge (2012) in an analysis of simulated negotiations involving business students using English as a lingua franca. The mitigation strategies used in the present study are presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Mitigation devices used to express disagreement: definitions and examples.

	Strategy	Definition	Example
Mitigating strategies	Delay	"Pause, discourse markers announcing that a disagreement act is about to be delivered, token agreement, appreciation or apology, qualifiers, hesitation features, or disagreement act displaced over a number of acts" (Stalpers 1995: 278).	Thank you for email with proposals for some modification. We are sorry to say that these modification do not fit into our design.
	Added support	"An explanation, a justification or a defense of a position" (Stalpers 1995: 278).	I would not like to change the drawing **based on the following**: […].
	Modulation[1]	"Modulation by means of external expressions, or modal verbs" (Stalpers 1995: 278).	I therefore **don't feel** that we need to modify the drawing.
	Indirectness	"No explicit rejection which negates unequivocally the previous speaker's statement" (Stalpers 1995: 278).	I have reviewed your comments and I would like to give my reply and comments in return.
Unmitigated strategy		Disagreement formulated without any of the strategies above.	Please consider that the proposed modification is not correct.

Note: [1]I included modifiers such as in *I don't quite agree* (Bjørge 2012) and also qualifiers (Stalpers 1995) such as *I believe*, *I find*, *I think*.

5 Results

In this section, I present the results of the analysis, first looking at the degree of directness used by the European informants (Section 5.1) to express requests, criticisms, and disagreements, and then describing the preferences the Asian informants showed for the three speech acts (Section 5.2).

5.1 Elicited e-mails

5.1.1 Request

As Tables 9 and 10 show, the informants slightly tend to use direct strategies (56 %) to realize their requests. Within direct strategies, mood derivative (*Please send the report*) is the most common strategy type. Within indirect strategies, on the other hand, the use of query preparatory (*Could you please send me the*

Table 9: Strategy types used to express requests.

Strategy type used	Example	Occurrences	%
Direct		**34**	**56**
Mood derivable/ Imperative	Please send the report.	16	26.5
Performative	I kindly ask you to send me the X report.	4	6.5
Interrogative	How soon can you send me the report?	6	10
Need statement	We need your report as soon as possible.	3	5
Reminder request	Would like to remind you to send me the report.	5	8
Indirect		**27**	**44**
Preparatory	Could you please send me the report by email as soon as possible.	17	28
Conditional request	Did you already finish it? If you're done with it, please send it to me.	2	3
Strong hint	Is there something you would like to discuss?	4	6.5
White lie	Could you please send me the report X again, I have not yet received it.	4	6.5

Table 10: Mitigation devices used to express requests.

Downgrader	Example	Occurrences
Internal		
Embedded if-clause	I would highly appreciate if […].	6
Interrogative	Can you please resend it?	2
Politeness marker	Please/kindly/kind	42
External		
Preparatory	Have you has the time to look into the last weeks email regarding report X?	3
Disarmer	Sorry to push about the report.	4
Grounder	Because our customer is pushing very much now.	38

report?) clearly dominates. It is interesting to note that hints (6.5 %) and white lies (6.5 %), such as in *Could you please send me the report X again, I have not received it yet*, were also used several times. I discuss this point later.

Regarding the mitigation devices used, most of the requests are preceded[6] by a politeness marker. In this perspective, it should be noted that requests formulated as mood derivative (imperative) were always preceded by a politeness marker, and the use of *please* clearly dominates (15/16 times). In addition, a large majority of requests are mitigated by external downgraders, and particularly grounders such as *because our customer is pushing very much now*.

5.1.2 Criticism

To express criticism, a majority of informants used indirect strategies (65.5 %), resorting to strategy types that state the differences (20 %), as in *We have received different values of this data*, or request verification (16.5 %), as in *I would like you to confirm the following data*. When a criticism is expressed directly, on the other hand, negative evaluation with expressions such as *incorrect* or *unclear* (33 %) is the most used (see Tables 11 and 12).

Table 11: Strategy types to express criticism.

Strategy type	Example	Occurrences	%
Direct		**21**	**34.5**
Negative evaluation	We found some of the data to be a little unclear.	20	33
Demand for change	I need some changes done.	1	1.5
Indirect		**40**	**65.5**
Expression of difference	We have received different values of this data.	12	20
Statement of difficulty	I do not quite understand the figure.	6	10
Expression of strangeness	I [...] found some odd things.	2	3
Question	I [...] have a question regarding the data on page 2.	5	8
Request for verification	I would like you to confirm the following data.	10	16.5
Request for further information	I would like you to describe in detail [...].	5	8

6 The placement of the politeness marker *please* in front of the verb (*Please send the report*) instead of following it (*Send the report, please*) was observed. The illocutionary force of the request may be slightly modified by this placement, but this is not discussed in the present study.

Table 12: Mitigation devices to express criticism.

Downgrader	Example	Occurrences
Internal		
Past tense	I **would like** you to check […].	7
Interrogative	Is it possible that the point […] is mixed with project […]?	1
Modal	There **might** be some incorrect data.	2
Understater	**A little bit** unclear, a **little** mistake.	4
Downtoner	It **seems like** the data is incorrect.	11
Subjectivizer	There is a little mistake, **I think**.	13
External		
Steer	I have read this with great interest and **have a few questions regarding x and y**.	4
Sweetener	Thank you very much for your well-written report.	52
Grounder	They are looking a bit strange to me.	2
	We have received different values of this data. Could you please go through the basis again and confirm the results?	4

Regarding the use of mitigation devices, almost all the criticisms (except four) are mitigated by at least one type of downgrader. Most of the criticisms are softened by a sweetener, a positive remark on the sent report. Criticism is also mitigated internally by the use of downtoners (*it* ***seems like*** *the data is incorrect*) and subjectivizers (*there is a little mistake*, ***I think***) within the head act. It is further observed that the four unmitigated criticisms are expressed using indirect strategies.

5.1.3 Disagreement

The analysis of the head acts shows that informants largely resorted to indirect strategies (90 %) when expressing disagreement with their Asian colleagues (see Tables 13 and 14). Within the indirect strategies used, expressions that request colleagues follow the initial plan (32 %), such as in *We propose no change to be introduced*, are the most used, closely followed by requests for information/ clarification (30 %), such as *Can you please clarify why you want me to modify the drawings?* Within the direct strategies, informants expressed disagreement mostly through the use of criticism or negative evaluation (8.5 %). Regarding the analysis of mitigation devices, the results show that only two elicited e-mails were not mitigated at all, while some e-mails (16/60) used more than one strategy to soften the disagreement.

Table 13: Strategy types to express disagreement.

Strategy type	Example	Occurrences	%
Direct		**6**	**10**
Criticism or negative evaluation	The modification […] do not make sense in my eyes.	5	8.5
Explicit disagreement	I can't agree to this change.	1	1.5
Indirect		**54**	**90**
Request for information/ clarification	Can you please clarify why you want me to modify the drawings?	18	30
Suggestion to follow the initial idea	We propose no changes to be introduced since original design can be considered sufficient for its purpose.	9	15
Request to follow the initial idea	Please proceed according to specifications.	19	32
Postponing decision	I will check your concerns and report back later today.	2	3
Impossibility to agree	I have checked the drawing with our technical manager and we have no problem seeing this from your point […] the drawing is made this way is because of approval from […]. So we have to leave it this way.	6	10

Table 14: Mitigation devices to express disagreement.

	Strategy	Example	Occurrences
Mitigating strategies	Delay	Thank you for email with proposals for some modification. We are sorry to say that these modification do not fit into our design.	13
	Added support	I would not like to change the drawing based on the following.	14
	Modulation	I […] don't feel that we need to modify the dwg.	13
	Indirectness	I have reviewed your comments and I would like to give my reply and comments in return.	35
Unmitigated strategy		Please consider that the proposed modification is not correct.	2

5.2 Perception questionnaires

How did the Asian employees perceive these e-mails?

5.2.1 Request

As Tables 15, 16, and 17 show, the Asian informants preferred requests formulated as *Can you please be so kind* (query preparatory, e-mail B), closely followed by requests such as *Please send me the asked report* (*please* + imperative, e-mail A). E-mail B was perceived as clear, short, and rather polite, and e-mail A as clear,

Table 15: Perception of request e-mails

E-mail		Most liked	Least liked
A	Please send me the asked report asap. (*please* + imperative)	**12**	4
B	Can you be so kind and sent me the needed documents for the design start on May 31st. (query preparatory)	**13**	4
C	Could you please resend the report from last week, I might have lost it in my emails. (white lie)	2	**11**
D	Just thought I would get in touch to see how are getting along with the X report we spoke about last week. Is there something you would like to discuss? (hint)	4	8

Table 16: Characteristics of e-mail B: request formulated as a query preparatory.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Clear	8	3	2	0	0
Friendly	1	6	5	1	0
Polite	3	3	6	1	0
Short	6	5	2	0	0

Table 17: Characteristics of e-mail A: request formulated as *please* + imperative.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Clear	5	6	1	0	0
Friendly	2	3	4	2	0
Polite	2	5	4	0	0
Short	1	2	6	3	0

rather friendly, and polite. The e-mail that was clearly liked the least was formulated as a while lie (e-mail C).

The following tables present the e-mails offered for each speech act. For each example, the number of informants who liked the e-mail the most and the least are given. The highest (and the second highest if the number was very close) is shown in bold. It should be noted that the figures in the following tables do not always add up to the total number of informants, as some informants did not fill in the questionnaire entirely.

5.2.2 Criticism

A majority of Asian informants preferred criticisms that were expressed indirectly, and particularly when formulated as *Many thanks for the report. Overall it was fine although I couldn't help noticing that your figures in section X are different to what I have here* (positive remark + expression of difference, e-mail F). The informants also liked the e-mail expressed this way: *I do not quite understand the figure* (statement of difficulty, e-mail H) (see Tables 18 and 19). E-mail F was perceived as

Table 18: Perception of criticism e-mails.

E-mail		Most liked	Least liked
E	I found that some of the data must be incorrect. (negative evaluation)	3	**14**
F	Many thanks for the report. Overall it was fine although I couldn't help noticing that your figures in section X are different to what I have here. (positive remark + expression of difference)	**15**	6
G	I have stated some data that I would like you to describe in detail. (request for clarification)	4	5
H	With regards to section xx. I do not quite understand the figure. (statement of difficulty)	9	4

Table 19: Characteristics of e-mail F: criticism formulated as a positive remark + expression of difference.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Clear	2	7	4	0	0
Friendly	7	5	3	0	0
Polite	7	5	2	0	0
Short	2	3	4	4	0

friendly, polite, and clear by the Asian informants. On the other hand, e-mail E, formulated as a negative evaluation, was clearly disliked.

5.2.3 Disagreement

Disagreements were clearly preferred when expressed indirectly, formulated as suggestions to follow the initial plan (e-mails K and M), as in the following example: *We find your comment to be a good solution however at this late stage the effect of additional changes can be delays. To avoid this we propose no changes to be introduced since original design can be considered sufficient for its purpose*. These strategies were moreover mitigated with added support. Both were perceived as friendly and polite. On the other hand, the Asian informants clearly did not like e-mail J, formulated as a criticism (see Tables 20 and 21).

Table 20: Perception of disagreement e-mails.

E-mail		Most liked	Least liked
J	We find modifications not necessary and therefore not necessary to revise. (criticism/ negative evaluation)	0	**14**
K	Which part exactly is the problem? To my knowledge all information on this drawing is appropriate and would not feel right doing this. (request for information/clarification)	11	5
L	Could you please give me more information about how and why you want to make this modification. (request for information)	7	5
M	We find your comment to be a good solution however at this late stage the effect of additional changes can be delays. To avoid this we propose no changes to be introduced since original design can be considered sufficient for its purpose. (suggestion to follow the initial idea)	**13**	5

Table 21: Characteristics of e-mail M: disagreement formulated as a suggestion to follow the initial plan.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Clear	2	6	2	0	0
Friendly	5	4	2	0	0
Polite	5	4	1	0	0
Short	0	1	7	2	0

6 Discussion

In the following, I first discuss the results presented above with regard to the research questions presented in the introduction. Further, I show how this study can contribute to the ongoing discussions on politeness theory, and particularly to the East-West debate.

Popular work (as presented in Section 2) in intercultural business communication depicts Europeans as direct and Asians as indirect. These simplistic, essentialist, and stereotyped claims are nuanced by the results of this study. Indeed, when expressing in English a work-routine request, criticism, and disagreement directed to their Asian colleagues, the European informants use a broad portfolio of directness strategy types. Even though they typically use direct strategy types, such as imperatives or negative evaluation, the data shows that they may also resort to more-indirect strategy types, such as hints and white lies. In addition, the speech acts are very often mitigated by syntactic and lexical downgraders. The results also clearly show that while requests are expressed in a slightly more direct way, criticisms and disagreements are predominantly expressed indirectly. The increased use of indirect strategies when expressing criticism and disagreement might be explained by the fact that these two speech acts threaten the self-image of Asian colleagues. This can be confirmed by informal feedback from the European informants, who explained, at the end of the activity, that they felt a need to be more careful when writing to their Asian colleagues in order not to offend them or make them lose face.

In terms of perception of the e-mails, the Asian informants prefer a clear, direct, and short e-mail when their colleagues make a request. However, when a criticism or a disagreement is expressed, an indirect strategy is clearly preferred. In addition, the use of negative evaluation to express a criticism or disagreement is clearly disliked as such utterances are perceived as too harsh, patronizing, and somewhat arrogant, in spite of the mitigation used to soften the message. Furthermore, discussion with the Asian participants showed that they had no problem coping with disagreement or criticism, as long as it was expressed in a friendly and polite way.

The present study also aims to contribute to the ongoing East-West debate on norms of linguistic politeness. As previously mentioned (in Section 2.2), many Asian scholars have stressed the specificities of Asian politeness, illustrating their positions with empirical studies involving Asian informants expressing speech acts in their native language. Lee-Wong (1989), for instance, concludes that while it has been shown that conventionally indirect strategy is the most frequently used strategy type (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) in Western language, Chinese nationals display a preference for direct requests. She further explains that it is "socially acceptable for [...] social equals to formulate direct bald on record requests using imperatives" (Lee-Wong 1989: 502). In the present study, where the speech acts were expressed to colleagues working at the same level of hierarchy, requests formulated in English as an imperative (*Please send the report*) were the second most liked by the Asian informants, and this may have been influenced by the preferences for directness in requests the Asian informants have in their native language. This may therefore support the argument for an East-West divide, or for a different position, to use Chen's (2010) terminology.

However, a deeper analysis of the results leads to the opposite conclusion, thus supporting Leech (2005), and Chen's (2010) view of a similar position. First, the preference for direct requests by Asian informants must be seen in light of two other variables in the present study: the use of English as a lingua franca and the work context. The results of the perception questionnaire (see Section 5.2.1) show that the informants slightly prefer the request formulated as a query preparatory (e-mail B: 13/31) to the imperative request (e-mail A: 12/31). As for the reason why they prefer e-mail B, the results show that it is not because it is perceived as more polite but because the e-mail is actually shorter. Similarly, e-mail A is perceived as clear and relatively friendly and polite. One explanation for this preference is the fact that some Asian informants find it difficult to read long messages in English. It could also be argued that these choices can be influenced by personal preferences toward shorter messages because of the quantity of e-mails that an individual has to read on a daily basis. Thus, the shorter and the clearer the request is expressed, the better it is understood.

Moreover, the Asian informants' preference for direct requests can be explained not only by the specificities of Asian culture but also by the work context in which the request is received. In this context, the request is rather seen as part of a routine work task (to send a report is a routine task when working on a project with colleagues). Likewise, Kankaanranta's (2005) study shows that Swedish and Finnish employees also resort to direct requests and scarcely use grounders when writing e-mails in English to their colleagues. She explains that "routine-like" requests need less mitigation: "When people exercised their corporate power by making legitimate requests within the boundaries defined by their job roles, other employees within their job roles were expected to meet the requests; such situations could be considered routine" (Kankaanranta 2005: 369–370).

Thus, the preference for direct requests by Asian informants may be explained by different factors: the work context in which the requests are made, the proficiency in English of the informants, and the preference for directness in requests uttered in their native languages, particularly when dealing with social equals (Lee-Wong 1989). In this perspective, the perception of requests is explained by contextual factors rather than solely by an Asian cultural specificity.

Another point that supports the similar position (Chen 2010) is the observed correlation between the production and perception of criticism and disagreement. The Western informants resorted to indirect strategies to express criticism and disagreement. Similarly, the Asian employees also preferred criticism and disagreement to be expressed indirectly. When one looks at the strategy used, the second most used strategy by the Westerners to criticize is “expression of difference” (20 %), which is also the most liked strategy by the Asian informants (15/31). Similarly, “request for information/clarification” is the second most used strategy (30 %) and also the second most liked (11/31) by the Asian employees. It seems therefore that there is a shared understanding that criticisms and disagreements should be expressed with care and rather indirectly. This view is also confirmed by a study on refusals between Korean and German workplaces where the author concludes that “direct refusals are almost never applied, maybe because, at workplaces, politeness plays a more important role than in other contexts” (Cho 2007: 2010).

It is true that the participants of the present study have different cultures and culture-specific norms. However, as Leech (2005: 4) states,

> an absolute universalist position is clearly untenable: it is obvious, from studies over the past twenty years that politeness manifests itself in different terms in different languages/cultures. On the other hand, a completely relativist position is equally untenable. If there were not a common pattern shared by different languages/cultures, it would be meaningless to apply a word like “politeness” or “face” to different cultures.

In the international company where the data was collected, similarities in the way of expressing and perceiving some speech acts may be due to the fact that employees have a common educational background and belong to a same “community of practice” but also probably share a similar goal, getting things done at work in the most efficient way. This similar goal may lead the informants to be more tolerant of linguistic forms used. This may be all the more true since e-mails are written in English, a language that is not the participants’ mother tongue.

7 Conclusion

The present article looked at internal e-mail communication at the workplace and had two aims: the first one, to look at the production of elicited e-mails by European informants, and the second one, to look at the perception of these e-mails by Asian informants, all employees of the same international company.

The European informants used a broad portfolio of strategies when expressing requests, criticisms, and disagreements. In addition, the results showed that the more face threatening a speech act is, the more indirectly it is expressed. Such a conclusion can be drawn as the study asked the same informants to express these three speech acts consecutively. In terms of perception, the Asian informants preferred requests to be expressed rather directly, while criticism and disagreement were preferred when expressed indirectly. This finding led to a discussion on the East-West debate, and the study concluded in favor of the similar position advocated by Chen (2010).

The present study offers several novel insights in the field of intercultural pragmatics. First, in terms of object of study, this work looks at the production of three different speech acts uttered by the same informants, thus enabling a comparison of these. The work also looks at the perception of these speech acts. To the best of my knowledge, little has been done in these areas, let alone in a study that combines all these elements and especially in an intercultural setting. Second, this study discusses and advocates the use of role enactment (using elicited e-mails here) to collect data in companies. This method allows the researcher to isolate specific variables to be tested. Further, it gives the researcher access to companies that are usually closed settings and to have informants (employees) play their own roles in a familiar situation, increasing the validity of the results and therefore the relevance for the workplace context. Third, the study offers an analytical framework to analyze the level of directness of different speech acts and the mitigation devices used. Indeed, while the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) coding scheme for requests has been largely used, discussed, and modified, little has been done to develop a similar coding scheme inspired by the CCSARP to look at the level of directness of criticisms and disagreements. Last, the study contributes to the ongoing debate on an East-West divide in politeness, using empirical data taken from an intercultural workplace setting. This study shows that in spite of cultural differences, in terms of cultural dimension but also linguistic politeness, people may successfully communicate with each other.

However, this empirical study has some limitations. The data was collected only in a single company and thus may not be representative of interactions taking place in other companies and industries. Furthermore, the number of informants and the fact that a large majority were working as or trained as engineers may also have biased the findings in the sense that the communication style of a "community of practice" is difficult to generalize and to transpose to other contexts. More research is needed to confirm or nuance these results. Still, the present study offers an insight into the communication practices at the international workplace and may have implications for the training of employees in intercultural communication. It also has an implication for the literature on teamwork, which, to the best of my knowledge, rarely focuses on communication practices and politeness. Last, the use of English as a lingua franca in international workplaces where most of the employees are nonnative speakers has clear impacts on the production and the perception of utterances. This needs to be further researched.

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Appendix: Definition of request, criticism, and disagreement

- Request: "S (speaker) indicates that he wants H (hearer) to do, or refrain from doing some act A"
- Criticism: "S indicates that he doesn't like/want one or more of H's wants, acts, personal characteristics, goods, beliefs or values"
- Disagreement: "S indicates that he thinks H is wrong or misguided or unreasonable about some issue, such wrongness being associated with disapproval" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 66)

Brown and Levinson (1987) add that while request threatens the hearer's negative face, criticism and disagreement threaten the hearer's positive face. As a rational agent, one should "seek to avoid these FTAs or employ certain strategies to minimize the threat" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 68) – in other words, one should resort to politeness strategies.

Bionote

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Getting Access to Language Data in the Workplace: Role Enactment as a Data-Generation Method

Annelise Ly

1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a critical review of two methods commonly used to collect language data in the workplace – naturally occurring data and interviews – and to argue in favour of role enactment to generate reliable and representative data.

The workplace is an important social context in which verbal interactions play an essential role. These interactions are of different natures – spoken or written – or of different content and level of formality, from small talk around the coffee machine to more institutional and routinized talk during meetings, from informal emails among colleagues to more formal written communication. The workplace is therefore a microcosm where politeness, intercultural competence and communication skills are acted out and where communicative issues would arise. As companies are growing internationally, cross-cultural challenges in communication are arising and becoming common. The interest to understand language use and misuse in the workplace has thus been increasing (Welch, Welch & Piekkari, 2005) and there is therefore a need to research the topic further. Paradoxically however, researchers from all disciplines usually struggle to collect empirical data and face three main obstacles: confidentiality, access and recording permissions.

Business organizations are indeed closed settings that are particularly eager to protect sensitive information, but also to preserve their relationships with their clients, colleagues and superiors. Confidentiality is an issue to be dealt with when researching in the workplace context, which goes against the dissemination imperatives of researchers. This issue has been recognized and discussed by many (see, among others, Chapman et al., 2004; Daniels & Cannice, 2004; Gimenez, 2006; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 2004; Vallaster, 2000), particularly those using naturally occurring data.

Access is also a major issue as business organizations are usually reluctant to grant access to their sites to researchers. Vallaster for instance, when recalling her research experience in multinational companies in Hong Kong, describes how the staff both resisted the research project and her, as she was perceived as an outsider (Vallaster, 2000). To get access to informants for an interview in this context can also be challenging and frustrating, as a researcher recalls: it was "tedious and nerve-wrecking to call stranger after stranger, trying to convince them that you are different from other researchers, that your project is more thoughtful, that they might even enjoy talking to you" (Andrews, 1995, 7) and he adds that "the interview itself is the prize you get for putting so many hours of often unrewarding and never stimulating work" (ibid). Further, once access to an organization has been granted, it still needs to be "negotiated over time" and over sites as "access to one does not guarantee access to all" (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 2004, 251). The methods used to collect data must be discussed and approved of by the company management and by the informants, and there is no denying that certain data collection methods are more difficult to obtain permission for than others: "Arranging access to business corporations for interviews is difficult and time consuming. Arranging access to business corporations for participant observation at managerial level is almost unknown." (Chapman et al., 2004, 291). The last statement should, however, be nuanced, as several recent studies have analysed the discourses of managers and leaders (see for instance the studies conducted by Schnurr et al., 2007; Schnurr, 2008). Still, it is clear that confidentiality and access represent important challenges for language data collection in the workplace.

In addition, recording of the data is another issue, and recordings and transcripts of authentic negotiations are difficult to obtain, as negotiators tend to resist all equipment that records their activity (Van der Wijst & Ulijn, 1995, 317). Without any recording of language data, the entire research project is very likely to be in jeopardy (Kasper, 2006). Other obstacles to collecting data in workplaces include time and cost issues, as employees would usually participate in a research project during their working hours and this represents a cost (the employees are not working when they are interviewed), which is rarely compensated by the researcher.

To bypass some of these challenges, I argue that role enactment – a kind of role-play in which the informants are put in a familiar situation and play their own roles – is an interesting method to generate first hand language data in the workplace. In research articles, methods used to collect data are usually described briefly and challenges that may arise are often not discussed. Only a few studies offer an overview of the methods used to collect language data (see for instance Jucker, 2009; Kasper, 2006) and to the best of my knowledge, an overview of such issues in the workplace context does not exist yet. Hence, the present paper will aim to fill the gap and to examine the following research questions:

- What methods are commonly used to analyse language data in the workplace, and what are their limitations?
- How can a researcher collect language data that are reliable and representative in the workplace?
- What insights can data generated by role enactment yield, and how can they be integrated in a methodological triangulation?

In the following, I first describe two methods commonly used to collect language data in the workplace, naturally occurring data and interviews, and I present their limitations. Then, I explain how role enactment can be useful as a method to generate data. Last, I discuss how role enactment can be used alone or in combination with other research methods to generate suitable and valid data.

2 A review of methods used to collect language data in the workplace

In this part, two common methods to collect data in the workplace, naturally occurring data and interviews, are described and discussed.

Naturally occurring data

Naturally occurring data, authentic discourse or field data (Jucker, 2009), can be defined as data that occur "for communicative reasons outside of the research project for which it is used" (1615). It comprises spoken data and written data (such as letters, emails, and short texts) that were produced with a communicative end, without the influence of the researcher. Naturally occurring data has a positive connotation among researchers and practitioners as such data is usually seen as authentic. In language research, the advantage of using authentic discourse is that it gives access to how interactions are actually carried out and how informants utter specific speech acts.

To be analysed systematically, spoken data need to be video or audio-recorded, while written data must be filed and stored. However, due to confidentiality issues already mentioned, only a limited number of research projects are allowed to gather extended naturally occurring data in business organizations. It is, for instance, the case in the study by Clyne (1996) and the large scale Language in the Workplace research project initiated by the University of Wellington (see for instance Holmes, 2003; Schnurr et al., 2007) that involved employees in over 30 organizations who audiotaped everyday work related meetings and discussion. Most of the studies looking at language use in the workplace, however, focus on specific communicative situations, such as business meetings (see for instance the work of Bilbow (1995), Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2004) and Poncini (2004)). Written authentic data such as business letters have also been examined (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1996; Kong, 1998) and more recent studies look at the way emails are written in the workplace (Kankaanranta, 2005; Gimenez, 2006). These studies are extremely valuable as they provide real, first hand information on interactions in the workplace. The data collected are often rich in information and, as they are not provoked or controlled by the researcher, can reveal things that the researcher had not planned or even thought of.

However, working with authentic data also presents numerous limitations. There are three main limitations: time, ethical issues and isolation of contextual variables. First, collecting and analysing naturally occurring data is time consuming. Of course, research in general takes time but when gathering naturally occurring data, the researchers usually need, in addition, to get to know the participants, build a trust relationship and possibly train the informants on the recording technology. As Spencer and Xing recall:

> Over the last few years, we have developed very good relations with staff of the host company. During the visit, one of us spent as much time as possible socially with the Chinese visitors in order to build up a good rapport with them (e.g. accompanying them on sightseeing trips). We did this deliberately, so that both British and Chinese participants would have confidence in us, so that they would not feel too uneasy about the recording, and so that they would be honest and open with us. (Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2004, 273).

The analysis of the data also takes time. Indeed, if the researcher is aiming to examine a certain feature of language in the workplace, such as a specific speech act (complaint, invitation, critique…), using naturally occurring data may be challenging if the speech act does not occur often. Depending on the frequency of the speech act examined, it may be difficult to collect a sufficient number of instances for an analysis, and the researcher may spend a long time transcribing data for only a few relevant occurrences. The researcher cannot intervene in the interaction and thus cannot provoke the utterance of the speech act they are studying.

Furthermore, using naturally occurring data may raise ethical issues that the researcher needs to deal with. To guarantee anonymity and confidentiality to all informants, a mutual consent document must be signed. However, who should sign this mutual consent? In his study on email communication for instance, Gimenez (2006) asked the sender and the main receivers of an email to sign the consent. However, as he rightly points out: "Should the people called upon by means of the CC[1] facility also be asked for consent?" (159). Such a question raises ethical issues to be solved. Also, the object of study, which is a part of the mutual consent, must be formulated in such a way that it gives enough information to the informant without revealing too many details in order not to influence the informant´s behaviour. This may particularly apply to language studies where the researcher is often interested in the way an informant will utter a specific speech event. The formulation of the mutual consent thus also raises an ethical issue: how much information should the informants know about the research project?

Last, using naturally occurring data makes it difficult for the researcher to isolate the contextual variables. One may argue that the researcher could replay a sequence in front of the informant and ask them for the contextual variables in which the utterance has been made. However, the informant may not remember or recognize the situation. The fact that a speech act uttered in the same context may be repeated is also of crucial importance in order for the researcher to identify trends and patterns. When naturally occurring data are collected, it is difficult to identify, to control and then to isolate the contextual variables. The fact that variables cannot be isolated makes comparison across workplaces and across cultures difficult, as some researchers recall: "A comparison of the individual studies is often problematic, since the background factors that could be responsible for the behaviours of a negotiation are almost impossible to trace." (Van der Wijst & Ulijn, 1995, 317). To sum up, using authentic discourse provides the researcher with rich data but the method is time consuming and, because of the nature of the data and the numerous contextual variables, the situations are therefore difficult to compare.

Interviews

Interviewing is a frequent part of our social life surroundings: turn-taking conventions and expectations of the interviewee and interviewer are shared cultural knowledge. Interviews have been widely used as a method to collect data, particularly in management studies (see the overviews provided in Daniels & Cannice (2004), Marschan-Piekkari et al. (2004) and Silverman (2010), where informants recall or explain their business practices). Interviews have also been used to collect language related data in the workplace, where employees of organizations share their perceptions of language practices with the researcher (see for instance the studies conducted by Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013; Ladegaard, 2007; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012; Rygg, 2012; Søderberg & Worm, 2011; Tange & Lauring, 2009).

However, using interviews to collect language data in the workplace also presents some limitations. In addition to access and confidentiality issues mentioned earlier, the interviewer may influence the interview outcome by something that is out of their control: their identity. The identity of the researcher (in terms of position, age, race or gender) is an important issue that has only been touched upon (Daniels & Cannice, 2004; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 2004; Søderberg & Worm, 2011; Vallaster, 2000). Søderberg and Worm for instance, two Danish scholars, raise this issue in their article:

> We are well aware of the fact that Danish expatriates may tend to construct an ad hoc national community with the Danish interviewers whereas the Chinese, even when interviewed in Mandarin, may have more reservations towards scholars from the country where the company headquarters is located. Despite the fact that we are independent scholars, not employed at headquarters, nor necessarily representing the Danish companies' perspectives on the subsidiary and its local managers and employees, our nationality might still have had an impact on the social relations. (Søderberg & Worm, 2011, 60–61).

Another limitation falls under the methodological perspective. Interviews are often used to elicit respondents' perceptions on their communicative practices. One may however wonder whether interviewees' responses are to be treated as "giving direct access to experience or as 'actively constructed narratives' involving activities which themselves demand analysis" (Silverman, 2010, 48). In other words, interviews can only provide the researcher with second hand data (perception of language use instead of the language actually used). In a recent study detailed in section 3 ("An example of role enactment in the workplace"), the results show the discrepancy between how the informants perceived their communication styles when expressing difficult messages and how they actually expressed these. In summary, gaining access to workplaces is challenging, and collecting naturally occurring data is difficult and time consuming. Relying solely on interviews to collect language data in the workplace, on the other hand, only provide the researcher with the perception of language use, which may not always coincide with reality. The identity of the researcher, in addition, may influence the outcome of the interview.

3 Role enactment as a data-generation method

Role-play and role enactment: definitions, differences and uses

As set out in the introduction, role enactment is an elicitation technique related to role-play. Role-play can be defined as "a social or human activity in which participants 'take on' and 'act out' specified 'roles', often within a predefined social framework or situational blueprint (a 'scenario')" (Crookall & Saunders, 1989, 15–16). As indicated by Kasper (2006), different types of role-plays can be distinguished, depending on the participant involvement and the extent of interaction. In the research literature however, such distinction is usually not made and the term role-play encompasses both role-play and role enactment. For more clarity however and following Jucker (2009), the present paper distinguishes the two terms: while in role-play the participants act as if they were someone else, in role enactment, the participants play a role that is part of their everyday life and personality in a familiar situation.

Role-plays and role enactments have been used extensively to generate research data and have "come to be widely recognized as constituting a dynamic and powerful tool in the study of a whole range of phenomena and fields such as conflict, decision making, language behaviour, intergroup relations and cultural values" (Crookall & Saunders, 1989, 11). The use of these simulation techniques as research methods can be justified by two main arguments: first, the researcher is more in control of contextual variables and second, these techniques give direct access to the informant's experience. The advantages of the methods are further detailed below.

Role-plays and role enactment have mainly been used in training sessions of employees and leaders in business organizations. These simulation techniques, indeed, have been proven efficient to develop skills and attitudes that are usually not easily acquired or changed through theories, reading and lectures. The recording of role-plays and role enactments are then used in debriefing sessions, giving the participants "an opportunity to reflect on the simulated experience" (Wiggins, 2011, 558). These elicitation techniques have often been used in the workplace context to increase intercultural awareness and competence among employees (Gumperz & Roberts, 1980; Wiggins, 2011). Business organizations are usually less reluctant to open their doors to researchers willing to train their employees in exchange for recorded data that are not perceived as confidential (since it is a simulation), thus creating a win-win situation both for the researcher (who can collect data) and for the company (as part of a training activity).

Role-plays have however often been criticized for not generating representative data. Indeed, participants may be asked to act out specified roles that they may not be familiar with, and this may create unnatural utterances. Therefore, the degree of validity of role-play data has been discussed (see for instance Kasper, 2006; Rintell & Mitchell, 1989). In role enactment, on the other hand, the participants play their own roles in a fictive but familiar scenario. In a study where role enactment is used in the workplace context (Bill & Olaison, 2009), the authors show that the participants, working as managers, and playing the roles of managers, forgot about the fictional setting and rapidly embraced the situation they had to deal with, as if it were real. Thus, one may expect that their professional behaviour or their language use in such a familiar situation will be close to what they would have done in real life. Therefore, I argue that role enactment generates valid and representative data.

The use of role enactment to study language use in the workplace

To the best of my knowledge, only a few studies use role enactment to collect language data in the workplace. It includes several studies listed in a volume by Ehlich and Wagner (1995), that look at language use in spoken discourse, and particularly in negotiation situations, and a recent study that I have conducted for my doctoral thesis and that I shortly present below ("An example of role enactment in the workplace"). In their edited volume, Ehlich and Wagner explain the choice of using simulated data by the fact that "business negotiation … is certainly one of those fields of verbal interaction to which it is most difficult for a non-participant, an analyst, to gain access" (Ehlich & Wagner, 1995, 2). The studies are based on a corpus of videotaped simulated negotiations, carried out in a professionally managed course on business negotiation that was organized in several countries (Villemoes, 1995, 291). The participants involved are young executives with some negotiation experience who are asked to work on a negotiation case (the scenario). The methods used in these studies are referred to as role-play or simulations. However, as these studies use participants who play a role that is part of their everyday life and personality in a familiar situation (negotiations in the workplace context), one may state that we deal here with role enactment. Several studies resulted from these seminars, on topics and focus as varied as how facework is expressed in Danish and Spanish business negotiations (Villemoes, 1995), sequencing in Spanish and Danish (Grindsted, 1995), how negotiation strategies are played out among Swedes and Spaniards (Fant, 1995), how communicative behaviour in negotiations are expressed in English and Danish (Andersen, 1995) or how politeness manifests itself in in French–Dutch negotiations (Van der Wijst & Ulijn, 1995).

The advantages of the method

Compared to naturally occurring data and interviews, the first advantage of using role enactment is the relatively easier access to the data. Since the situation recorded and researched is a simulation, there are, in general, less sensitive issues to be taken into account and thus fewer confidentiality issues arise. Also, when role enactment is part of a training course, the participants are more willing to join in the activity and be filmed, as the simulation is perceived as valuable for them. The number of participants is therefore probably higher than when using naturally occurring data though, to the best of my knowledge, no statistics exist on this.

Another advantage of role enactment is the control of contextual variables. While naturally occurring data need to account for contextual variables, in role-play and role enactment, the researcher can carefully design a scenario in which the variables to be analysed are isolated and chosen. The participants can also be carefully chosen depending on the research question raised or the hypotheses to be tested. In Villemoes' study for instance (1995), the same scenario (named "the fishing boat case") and the same type of participants (young executives with some negotiation experience who wished to improve their skills) were chosen. The only variable that changed was the nationality of the participants. As most parameters were identical, she could therefore conclude that "Any major differences in the way the Danes and the Spaniards approach the simulated negotiation situation may arguably be attributed to cultural differences." (Villemoes, 1995, 291).

Using role enactment also allows the researcher to get direct access to the research object of study. While some speech acts may not appear frequently in naturally occurring data, the scenario created in such simulation techniques allows the researcher to provoke a determined situation (a compliment, an invitation…) and the data collection is therefore less time consuming. I illustrate this point below ("An example of role enactment in the workplace"). Thus, Houck and Gass argue that "When the focus of the study is on data production, data elicitation measures…(are) the most appropriate means because natural data cannot produce adequate data due to infrequent emergence of the speech act studied" (Houck & Gass, 1996, 46).

Last but not least, the scenarios created for role enactments can be easily and rapidly distributed to a large sample of participants, creating a corpus of data that can be compared across cultures (see example below "An example of role enactment in the workplace"). As Van der Wijst and Ulijn confirm, "An important advantage of this method is the possibility of repeating the same negotiation with other participants and comparing the results. In addition, to the obvious educational benefits, this method offers the researcher opportunities for studying various aspects of the negotiation."(Van der Wijst & Ulijn, 1995, 317). Role enactment thus presents several advantages, and has been particularly suitable to researching language use in the workplace.

An example of role enactment in the workplace

In this section, I illustrate how role enactment has been used in one of my studies to generate language data in the workplace (Ly, under consideration for publication). One of the aims of the study was to look at the way Scandinavian and German employees of an international company communicated difficult messages in the workplace (requests, criticisms and disagreements) when writing emails to their Asian colleagues.

The company, operating in the shipbuilding industry, has its roots and headquarters in Norway. Over the years, it has expanded abroad and has now business units in Sweden, Germany and China. Working across borders has become common for the company, and employees of different nationalities and backgrounds are asked to collaborate on business projects. However, miscommunication and conflicts have arisen among some of the employees. According to the management, these issues could be explained by cultural differences among employees of different nationalities, and I was therefore assigned the task of training the employees to increase their intercultural awareness and competences, in exchange for data collection in the company.

Even though the company was well aware of my research purposes, access to the data was restricted and each step of the process needed to be validated by the management. I was, for instance, invited to attend some meetings involving participants from the different business units and to observe the interactions, but not allowed to record them. I could, on the other hand, interview employees who agreed to participate to my study. In the training sessions I was in charge of, I was allowed to conduct a large role enactment study.

The employee interviews revealed two elements that were then used to create the role enactment situations: first, that email communication across business units could be challenging and second, that the Scandinavian informants perceived their communication style as direct, and therefore would also express difficult messages in a direct way. In order to examine how the Scandinavian and German employees of the company actually expressed these difficult messages when communicating with their Asian colleagues, three role enactment scenarios were created, to yield a request, a criticism and a disagreement respectively, and were expressed as follows:

1) You are working on a project with a Chinese colleague in China. Last week, you asked him to send you a report, X, but he did not do it. Write him an email to ask him again. (request)
2) Your colleague in China has eventually sent you the report. You have read it with attention but have found out that some of the data is incorrect. Write him an email informing him that you have received the report.[2] (criticism)
3) On Monday, you sent a drawing to your colleague in China. This morning, you received an email from him asking you to make modifications to the drawing. You think that the drawing is fine and disagree about making the changes. Write him an email to inform him. (disagreement).

(see Ly, under consideration for publication).

The scenarios were inspired from daily routine work in this company and involved Scandinavian and German employees working on a common project with Asian colleagues (at the same level of hierarchy) and communicating by email in English. All the informants of the study were employees of the company who were in direct and regular contact with Asian colleagues. The informants were asked to write an email "as if" they were writing to their Asian colleagues, thus reproducing a familiar situation. In order to test for the validity and accuracy of the situations and possibly modify them, some employees of the company were asked to comment critically on these situations. As the situations were perceived by these reviewers as very realistic, they were not modified. The role enactments were carried out between March and June 2013 in seminars on intercultural communication, as a part of understanding the communication challenges. Out of the 130 informants participating in the seminar, 63 allowed me to use their written output for my research (approximately 50% response rate) and 182 elicited emails were collected.

The emails were analysed in terms of level of directness and mitigation strategies used. The results are presented in detail in an article (Ly, under consideration for publication). An interesting finding is that the Scandinavian and German informants were rather indirect (65.5% of the messages) and clearly indirect (90% of the messages) when expressing criticisms and disagreements respectively. Criticisms for instance were mostly communicated through an expression of difference that softened the force of the message, as in "We have received different values of this data, could you please check…" instead of very direct criticism such as "your data is incorrect". Most of the disagreement messages were also expressed in an indirect way, through a request for clarification such as "Can you please clarify why you want me to modify the drawings?" instead of an explicit disagreement as in "I can't agree to this change". Even though requests were mostly expressed directly, the study shows that their illocutionary force was softened by many downgraders such as politeness markers ("please", "kindly"), modal verbs ("Can you send", "Could you send"), or grounders that explain or justify the request "Because our customer is pushing very much now".

The results collected through role enactments nuance the interviewees' responses in which they claimed to be direct. The findings also show that there is a discrepancy between the perception of one's own communication style (collected through interviews) and what is actually uttered (role enactment). Though some informants might have been lying, it is more probable to think, as Rosendale states, that "people often do not know exactly how they do things, especially those acts that are part of their everyday communication repertoires" (Rosendale, 1989).

Role enactment turned out to be a fruitful method of collecting language data in my project. Even though I had access to a company, such data could only be collected because the informants and the management did not perceive it as confidential. In addition, as it was part of a training activity, the employees were eager to participate, as they perceived it as a win-win situation. Furthermore, the role enactments were rapidly distributed and the data collection took place in a rather short period of time (four months). In terms of method, elicited emails allowed me to isolate the variables, generate language data and conduct a linguistic analysis of the utterances that can be compared across cultures.

4 Discussion

Is there only one best method?

In a paper examining three research methods – "armchair, field and laboratory" – Jucker (2009) rightly points out that "researchers tend to defend their chosen method as the only one that provides reliable and useful results and criticize other methods as completely unsuitable" (Jucker 2009, 1619). In fact, the choice of method to collect language data should rather depend on the research questions, the type of study conducted, the availability of the data and the time allowed for the research project.

First, the choice of data collection method depends on the object of study and on the research questions. If the researcher is interested in understanding the perception and the interpretation of the informants' language practices in the workplace, then they should resort to interviews. On the other hand, if the researcher is interested in how a specific language event is actually uttered in workplace interactions, then the observation of naturally occurring data and role enactment data would seem more appropriate.

Second, the method used to collect data also depends on the type of study and the stage of research. As has been explained earlier, the observation of naturally occurring interactions and the use of interviews are relevant in exploratory studies, or when the researcher is searching for an object to study. On the other hand, when the researcher wants to test hypotheses or detect trends in language use, then an experiment may be conducted, and therefore role enactment can be relevant.

Third, there is no denying that the method used to collect data also depends on the availability of the data. When access to corporations has been granted, such as in the Wellington project, it is somehow easier to get access, to observe, and to record authentic interactions. One should however bear in mind that in general, getting access to a company is challenging, even for experienced researchers with extended networks. Access to companies is – according to my own experience – even more challenging for junior scholars with a limited or no professional network.

Finally, time allowed to collect the data is also decisive in the choice of method. As has been said earlier, when working with naturally occurring data, prior networking and trust building are essential elements that take time (in addition to building the network). Furthermore, the data collection itself and the transcription of such data also take time. If part of this work cannot be outsourced or done with some assistance, it is very challenging for a young scholar such as a PhD student to deliver results within a three or four year time frame. In this case, experiments can again be a relevant method to generate data.

Use of role enactment in methodological triangulation

Research methods do not need to be used alone. On the contrary, they can be used in combination with other methods to increase the credibility and the validity of results. The concept of methodological triangulation has been identified and defined by Denzin (1978) as involving more than one method to gather data, such as interviews, observations, questionnaires and discussion.

The use of different methods in combination may be useful in some studies. As all methods present different perspectives on a research question, the use of different methods may yield interesting results. In my research project for instance, methodological triangulation has been used to consider an issue from different perspectives and to collect data – see section 3 ("An example of role enactment in the workplace"). The observation of meetings let me understand the interactions between the participants, and catch a glimpse of the possible challenges in communication across cultures, and the interviews allowed me to understand the employees' perceptions of their communication practices. Last, through the use of role enactment (elicited emails), I could analyse the linguistic realization of the three studied speech acts. The results yielded by using these three methods were somewhat different, and allowed me to nuance my conclusions and, in my opinion, to give a new perspective on the overall research question. Role enactment, used alone or in combination with other research methods can therefore provide new insights into a research question and enrich one's study.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, two methods of collecting language data in the workplace, naturally occurring data and interviews, have been described and discussed with regards to their limitations. The use of role enactment has then been argued for, as a method to generate valid and representative data. Role enactment is a method that has often been dismissed by researchers looking for more "authentic data". However, as has been shown in the present paper, it is a method that offers valuable insights into the way language is used in the workplace, particularly in situations where other methods have proven to be challenging. To sum up, role enactment allows the researcher to collect data in workplaces, by-passing confidentiality issues and therefore making access easier. In addition, the researcher can isolate contextual variables and compare outputs across cultures and workplaces. Last, the ways that the method could be used alone or in methodological triangulation have been discussed, laying the emphasis on the richness such methods used in combination could bring to a research project.

Notes

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1. Carbon Copy: the person will receive a copy of the email.
2. The situation was created to yield a criticism but is actually formulated as a request for information. This can be explained by the fact that I wanted to let the participants the possibility not to criticize their colleagues, which would have been impossible if the scenario had been formulated as "criticize their work". I wanted to give the participants the choice of not performing the criticism.

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8. Appendices

8.1. Sources of data

a) Meetings and discussions
   a. Strategy meeting in Shanghai, 29.06.2012.
   b. Informal discussion with the management team during the strategy meeting, the breaks and the banquet dinner, Shanghai, 29.06.2012.
   c. Informal discussion with the management team and Scandinavian expatriates in Shanghai through two evenings, Shanghai, 28-29.06.2012.
   d. Informal discussion with the participants of the workshops during the breaks and meals (lunch, sometimes dinner)
   e. Meeting with the consultant who made the study, 25.09.2012

b) Interviews
   a. Informant 1, Chinese national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Shanghai, China, 16.01.2013, duration: 1h18 min (transcribed)
   b. Informant 2, Chinese national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Shanghai, China, 16.01.2013, duration: 44 min (transcribed)
   c. Informant 3* (not used for paper 1), Chinese national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Shanghai, China, 17.01.2013, duration: 51 min (transcribed)
   d. Informant 4, Norwegian national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Shanghai, China, 17.01.2013, duration: 33 min (transcribed)
   e. Informant 5, Norwegian national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Shanghai, China, 18.01.2013, duration: 36 min (notes taken)
   f. Informant 6*[1], Chinese national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Dalian, China, 22.01.2013, duration: 30 min (transcribed)
   g. Informant 7, Norwegian national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Bergen, Norway, 13.03.2013, duration: 1h10 min (notes taken)
   h. Informant 8, Norwegian national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Bergen, Norway, 13.03.2013, duration: 44 min (transcribed)
   i. Informant 9, Norwegian national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Bergen, Norway, 13.03.2013, duration: 33 min (notes taken)
   j. Informant 10, Norwegian national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Bergen, Norway, 20.03.2013, duration: 30 min (notes taken)

[1] These interviews were not used in paper 1 because the informants were not engineers.

k. Informant 11, Norwegian national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Bergen, Norway, 20.03.2013, duration: 1h02 min (partially transcribed)
l. Informant 12, Norwegian national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Bergen, Norway, 22.03.2013, duration: 38 min (transcribed)
m. Informant 13, Norwegian national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Bergen, Norway, 22.03.2013, duration:49 min (partially transcribed)
n. Informant 14, Norwegian national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Bergen, Norway, 25.03.2013, duration:1h17 min (notes taken)
o. Informant 15, Swedish national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Bergen, Norway, 26.03.2013, duration: 37 min (transcribed)
p. Informant 16, Swedish national. Interview conducted in the business unit in Gothenburg, Sweden, 14.04.2013, duration: 53 min (transcribed)

c) Role enactment data were collected in workshops organised in:
   a. Bergen, Norway, 15. 03.2013 and 18.03.2013.
   b. Kristiansand, Norway, 21.03.2013.
   c. Gothenburg, Sweden, 17.04.2013 and 19.04.2013.
   d. Bremen, Germany, 13.06. 2013.
   e. Hamburg, Germany, 17.06.2013.

d) Perception questionnaires data were collected in workshops organised in:
   a. Shanghai, China, 27.05.2013.
   b. Dalian, China, 28.05.2013.
   c. Busan, Korea, 30.05.2013.

e) Company documents
   a. Report from the consultant, December 2010.
   b. Internal documents (meeting slides and minutes)
   c. Annual reports from 2011 and 2012

8.2. Transcription and coding of the interviews (example)

Extracts from an interview conducted in Gothenburg, 16.04.2013

Male, Swedish. Duration: 53 min

The interview was fully transcribed, verbatim. The interviewer and the interviewee are not native speakers of English.

Coding categories are set in parentheses in blue.

ANNELISE: #00:01:26-7# How long have you worked in the company?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:01:28-7# Close to 5 years.

ANNELISE: #00:01:32-4# And have you worked in other companies before?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:01:43-1# Yes. I started working as a steel structural engineer in a consultant agency, doing strength analysis on anything from ships, cars, hockey clubs, pretty much everything. Then I moved on for (Company). (ENGINEER–EXPERIENCE)

ANNELISE: #00:02:10-7# And you have studied engineering?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:02:16-3# Yes, engineering, naval architecture here in Gothenburg. (ENGINEER)

(...)

ANNELISE: #00:06:58-2# Do you feel that you can express what you want in English?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:07:04-5# Yes, but maybe, I don't think that I will always find the nuances in the language, but in general I can get what I want to say across. But then, mostly I deal with people, I feel they have a lower level of English than I have. (ENGLISH LEVEL-OWN LEVEL)

ANNELISE: #00:07:30-6# Do you mean in general in Sweden or abroad?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:07:39-1# Both.

ANNELISE: #00:07:40-0# ok. That's your perception.

INTERVIEWEE: #00:07:45-1# That's my perception.

ANNELISE: #00:07:46-0# Why is that?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:08:24-8# Partly based on what words, the vocabulary the other person uses, I feel that I have a larger vocabulary. And sometimes I'm not very clear, I don't know, but my feeling is that I'm fairly clear but I have to simplify the words, and the length og the sentences sometimes, in order to get my message across. (ENGLISH LEVEL–ACCOMMODATION)

ANNELISE: #00:08:23-7# Are you still talking about communication with the Swedes, that you need to simplify?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:08:32-7# No, not really with the Swedes, mostly in Asia. Sometimes in France I have experienced the same thing as well. If you would generalise, I think that often a Swedish person understands English very good but when it comes to writing and speaking, we are not as good as we believe we are. (ENGLISH LEVEL- OTHERS)

ANNELISE: #00:09:08-4# Ok. How often do you communicate with the Chinese?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:09:18-3# If we have a project there, everyday, pretty much.

ANNELISE: #00:09:23-6# And how often do you have a project with China?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:09:33-0# Maybe 60% of the time, on average.

ANNELISE: #00:09:34-6# And you've done that for 5 years?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:09:38-9# yes (CONTACT WITH CHINESE COLLEAGUE)

(...)

ANNELISE: #00:13:16-0# How would you rate the English level of your Chinese colleagues or partners? (ENGLISH LEVEL- OTHERS)

INTERVIEWEE: #00:13:26-6# It varies from really really bad till ... I see one of the supplier I've been working the most with, I'd seen her English improved quite a lot since we 've first met. Now she's about average. But then it ranges from... You see, some of the project managers, they understand but they would never say a word in English. Why they would not do it, I don't know. But you see that sometimes they understand, but so far they've never said anything. (ENGLISH LEVEL – PROBLEM)

ANNELISE: #00:14:10-1# No. Is there one person that speaks for the group?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:14:14-5# Yes.

ANNELISE: #00:14:16-6# And then this person is the one who speaks better English?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:14:20-4# Yes.

ANNELISE: #00:14:21-0# Is it the reason why this person speaks for the group, you think?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:14:23-6# Yes

ANNELISE: #00:14:23-6# Ok.

INTERVIEWEE: #00:14:26-3# Most of the times I have experienced this is usually with a fairly young girl in the marketing department who speaks English and speaks for the whole group. If you're lucky, it's someone with some technical knowledge but quite often someone without any technical language which also makes it much harder to get the message across, when you get into technical details. (ENGLISH LEVEL – PROBLEM) (NEED INTERPRETER)

ANNELISE: #00:14:55-6# Do you use interpreters?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:15:02-6# Not professional interpreters, no. Sometimes we have one of our Chinese colleagues to join us (ENGLISH LEVEL – SOLUTION?)

ANNELISE: #00:15:13-1# Who speaks enough English to be able to translate?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:15:13-1# Yes. But still, not a professional translator.

(...)

ANNELISE: #00:17:08-4# Why don't you come with a professional interpreter then?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:17:16-7# Cost. Not accepted by (Company) I would say.

ANNELISE: #00:17:20-2# What would not be accepted?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:17:21-7# The extra cost. We should use our Chinese colleagues.

ANNELISE: #00:17:29-6# Is that a message from the Headquarters?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:17:33-9# No, I would say this is more of a silent thing. I have for instance, been interested in speaking courses, argumentation, English language course. The general answer was that no we don't need that; we're good enough in English. And perhaps we are, I just have too high demands on myself and others. I'm not the right person to say that. But often more focus is on technical part, parts that will give you a direct kickback. While language training, or what interpreters do is more soft. It's not so easy to say that by having this interpreter I was able to push down the price by 2%. (BELF COMPETENCE)

ANNELISE: #00:18:38-0# You cannot really give a direct return on investment?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:18:42-0# No, exactly, exactly.

ANNELISE: #00:18:42-0# I see. And earlier you said that someone from the company comes to do the interpreter's job, and then you're missing some technical details. (BELF COMPETENCE)

INTERVIEWEE: #00:18:59-8# Sometimes, yes. Depends on the person.

(...)

INTERVIEWEE: #00:23:47-4# The problem comes a little bit when you get into the political and bird flue something like that. Then you feel that most persons' English will put a stop to the discussion. You will not be able to go into details about those things. (ENGLISH PROFICIENCY)

ANNELISE: #00:24:02-2# Because of the voculabulary?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:24:06-9# Yes.

ANNELISE: #00:24:07-4# Earlier you also talked about work and technical details. You are trained as an engineer and what I have learned is that, as engineers, you use a lot of drawings. Is it correct?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:24:22-0# Yes.

ANNELISE: #00:24:22-4# That... You use drawing with international standards. Do you work with drawings as well? (DRAWING)

INTERVIEWEE: #00:24:35-8# Yes. That's never a problem. The problem is that when something is not shown on the drawing, that you try to describe in words, sort of more conceptual, then you might have problems. But if you have two well-trained engineers, with drawings in front of them, they don't need any language. I have this fantastic moment: me and a colleague, we were down in Guangzhou and the young engineers they didn't understand. They pointed at the drawings and they discussed and we tried to say it in English. And then the Head engineer, the old head engineer comes in. And my colleague in the late 50ies, him and the old engineer, they start pointing at the drawing, creating sketches, my colleague spoke in English, the other one spoke in Chinese and nothing except from “yes yes”, “no no”, and they completely understood each other, just by drawing on a paper. (DRAWING) But that was two persons with a long experience of the same type of products, and then they didn't need to speak the same languague. Well, you know what I mean. (ENGINEER– SAME BACKGROUND)

(...)

ANNELISE: #00:27:50-2# So, earlier we talked about the type of communication you generally use: face-to-face, email and phone. So face-to-face, you said that it was for negotiation. How about email? I guess that you mosty use email, don't you?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:28:10-8# Yes, mostly. It depends on the level of English the person has. But mostly emails.

ANNELISE: #00:28:22-8# What do you mean by “it depends on the level of English”? To what extent does the level of English influence...

INTERVIEWEE: #00:28:31-1# Face-to-face is ok for lower levels of English; the phone, you need to have a higher level of English for the message to get across, according to my experience...

ANNELISE: #00:28:42-6# and email?

INTERVIEWEE: #00:28:43-6# Email can be even less than the phone. It also depends. If youre gonna discuss a technical problem, there are really no feelings involved. Then the level of English doesn't have to be that good because you can refer to the drawing, you can refer to certain measurement or standard. And that would be probably enough. But if we start to discuss why they are delayed, then it will be much much harder to discuss in an email. You still have to do it sometimes, but the English cannot be too bad because it's so easy to misinterpret what the other person has written and take as critique what is merely a way to trying to find a solution to the problem. (BELF COMPETENCE)

ANNELISE: #00:29:42-8# So if you are working with say, technical details, then you would write an email. As you say, something that is not personal, you could use emails. But then, what would you do to avoid misunderstandings? Would you take the phone then? Would you call? (EMAIL –CHALLENGES)

INTERVIEWEE: #00:30:10-9# It's very much related to the person on the other side. Usually I would try to gather up those things and save them for a face-to-face meeting and second, I would try to write an email but be very careful in the formulation of my sentences. So it doesn't seem aggressive or critique but just saying that we need to solve this. And probably with the solution. (EMAIL COMMUNICATION)

(...)

8.3. Role enactment: scenarios and participant´s information

Activity: write an email

1) You are working on a project with a Chinese colleague in China. Last week, you asked him to send you a report, X, but he did not do it. Write him an email to ask him again.

2) Your colleague in China has eventually sent you the report. You have read it with attention but have found out that some of the data is incorrect. Write him an email informing him that you have received the report.

3) On Monday, you sent a drawing to your colleague in China. This morning, you received an email from him asking you to make modifications on the drawing. You think that the drawing is fine and disagree to do so. Write him an email to inform him.

Dear participant,

I would like to analyse the emails you have written in the previous activity for my own research. If you do not mind, please fill in the form under and hand in the full document (pages 1&2) to me during the break or at the end of the workshop. The information is anonymous and will be kept confidential. If you do not wish you participate in this study, you do not need to fill in the form. Thank you. Annelise Ly

Your position:

Your education:

Your nationality:

Are you a: Man Woman

Your age: 25-35 35-45 45-55 55-65 65+

How long have you worked with Chinese colleagues?

How often are you in contact with Chinese colleagues?

The contact with the Chinese colleagues is rather:

Very easy Easy Neutral Sometimes difficult Very difficult

Your English: On a scale from 1 to 10 (best), how would you rate:

- Your reading comprehension:
- Your listening comprehension:
- Your writing competence:
- Your listening competence:

8.4. Role enactment: analysis (example)

Pero	Email	Email content	Greeting/ opening: Dear	Hi	Good	Thank	None	Preclosing & closing: Preclosing	Thanks	Best regards	none	Email object	Head act: strategy type	synctactic downgarder	other downgrader	please	upgrader/intensifier	Adjunct to the head act: before HA	after HA
1	1	Dear Sir, Referring to my email last week asking for the report X. we have still not received the report, **please provide me with this ASAP**.	x								x	x	imperative			x	time intensifier	grounder	
2	1	Hi X, **Could you please resend the report from last week**, I might have lost it in my emails, it cannot be found.		x							x		query preparatory	interrogative	resend	x			grounder
3	1	Dear Jenny, I have not yet received the report X. **Could you please check the situation and confirm when you will have it available for me.** It will be needed latest at the end of this week due to project management meeting. Best regards	x							x			hint	interrogative		x		grounder	clarification deadline
4	1	Dear Mr Y.H.Lee, How are you? I hope that fine. I was wondering did you get my previous email where I asked that report concerning spare parts? **Could you please sent that report that we would move forward with this case.** If you need any assistance or you have any question please don't hesitate take contact. Best regards.	x		x					x		x	query preparatory	interrogative		x	time intensifier	checking on availability	offer help
5	1	Dear Colin **Could you please send me the report X again**, I have not yet received it. Thank you B.reg.	x						x	x			query preparatory	interrogative	again	x			grounder
6	1	Dear Sir **can you please send me the report that we talked about last week?** I really need it. Best regards	x					x					query preparatory	interrogative		x			intensifier
7	1	Dear X, **Please send the report I asked about last week.** Best regards	x							x			imperative			x			
8	1	Dear Mr guanxi, reference is made to my email I sent you on april 5th, in which I requested the report X for reviewing purposes. I have so far not received the report, and **I would highly appreciate if you could send me this report.** Your kind understanding of the situation is highly appreciated . Thank you for your kind understanding.	x						x			x	query preparatory	embedded if clause			intensifier	grounder	sweetener
9	1	Dear X, **Could you please provide me with report X**. Would appreciate it you could deliver it during the day.	x								x		query preparatory	interrogative		x			clarification deadline +

8.5. Perception questionnaire: questionnaire and participant´s information

Dear participant of the workshop,

Please fill in the form and the questionnaire.

About yourself:

Your position:

Your education:

Your nationality:

Are you: Male Female

Your age: 25-35 35-45 45-55 55-65 65+

How long have you worked with European colleagues?

How often are you in contact with European colleagues?

Communication

Communicating with Norwegian colleagues is difficult:

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

Communicating with Swedish colleagues is difficult:

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

Communicating with German colleagues is difficult:

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

Your English level:

On a scale from 1 to 10 (best), how would you rate:

- Your reading comprehension:
- Your listening comprehension:
- Your writing competence:
- Your speaking competence:

Please write a cross here (x) if you agree that the questionnaire will be further used for my own research on communication ____

Activity 1:

You are working on a project with a European colleague in TTS (same level on the hierarchy). Last week, he asked you to send him a report, X, but you did not do it.

You receive the following emails:

A) Dear …, good day, please send me the asked report asap, see my message from last week below too. Kind reminder because our customer is pushing very much now. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

B) Dear…, could you be so kind and sent me the needed documents for the design start on May 31st.Thanks in advance.

C) Hi X, Could you please resend the report from last week, I might have lost it in my emails, it cannot be found.

D) Dear…, good day, hope all is well. Just thought I would get in touch to see how are getting along with the X report we spoke about last week. Is there something you would like to discuss? Hope to hear from you soon, best regards.

The email I prefer is:	A	B	C	D
The email I like the least is:	A	B	C	D

I prefer this email because it is:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Clear					
Friendly					
Polite					

Short					
Well written					

Activity 2:

You have sent the report but your colleague in Europe does not agree with some of your data.

You receive the following emails:

A) Dear…, during the reading of report X, I found that some of the data must be incorrect. Could you please check and get back to me?

B) Dear…, many thanks for the report. Overall it was fine although I couldn't help noticing that your figures in section X are different to what I have here. May I ask which source you got this from, or am I missing something?

C) Dear…, I have now gone through the report you sent me and below I have stated some data that I would like you to describe in detail

D) Dear…, Ref. my email of xx. With regards to section xx. I do not quite understand the figure. Could you please clarify this?

The email I prefer is:	A	B	C	D
The email I like the least is:	A	B	C	D

I prefer this email because it is:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Clear					
Friendly					
Polite					
Short					
Well written					

Activity 3:

You have received a drawing; you have made some modifications to it and have sent it to your colleague in Europe. He disagrees to make the changes.

You receive the following emails:

A) Dear…, referring to your email this morning proposing modifications of the drawing. However, we find modifications not necessary and therefore not necessary to revise.

B) Dear…, Good morning. Which part exactly is the problem?To my knowledge all information on this drawing is appropriate and would not feel right doing this. If you really insist please get back in touch and we can discuss it more. Very best regards,

C) Dear…, ref. your comments about making modifications to the drawings. Could you please give me more information about how and why you want to make this modification

D) Dear…, your message is received. We find you comment to be a good solution however at this late stage the effect of additional changes can be delays. To avoid this we propose no changes to be introduced since original design can be considered sufficient for its purpose. Many thanks.

The email I prefer is:	A	B	C	D
The email I like the least is:	A	B	C	D

I prefer this email because it is:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Clear					
Friendly					
Polite					
Short					
Well written					

8.6. Perception questionnaire: analysis

	REQUEST							CRITICISM							DISAGREEMENT							
	Prefer	like the least	Clear	Friendly	Polite	Short	well written	Prefer	like the least	Clear	Friendly	Polite	Short	well written	Prefer	like the least	Clear	Friendly	Polite	Short	well written	
3	A		A	D	N	N	D	D		A	N	N	N	D	B		A	A	A	N	N	Chinese
4	B	D	SA	A	A	SA	SA	B	A	SA	SA	SA	N	SA	D	B	SA	SA	SA	D	A	Chinese
5	C	A	A	D	D	A	A	C	B	A	A	N	A	A	C	D	A	N	N	A	A	Chinese
6	B		SA	A	A	SA	A	D							B							Chinese
7	A	C	A	N	N	N	N	D	C	A	D	D	SA	A	C	A	A	A	A	A	A	Chinese
8	B	C	SA	N	N	A	A	D	B	SA	N	N	SA	SA	D	B	A	N	A	N	SA	Chinese
9	B	C	N	D	D	N	SA	B	D		A	A	N	A	C	B	SA	N	N	SA	SA	Chinese
10	B	D	A	N	N	A	N	D	B	A	N	N	A	A	C	D	A	A	A	N	A	Chinese
11	B	C	A	N	N	SA	D	D	A	A	A	A	SA	N	C	B	A	N	N	A	N	Chinese
12	B	C	SA	SA	A	A	A	D	B	SA				SD	D							Chinese
13	D							C	A						D	A						Chinese
14	B	A	SA	N	N	SA	N	C	B	SA	A	N	SA	N	D	A	A	A	A	N	N	Chinese
15	D	B	A	SA	SA	N	N	B	A	A	A	SA	A	A	D	A	A	SA	SA	N	N	Chinese
16	B	A	SA	A	SA	A	A	D	A	SA	N	N	A	N	D	A	N	A	SA	N	SA	Chinese
17	A	C	N	N	N	N	N	B	A	N	N	N	N	N	D	B	N	N	N	N	N	Chinese
18	B	C	SA	N	N	SA	A	D	B	A	N	N	SA	A	D	A	A	A	A	D	A	Chinese
19	A	D	A			A	A	B	C	N	A	A		A	C	A	A	A	A	A	A	Chinese
20	A	D	SA	SA	SA	A	SA	B	A	N	SA	SA	A	SA	B	A	A	SA	SA	SA	SA	Korean
21	A	D	SA	N	N	N	N	B	A	A	N	N	SA	N	D	A	A	SA	SA	N	A	Korean
22	A	B	SA	A	A	N	A	B	D	A	SA	SA	A	SA	B	C	A	A	A	A	A	Korean
23	C	A/D	SA	A	A	SA	SA	A	D	SA	A	A	SA	SA	C	D	SA	A	A	A	SA	Korean
24	A	B	A	N	A	D	A	B	A	A	N	A	D	A	B	C	A	N	A	D	A	Korean
25	A	C	A	D	A	N	N	B	A	A	A	A	N	N	D	C	A	A	A	N	A	Korean
26	B	D	SA	A	SA	SA	N	C	A	SA	A	A	N	A	B	A	SA	SA	SA	A	A	Korean
27	B	C	A	A	SA	A	N	B	D	A	A	A	D	A	B	A	A	A	A	N	A	Korean
28	B	C	N	A	N	N	N	A	C	A	N	N	N	N	B	A	A	N	N	N	N	Korean
29	A	D	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	A	C	SA	D	N	SA	A	B	D	A	SA	A	A	A	Korean
30	A	C	A	A	A	D	N	B	A	N	SA	SA	D	A	B	A	A	SA	SA	D	A	Korean
31	D	A		SA				B	A		SA				D	C		SA				Korean
	A	D	SA	A	A	D	A	B	C	A	SA	SA	D	A	B	A	A	A	A	N	A	Korean
	D	B	SA	SA	SA	A	SA	B	A	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	D	C	SA	SA	SA	A	SA	Korean