

# Linguistic skills: the fundament of boundary spanning in international organizational contexts?

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Les personnes qui relient deux groupes de part et d'autre d'une frontière quelconque ont un impact significatif sur la façon dont la relation entre les groupes se développe au fil du temps en termes de communication, de flux de connaissances et de présence ou d'absence de conflit. Le rôle clé de ces personnes, appelées ici "passeurs de frontières" (Angl. "boundary spanners"), est particulièrement important lorsque la communication se déroule à travers de multiples frontières linguistiques et culturelles. C'est le cas dans les sociétés multinationales, mais aussi dans d'autres types d'organisations qui opèrent régulièrement à travers les frontières internationales. Cet article explore dans une perspective théorique comment les compétences linguistiques et culturelles des frontières et les liens entre ces compétences et d'autres aspects de leur comportement influencent l'émergence et le développement de relations positives ou négatives entre individus et unités dans de tels contextes organisationnels internationaux. Un cadre interdisciplinaire est développé et des propositions pour des recherches futures sont avancées.

**Mots-clés:**

Passeur de frontière, organisation internationale, communication inter-unité, compétence linguistique, framing.

**Keywords:**

Boundary spanner, international organization, interunit communication, linguistic skill, framing.

## 1. Introduction

This exploratory paper aims to broaden the theoretical understanding of individuals spanning group boundaries in international organizational contexts, or 'boundary spanners'. Research in the context of multinational corporations (MNCs) indicates that boundary spanners can bridge group boundaries, support flows of knowledge and social capital across these boundaries, and prevent or dampen the eruption of conflicts between groups (Kostova & Roth 2003). In this paper, specific interest will be directed toward boundary spanners' linguistic and cultural skills and their links to other factors enabling boundary spanning behavior – specifically framing, motivation and organizational context – in pursuit of an emergent research avenue fusing insights from multiple disciplines including international business and management research, linguistics, and psychology. A framework and propositions for future interdisciplinary research are advanced.

The paper draws extensively on recent research in the context of MNCs, where boundary spanners and especially their linguistic and cultural skills have been

recognized as important for a number of positive outcomes. This is not a coincidence, as multinational corporations are multilingual and –cultural almost by default (e.g., Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman 2005) and rife with internal tensions along these linguistic and cultural boundaries as well as others, such as functional, unit, geographical and temporal ones (Carlile 2004). At the same time, multinational corporations derive a substantial proportion of their competitive advantage from knowledge sharing and interunit collaboration (e.g., Kogut & Zander 1993). Consequently, their performance can be severely damaged by interunit conflicts, and thus the capabilities of boundary spanners are, in principle, of significant value to them.

However, as will be argued below, boundary spanning capabilities are highly pertinent also to other types of organizations operating regularly across multiple boundaries in international contexts. Also, they are not only pertinent to managers but also to other organizational members. The capability to assuage tensions and advance harmonious cooperation across different kinds of organizational boundaries improves working conditions and ensures that less energy and effort is wasted on destructive, emotionally stressful tensions and conflicts. Hence, interdisciplinary research efforts to understand boundary spanners better are of broad relevance to both business and society.

## **2. Background**

In recent years, international business and management scholars have become increasingly interested in the role of linguistic and cultural skills for boundary spanning in MNCs. This can be seen as part of the broader insight that language skills are indeed relevant to MNC management. This insight, unlikely to be perceived as path-breaking by linguists, was first advanced in the context of international business and management research in the late 1990s (Marschan et al. 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999a, 1999b), and became part of mainstream research in this field even more recently. The two leading journals in the field devoted special issues to the matter only in the 2010s (Journal of World Business 2011; Journal of International Business Studies 2014).

Recent advances notwithstanding, the understanding of boundary spanning across linguistic and cultural boundaries in multinational corporations remains in its relative infancy. Key arguments motivating the present paper is that this understanding is in need of further development, and that systematic efforts are requested in order to extend it beyond the context of large multinational firms, which constitutes the empirical base of most current research on the topic. Boundary spanners exist also in other organizational contexts where linguistic and cultural boundaries are crossed, such as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and other kinds of international organizations, playing equally important roles there (see e.g. Johnson & Duxbury 2010 for an insightful study of boundary spanning by Canadian diplomats). With increasing voluntary

and involuntary migration across national borders, boundary spanners are also likely to become more important in domestically operating organizations. Due to transnational mobility, even businesses deriving most of their turnover from domestic markets may have significant international diversity among their employees. This paper addresses a broad range of organizational contexts and thus aspires to contribute to our understanding of such contexts as well as large MNCs.

Multinational corporations are nevertheless an appropriate starting point. This is because they offer empirical insight into phenomena and dynamics that may also exist elsewhere, but in forms that are less readily observable and more difficult to interpret (Ghoshal & Westney 1993; Roth & Kostova 2003). For example, in domestic non-corporate contexts, boundary spanning may be pertinent to understand how relationships between ethnic or cultural subgroups develop over time in terms of accommodation, integration, negotiation and/or conflict mediation. Obviously such dynamics are important, but when they are framed in terms of key societal issues, individual boundary-spanners and their actions, motivations and resources may receive less attention – no matter how crucial they are for positive outcomes. Similarly, research on boundary spanners in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) may face difficulties in parsing out actions and motivations related to boundary spanning from those related to innovation, entrepreneurship, and/or leadership, as individuals in small organizations often have multiple roles – even though a better understanding of each separate role might benefit both individuals and organizations.

Against this background, research in the context of MNCs may help us discern otherwise obscure patterns and interpret them with greater clarity. Hence the ambition here to draw on research in MNC contexts to provide a more general understanding of individuals spanning linguistic and cultural boundaries in organizational contexts.

The above argumentation suggests that boundary spanning may be of significant practical relevance for the wellbeing and professional success of individuals in multilingual and –cultural contexts, as well as for the organizations that employ and develop them. It has long been argued that the ability to share knowledge internally is a primary reason for the existence of multinational corporations (Kogut & Zander 1993). While we engage here with a broader category of contexts than just MNCs, the following question remains valid: if the ability to share knowledge is important, how can we minimize the negative impact of linguistic and cultural differences in terms of misunderstandings, tensions and conflicts? In a globalizing economy and society where an increasing number of people need to cross linguistic and cultural barriers on a daily basis both at work and in private, challenges related to these issues are bound to be prevalent as well as pertinent from a business viewpoint.

Recent research suggests that in addition to their skills in specific languages and cultures, individuals spanning linguistic and cultural boundaries in MNCs may also rely on behaviors such as framing (e.g., Cornelissen et al. 2011) and different forms of plurilingualism (e.g., Lüdi et al. 2013; Janssens & Steyaert 2014; Langinier & Ehrhart 2015; Gaibrois, 2016; Tietze et al. 2016) to ensure fluent internal communication. In other words, there is a range of language-related behaviors that potentially enables boundary-spanning individuals to frame day-to-day interactions in consensual terms, achieve communicative purposes, and leverage creative resources. Over time this is likely to contribute to the emergence of shared identities that encompass and envelop those of previously separate, and possibly conflicting subgroups, thus assuaging any tensions between groups and contributing to harmonious intergroup relations.

The above considerations highlight the need to conceive of language competences in a broad sense. In organizational contexts where linguistic and cultural boundaries are being spanned, both competence in discrete languages and ability to produce plurilingual speech are relevant abilities. Given that most international business scholars tend to have focused on discrete languages and operationalized them in a simple manner, the growing interest in plurilingualism is a welcome development suggesting an area of future collaboration between linguists and business academics.

Additional and complementary input may be provided by occupational psychology and its applications within Human Resource Management (HRM) – an area of research that may be helpful in deepening our understanding of individuals' motives to put their linguistic and cultural competences to use in multinational organizational contexts. In combination, the approaches mentioned above suggest a significant yet underexplored research avenue, the pursuit of which is the topic of the rest of this paper.

The literature reviewed below draws on an eclectic set of sources discussing boundary spanning behavior in multilingual and –cultural organizational contexts, with a particular focus on the issues highlighted above. Based on this review, a frame of reference and a number of propositions for future validation are advanced, in line with the exploratory approach of the study.

### **3. Literature review**

This review is structured as follows. First, a summary is provided of previous research on individual-level language use in the MNC context, and on linguistic and cultural boundary spanners in particular. We then proceed to an overview of what is currently known about framing, plurilingual competences, and psychological preconditions for boundary spanning. These sections are summarized in a framework inspired by the well-established ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) model of human resource management (e.g., Lepak et al. 2006), which views employee performance as a function of three components:

ability, motivation, and opportunity to perform. Analyzing the issues covered in this paper from the complementary angles of ability, motivation and opportunity provides a base for the subsequent development of propositions in the final section of the paper.

### *3.1 Individual-level patterns of language use in MNCs*

Among their other seminal contributions to research on language in the context of MNCs, Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999a, 1999b) observed that individuals with relevant language skills (which they termed 'language nodes') were often more extensively involved in inter-unit communication than their formal position indicated, and tended to have superior access to information compared to their less skilled colleagues and superiors. The latter in turn tended to delegate a relatively more extensive responsibility for linguistically challenging interunit relationships to these 'nodes'. Over time, this resulted in the latter receiving or actively taking on organizational roles that Feely and Harzing (2003) have described with the term 'bridge individuals'.

Subsequent research (e.g. Holden & von Kortzfleisch 2004; Vaara et al. 2005; Piekkari 2008; Tietze 2008, 2010) has shown that when demand for skills in a certain language in a particular organizational context exceeds supply, individuals with a command of the language in question are likely to gravitate toward formal or informal roles as gatekeepers, *compradors*<sup>1</sup>, liaisons, or translators between their linguistically less skillful colleagues and relevant external parties, endowing them with access to networks and formal or informal influencing opportunities. This has often been interpreted in terms of these individuals accumulating disproportionate power (e.g. Vaara et al. 2005), but such roles have also been found to entail increased work pressures in the form of requirements for translation support, clarification of misunderstandings and other 'bridging' tasks that are not related to the actual work tasks of the individuals in question (e.g. Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999a, 1999b).

Mirroring the formal or informal, yet undeniably to some extent special position of individuals with desirable language skills, linguistically less skilled individuals have been found to be susceptible to (real or perceived) negative personal consequences such as career-related degradation (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999b; Piekkari et al. 2005; Piekkari & Tietze 2012), status loss, or language-based ostracism (Neeley 2013; Neeley et al. 2012). Such consequences have been observed in a broad range of empirical situations including 'subsidiary employees lacking skills in the HQ language, expatriates lacking skills in the subsidiary language, senior subsidiary managers being less skilled than junior managers in a newly established common corporate language, subsidiary

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<sup>1</sup> This word has its roots in the Portuguese word for 'purchase'. It originated as a term for local merchants who acted as mediators between foreign producers and local consumers (Reis Rosa & Aquino Alves 2010).

representatives being more skilled in the common corporate language than their colleagues at HQ, and one party in a merger being less skilled than the other in the new HQ language, or the common corporate language' (Tietze et al. 2016: 328).

As this list indicates, an elevated or privileged formal organizational position does not necessarily protect organizational members from language-related negative effects. However, depending on other resources at their disposal and the surrounding institutional environment, organizational members may be able to influence and/or resist language-related policies and choices to a lesser or greater degree. Vaara et al. (2005) document a case where the Finnish employees of a newly merged Finnish-Swedish bank drew on the role of English as the international *lingua franca* of the financial sector to resist the imposition of Swedish as a common corporate language in their company. In that case, the global position of English was among the institutional resources that individual actors could leverage to influence local language choices. In other situations, organizational members may not be able to resist, or 'fight', corporate language policy decisions; their options may then be restricted to 'flight' (i.e. looking for another job) or 'adaptation' (e.g. improving their language skills or relying on other solutions, such as online translation services) in order to cope with new demands (Tietze et al. 2016).

### 3.2 *Boundary spanning*

Boundary spanning is a longstanding concept in organizational research (e.g. Adams 1976) and basically denotes the activity of individuals keeping or managing the contact between two organizations or two units of the same organization. It has been applied to many forms of organizational relationships including interunit relationships in multinational corporations (e.g. Kostova & Roth 2003), contacts between different units of a diplomatic corps (Johnson & Duxbury 2010), and relationships between suppliers and customers (e.g. Singh et al. 1994).

Building on Adams (1976), Ancona & Caldwell (1992), Callister & Wall (2001) and Richter et al. (2006), boundary spanners can be defined as individuals who are perceived by other members of both their own in-group and/or relevant out-groups to engage in and facilitate significant interactions between two groups (Koveshnikov et al. 2012). The activities of these individuals can be synthesized into four functions: exchanging, linking, facilitating and intervening. Definitions of and key references to each of these functions following Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014) are provided in Table 1.

<b>Function</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Key references</b>
<i>Exchanging</i>	Personal engagement in the exchange of information, knowledge and other such resources with actors in the other unit.	Ancona & Caldwell 1992; Mäkelä & Brewster 2009; Johnson & Duxbury 2010
<i>Linking</i>	Utilization of personal networks to enable other, previously unconnected actors to connect across unit boundaries.	Burt 1992, 1997; Kostova & Roth 2003; Johnson & Duxbury 2010
<i>Facilitating</i>	Personal engagement in facilitating/assisting others' cross-boundary transactions.	Boland & Tenkasi 1995; Harzing 2001; Johnson & Duxbury 2010
<i>Intervening</i>	Personal active intervention in inter-unit interactions in order to create positive outcomes, (e.g., resolving misunderstandings, managing conflicts or contributing to trust building between the two units).	Ancona & Caldwell 1992; Kostova & Roth 2003; Johnson & Duxbury 2010

Table 1: Definitions of boundary spanning functions

As Table 1 indicates, all four boundary-spanning functions require some degree of linguistic and/or cultural skills. Based on empirical studies of Finnish-Russian and Finnish-Chinese headquarters-subsidary relationships, Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014) concluded that especially the more advanced functions – facilitating and intervening – demanded a high degree of comprehension and extensive ability to actively manage and redirect interactions that otherwise might turn arduous or escalate into conflict. Based on Hong (2010), these authors also noted that intervening can involve mediation in existing conflicts, too, further accentuating the level of skill required.

### *3.3 Plurilingual competences and boundary spanning*

The research reviewed above suggests that linguistic and cultural skills are key resources for boundary spanners in MNCs, but business scholars have tended not to delve deeply into the nature of these skills, mostly operationalizing languages as distinct or discrete (e.g., 'English', 'Japanese'), even in spite of empirical evidence that daily life in international organizations often entails the mixing of languages (e.g., Steyaert, Ostendorp and Gaibrois 2011) and involves also other linguistic resources such as 'company speak' (Welch, Welch and Marschan-Piekkari 2005). Janssens and Steyaert's (2014: 624) proposal for a 'human-centered multilingualism' where language is conceived as 'a social activity in which speakers mobilize multiple linguistic resources to express voice' is a rare exception in a leading international business journal.

However, recent research on multilinguaging (Lüdi et al. 2013), plurilinguaging (Lüdi et al. 2016) and/or translanguaging (García 2009; Langinier & Ehrhart 2015) suggests that this type of language use is one of the ways in which boundary spanners may exert their positive influence in MNCs. Other concepts that capture the linguistic eclecticism that individuals may draw upon to act as

boundary spanners are multilinguaculturing (Yanaprasart 2015), hybrid languages (Gaibrois 2016) and special languages and corporate sociolects (Tietze et al. 2016). These conceptual advances suggest that a broader and arguably more realistic conception of the use of linguistic resources may be gaining ground in business studies.

While there are differences between the concepts briefly mentioned above, they all point toward what Janssens and Steyaert (2014: 624) have identified, with reference to Pennycook (2007), as the need to 'think of languages not as clearly bounded, unified systems but rather as translingual practices.' In relation to earlier research on boundary spanners, this implies an imperative for future work to engage with a significantly broader set of linguistic resources – including but not limited to those listed above and different combinations, mixes, hybrids or blends of these. It further implies less attention toward language choice interpreted as 'Finnish', 'Russian', or 'English', and more attention toward situations where – for example – a Finnish and a Russian accountant solve a practical problem in imperfect English by drawing on a mix of terms specific to the accounting profession, company-specific abbreviations and concepts, and whatever words and expressions they may know in each other's first or preferred language.

Furthermore, language use in such an encounter will be conditioned by the interlocutors' understanding of each other's cultural background, which provides an additional resource they can draw on to try to interpret each other's words and behaviors. By drawing upon such multiplex combinations of linguistic and cultural resources, interlocutors may arrive at genuine mutual understanding, yet when asked, they may say that they usually conduct their meetings in English.

### *3.4 Framing and boundary spanning*

Framing (see e.g. Bateson 1955/1972; Goffman 1974; Tversky & Kahneman 1981) is long established as a ubiquitous construct across a range of social science disciplines and particularly in management and organizational research, where it has been applied to managerial cognition and decision-making, strategic and organizational change, and social movements and institutions (Cornelissen & Werner 2014). It has variously been described in terms of 'how organizational actors process information and how the resulting interpretations mediate their actions' (Burg et al. 2014: 352 based on Daft & Weick 1984; Kaplan 2011; Walsh 1995), or individuals' use of signals, such as gestures or words, to 'evoke frames of interpretation for their behaviour or communicated messages' (Cornelissen et al. 2011: 1703, building on Bateson 1955/1972).

Framing can thus pertain both to how actors through their behavior can influence others' interpretations of situations, and to how actors' interpretations of situations influence their own behavior. The essence of framing is brilliantly

captured in the title of the book 'Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate' (Lakoff 2004), where the sentence 'Don't think of an elephant!' immediately frames the situation so that it is very difficult not to think of an elephant.

Burg et al. (2014) argue that the cognitive processes underpinning framing play a key role especially in situations when information is complex, ambiguous or absent (Kaplan & Tripsas 2008). Such situations challenge actors to develop cognitive structures – frames – to understand and interpret their environment. Once developed, these frames then 'allocate the actors' attention, guide their evaluations of ambiguous information, and provide a basis for inference' (Burg et al. 2014: 352).

What is relevant for our discussion is the notion of framing as a complementary resource that boundary spanners draw upon to exert a positive influence on interunit relationships. This is what Kostova & Roth (2003) suggest in their seminal theoretical piece on boundary spanners in MNC interunit contexts, which underlines the importance of individuals in multinational corporations telling their colleagues in their own unit about positive or efficacious interactions with people in the other unit. Linking framing explicitly with linguistic and cultural skills as resources for boundary spanning in international contexts, Barner-Rasmussen (2015) has argued that the former both overlaps with and complements the latter.

Research shows that framing is partly culturally conditioned, for example in that identical conflict episodes are perceived differently across cultures (Gelfand et al. 2001), and that the effectiveness of framing efforts is influenced by the degree to which the frames in question are culturally familiar to stakeholders (Cornelissen et al. 2011). It has also been shown that individuals with advanced linguistic and cultural skills have access to different cultural interpretive frames (Thomas et al. 2008; Brannen & Thomas 2010).

In combination, these findings strongly suggest that different interpretive frames are an important cause of misunderstandings, tensions and conflicts in international contexts, and that individuals with advanced linguistic and cultural skills are potentially in a position to act as translators or interpreters of such frames. Thus, they may help dampen or alleviate any problems related to inappropriate framing before they escalate to hurt interpersonal and organizational cohesion. Linguistically and culturally skilled individuals are also likely to pre-empt problems by recognizing and avoiding clumsy, ambiguous or inappropriate frames before they are used, increasing the likelihood of message acceptance and decreasing the risk of antagonizing interaction partners.

The pattern indicated above suggests the potential in interunit relationships for a cycle of framing, interpretation and behavior where each stage can have positive or negative organizational consequences, each stage and each loop of

the cycle influences the subsequent one, and information about positive or negative interactions spreads more widely in the respective units for each loop of the cycle. This can give rise to a powerful effect of reciprocal reinforcement, yielding powerful virtuous or vicious circles of which especially the latter may be very difficult to break. A schematic illustration of such a process is provided in Figure 1. Boundary spanners can potentially intervene at every stage.

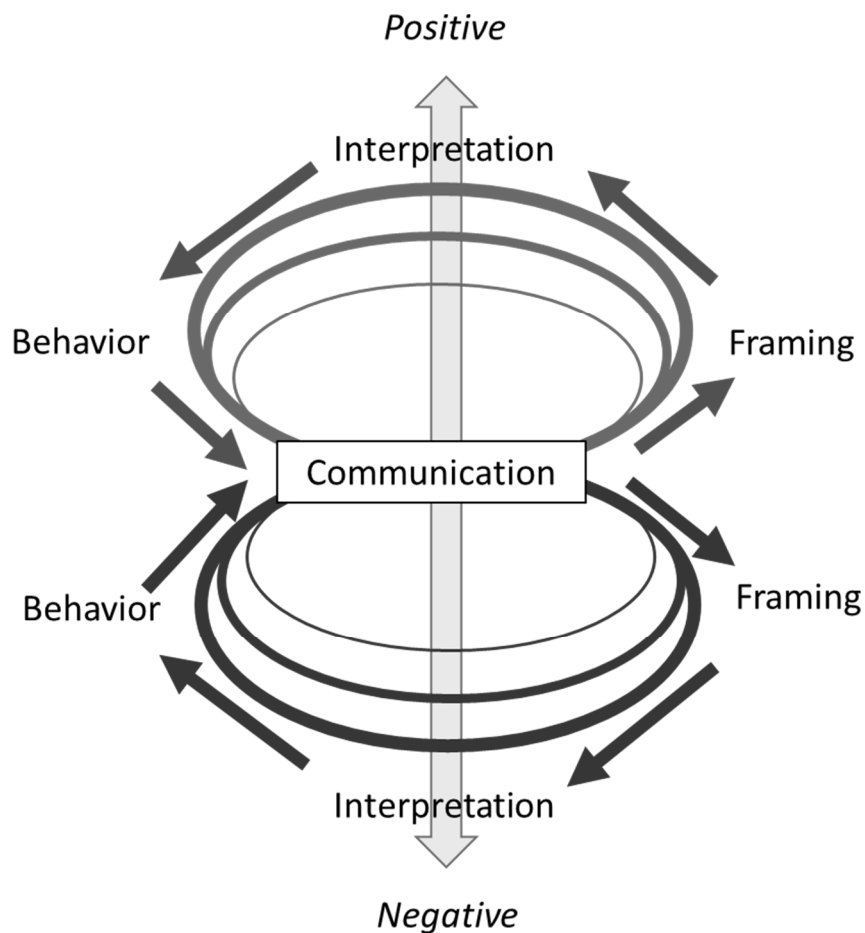


Figure 1: How communication in MNCs is influenced by boundary spanning behavior

A simple empirical example of how boundary spanners can influence processes of this kind can be found in Ribeiro's (2007) study of Japanese translators in Brazilian firms. The translators were found to go beyond the strict remit of their job duties and to act also as informal cultural buffers/mediators. In order to avert potential conflicts and misunderstandings, they occasionally acted independently to omit or rephrase messages they regarded as culturally inappropriate.

### *3.5 Motivation and opportunity in boundary spanning*

We have referred above to the AMO model, which considers the work-related performance of an organization's employees to be a function of ability,

motivation, and opportunity to perform (e.g. Lepak et al. 2006; Liao et al. 2009; Jiang et al. 2012). Applying this analytical lens to the performance of boundary spanners demonstrates unanimously that the previous research reviewed above is heavily tilted towards ability. Linguistic and cultural skills (including plurilingual competences) are abilities; so is the knowledge of culturally conditioned frames to guide one's own actions and interpret and act upon others' actions. But we know very little about why people with the ability to act as linguistic and cultural boundary spanners may actually do so.

By highlighting boundary spanners' motivations and opportunities to act alongside their abilities, the AMO model draws attention to a number of issues that are mostly implicit in the literature reviewed above, yet permits some inferences regarding especially the motivations of these individuals. Firstly, multiple empirical studies (e.g. Schotter & Beamish 2011; Yagi & Kleinberg 2011) have shown that boundary spanning is not necessarily something that organizational members engage in because it is an explicit part of their job. Rather, individuals with the requisite skills may be requested by their peers and superiors to take on certain tasks – or may feel a duty to do so – even if they themselves do not actively seek these responsibilities and/or the tasks in question may be above (or below) their formal hierarchical position.

Secondly, and partly in opposition to the first finding, there are indications that individuals with the skills required to act as boundary spanners actively seek out opportunities to do so in order to accrue information, power and visibility advantages, thus advancing their own careers (e.g. Vaara et al. 2005). Thirdly, there is interview data to suggest that some individuals engage in boundary spanning because they enjoy communication and interaction with others across a broad spectrum and find it an interesting part of their professional life (e.g. Lönnholm 2012). These three tentative motives might be termed 'duty', 'ambition', and 'curiosity'. But the question has not been addressed systematically and we lack a holistic understanding of the possible links between different motivational aspects and paths into boundary spanning roles. In sum, current research offers only a limited understanding of linguistic and cultural boundary spanners' motivations to use their skills, and very little to help us grasp their possible reasons for not doing so.

As for the opportunity dimension, most research on boundary spanning takes as its starting point that the formal leaders of a group will also act as its boundary spanners in relation to other groups (e.g. Richter et al. 2006). Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014) criticized this assumption and in their empirical study found boundary spanners at all levels of formal hierarchy, while far from all individuals in formal interunit liaison roles in fact acted as boundary spanners. However, their findings also suggested that given sufficient ability and motivation, persons whose jobs provide opportunities to interact across unit

boundaries (for example, an executive assistant in one of their case companies) are more likely to accumulate boundary spanning responsibilities.

The lack of 'competition' to act as the boundary spanner of a subgroup or unit could potentially be a second dimension of opportunity. So could participation in organizational control and coordination mechanisms such as job rotation, interunit teams, task forces, and committees. Within the field of international business and management there is a longstanding interest in such mechanisms and their positive organizational effects on knowledge sharing/transfer and different aspects of interunit collaboration and integration (see e.g. Hedlund 1986 for an early contribution). The generally accepted view in this literature is that networks and contacts formed as part of such interaction are an important aspect of the 'glue' that keeps an MNC together (e.g. Gupta & Govindarajan 2000).

However, the historical tendency in this field has been to focus on MNCs and subsidiaries as units of analysis, and individual-level analyses are scant, with rare exceptions that usually straddle the boundary between international business and management and human resource management (e.g. Mäkelä & Brewster 2009). Despite the obvious linkage between MNC- and unit-level coordination and boundary spanning opportunities for individuals, there are relatively few empirical pieces spelling out this connection in detail.

Summing up this discussion, it can be concluded that applying the AMO framework to boundary spanning raises a number of questions especially related to motivation and opportunity that can at this point be answered only at a superficial level. However, there are indications that all three dimensions are relevant and perhaps necessary for boundary spanning to occur. This points the way toward future research with a holistic and interdisciplinary approach that can account for the business dimension of the issue as well as for the linguistic and psychological dimensions. We may also infer some indicative patterns of progression from one dimension to another.

Opportunity alone does not seem to be a sufficient condition, as de facto not all formal liaisons attain boundary spanner status. Motivation may drive a person to accumulate relevant skills and seek relevant opportunities, thus contributing to building ability, but it is not equivalent to ability and thus is also insufficient on its own. In most cases, it seems that ability (in terms of skills in discrete language/s, relevant professional languages and sociolects, the ability to combine these language resources, and frame issues in a culturally acceptable way) precedes the other dimensions as a necessary or near-necessary condition for boundary spanning. Having attained ability, the path to a boundary spanning role may then proceed via motivation to opportunity, or via opportunity to motivation.

Motivation may drive individuals to seek relevant opportunities, while individuals who get relevant opportunities that they are not a priori motivated for and have not actively sought, such as unexpected job offers, must either reject these opportunities or recalibrate their motivation. However, under some conditions, opportunity or motivation may be sufficiently strong to induce individuals to acquire ability and proceed to become boundary spanners. To clarify which these conditions are is an important question for future research.

#### **4. Conclusions and suggestions for future research**

The above discussion can be summarized in the following propositions:

- Proposition 1: The broader the selection of relevant linguistic competences that an individual can draw upon in an international organizational context, the more likely that individual is to act as a boundary spanner.
- Proposition 2: Individuals who act as boundary spanners in international organizational contexts draw on framing as a resource to exert their positive influence.<sup>2</sup>
- Proposition 3: Individuals are motivated to engage in boundary spanning in international organizational contexts by duty, ambition, or curiosity, or a combination of these.
- Proposition 4: Not all individuals in international organizational contexts with the ability to act as boundary spanners actually do so.
- Proposition 5: If individuals in international organizational contexts with the ability to act as boundary spanners do not do so, it is due to a lack of either motivation or opportunity.

Exploring these propositions empirically demands a two-pronged strategy that is differentiated according to the primary level of analysis (organizational or individual), but in both cases based on genuine interdisciplinary collaboration between international management scholars, linguists and psychologists, and with significant input by the practitioners who constitute the object of study. Firstly, at the organizational level, consider the example of the Finnish and the Russian accountant above. Such situations are difficult to capture empirically because they necessitate observation of 'real' interactions between individuals to get sufficiently rich data. Interpreting such interactions requires sufficient familiarity with the full range of linguistic and cultural resources the interlocutors draw upon, which is something few researchers can muster alone. Finally, the validity of analyses of the data thus generated would benefit greatly from post hoc input by the involved actors to elucidate their reasoning. Traditional methodologies based on cross-sectional interviews conducted and analyzed by

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<sup>2</sup> This wording accounts for the possibility that not all framing activity is positive. There can be negative framing.

researchers representing only one discipline cannot easily accommodate these demands. To address this challenge, researchers should strive towards longitudinal observation or even participation in regular organizational processes, draw upon interdisciplinary teams to collect and analyze their data, and work more closely with each other and members of the organizations they have studied to validate their findings.

Interdisciplinary collaboration will also be necessary to test those propositions that pertain to the individual level of analysis, but here the emphasis will be on drawing on insights from psychology and social psychology to understand the language-related actions of individuals in international business contexts. Such research could also use observation and analysis of real-life examples as a starting point, but could be followed up with psychological tests and/or in-depth interviews to validate hypothesized cause-effect linkages.

For example, an important question is to what extent people are hampered in using their linguistic and cultural skills in work-related contexts – or driven not to use them – for reasons that could be described as personal (as opposed to organizational). There may be many reasons for not drawing on the full range of one's skills, and thus remaining what might be termed a 'latent' boundary spanner. These could include uncertainty about one's competence (e.g., feeling uncomfortable about using a language in which one is perhaps not fully fluent), other psychological motives such as shyness or previous negative experiences, tactical motives (e.g., attempting to avoid extra work), or strategic motives (e.g. ensuring that the communication situation unfolds in such a way that also colleagues who do not have the requisite language skills can be included). In any case, the consequence may be silence, with subsequent problems for the organization:

'Every time they enter into an exchange with the holders of the legitimate competence, and especially when they find themselves in a formal situation, dominated individuals are condemned to a practical, corporeal recognition of the laws of price formation which are the least favourable to their linguistic productions and which condemns them to a more or less desperate attempt to be correct, or to silence.' (Bourdieu 1991:97)

Finally, in terms of the organizational impact of the avenues for future research briefly outlined above, an interest in the reasons why individuals use or do not use their linguistic and cultural skills also draws our attention to individual-level responses to sudden changes in the level of skills required to perform one's job. This question highlights the availability and quality of organizational support in the case of sudden changes that catch employees by surprise, such as mergers and acquisitions. A better understanding of individual reactions will be helpful to organizations in coming up with appropriate support measures, work conditions and opportunities in situations when competence requirements change significantly, assuming of course that these changes have not deflated employees' motivation to continue to act as boundary spanners.

In conclusion, while pre-existing linguistic and cultural skills in many ways constitute the fundament of boundary spanning in international organizational contexts, it is important to be aware that the structure of that context also exerts an influence on boundary spanning, as does motivation- and opportunity-related factors that may induce individuals to improve their level of linguistic skills over time.

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