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# Language choice as a means to transcend and reinforce language and group boundaries in multilingual business settings

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In multilingualen Firmen in Europa hat sich Englisch als *lingua franca* inzwischen durchgesetzt. Aufgrund der Existenz der Sprachenvielfalt in multilingualen Firmen führt die Implementierung von Englisch als Konzernsprache jedoch nicht automatisch dazu, dass sie permanent in der Firmenkommunikation verwendet wird. Die Verwendung verschiedener Sprachen bringt mit sich, dass sowohl Sprachgrenzen als auch Grenzziehungen zwischen Gruppen von Menschen überwunden und verstärkt werden können. Zudem zeigt die Wechselwirkung zwischen Sprachwahl, Sprachgrenzen und Identitätskonstruktionen Auswirkungen, welche auf den ersten Blick nicht sichtbar sind. Bezugnehmend auf Interviewdaten mit kroatischen und serbischen Angestellten in internationalen Firmen in Kroatien, Serbien und Österreich, wird analysiert, wie Sprachwahl von den Angestellten als Mittel für die Konstruktion von Sprach- und Gruppengrenzen sowie kollektive Identitäten am Arbeitsplatz eingesetzt wird. Es zeigt sich in der Analyse, dass die Überwindung und Verstärkung von Grenzziehungen nicht strikt an die Verwendung der Konzernsprache bzw. lokalen Sprache festzumachen sind, sondern, dass Grenzziehungen zwischen Gruppen und Identitätskonstruktionen eng mit der Sprachwahl verknüpft sind, somit wesentlich für erfolgreiche Zusammenarbeit zeichnen und daher zur Komplexität der Sprachenpolitik am multilingualen Arbeitsplatz beitragen.

## **Stichwörter:**

Sprachwahl, Sprachgrenzen, Englisch als *lingua franca*, Identitätskonstruktion, multilinguale Arbeitsplätze, Sprachideologien.

## **Keywords:**

Language choice, language boundaries, English as a *lingua franca*, identity construction, multilingual workplaces, language ideologies.

## **1. Introduction**

- (1) Check-in...Eventsaal...Grand Hall...Carrier...Welcome Package...Home Bases. Meeting points ... Support team. Arme deutsche Sprache :-)

*Check-in...Eventsaal...Grand Hall...Carrier...Welcome Package...Home Bases. Meeting points ... Support team. Poor German language :-)*

- (2) Unsere Konzern Sprache ist aber nun mal Englisch...

*Our corporate language is English after all...*

- (3) Zu "Unsere Konzern Sprache ist aber nun mal Englisch...": Heißt das, dass die Briefe und E-Mails an unsere Kunden in Englisch geschrieben werden?

*In regard to "Our corporate language is English after all." Does this mean that the letters and email sent to our clients are written in English?*

- (4) Wir sind ein international Unternehmen. [Name der Firma] ist die Zentrale; sollten unsere Kollegen und Besucher aus Rumänien, Ungarn, Slowakei ... immer Deutsch zu sprechen? Was ist die Verbindung zwischen Gebäude Sprache und E-Mails an die Kunden?

*We are an international company. [Name of company] is the headquarters; are our colleagues and visitors from Rumania, Hungary, Slovakia, ... supposed to always speak German? What is the connection between company building, language and emails sent to clients?*

- (5) 65 Kollegen mögen bislang diesen Beitrag. Nachvollziehbar, denn es wurde da wirklich Großes geleistet und dennoch stößt man sich am Wording einer internationalen Organisation (bzw. vermischen Konzern- mit Amtssprache)? Nicht wirklich, oder? Von meiner Seite jedenfalls Gratulation zum erfolgreichen Move #1! Ganz großes Kino...und ein 66. Like ;-)

*So far 65 colleagues have pressed the like-button. This is understandable as something exceptional has been achieved. And yet, people oppose the wording of an international company (or rather confuse corporate with national language). You are not being serious, are you? From me, congratulations on the successful move #1! Excellent...And Like number 66 ;-)*<sup>1</sup>

These five posts from the intranet of a large company in Austria were written in reaction to a celebratory post by the marketing department upon the inauguration of a new office building. Even though the post was written in German, each German sentence boasted at least two English terms: parts of buildings, rooms as well as devices and office materials were expressed in English<sup>2</sup>. The post instigated a lively discussion. More than 70 replies were written of which the 5 above have been chosen as a vignette for this paper.

What these five posts demonstrate is the role of language in the multilingual workplace on the one hand, and how language serves as a means to construct various boundaries not only between languages but also between people on the other hand. The posts themselves indicate that this topic is rather complex. While writer 1 criticises the use of English terms instead of their German counterparts in the original post, writer 2 considers this naming policy as justified since English is the corporate language. Writer 3 enquires about the nature of a *lingua franca* as corporate language as well as language practices in the everyday work life. Writer 4 hypothesises about possible German language practices and raises the issue of the relationship between company building, language policy and language practices. Writer 5 refers to the absurdity of this conversation which equates company building and language practices when the focus should be on celebrating the new building.

Next to referring to language use, in particular to language choice and its impact on language practices in the daily work life, what these posts also disclose is the concept of boundaries, i.e. language and group boundaries. The former encompass the boundaries between languages such as English and German

<sup>1</sup> Translations by author.

<sup>2</sup> The contested beginning of the celebratory post. Words in italics indicate English words in the original post; translation by author:

The day started with a *check-in* in the *event hall*, the *grand hall*, where the *carrier* and the *welcome package* were distributed to staff members. Afterwards a tour around the *home bases* and the *meeting points* was provided and a *support team* helped with any questions about the new office space. [...]

or, as the fifth writer states, 'the corporate and official language'. The latter subsumes boundaries between groups of people: employees vs non-employees (clients), and employees working in the HQ vs employees working in the subsidiaries abroad. The two different sets of boundaries are determined by the choice of language and yet, they are slightly different. While language boundaries are marked by the use of specific linguistic codes, boundaries between groups of people are marked by the linguistic code and its pragmatic use. It is the interrelationship and interplay between language choice, the construction of language boundaries and boundaries between groups of people, i.e. identity construction with a focus on multilingual companies in South-Eastern Europe which is the subject of this paper.

The next section provides a brief literature review on language choice and boundaries as well as the rationale of this paper. After the methodology section, the analysis of the data focuses on the interplay between language choice and the construction of language and group boundaries as well as identities.

## **2. Language choice and the construction of boundaries in multinational companies**

In this paper the term language choice is applied since a choice is "made at the beginning of an interaction [...] and applies to choices made at all levels of speech or writing" (Lønsmann 2011: 143). Language choice is thus evident when two or more languages can be chosen for an interaction. This macrolevel of language choice, i.e. which language to use for a conversation, rather than the microlevel of language choice, i.e. codeswitching within a conversation, is of main interest in this paper.

When interlocutors do not share a language, a common language for successful interaction is necessary. In European business contexts the language chosen is mostly English, which has also become the predominant corporate language in multinational companies (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta 2005; Rogerson-Revell 2007; Gerritsen & Nickerson 2009)<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, the language factor was initially not regarded as important for neither the companies nor for research (Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen & Piekkari 2006). The first studies on the role of language and English as a *lingua franca* in multinational companies emerged in the 2000s (e.g. Nickerson 2005; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005; Rogerson-Revell 2007; Ehrenreich 2010). Soon studies revealed that despite the introduction of a *lingua franca*, language practices were more complex (Nickerson 2005) and deserved to be addressed specifically in research. The more so as "communication [in global business] involves crossing

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<sup>3</sup> But other languages may serve as *lingua franca* in organisations and business communication depending on geographical location and/or historical background. For example, French in Belgium (Mettewie & Van Mensel 2009), Russian in the Baltic States (Eurobarometer 2006), and 'scandinaviska' in Scandinavia (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta 2005).

language boundaries and operat[es] at the interface between several languages including those of the home country and the host country, the corporate languages and 'company speak'" (Fredriksson et al. 2006: 407). This complexity instigated another strand of research, viz. a focus on multilingualism and language diversity in companies (Angouri 2013; Angouri & Miglbauer 2014; Fredriksson et al. 2006; Gunnarsson 2014; Lønsmann 2014; Tange & Luring 2009). The studies disclose the existence of a broader range of language use in the workplace despite an official company language. The foci of this field of research are widespread. For example, Angouri & Miglbauer (2013) analyse challenges on a communicative level which language diversity in workplaces poses to employees, while Lønsmann's study (2014) shows the impact of language choice on social inclusion and exclusion in the workplace. The discrepancy between organisations' language policy and the linguistic reality in the workplace is, for instance, highlighted by Angouri (2013).

A focus on languages, and in particular on language choice, inevitably leads to the matter of language boundaries. Generally, language boundaries constitute the borderline between two linguistic communities. According to Škiljan (2004: 16), a linguistic community is a group of people who shares the same idiom/language and thus each one of the group is considered a member of this community. Škiljan further distinguishes between a primary and a secondary linguistic community, which consists of L1 speakers and L2 speakers respectively. This distinction proves relevant for this paper as "the collective relations established by means of language are realised in two mutually connected dimensions, communicative and symbolic" (Škiljan 2004: 16). While the former ensures understanding the messages conveyed, the latter is important for identifying with a secondary linguistic community – both on a collective and individual level. Despite the difficulty of clearly defining the borders of a language, linguistic communities belong to a "'core' human group" whose individuals construct various identities" (Škiljan 2004: 17).

While some studies approach language boundaries in an organisational context from the perspective of success for teams and thus for companies (e.g. Feely & Harzing 2003; Henderson 2010), some other studies address the role of language boundaries for exerting power (Logemann & Piekkari 2015) and constructing group boundaries (Lønsmann, 2011; Tange & Luring 2009). What can be drawn from these studies is that language choice constructs primary and, above all, secondary linguistic communities in multilingual workplaces. This means that boundaries are discursively constructed in each interaction; they are thus fluid. This conceptualisation follows Busch & Kelly-Holmes (2004: 6), who define "language boundaries [as] imaginary lines that run an ambiguous course" and which are considered as "social and political as well as discursive constructs". This is especially relevant when taking the language diversity and ideologies of South-Eastern Europe into consideration.

Linked to language boundaries are language ideologies (Gal & Irvine 1995), which constitute of "beliefs, or feelings, about language as used in their social world" (Kroskrity 2004: 498). They are determined by and create power relations between groups of people since these beliefs structure social behaviour (Seargeant 2009: 40). In business contexts language ideologies are, for example, disclosed in the choice of which language to implement as the corporate language and in the language choice and construction of group memberships in interactions. Research on language ideologies in multilingual organisations analysed the effect of ideologies on multilingualism and power in EU institutions (Wodak, Krzyżanowski & Forchtner 2012), in universities (Björkman 2014) and multinational companies (Lønsmann 2014). In particular, Lønsmann's paper investigates specific language ideologies (e.g. 'one nation – one language' and 'language hierarchy') and how they are tied to the social behaviour of exclusion of employees based on lack of language skills.

Another concept of relevance, in particular for the analysis of boundaries in organisational contexts, is the one of *linguascape* (Steyaert, Ostendorp & Gaibrois 2011: 277). Linguascape is defined as

a discursive space in which an organization or any other actor frames and imagines how it can deal with its (de facto) multilingual composition by negotiating among various discursive options that distinguish between local, national and global spaces and that are oriented to more situational or enduring solutions

This concept proposes that language use is modelled by discursive practices and regards "the flow of languages that cross a specific organizational space [... as] discursively mediated" (Steyaert, Ostendorp & Gaibrois 2011: 270). The authors analysed which discourses their respondents refer to when talking about, or even justifying, the adoption of a language – English in this case – in everyday worklife. The analysis of language use in two multinational companies in Switzerland revealed six discursive practices: adaptation to the viable language of a certain location, adaptation to the language of the other (interlocutor), collective negotiation of a common language, simultaneous use of various (mutually) comprehensible languages, finding a compromise through a third language, and improvisation. The authors do not claim their list of discursive practices being exhaustive (Steyaert, Ostendorp & Gaibrois 2011: 276), they, however, provide a valuable insight into bottom-up strategies of language use in multilingual companies. Some of these practices serve as starting point for the construction of language and group boundaries in this paper.

Language choice and the construction of group memberships refer to another relevant aspect for this paper: the construction of identities. Following the social constructionist approach, which regards identity construction as occurring in interactional occasions and entailing discursive work (Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg 2006), identity construction is done in each interaction and is highly context-dependent. In this paper, the data used is the semi-structured interview. The

interview consists of accounts of language use in the workplace. Yet, by talking about such accounts, identity constructions that occurred during these accounts as well as during the interview itself are disclosed and constructed (see Miglbauer 2012 for further details). This approach to identity constructions conceives boundaries and the construction of group memberships as fluid concepts rather than static traits (Butler 1993). Further, in regard to language choice, the term *boundaries* tends to be used to highlight overcoming (fluid) boundaries, while the term *barriers* tends to focus on preventing something from happening. This paper takes up the concept of discursive practices as being essential for the construction of various boundaries and provides an analysis of the construction of boundaries connected with identity construction by language choice in multilingual organisations. Analysing boundaries in connection with language choice demonstrates that the implementation of a corporate language goes beyond the often held belief of proper command of the language as being the main factor for successful communication. Rather, language choice involves the construction of new boundaries which have a decisive role for the communication between employees in a company. For showing this complexity, two aspects are specifically addressed: boundaries in connection with language choice and, second, the construction of identities in connection with language choice in South-Eastern European business settings where language ideologies have also been strongly tied to politics since the 1990s.

Regarding the first aspect, Luring & Selmer (2010) stress the existence of parallel language-based communication networks next to a common organizational language in multilingual companies:

Multicultural organizations are almost by definition also multilingual. Hence, although introducing a common organizational language may improve communication frequency it is also common to experience parallel language-based communication networks and frequent code-switching in multilingual organizations. (Luring & Selmer 2010: 269)

In this paper, I draw on the hypothesis that a common organizational language transcends (language) boundaries while parallel language-based communication networks reinforce (language) boundaries among the diverse employees in multinational companies. The two hypotheses are tested with a focus on how language can both act as a facilitator and a barrier (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch 1999) when it comes to constructing boundaries among groups of people. Three sets of boundaries in the context of multinational workplaces have proven prominent: first, language boundaries between two or more languages; second, boundaries as borders of national countries; and third, boundaries between groups of people. The third set of boundary leads to the analysis of the second aspect, the interrelationship between language use, language boundaries and the construction of group identities of South Slavic-speaking employees in international business contexts – a context which has not yet been well-researched. By doing so, this paper reveals the complexity of language choice policy and its effects on language use, group memberships

and, consequently, on successful teamwork, which multilingual companies when implementing a corporate language may not always be aware of.

### 3. Data

The data for this paper comprise interviews that were conducted in English with Croatian and Serbian employees in multinational companies in Austria, Croatia and Serbia. The companies have subsidiaries all over Europe and English has been chosen as the *lingua franca* by these companies (as a top-down approach<sup>4</sup>). Despite the international orientation of the companies, the majority of the workforce in the subsidiaries are local employees. Due to a fairly acceptable command of English, the semi-structured interviews were carried out in English at the company premises. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, which means any language peculiarities have been left in the transcripts.

The interviews were conducted with female and male employees who work in multinational companies in Croatia and Serbia. The majority are in their early 30s due to the economic transition in the 1990s and the introduction of new kinds of jobs with altered (language) requirements. The interviewees were asked about their experience with various aspects of their work such as communication in the company, the role of English, working with expats, and postsocialism. The interview transcripts were coded with the qualitative data analysis and research software Atlas.ti. These codes were put into various summarising categories such as interculturality, communication, work tasks, mother tongue. For this paper the categories 'English: role', 'communication', 'local language', 'identity: employees', 'identity: regional' are relevant. These parts of the interviews have been analysed against the backdrop of language boundaries. The interviewees talk about their self-perceptions of the role of English and communication practices at work (Angouri & Miglbauer 2013, 2014). Yet, this paper does not solely analyse what is being revealed in this regard but how group memberships to linguistic communities are established. By doing this, this paper specifically focuses on the effect of language use and communication in regard to transcending and reinforcing (language) boundaries and simultaneously constructing group boundaries and identities.

### 4. Analysis

The analysis of the data is presented in three sub-sections. First, how language and group boundaries are transcended; second, how language and group boundaries are reinforced; and third, how language and group boundaries are

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<sup>4</sup> In language planning, a top-down approach includes the implementation of a language in a particular geographical area via a language policy instigated by language planners. In a business context, such language planners, e.g. head of companies would implement a *lingua franca* in their companies via a company language policy.

simultaneously transcended and reinforced in the South-Eastern European (language) context.

#### 4.1 Transcending language and group boundaries

Transcending language boundaries in communications indicates moving beyond one's own language community and passing the language boundaries of two or even more languages. If those language communities correlate with national/regional borders, these boundaries of political nature may be made irrelevant in these conversations when using a common language. The first example refers to transcending language and constructing new group boundaries with people from different linguistic communities.

- (1) [English] plays a very uh (.) big role (..) I think (.) uh it's obviously widely spoken in the business community [...] obviously the job is such that uh you communicate with uh (.) a very wide range of people in terms of geography in terms of background (.) so it's really great communication tool

In this quote, language boundaries and specifically national boundaries, which are transcended by the use of a common language or *lingua franca*, are highlighted. In general, the term English as a *lingua franca* is used "to refer exclusively to the use of English between speakers whose mother tongue is not English" (Rogerson-Revell 2007: 104). Already in 2002, Tagliabue wrote: "As European banks and corporations burst national boundaries and go global, many are making English the official corporate language". The interviewee makes the function of English explicit: to enable communication with 'people in terms of geography in terms of background', transcending not only national and language boundaries but also boundaries among groups of people (based on background).

The introduction of a corporate language facilitates communication between a linguistically diverse workforce. What impact a *lingua franca* as corporate language has on daily work life is revealed by the next interviewee.

- (2) I mean all our written documents are in English (.) reports website contracts applications so (.) even our internal communication between ourselves when it's official it's in English so it's English all the time

As English is the official corporate language, external communication is in English. The boundaries transcended here are literally 'real' as they consist of brick and mortar by communicating beyond the office premises with clients and colleagues in the headquarters or other subsidiaries. Another boundary indicated is the one between official and unofficial communication, which may be carried out in different languages depending on the context. This refers to the fact that "communicative events are considerably more complex than the label of English as a *lingua franca* would suggest" (Nickerson 2005: 371). When it comes to the choice of language in official communication, the addressee of the interaction (headquarters, other subsidiaries) trumps the common mother tongue of the majority of office staff.

Language choice in this context constructs several group memberships. As members of the company and their individual identities as employees, they use English in their conversations. Yet, in some instances local language use may also construct collective identities such as the one of office staff (see discussion further below).

Example 3 refers to the case of language choice in daily language practices. When employees with different mother tongues meet and are supposed to interact with each other, language choice depends on at least three aspects: the communicative event, the people involved, and the balance between the majority and minority of language speakers (Steyaert, Ostendorp & Gaibrois 2011).

- (3) if you have 15 people and just one non- non-Croatian speaker of course then you will speak Croati- uh you will speak English (.) so that's normal (.) and it's never happened that (.) somebody is you know like really excluded (.) in that way

In this sample, language difference serves as a boundary between people: those who speak a particular language and those who do not. Yet, in a business context, due to economic reasons, efficient team work is paramount. The choice of using a common language can be assumed common-sense behaviour (Angouri & Miglbauer 2014) as it transcends language boundaries and enables communication and team work. In sample 3, even though the choice of language ensures participation of all parties involved, it is phrased in a slightly peculiar way. A group boundary is indeed constructed by stressing the fact that someone (non-Croatian speaker) is different from the group of 15 Croatian-speakers and perceived as 'other'.

#### 4.2. Reinforcing language and group boundaries

Next to transcending boundaries, language choice does not only construct but also reinforce existing boundaries. As outlined above, boundaries are fluid and discursively constructed in interaction. In multilingual companies, such boundaries can be drawn along language boundaries as in the following example.

- (4) I use Serbian in communication (.) with uh (.) local staff because there's no need for us :to talk in English: ((laughing)) and also in communication with all of the governmental officials uh and courts bankruptcy administrators agencies meaning all the local (.) counterparts

The corporate language is used whenever necessary. If it is not necessary to be used, it is simply not in use – no matter whether the communication is internal or external, as some other interviewees state: *"what we speak the most is Serbian (.) and in the meetings when we have anybody who is present and who doesn't understand then we naturally switch to English"*. Such a behaviour reinforces boundaries which are based on language knowledge, which in this context is the command of the local language or the mother tongue. The term *language clustering* has been introduced (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999), which is applied "when informal language clustering takes the form of informal

gatherings between the speakers of the same national language" (Tange & Lauring 2009: 224). Some interviewees hint at that: "*when you just talk to people it's usually Serbian*" or "*when we talk we talk in our language*". Language boundaries are constructed via the use of the local language and the national boundary is drawn around local professionals sharing the mother tongue. Here the local language is used to reinforce group boundaries based on the territory and the common mother tongue. These practices reveal that a corporate *lingua franca* seldom completely replaces the company's original language as a working language (Fredriksson et al. 2006; Angouri & Miglbauer 2013, 2014).

The next example demonstrates how members of the local linguistic community are granted access to the global nature of the companies. As Tange & Lauring (2009: 220) state, "access to a speech community is controlled by the ingroup members" and in a business context, the ingroup members are the jury in a job interview.

- (5) I mean it's kind of a (..) given fact that your English is good sometimes even when we EMPLOY we uh (.) sit with people and then uh (.) talk a little bit even in English just to make sure that they have a sufficient level of knowledge (.) part of the interview we use(d) to have in English you know and (.) and the written test

Language choice is also a symbol of the initiation process and for assessment. In this example, the initiation process consists of the oral job interview and a written test. Both parts assess the command of English as employers strive to ensure that only people with sufficient knowledge of the corporate language join the staff. The boundaries reinforced here are the ones between people who 'function' as employees when applying the corporate language and those who do not and are therefore not recruited. In this case, English as the corporate language functions as a gatekeeper (Park & Wee 2011). It does not matter which linguistic community a job applicant belongs to, being able to speak the required *lingua franca* is an essential aspect for 'letting someone in' (among other skills obviously). English competence is, therefore, considered as a valuable skill and also linked to social mobility (Angouri & Miglbauer 2014). In the South-Eastern European context, having command of English facilitates working in jobs of higher prestige and higher salaries.

Yet, the intention to become a 'full-functioning member' may also be prevented or at least made more difficult by various aspects, one of which may be down to exclusion based on language choice. Ailon-Souday & Kunda (2003) reveal in their study how language choice is used to consciously draw boundaries between groups of people. They found that "[i]n joint interactions, Hebrew symbolized boundaries and, moreover, turned them into a social fact by creating exclusion, by practically sealing off social interactions from the comprehension and participation of American colleagues" (Ailon-Souday & Kunda 2003: 1082). Lønsmann (2014) also shows how language use (unintentionally) contributes to the sociolinguistic exclusion of employees – no matter of those who do not have

proper command of the local language or those who are not well versed in communicating in the *lingua franca*.

The next example refers to such a case. The interviewee works in the headquarters of a company with English as the corporate language. Most of the staff are German speakers and the local language is German, which, however, the interviewee does not have command of.

- (6) we have helpdesk which is IT helpdesk and help with computer and something like that and it should be English-speaking and they [*the Austrian colleagues*] like speak English but then when I phone this number I said ok I have a problem with computer and they start asking me some (.) some very uhm technical things (.) I am not IT specialist and I don't know how to answer and then they get nervous and then I said o.k. I give my colleague and my colleague speaks German and they EASILY immediately uh (disperse) this (.) or I experience a lot times they told like do you have some English sp- uh German speaking colleague around you I can't understand what your problem is

While example 5 reveals a case of English being the gatekeeper, example 6 is about how the local language functions as a gatekeeper. There is deliberate refusal to use the corporate language in order to enable communication. The language choice is specifically constructed as a barrier. The IT helpdesk does not only construct boundaries around their group of IT experts but also constructs boundaries around the German speakers. The interviewee constructs a boundary around herself as the outsider who speaks a different language and is thus not included in the group of German speaking employees. Instead of successfully trying to transcend the language boundaries for the sake of collaborating effectively, the local staff reinforce group boundaries in a context where such a behaviour is slightly unexpected, as the interviewee also indicates. In fact, this example discloses that language choice which either transcends or reinforces boundaries is not always as exclusionary as assumed.

Once granted access to the ingroup, becoming a full-functioning member is a "process of socialisation, which involves the learning of collective norms and practices, as well as the acquisition of the group speech" (Tange & Lauring 2009: 220). The existence, or rather the importance of such 'group speech' is indicated in the following sample.

- (7) there is a special English that we use because there are SO many nations I mean {company} operates in like 180 endmarkets so there are SO many ((laughs)) words [3 lines omitted] of I don't know how many thousands of words not too many thousands (.) that everybody can understand so

Group speak, or 'company speak' is a register "replete with acronyms, special terms, and management process terminology specific to the company, that evolves over time" (Welch, Welch, & Piekkari 2005: 13). Interestingly, the interviewee also states later in the interview that the 'special English' is influenced by other national languages and may be a toned down version of English. In this case the construction of boundaries is two-fold: on the one hand, the use of 'company speak' or 'special English' facilitates the deconstruction of

national and language boundaries. On the other hand, new group boundaries are constructed resulting in a global collective identity of employees.

#### 4.3. *Transcending and reinforcing boundaries*

The two previous sections have disclosed how language choice can transcend and reinforce boundaries between people. Yet, depending on the context, language choice can also demonstrate both actions – sometimes even simultaneously. This is particularly the case when 'national languages' from the same language group and which are mostly intelligible for all speakers involved meet. Despite the fact that English is used as the corporate language when employees with different mother tongues work together, language practices that occur when people with two very similar mother tongues interact reveals another degree of complexity.

- (8) we don't speak English between us but (.) with all of our offices EXCEPT for the Belgrade one Slovenian one (.) uh we speak in English [140 lines omitted] well (.) usually sometimes when we work (.) I mean together with Belgrade or Slovenian office we communicate in ((laughs)) we call it REGIONAL language (.) they talk in Serbian we in Croatian but we understand each other

Next to the setting (interactional context) and social identity (belonging to a region), the participants as well as the historical context are the dominant factors in regard to the determiners of language choice (Saville-Troike 2003). As already demonstrated in some examples above, the local language is used as language in office conversations. But, to make language practices even more complex, the corporate language English is not used in conversations with colleagues working in the subsidiaries situated in other former Yugoslavian successor states. As the languages are intelligible to speakers of each one of these, the use of the local languages transcends office and national boundaries. Yet, based on former political entities and the use of the term *regional language*, boundaries are reinforced again. Interestingly, the employees are aware of the fact that they communicate with each other in two languages, and by doing so, they create a new variety like 'skandinaviska' in Germanic language speaking Scandinavia (Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005). The interviewee is slightly embarrassed when revealing the use and perception of a *regional language* to the interviewer. A regional identity based on language use and shaped and influenced by language ideology is constructed here. The existence of a regional identity was also mentioned by other interviewees. One of the interviewees indicated that *slovenska duska* may be the reason of why, for example, it is easier to speak to Russians than to Austrians<sup>5</sup>. This example also shows how the construction of boundaries are fluid and shift depending on the focus, setting, function of the conversation and social identity (Troike-Saville 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Comparison provided by the interviewee.

Another aspect which arose in the interviews and is specific to Slavic-speaking South-Eastern Europe, is the question of language ideologies and the shift from using local languages to using English as "a compromise through a third language" in the region (Steyaert, Ostendorp & Gaibrois 2011).

- (9) when we are speaking with the guys from Slovenia they speak Slovene of course we speak Croatian and these two languages are very similar at least to me because I speak Slovenian as well and then when I try to speak to them I always try to use my Slovenian not to forget it (.) but (.) other people from company they also use English to communicate with Slovenians so this is for me something very strange because these two languages are (.) very very similar (.) and uhm (..) sometimes it's not so (.) nice to see that ((laughs)) [...] because this uh English is completely foreign language and for Slovenian I don't get it as a completely foreign language because before we were all one country you know and this was not foreign language and now suddenly it became foreign language and some people really try to INSIST to that that Croatian is ONE and Slovenian is DIFFERENT and they don't try to (.) to find uh some solutions or whatever they are really this communication goes in English

Several points are addressed here. One of them is the construction of – both language and political - boundaries where there were 'soft boundaries' (Škiljan 2001) up until 1991. In this case two similar language varieties were used to communicate with each other. The interviewee hints at the fact that despite two separate linguistic communities, both of them used to belong to one larger group of linguistic community. Despite new national borders and thus stricter language boundaries since the 1990s, the interviewee does not see the necessity to construct and reinforce relatively newly established political and national boundaries by using a third (non-Slavic) language at the expense of local language use in the regional business community. This kind of language choice also affects the construction of group boundaries and identities as the construction of a regional identity as indicated in sample 8 tends to be at stake. Further, by bringing forth the argument that English is considered a foreign language while Slovenian is not, this perspective aligns with the critical literature of 'Englishisation' of the (business) world (Philipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 1999). Additionally, the interviewee criticises the ideology of *language hierarchy* with English at the top. While in international contexts, the use of English may be standard; in regional contexts this standard may be opposed.

## 5. Discussion

The introduction of a *lingua franca* is essential to enable communication between different groups of employees within companies. Regarding language use, multinational and multilingual companies are, however, quite complex. Despite these top-down approaches, the language diversity in multilingual companies tends to be more diverse than the term *corporate language* indicates. The analysis of the data in this paper reveals the mechanisms and fluidity of language choice and boundaries between languages and groups of people interconnected with identity constructions.

In regard to boundaries in connection with language choice, two hypotheses were advanced. The first hypothesis was that a common organisational language enables people to transcend boundaries as members of a different speech community are included in the multilingual speech community. This is in fact the main reason for implementing a *lingua franca*. Yet, at closer scrutiny it is revealed that such a *lingua franca* also serves as a gatekeeper in the workplace context. Lack of or little ability to speak the *lingua franca* hinders people to become 'fully-functioning' employees in a company. The implications of such a gatekeeper function are obvious in the South-Eastern European context. Due to historical reasons, those who are well-versed in English are the younger generations while the older generations were educated and socialised in the socialist era with a focus on learning languages other than English. At the time of the interviews, the majority of the local staff in these international companies were in their late 20s and early 30s. One interviewee points out the lack of employability of people who do not boast skills necessary for working in multinational and multilingual companies:

- (10) I guess for people who are like 40 and something (.) don't know much about computers don't know much about foreign languages don't know much about uh (.) modern business (..) for them (.) this is very bad period and (..) you know I think that the entire transition (.) for us younger it's fine you know

The second hypothesis was that parallel language-based communication networks reinforce boundaries by excluding people who do not speak the local language(s) from the professional speech community. Such behaviour depends on the majority of language users, the critical mass in a communication and the company culture. The analysis shows that small instances of exclusion may occur in settings when the majority of the local language users do not have adequate command of the corporate language. Yet, this study further reveals the use of local languages also transcend boundaries, in particular, when people speak a similar and intelligible language for everyone involved. In the South-Eastern European context, these boundaries are fluid as "the idioms are genetically related and mutual comprehension is not excluded" (Škiljan 2001: 90). These boundaries also constitute relatively new national boundaries established in the 1990s. This recent construction of boundaries discloses the fact the languages are not necessarily automatically perceived as dissimilar. This is evident in the naming and use of the *regional language* and lack of understanding in using English in interactions when not necessary.

In regard to the interrelationship between language use, language boundaries and the construction of group identities, the analysis shows that there is not an either-or situation in regard to language choice in multilingual companies. The analysis demonstrates that language use does transcend and reinforce boundaries in interactions and occasionally they are transcended and reinforced simultaneously. Thus, transcending and reinforcing boundaries by the choice and use of language are on a continuum depending on the context and the

language(s) used. By doing so, group boundaries are transcended and reinforced and even new group identities are constructed. Employees construct various identities which are connected to language use. Local language use is a marker for regional identity and identity of office staff while English language use is tied to identity of global employees. Identity work is done continuously when transcending and reinforcing language boundaries during one's workday.

Further, the analysis also reveals that language choice in the business context is linked to prevalent language ideologies. English competence is regarded as a valuable skill which may grant social mobility due to working in jobs with higher salaries. Further, language ideologies – by creating, structuring and consequently transforming the social world – facilitate categorising people into groups to whom positive or negative values are ascribed. One such example in the data is the group of Slovenian colleagues who are ascribed a slightly negative value since they speak English rather than Slovenian with their Croatian and Serbian counterparts. Referring to *linguascapes*, the aforementioned Slovenians apply a discursive practice, which can in this context be considered unusual, in particular by people who oppose the construction of new language boundaries. It is evident that command of the corporate language is not enough for successful communication in the multilingual workplace. Opposition to new boundaries – either language or group boundaries – can have a major impact on individuals as they find themselves outside of groups in the workplace which further influences effective communication, team work and identification with the company. This may further affect the company whose goal is a 'full-functioning' workforce contributing to the successful performance of the company.

In general, not only multilingual companies are complex when it comes to language choice, but also language practices and identity constructions reveal and add a high degree of complexity to worklife in multilingual companies.

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