

**Zeitschrift:** Bulletin suisse de linguistique appliquée / VALS-ASLA  
**Band:** - (2017)  
**Heft:** 106: Overcoming barriers, bridging boundaries and deconstructing borders in multilingual professional settings : une perspective comparative  
**Artikel:** Language ecology as a centripetal force for the multilingual workplace  
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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-978721>

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# Language ecology as a centripetal force for the multilingual workplace

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Dieser Artikel präsentiert praktische Beispiele der Überschreitung von Grenzen unterschiedlicher Art, welche sich speziell am Arbeitsplatz ergeben. Diese zentripetalen und demokratisierend wirkenden Kräfte verringern durch die Herausbildung von inklusiven Räumen den Abstand zwischen Menschen mit unterschiedlichen Ausgangsbedingungen. Mein komparativ angelegter Beitrag verortet sich in der Ökolinquistik, einer relativ neuen Disziplin, welche verschiedene interdisziplinäre Ansätze im Gebiet der Kommunikation zusammenfasst, insbesondere in komplexen Kontexten mit einer ausgeprägten Diversität von sprachlichen Systemen.

**Stichwörter:**

Mehrsprachiger Arbeitsplatz, Sprachökologie, Sprachenpolitik, Soziolinguistik, interkultureller Dialog.

**Keywords:**

Multilingual workplace, language ecology, language policy, sociolinguistics, intercultural dialogue.

## 1. Introduction

For a long time, language ecology as a branch of applied linguistics has concentrated on the protection of endangered languages, before focusing on language learning in the institutional contexts of kindergartens, schools and universities. Only recently, it has also been applied to the analysis of linguistic and cultural diversity of the workplace in international settings (Lüdi et al. 2001, Langinier & Ehrhart 2015; Trepos & al. 2016). This approach is interesting also for management studies as it transcends the traditional models aiming at opposing languages in contexts that used to be described as fierce battles between hostile armies.

In 2014, with our trinational and interdisciplinary research group GRETI we conducted interviews with people of different departments of the bilingual or even multilingual Smart factory situated in Hambach/Lorraine situated in North-Eastern France close to the German border. Smart is a subsidiary of German Daimler Benz. One of the reasons for the choice of this location was the bilingual tradition of this region. In the past, neighboring Alsace and parts of Lorraine had a bilingual population being able to use a Romanic language, French, and its local dialects parallel to Germanic languages like Moselle Franconian (also called Platt; it was considered a dialect for a long time) and also Standard German in some cases. Our objective was to find out about the representations of space and particularly the concept of border within the staff of the company. For the geographers of our team this was mainly analyzed through mental

maps, for the people in management studies especially through the investigation of the organization of the workforce. As for the linguists, the sociolinguistic representations were examined: language boundaries between languages that were conceived as distinct entities or rather a view on a holistic repertoire of all the linguistic resources an individual person draws upon. In my contribution, I will focus on the last aspect without omitting the information I received through the interdisciplinary exchange with my research partners.

During our interviews, we were able to talk to people who did not necessarily have a special education in intercultural communication and multilingual dialogue, but who, by themselves, had discovered interesting solutions and efficient practices to face communicative problems in diverse settings at their workplace. We were particularly interested in practices like receptive bilingualism and translanguaging seen from the standpoint of their users. The information provided by this kind of research was collected through an indirect ethnographical observation, as we had the detailed description of experiences and behavioral patterns, through the representations of our informants. Nevertheless, we are well aware of the bias created by such a procedure.

We would like to support the hypothesis that the tradition of border-crossing in the region between Lorraine and Saarland makes it easier to create active interfaces for all kinds of communication in the company, between different levels of activity and also between people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

## **2. Short definitions of central concepts**

### *2.1 Ecolinguistics – language ecology*

Language ecology or ecolinguistics (we do not distinguish between the two for our purpose) is a branch of linguistics originally committed to the protection of endangered languages or speech communities of minority groups, in order to strengthen their position and to encourage social justice. Later on, this approach has been used to foster language learning in the institutional contexts of kindergartens, schools and universities. It is important to mention that the changes brought about by the new ecolinguistic paradigm affected pupils or learners as well as their teachers as they tried to create new translingual spaces which could be accessed equally by both groups. Astonishingly, until recently, it has not been used for the analysis of the workplace in international settings. The ecological approach is interesting for linguistics as it proposes a unique learning space with an authentic learning environment as well as for management studies as it transcends some of the traditional dichotomic models of languages that were seen as opposing armies on a battlefield trying to occupy space snatched away from the enemy used in language didactics or the purely functional approach that has tended to prevail in management studies for quite some time. In the organizational context, ecolinguistics highlight how

multilingual practices are linked to the history and the space of their territorial environment, thus questioning traditional power games observed by management scholars (e.g., Tenzer & Pudelko 2017; Vaara et al. 2005 and many others).

In contrast to the war metaphors used by some sociolinguists (cf. the explanations in Calvet 2006), the virtue of an ecolinguistic perspective lies in the fact that it focuses on the link between different partners and on the quality of their relationship based on mutual exchange and reciprocal enrichment (Fill & Mühlhäusler 2001; Wurm et al. 1996). Both partners are transformed by the encounter, in a centripetal movement towards the common aim of approximation, for which an effort is needed from both sides:

Ecolinguistics is that branch of linguistics that takes into account the aspect of interaction, whether it is between languages, between speakers, between speech communities, or between language and world, and that in order to promote diversity of phenomena and their interrelations, works in favour of the protection of the small (Fill 1993: 133).

More recently, ecolinguistics has also started to address negative aspects, beside the positive ones that are still prevailing, in order to give a complete picture of the situation observed. This twofold attitude is inspired by the study of the relationship between humans and their social, geographical or political environment:

It concerns the negative or positive impact language has had and still has on the relationship between humans and what has been called the environment (ecologically named 'convirment') (Penz & Fill 2015:1).

For the workplace, research on management and language policy is of particular interest. Language policy can be divided into an explicit (definition by clear laws or regulations) and an implicit branch (definition by doing, not necessarily consciously or through introspection). Language management inspired by ecology has a holistic orientation and can be situated more closely to implicit language policy and tactical moves than to explicit activities and constructed strategies. For this reason, it is well fitted for the workplace where the language policy is often not clearly defined, but negotiated in a movement of power consolidation on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by the sharing of initiative in the decision-making through the empowerment of all persons employed in the work process.

## 2.2 *Border – boundary – margin*

Different terms are used for referring to spatial and symbolic limitations like border, boundary or margin. Konstanze Jungbluth, a researcher in the field of contact linguistics from the University of Frankfurt on the Oder situated on the German-Polish border, explained in a personal communication given in Luxembourg in 2016 that for her team of linguists, *borders* are (almost) impermeable limits, while *boundaries* are limitations that can be negotiated and *margin* relates to a new entity created from what formerly used to be remote

and located at distance from an imagined center.<sup>1</sup> In this process of re-centering marginalized spaces, centripetal forces prevail. In what follows, we will try to link those concepts to the management of human resources and the communication of the multilingual workplace.

### *2.3 Borders between languages*

This booklet "*français au travail*" is a joint initiative of the French and the Québec governments, it can be downloaded free of charge.<sup>2</sup> The authors explain that the necessity to communicate in the international business sector often leads to monolingual habits, by giving a priority to the English language. The publication encourages firms to maintain or re-establish the use of French, especially for companies located in French-speaking countries or territories. While giving precious hints for raising awareness of linguistic vitality or the management of the multilingual space, the document keeps up the paradigm of languages separated by borders that are not easy to cross. It is representative of most of the publications by authorities in French-speaking countries or territories who see the existence of other languages as a threat to the use of French. They aim at reaffirming the position of French compared to other languages, and what they mean by "vitalité linguistique" is in fact the defense of one single language, French. The case where French is the stronger language and threatening another one is not foreseen or described, therefore the image is not complete in an ecolinguistic sense as it observes the relationship only in one direction and not in the other. This kind of language policy is neither explicit nor transparent. This attitude, which we cannot treat in detail here, has a long historical tradition in the "francophonie", the grouping of French-speaking countries (cf. Ehrhart 2012; Cichon, Ehrhart & Stegu 2012). It is not always in harmony with new developments in the globalized world, which require more flexible and sustainable solutions.

## **3. Case study set-up and data collection**

Smart France is a subsidiary of the German firm Daimler AG with its headquarters situated in Böblingen close to Stuttgart in Southern Germany. Hambach is a little country town in France with a few more than 2000 inhabitants situated in the part of Lorraine which has a Germanic-speaking substrate, a Moselle Franconian dialect. It is also located very close to Alsace, another region with a rich bilingual tradition. In 2016, both regions were united with another region, Champagne, through the creation of a more comprehensive administrative unit of France, le Grand Est. Despite this attempt of political unification, these parts of France are rather different from each other, with a

<sup>1</sup> For the research center and its general activities see <https://www.borders-in-motion.de/download/15.4.17>).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.francaisautravail.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Bonnes-pratiques-19-3-2013-complet.pdf> (last access on 15/9/17)

long-standing tradition of regional specificities. The inhabitants of Moselle and Alsace, the region from which most of the work force in Smartville originates, have a long-standing tradition of addressing linguistic and cultural borders, by transforming them into manageable boundaries. Nowadays, the younger generations have a much weaker command of the Germanic languages. Nonetheless, the memory of the strong link to this linguistic and cultural heritage of their parents' and grand-parents' time is still alive and, people do not really perceive themselves as foreigners when crossing the closely situated national border between France and Germany.

In the professional context, communicative and linguistic solutions need to be adapted to each specific environment. This goes beyond the perfect use of grammatical rules as they are usually taught in the language class. In the Hambach Smart factory, we were able to interview people who did not necessarily have a special education in intercultural communication and multilingual dialogue, but who had by themselves discovered interesting solutions and efficient practices to face communicative problems in diverse settings at the workplace. This precious talent was not always visible to the management or at least not always highly valorized. A similar situation in Switzerland was described in publications like Duchêne et al. (2013). We are therefore of the opinion that the existing resources and their use could be more highly considered as a good practice of intercultural communication developed in situ, i.e. for the specific purposes of a given work environment by means of an ecological approach.

We hypothesize that the tradition of border-crossing in the region made it easier to create active interfaces for all kinds of communication in the company, between different levels of activity and also between people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. We collected data of various kinds: visual (photos and on-site observations of common spaces i.e. the linguistic landscape), audio (with interviews on representations) and graphical illustrations (through mind maps).

In spring 2014, we collected 15h of interviews working as binational, multilingual and interdisciplinary tandems consisting of researchers in linguistics, geography, sociology and management studies stemming from three Universities of the Greater Region: Universität des Saarlandes (Germany), Université de Lorraine (France) and the University of Luxembourg. Each tandem (consisting of at least one German and one French speaker) collected audio recordings which were then transcribed as a whole. They were analyzed through different methodological approaches for analysis (discourse analysis for the linguistic part and mental mapping for the spatial sciences) and finally, the results were exchanged and discussed between the partners from the different disciplines.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Observation-based findings

During our field research in the Hambach Smart factory, this German firm based in France close to the German border, we discovered that the employees were able to find new solutions to communicate with persons of another linguistic and cultural background, in the sense of negotiable boundaries, which were perfectly adapted to the local and professional context. In what follows, we would like to illustrate their innovative ways of communicating by linking them to some concepts in Management studies.

The linguistic landscape of the observed place is heterogeneous, with the use of

- the territorial language, French,
- the company's main language from the headquarters, German,
- a non-territorial language, English
- and hybrid constructions

This heterogeneity can be illustrated through a signpost located at the main entrance to the central building which indicates:

*smart France*  
*Entrée principale/*  
*Haupteingang*

This is a procedure used frequently on the site: an indication drawing on all possible resources of the repertoire held by the potential reader. *smart* is the name of the firm and also an English word not forming part of the French or German vocabulary. The word *France* can be attributed either to the French or to the English language. Then the indication is followed by the French and then by the German word saying that this is the main entrance. When we took the photo, there was also a van parked in front of the building with only the French inscription "sécurité incendie", corresponding to the official language of the territory.

The visitor's map of *Smartville* follows the strategy of the signpost at the main entrance: it contains words of hybrid origin expressing corporate identity (plastal, Magna Uniport), abbreviations accessible only to insiders (MLT, VDO), expressions in English (*smart mall, paint shop*) as well as, most frequently, bilingual inscriptions in French followed by German in letters of the same size.

In the lunchroom and cafeteria the menu was exposed only in French, but this monolingual mode was backed by a nonverbal illustration by means of the exhibition of plates with the different meal options.

The place for handing in the trays is indicated in French (big letters) and German (letter of almost half the size). Small adhesive pictures of *smart* cars are placed on the large windows of the canteen terrace with the function of deterring birds from flying into the glass surface. This language-neutral symbol is a strong federative signal for all employees. Like the other examples mentioned, its objective is clarity and optimization of the comprehension for persons of different linguistic environments. This is what we mean when referring to centripetal forces, forces that bring people of different backgrounds together.

#### 4.2 Interview-based findings

For the present purpose, we find it particularly interesting to interpret our findings in the light of the concepts elaborated by Wilhelm Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014) in their article on border crossing in International Business.

"Our focus is on individual "boundary spanners" whom we define 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 the two groups (...). Previous research suggests that boundary spanners contribute significantly to inter-unit interaction in MNC's (...). They facilitate knowledge sharing and the development of collective social capital (...), effective collaboration (...) and value creation (...). However, little is known about what enables them to do so." (Barner-Rasmussen et al. 2014: 887)

Barner-Rasmussen and his research partners observed multilingual communication in Finland, with Finnish, Swedish and English as the main languages used. In their field study, a limited number of border-crossers, or boundary-spanners in his terminology, achieve a great number of results in the sense of a centripetal movement, they enumerate the following types of activities:

- Exchanging
- Linking
- Facilitating
- Intervening

In the introduction to their article, Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014: 886) explain: "We examine the role of cultural and language skills as resources for individuals' boundary spanning ability in multinational corporations. Our combined qualitative and quantitative analysis shows that cultural and language skills influence the extent to which individual boundary spanners perform four functions: exchanging, linking, facilitating, and intervening. Boundary spanners with both cultural and language skills perform more functions than those with only cultural skills, and language skills are critical for performing the most demanding functions. Key boundary spanners have properties that potentially



make them not only valuable organizational human capital, but also rare and difficult to imitate."

In our data, the crossing of borders between languages, countries and ways of functioning is seen as natural and it looks as if no special effort was needed to do it. This is in opposition to research conducted in other environments (for instance in Finland by Barner-Rasmussen 2014) where only a very limited number of persons is able to act as a boundary spanner.

In a next step, we tried to link the descriptions given by our informants concerning their working environment and their general behavior in challenging situations from the intercultural point of view to the types of boundary spanners quoted by Barner-Rasmussen.

### **Example 1 Exchanging**

Our informant - a 60-year-old man of Alsatian origin - tells us that he does not take notes during long instruction sessions in Germany. He uses the written material that is distributed (in German) and otherwise he relies on his memory, because, as he says, he wants "to live as a free man". He is then able to pass the information to his team either in French or in the regional variety of a Germanic language (this is part of the further transcription not reproduced here):

#### **(1) Transcription "Faut vivre libre"**

E1 (enquêteur) Et si vous prenez des notes par exemple. Vous faites une formation en Allemagne pendant trois mois vous prenez les notes en allemand ou en alsacien en français ?  
 M2 (employé) : Non pas du tout  
 E1 Vous enregistrez comme ça  
 M2 Forcément y'a toujours un support papier qui nous qui nous est donné. Mais ça s'arrête là. J'avais pas le charger plus y'en a assez. J'crois que tout c'qui est papier faut faut pas se/ C'est pas la peine hein. Faut Faut vivre libre [rire]

Referring to the activities quoted above, the situation described would fall into what is called "exchanging". For the informant, the fact of transmitting rather complicated messages from one language to the other does not constitute an action he is particularly proud of. He rather insists on the fact that he is free to choose the strategy he wants to employ, this is important for him to be efficient in his transmission work.

### **Example 2 Linking**

Example 2 describes the use of French by a representative of the German headquarters, an effort made in order to speak directly to the whole staff, including not only the managers, but also the people employed in production stemming mainly from the French-speaking immediate surroundings of the company.

## (2) Transcription "nicht um die Ecke kommen"

A: als Frau xxx < eine Deutsche aus Böblingen> das letzte Mal hier war im Dezember. Ähm das war ja 'ne Ansprache um um m m um um/ ja es war für ja auf jeden Fall 'ne große Betriebsversammlung ähm durch sie auch initiiert und sie spricht natürlich dann nicht nur die Indirekten an sondern sie spricht die direkten ähm Arbeitnehmer an. Das heißt die Produktion. Und auch aus dem Grund weiß sie: da brauch ich jetzt nicht mit Deutsch oder Englisch um die Ecke kommen auch wenn viele aus Lothringen kommen.

F: Mhm (bejahend)

A: Ähm das hatte auch ne Rolle gespielt. Ich muss diese Leute auch in den Produktionen erreichen können. Das geht nur mit Französisch.

F: Mhm (bejahend)

A: Aber in meinem Arbeitsbereich denk' ich mal is' das'n bisschen äquivalent Deutsch. Französisch. Da kommt man eigentlich fließend durch.

According to types of activities identified by Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014), we classify the scene described in this short quote as "linking". The German lady made a visible effort to speak in French, as she wanted her message to be directly understood by the whole team. It is interesting to see that she is not a native of the Hambach region with its long tradition of border-crossing and the effort it takes her to perform border-crossing is more strongly addressed than in example 1.

## Example 3 Facilitating

The employees of an intermediate level between production and higher management levels, often perceive the change of languages as a game which helps improving mutual comprehension between people of different origin:

### (3) Transcription "nette Spielerei"

A: Also das/ je nach dem wer grad in welchem in welcher Sprache den Satz anfängt so sprechen wir auch. Es wird auch was ich sehr intressant find'/ das war für mich nochmal ganz intressant ähm wenn ich dann wie in der Schulzeit ähm dass man hier im Satz dann springt von Deutsch auf Französisch oder umgekehrt. Ähm das fand ich i ist find' ich jetzt schon fast wieder wenn ich das beobachte ist halt 'ne nette Spielerei. Und das wiederum ist dann für mich doch 'ne gewisse Kompetenz die sich die Leute unbewusst angeeignet hab'n. Und führt natürlich dazu dass dann ähm man plötzlich wenn man spring'n kann innerhalb eines Sachverhalt's 'ne Alternativmöglichkeit hat Information'n zu übermitteln.

F: Mhm (bejahend)

A: Die man wenn man nur auf einer Sprache fährt nicht hat.

The informant compares this type of behavior to language learning at school where pupils had to stay in one language. In this specific work situation, the employees developed the competence to switch between languages, in a more or less unconscious way, by offering them alternative manners to express what they have to say. This strategy is used in a great number of situations worldwide and is described as code-switching or translanguaging (García 2009) or dual-lingualism or receptive bilingualism (Lincoln 1979) and it seems to be very useful also in working place conditions. As for Barner-Rasmussen et al.'s (2014) categories, one could classify this attitude as "facilitating".

Our field data are based on personal interviews during which our partners described their actions. We are well aware that these descriptions are strongly influenced by their beliefs and representations and that they do not constitute a data set of ethnological observation.

#### **Example 4 Intervening**

In this extract, the informant describes the progress of an important meeting with partners from Paris and Stuttgart who initially had chosen to use English instead of the local strategy of bilingual conversation between German and French. When he realized that for the car production process, the two partners were speaking about something completely different by having the false impression of using the same language, he intervened as follows:

##### **(4) Transcription "le Denglish et le Franglais, c'est deux langues complètement différentes"**

M9 : L'anglais bah après c'est/Attends c'est peut être 5 % de l'anglais  
Notamment s'il y a des prestations à faire pour le projet  
Parce que pour le projet il faut faire en anglais. Dès qu'il y a des  
présentations à faire dans l'anglais où qu'il y a des gens de Paris avec  
des gens de Böblingen qui sont avec.  
Après c'est l'anglais. Au début c'était pas évident non plus parce qu'on  
avait remarqué aussi comme quoi si on comprend allemand français et  
l'anglais hum. On comprend aussi un peu la façon de penser. Et des fois on  
a remarqué quoi comme quoi.  
Pour rigoler on a dit quoi le Denglish et le Franglais c'est deux langues  
complètement différentes.  
Parce que des fois ils ont parlé en anglais d'un sujet bah complètement...  
l'un a parlé de stylos roses et l'autre a parlé de stylos mauves et « ouais  
on est d'accord on est d'accord » Bah stop ça va pas parce que vous parlez  
de rose et l'autre parle de mauve. Ça va pas.

*(For the communication between the people from Böblingen and Paris, sometimes English was chosen, but they became aware of the fact that the English used by the French "Franglais" and the English used by the German staff "Denglish" were not easily intercomprehensible and in some cases, misunderstandings about the production process were the result of that. So they chose to come back to French and German again and the communication flow was functioning again.)*

This meta-level of linguistic awareness is more than just knowing how to use one or two languages. The informant here has a more important competence, he knows how to manage transitions between languages with the aim of optimizing the comprehension of partners with different backgrounds and where to intervene when he feels that the gap is becoming too big to ensure the well-functioning of understanding. Later on in his quote he mentions how he intervenes by encouraging the group to go back to their respective mother tongues or languages of origin.

Altogether, the quoted examples show different attitudes or solutions to face multilingual situations in a bilingual firm and its multilingual workplace. These can be seen as activities with a growing intensity of contact and agency, from pure exchanging of information, linking, facilitating to the more complex activity of intervening actively in the communicative process.

## 5. Discussion

In future research, it could be interesting to discuss whether the different action types of boundary spanning indicated by Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014) are indeed expressions of different levels of intensity of contact or whether they are representative of different qualities of exchange. Is the attitude of a person always linked to any specific activity type or is it possible to move from one to the other? Some descriptions given by the informants show that there might be a development towards the more challenging ways of sharing and communicating. They told us that it takes time to better understand the partners from another background, and this is not limited to the mastery of grammatical rules only, but to the capacity of monitoring a communicative situation as a whole.

Our observations and the literature review show that the multilingual space of international companies can be managed in different ways. A workplace with different languages can be seen in a centrifugal manner by considering that languages are strongly separated from each other by borders that can be passed only with great difficulties and by displaying huge efforts. This traditional view is frequently linked to a top-down approach held by the company leadership.

By contrast, when taking a bottom-up approach and when looking at the authentic meeting places of languages in the firm and the professional activities related to them, we notice that there are numerous promising strategies of boundary-crossing used by the staff. This group of boundary-spanners can be a minority within the company (cf. Barner-Rasmussen et al. 2014) or form a bigger group or even the majority, like in the Hambach setting we presented here. The ratio or the distribution of those persons with pivotal influence depend on the general environment as the bilingual traditions in the surrounding region, the branch of industry and the corporate culture of the firm (with flat or strongly developed hierarchies).

## 6. Conclusion

Among the concepts of spatial and symbolic limitations mentioned in the introduction, there was, apart from borders and boundaries, a third category, margins. What used to be considered as marginal can be transformed into an innovative center of language creation (like the emergence of contact languages, *lingua franca*) and generally speaking, of new modes of communication.

García (2009: 140) describes it under the definition of translinguaging: "Translinguaging is the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential. It is an approach to

bilingualism that is centered, not on languages as has often been the case, but on the practices of bilinguals that are readily observable in order to make sense of their multilingual worlds. Translanguaging therefore goes beyond what has been termed code-switching, although it includes it."

This innovative view of language contact is a promising strategy of empowerment from which the totality of the working force within a company is able to benefit. Its strength is to give priority to centripetal forces, the ones that bring people together and underline their correspondences, in an ecolinguistic orientation. This force of relationship is urgently needed in our societies which tend to emphasize the centrifugal forces acting in favour of segregation and alienation (cf. Ehrhart, in prep.). In addition, the practices developed by our informants in Hambach could serve as a starting point for the development of innovative learning strategies for languages in the professional sphere and for other special purposes. In future research and by comparing our findings to those of other field work in different international companies, it would be interesting to see whether indeed the location in a region with multilingual practice provides a solid ground for further moves of internationalization of the company, especially when the awareness for the advantages of this resource is well established.

### **Acknowledgments**

This work would not have been produced without the help of the international research group GRETI <http://www.greti.org/> and especially the support provided by H el ene Langinier from EM Business School in Strasbourg.

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