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Towards a Richer Understanding of Language and Identity in the MNC: Constructing Cosmopolitan Identities Through "English"

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Abstract

Bringing in insights from sociolinguistics, this conceptual paper advances the theorizing on language and identity in the MNC, viewed as socially constructed by individuals in interaction when they cross fluid linguistic and geographical boundaries. We posit that the identities of global business professionals in the MNC are not intrinsically tied to nationality and native language, they are rather cosmopolitan and constructed in interactions in English as the working language (BELF: English as a Business Lingua Franca). We further conceptualize the multilingual MNC as a social constellation – providing the context for processes of identity construction but also shaped by them. We outline three propositions that capture the ways in which BELF contributes to the construction of a cosmopolitan identity on three dimensions (individual, interactional and contextual) in multilingual professional MNC settings. The first one concerns the identification of individuals as participants in BELF interactions drawing from their different linguistic resources, national origins and professions, and previous experiences. The focus in the second one is on BELF interactions that manifest an orientation to both sharedness and difference in skills, knowledge and social relations. The third proposition concerns the MNC context in terms of enabling BELF interactions and being (re)constructed as a social constellation with fluid linguistic and geographical boundaries. We further elaborate on the methodological implications of sociolinguistic and cosmopolitan approaches to IM research on identity in general, and how our propositions could guide future research on language and identity in the MNC in particular.

Keywords Cosmopolitanism · English as business lingua franca · BELF · Identity · Language · Multilingualism · Multinational companies · MNC

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1 Introduction

Globalization has broadened the sphere of social interactions by making intercultural encounters easier and professional networks more diverse. Many such interactions are carried out in the global language–namely English–which inevitably influences the way people see themselves and construct their identities as individuals and professionals. The question of identities is particularly relevant to international management (IM) nowadays when multinational corporations (MNCs) are faced with challenges related to multiculturalism and multilingualism in the workforce. Indeed, contemporary MNCs are expected to promote diversity, inclusion, and equality among their employees (and their identities) as integral to their corporate values (Kelly, 2021).

Identity has been a central theme in the language-sensitive stream of IM research, which focuses on the implications of language for management, particularly in MNC contexts (Karhunen et al., 2018; Tenzer et al., 2017). English is conceptualized as its native variant in most of this research, and as a marker of social identity and consequently a source of social categorization, creating language-based fault lines and negative implications on identities (e.g. Hinds et al., 2014; Neeley, 2013). It has only recently been acknowledged in IM research that English as a working language in the MNC may differ from its native variant, and that geographical and linguistic boundaries are not as fixed in contemporary MNCs as traditionally assumed in the theory (e.g. Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1990). However, little is known about how English in its role of enabling interactions among global business professionals might positively contribute to their identity construction.

We argue that two key notions provide a novel perspective on questions about the professional identities of MNC employees: *cosmopolitanism* and the sociolinguistic concept of *English as a Business Lingua Franca* (BELF). Cosmopolitanism, defined in the context of this study as belongingness to a global community (e.g. Vertovec & Cohen, 2002), serves to capture the processes through which the identities of global professionals emerge from global interactions, or the complex liaison of universality and particularity (e.g. Beck, 2004; Hannerz, 1990). As Watson (2018) argues, a cosmopolitan identity is understood as a "supranational" expression of selfhood, national identity being one - but not the dominant - marker (Smith, 2007; Turner, 2002), alongside others such as profession (e.g. Vertovec & Cohen, 2002). Although IM researchers have attached the attribute "cosmopolitan" to MNC managers and mobile professionals such as expatriates (Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018; Adams and van de Vijver, 2015) and transnational knowledge workers (Colic-Peisker, 2010), the role of language in cosmopolitan identity construction has not been explicitly addressed.

We seek to narrow this gap by viewing language and identity from a sociolinguistic perspective (e.g., Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Omoniyi, 2006), namely as socially constructed in and through language in interactions among and relations between people situated in and aligned with various social settings and networks (Jenkins, 2014). We argue that a fruitful approach to identity construction in the

MNC is to consider three interrelated dimensions, namely the individual, the interactional, and the contextual (Jenkins, 2014): the first of these represents professionals, the second their interpersonal communication, and the third the MNC context. Given the special position of English in the MNC, we argue that the most fruitful basis on which to study how cosmopolitan identities are constructed in the multilingual MNC in and through language is to conceptualize the "language" as English.

Scholars in the field of sociolinguistics have investigated the relationship between English and a cosmopolitan identity, revealing several processes at play when users of foreign languages negotiate cosmopolitan identities that are attached to real and imagined communities (De Costa, 2011; Ros i Solé, 2013; Davydova & Ilg, 2021). Involvement with communities is not only about engagement – it also requires imagination, which is a process of self-expansion by crossing boundaries and creating new images of the world (see Wenger, 1998, p. 176). Imagined communities refer to settings that individuals envision for themselves and aspire to join, such as the global community of English users. Given the sociolinguistic approach to English in general, and as a means of cosmopolitan identity construction in particular, the findings of this research provide insights for our study on the construction of a cosmopolitan identity in the MNC context. In this endeavor we apply the sociolinguistic concept of BELF, which refers to the hybrid and variable *usage* of English among speakers of different first languages that meet the demands of the specific business context (Komori-Glatz, 2018, p. 52). In that BELF is not *a* language (Räisänen & Kankaanranta, 2020) that is "owned" by native English speakers, it escapes language-based social categorization (Giles & Johnson, 1981; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Lauring, 2008). We argue that the BELF perspective in the MNC context contributes to the construction (and/or molding) of cosmopolitan identities that are not based exclusively on the national identity but also incorporate other identity markers such as profession (e.g. Kennedy, 2004; Mao & Shen, 2015; Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002).

Our aim in this paper is to outline three propositions that capture the ways in which adopting the BELF perspective contributes to the construction of a cosmopolitan identity on three dimensions (individual, interactional and contextual) in multilingual and professional MNC settings. The first one concerns the individual's identification as a participant in BELF interactions, who draws on different linguistic resources, national origins, professions and experiences. The focus in the second proposition is on BELF interactions in which participants orient to both sharedness and differences in skills, knowledge and social relations. The third proposition elaborates how the construction of a cosmopolitan identity through BELF interactions projects the MNC as a social constellation with fluid geographical and linguistic boundaries.

Our propositions enable us to make several contributions to existing knowledge as we bridge work across disciplines, provide multi-level insights, and highlight directions for future inquiry (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). First, we advance the theorizing on language and identity in the MNC, viewing them not as intrinsically tied to nationality, but as socially constructed in BELF interactions across linguistic and geographical boundaries. Second, we enrich IM scholarship on cosmopolitan

identities in elaborating the role of language in identity construction. Third, we contribute to developing the notion of the MNC as a social constellation (Karhunen et al., 2018), which not only provides the context for the construction of a cosmopolitan identity in BELF interactions but is also socially constructed through them.

We proceed as follows. First, we review conceptualizations of identity and English in language-sensitive IM research. Next, we introduce cosmopolitanism as a concept and outline how cosmopolitan identities have been addressed in IM research. After that we describe the sociolinguistic approach to cosmopolitan identity construction, and BELF as our "proxy" for English in the MNC context. Then we describe the processes in which BELF constructs cosmopolitan identities and develop our propositions. Before concluding the paper, we discuss implications for future research on language and identity in MNCs.

2 Current Conceptualizations of Identity and English in Language-Sensitive IM Research

Identity has been identified as one of the central themes in recent reviews of language-sensitive IM research (Karhunen et al., 2018; Tenzer et al., 2017). The most frequently used sources of information include Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Tajfel's (1978) linear explanation of language as a marker of social identity formation and consequent to social categorization (Giles & Johnson, 1981; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Iwashita, 2022; cf. Lauring, 2008). In other words, individuals have linguistic identities, which are self-defined based on perceived membership of a linguistic group or as a speaker of a certain mother tongue (Bordia & Bordia, 2015; Iwashita, 2022; Kroon et al., 2015; Wöcke et al., 2018). Hence, linguistic identity is intrinsically tied to the notion of nationality and national languages (cf. Vaara et al., 2017). It was only recently that Iwashita (2022) challenged this in his multi-case study of a Japanese MNC, suggesting that in the context of subsidiaries, national identity may be sustained independently of the languages used.

Many studies in IM research on language and identity focus on the negative implications of English as the dominant language in the MNC and in other international business interactions. These studies, reflecting the language-sensitive stream of IM research generally conceptualize English as its native variant (Karhunen et al., 2018), which enjoys a special position at the top of the language hierarchy in MNCs (Gaibrois & Nentwich, 2020). It is a position that arouses feelings of inequality and friction between those who master English and those who do not (e.g. Boussebaa & Brown, 2017; Gaibrois & Nentwich, 2020; Hinds et al., 2014; Neeley, 2013), and between native and non-native speakers (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014). More specifically, a lack of English language skills may cause anxiety among individuals (Neeley et al., 2012; Presbitero, 2020; Swift & Wallace, 2011), whereas proficiency and native-speaker status may generate language-induced power distortions such as an unearned increase in status within the organization (e.g. Neeley & Dumas, 2016; Śliwa & Johansson, 2014). Various linguistic hurdles that impede knowledge sharing have also been identified in team communication (Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013;

Tenzer et al., 2014), as well as between headquarters and subsidiaries (e.g. Peltokorpi, 2015; Reiche et al., 2015).

The conceptualization of (the national) language as a pre-determined marker of (national) identity reflects the traditional view of the MNC as an organization in which units are separated by geographical borders (e.g. Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1990), and languages by a "language barrier" (e.g. Feely & Harzing, 2003), in other words a linguistic barrier to communication. Recently, however, some language-sensitive IM research has started to draw inspiration from sociolinguistics, reconceptualizing the MNC as a social constellation (Karhunen et al., 2018) that emerges in everyday interactions in which languages are mixed (e.g. Gaibrois, 2018; Janssens & Steyaert, 2014; Kassis Henderson et al., 2018; Langinier & Ehrhart, 2020; Steyaert et al., 2011). The idea of an MNC as socially constructed in multilingual interactions implies that boundaries – both geographical and linguistic–traditionally perceived of as fixed become fluid. This echoes the cosmopolitan ideal of a borderless world on the organizational level.

In the context of identity research, the idea of the MNC as socially constructed implies that the identity of the English users in it are not linked exclusively to nationality, but are influenced by the interplay of English as a global language with other local languages, thereby paving way to a more dynamic - and positive - understanding of language and identity. Pioneering the sociolinguistic conceptualization of English, Kassis Henderson, (2005) points out how members in international management teams using English recreate language and communication norms to suit their multilingual context, with a view to negotiating shared understandings. Similarly, Steyaert et al., (2011) refer to "simplified" English emerging through negotiation as a "hybrid platform" (p. 277). Gaibrois' (2018) findings on two Swiss multinationals further revealed "hybrid language use", including mixing languages, using "simple" English, and fostering solidarity and empowerment among non-native speakers. However, this novel understanding has not yet been tested in the research on IM identity, despite Janssens and Steyaert's, (2014) suggestion to revisit the idea of identities in the MNC from a cosmopolitan perspective.

3 Cosmopolitanism and Cosmopolitan Identities in IM Research

We consider cosmopolitanism a fruitful view for the study language and identity in MNCs from a sociolinguistic perspective, especially given the contested nature of the link between identity and national culture in cosmopolitanism. Some scholars argue that a moderated or weakened national identity is a critical feature of cosmopolitanism (Norris & Inglehart, 2009; Pichler, 2012), while acknowledging that a national identity may be a necessary condition for its development (Smith, 2007; Turner, 2002). Watson (2018) proposes a consensus definition of cosmopolitan identity as "supranational", not directly attached to any national culture.

Cosmopolitanism as a concept is applied in many disciplines, and it lacks a uniform definition (Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018). Scholars have described many types of cosmopolitanism (e.g., Rapport & Stade, 2007) and its components (e.g., Pichler, 2012). Watson (2018) summarizes the common themes in the literature as

including global mobility and affiliations; the appreciation of diversity and solidarity with strangers, including support for human rights more broadly; a preference for the cross-cultural consumption of goods; and a sense of identity or belonging to a "global we" that transcends borders (e.g. Pichler, 2012; Rapport & Stade, 2007; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002). She continues that a cosmopolitan person is generally understood as manifesting or subscribing to all of these aspects. Our focus in this study is on the identity of cosmopolitanism, which we define as belongingness to a global community (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002). More specifically, we limit our discussion to *professional* identities, in other words identities constructed in work-related interactions.

"Cosmopolitan" in IM research is an attribute that is frequently attached to mobile business professionals in MNCs. Research on global managers as representatives of a global elite presents them as a "benevolent cosmopolitan group of individuals" (Goxe & Belhoste, 2015, p. 192), for example. Individuals with a "cosmopolitan mindset" are described as flexible and open toward cultural challenges, feeling mentally at home across the globe (Barmeyer et al., 2020). However, not only does it represent universalism, impartiality, and objectivity, cosmopolitanism also stands above cultural particularism and "locals" (Levy et al., 2007; also Adams and van de Vijver, 2015).

Interestingly, empirical research on cosmopolitan identities in IM has shown how professions or occupations may constitute the central axis of identity-belonging, downplaying the nation of origin (Colic-Peisker, 2010). It has also been suggested that cosmopolitanism implies boundary drawing to demarcate "us" as cosmopolitan "non-nationals" in relation to the national (mono)culture (Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018). Indeed, referring to transnational knowledge workers, Colic-Peisker (2010) points out that professionalism and cosmopolitanism are mutually reinforcing through identity-belonging, and that professional networks are inherently transnational, open to anyone in the same professional "class" regardless of ethnic and national boundaries and affiliations.

In sum, there are interesting contributions in IM research on cosmopolitan identities, but they do not explicitly address the role of language in general, or English in particular, in identity construction. We maintain that, given the dominant role of English as "the language of international business" (Neeley, 2012) and the default corporate language in MNCs (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999), the most fruitful approach in studying how cosmopolitan identities are constructed in the multilingual MNC in and through language is to conceptualize the "language" as English. Next, we discuss how sociolinguistic scholarship has addressed the liaison between cosmopolitan identities and English. We also elaborate on the concept of BELF, which with its focus on English in international business encounters is relevant to the present study.

4 A Sociolinguistic Approach to Cosmopolitan Identity Construction and English in the MNC Context

The sociolinguistic perspective on identity aligns with social constructionist approaches (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Jenkins, 2014), but specifically focuses on language as a key to identity construction. Identity is socially constructed in and through language, in interactions and relations among people situated in and aligned with various social settings and networks (e.g. Omoniyi, 2006). It is not a stable, individual characteristic, but emerges dynamically in processes of identification (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Omoniyi, 2006). In other words, it concerns the positioning of the self and the other(s) in everyday interactions in which individuals take on specific roles: workplace examples include leaders and subordinates (see e.g. Holmes & Stubbe, 2003; Schnurr & Zayts, 2017). Identification is also connected to the surrounding context, the discourses and ideologies that help to determine what kind of identification is feasible (Angouri & Marra, 2010; Angouri et al., 2017). Sociolinguistic approaches thus acknowledge the individual, interactional and contextual dimensions of identities (see also Jenkins, 2014) on which cosmopolitan identity theory depends (Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018). The sociolinguistic perspective highlights how professionals' identity construction occurs in interactions in the MNC context, which, as social constructionists maintain, is shaped by these interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The sociolinguistic perspective further rejects the idea of linguistic identities based on the mother tongue as a stable individual characteristic (Hua, 2017; Omoniyi, 2006). The mother tongue is just one of the resources drawn on in identity construction, along with other languages used by the individual in different communicative settings and reflecting other characteristics such as profession, age, gender and ethnicity (e.g. Hua, 2017). This challenges the idea of language as a predetermined basis for social categorization. On the contrary, such categories may emerge as a result of identity negotiation, defined as the processes through which people reach agreement regarding "who is who" in their relationships (Goffman, 1959; Swann et al., 2009). Individuals negotiate identities in real interactions depending on the resources available and the people involved. Identity may thus be negotiable, renegotiable or non-negotiable: some identities are negotiable in different social and historical contexts whereas others are not (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004). For example, a language learner may or may not be able to negotiate an expert identity, depending on the context and the skills of the other people involved.

Scholars in sociolinguistics have also investigated the relationship between English and a cosmopolitan identity, revealing several processes in the negotiation of such identities among users of foreign languages. One key process is *imagination*, which Wenger (1998 p. 176) describes as "a process of expanding oneself by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves". Ros i Solé, (2013), in turn, points out how cosmopolitan language users acquire new identities in their workplaces in interactions with other people and through the media they consume. Hence, acquiring a cosmopolitan mindset is not simply

a matter of education: it can be achieved gradually through mobility and socialization. Moreover, cosmopolitan language users participate in different communities simultaneously, and they are capable of acting as mediators between cultures and of bridging gaps between people from different backgrounds (see also De Costa, 2011). In this process, they move between different life worlds and embrace hybridity. Moreover, many of them desire to become members of a real or an imagined global, cosmopolitan community (De Costa, 2011). The feeling of belonging in a real or imagined community requires one's capital (Bourdieu, 1991), such as language skills, to be valued as legitimate (De Costa, 2011).

The sociolinguistic approach to English as a means of constructing a cosmopolitan identity recognizes the situational and contextual nature of the language. The concept of English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF, see Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005), a subcategory of the sociolinguistic paradigm of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF; see e.g. Jenkins et al., 2018), was developed to shed light on how business practitioners from diverse linguistic backgrounds used English in their daily interactions aimed at getting their job done and maintaining/enhancing relationships (e.g. Cogo, 2016; Ehrenreich, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011; Räisänen, 2018). Drawing on the work of BELF scholars, Komori-Glatz (2018, p. 52) defines BELF as "the use of English as the medium of communication among speakers of different first languages in an emergent, variable and hybrid manner that is appropriate to the demands and (multilingual) resources of the specific business context". This highlights BELF not as *a* language but as emerging in the *use* of language in international business encounters among individuals who share business knowledge and skills (see Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018).

Moreover, the "language" that emerges from dynamic BELF interactions is never the "same": it is always unique given the participants' diverse backgrounds and resources, which makes BELF inherently multilingual (e.g. Cogo, 2012). Consequently, BELF competence cannot be measured against the native speaker because there are no native speakers, and no grammar books or dictionaries. This levels down the native-non-native divide with its inherent power implications (e.g. Śliwa & Johansson, 2014). Rather, as Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2018) argue, BELF is an integral component of the business knowledge of global business professionals, including the "what, why, how, and when to communicate in a particular situation" (p. 318).

BELF also diverges from "Business English", a specific variety of English (as *a* language) with a particular vocabulary and phraseology, in that participating in BELF interactions requires knowledge and skills only achievable via business education and socialization to the business community and/or on-the-job learning (see Manuti et al., 2015). The BELF concept thus combines language and business: the principles of practice are considered universal and cultural differences are secondary, to be managed in daily interactions. These are the two sets of skills, or competences, that global managers attribute to themselves in their self-definitions (Goxe & Belhoste, 2015).

Participants in BELF interactions–native and non-native English speakers alike–need to be aware of differences in language proficiency and of how to overcome them. Research has revealed that non-native speakers tend to show

sensitivity and solidarity when searching for a common understanding (e.g. Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Nurmi & Koroma, 2020), which is characteristic of cosmopolitan identities. Indeed, Baker (2015; also Sung, 2013; Virkkula & Nikula, 2010) implies that English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)-related identities share characteristics with cosmopolitan identities, including orientation to what ELF speakers share with each other, how they differ from one another and how they overcome differences in their intercultural encounters. As a sub-stream of ELF, the BELF perspective sheds light on how the identities of a specific group of individuals, namely global business professionals, are constructed in and through language in their daily interactions in the inherently cosmopolitan MNC context. Qualitative and longitudinal BELF studies on socialization trajectories, personal accounts, and viewpoints on language use among professionals reveal how individuals' attitudes and life experiences matter in constructing a professional identity (Räisänen, 2016; Takino, 2019).

5 Constructing Cosmopolitan Identities through BELF

We acknowledge that the construction of cosmopolitan identities is a complex process, which develops in the MNC in various ways, and not only among global elites such as managers and other international business professionals. International mobility in the contemporary global world is not a privilege reserved for these elites (Levy et al., 2007), it is also accessible to other groups such as low-skilled self-initiated expatriates (Holtbrügge, 2021; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2014). Similarly, contexts of international interaction in business have become more multifaceted, including born-global start-ups (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015) and ad-hoc transient groups and networks (Mortensen, 2017; Pitzl, 2018). Although English is the most commonly adopted corporate language in MNCs and in other international business encounters (Neeley, 2012), other languages continue to be used as well (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013; Selmier II et al., 2015; see also Froese et al., 2016). Indeed, research has shown that the most commonly used language in an MNC may well be the mother tongue of the employees (e.g. Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005).

Nevertheless, we focus on internationally operating professionals and managers participating in BELF interactions in MNCs, on the grounds that most empirical BELF research has focused on such professional groups. Similarly, most language-sensitive IM research on identities has drawn from contexts in which English is the corporate language. Our aim in this section is to show how BELF contributes to the construction of a cosmopolitan identity on three dimensions (individual, interactional and contextual) in multilingual professional MNC settings (Fig. 1).

In what follows we elaborate on the processes in which BELF contributes to identity construction along these dimensions, and then we develop three propositions that capture them.
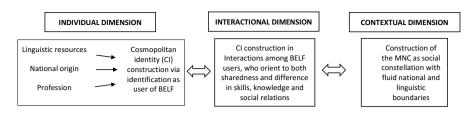
Fig. 1 Dimensions of cosmopolitan identity construction in the MNC through BELF

5.1 The Construction of a Cosmopolitan Identity via Identification as an Individual Participant in BELF Interactions

On the *individual* dimension, MNC employees construct their identities as participants in BELF interactions (e.g., Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013; Räisänen, 2016), reflecting an orientation to the sharedness of cosmopolitan identities (see Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018) from two perspectives: the shared language (English) and business (see also Goxe & Belhoste, 2015). Individual professionals talking about themselves as global business professionals participating in BELF interactions identify themselves not as failed native speakers but rather as language users in their own right in settings in which business is of primary and linguistic proficiency often of secondary importance. In the MNC context, this means assessing one's linguistic skills, i.e., capital (Bourdieu, 1991), as legitimate in the community. For example, a business manager interviewed in Räisänen's (2016) study explained how his fear of speaking English had disappeared almost completely and he no longer worried about his shortcomings in terms of language proficiency; this was a result of mobility and socialization into Chinese companies, and his move between different life worlds, as is typical of cosmopolitans (Ros i Solé, 2013). He attributed this change to his encounters with people from different language backgrounds speaking "English" with different accents and levels of proficiency, further explaining how he had noticed how well the people representing his first language background spoke, knew and understood English and should not feel humbled about their proficiency (Räisänen, 2016, p. 169).

Indeed, BELF functions as an empowering resource and an emancipatory force among professionals maintaining such an orientation in their self-accounts. They are not concerned about their inadequacies in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, or their lack of skills in small talk (e.g., Cogo, 2016; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Nurmi & Koroma, 2020; Räisänen, 2016). Instead, they make use of their linguistic knowledge, even linguistic fragments, and other available embodied and material resources such as gestures and objects in order to reach a shared understanding with their business partners (see Räisänen, 2020; also Ly, 2016). As shown in empirical BELF research, business professionals working in transnational settings in expatriate positions and participating in BELF interactions draw on their profession and national origin in their identity construction (Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013; Räisänen, 2016).

Whereas orientation to sharedness shows in identity construction among business professionals as individual participants in BELF interactions in the global context, orientation to difference (see Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018) manifests in comparisons of their own performance to that of others. This emerges in their self-identification as BELF users with a specific lingua-cultural background. For example, empirical research has shown that certain characteristics are attributed to Finnish business professionals across global business contexts characterizing them as direct in meetings, focused on issues rather than people (Räisänen, 2016; see also Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005).

We argue that participating in BELF interactions allows individuals to express their professional expertise and their cultural background in aiming to reach a shared understanding. As participants in such encounters, business professionals are not forced or assumed to fit into one identity category defined in terms of managerial goals (cf. Boussebaa & Brown, 2017). Instead, they may cross borders and negotiate their cosmopolitan identities. Therefore, alongside BELF, professional and occupational positions in global business, in which individuals connect with various global and local networks, may constitute the main axis of identity-belonging, downplaying the nation of origin (see also Ashcraft, 2007; Colic-Peisker, 2010; Fine, 1996; Fraher & Gabriel, 2014). In the IM context, Vaara et al. (2021) discuss how the self-identification of transnational professionals may be rooted more deeply in their career and professional successes than their nation of origin. In other words, it is not only the use of BELF but also the perceived feeling of belonging to a community of BELF speakers that contribute to identity construction as a cosmopolitan.

Highlighting the construction of a cosmopolitan identity on the individual dimension, our first proposition reads as follows:

> *Proposition 1*: Cosmopolitan identities are constructed as individuals draw from their different linguistic resources, national origins, and professions when identifying themselves as participants in BELF interactions.

5.2 Cosmopolitan Identity Construction in BELF Interactions

Our second proposition shifts the focus from the self-identification of individuals as BELF users to the processes in which they relate to others in BELF interactions. Here, we apply a notion widely used in sociolinguistics, namely that of community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Participants in BELF interactions in the MNC can be seen to form communities of practice and orient to what they share with one another, including linguistic, cultural and social features, as well as orient to differences which they need to manage. BELF *interactions* share two fundamental features in the construction of cosmopolitan identities: first, the 'B' (of BELF), in other words, the business context requiring knowledge enabling the participants to do business and second, the contextual and situational use of English as their working language (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta, 2018; cf. Goxe & Belhoste, 2015). Orientation to these shared characteristics shows in the very practice of business professionals. BELF is inherently multilingual, therefore features from the participants'

multilingual repertoires are common in their interactions, which may or may not create difficulties in understanding and in conducting business.

Orientation to sharedness manifests in BELF interactions in different ways, showing characteristics of a cosmopolitan identity such as hybridity (Ros i Solé, 2013), as in the following example showing the multilingual nature of BELF. Cogo (2016, p. 8) discusses an exchange between three employees, one with a German and two with Spanish-speaking backgrounds, working in a small information technology company based in London, UK (although this example is from a small company, it could very well take place within a team in an MNC). While discussing invoicing they refer to a business partner who "reclamate always". Cogo explains that the word "reclamate" could relate to the Spanish verb "reclamar" meaning to complain or to express dissatisfaction. Here it illustrates the creative usage of English as it does not cause any problems in the conversation for the German accountant. According to Cogo (2016), it could therefore be assumed to be shared by the participants because of their multilingual repertoires, either as coming from their first language or because they are part of the same community of practice; indeed, this term could facilitate the process of understanding the business issue. Similarly, in another empirical study Virkkula-Räisänen (2010) demonstrates how participants in BELF interactions sometimes need competence in acting as mediators between languages and cultures and in deciding what type of language is appropriate.

Orientation to sharedness may also show in individuals' accommodation practices (e.g. Cogo, 2016; Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013) that aim to level down differences between skills and knowledge in BELF interactions. A shared understanding needs to be negotiated and confirmed by signaling (non)comprehension, asking questions, giving clarifications, paraphrasing and repetition, for example, especially in the early stages of relationships (e.g. Kankaanranta and Planken 2010, Ehrenreich, 2016; Franceschi, 2019; Cogo, 2016). Individuals may also use linguistic fragments as strategic accommodation practices to enhance social relationships and feelings of belonging (Cogo, 2012; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005).

On the other hand, orientation to differences manifest in individuals' social relations, which in the workplace context tend to be asymmetrical and/or heterogeneous due to the participants' hierarchical positions (e.g., superordinate-subordinate), age differences (e.g., recent graduate or almost retired), physical location (e.g., in the same room or in remote offices) and roles in the communicative situation (e.g., meeting chair or participant; see e.g., Holmes et al., 2008). Asymmetries such as these reflect situated power relations in interaction (Holmes, 2015) and in their context (Primecz et al., 2016). It is thus necessary to consider who is speaking to whom, why and in what circumstances (e.g. Blommaert, 2010; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985). A key goal in BELF interactions is to identify and make use of these differences, and to accept them in order to reach a shared understanding. We argue that BELF interactions work as empowering resources among professionals working in various positions, localities and teams by levelling down these differences.

To highlight identity construction on the interactional dimension, our second proposition reads as follows:

Proposition 2: Cosmopolitan identities are constructed in BELF interactions, whereby participants orient to both the sharedness and differences in skills, knowledge and social relations.

5.3 Re-Conceptualizing the MNC as a Context for the Construction of a Cosmopolitan Identity

On the contextual dimension our idea of constructing a cosmopolitan identity through BELF offers an alternative to the view in critical scholarship that promotes the dominance of English - or "organizational Englishization" - as a vehicle for identity management whereby the identities of non-Anglophone employees are transformed in line with managerially defined goals (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017). Instead, we suggest that the MNC should be considered a social constellation rather than a static entity (Karhunen et al., 2018) - or even a combination of transient multilingual communities (Mortensen, 2017; Pitzl, 2018). It comes into being in and through the various BELF interactions of individuals who construct their cosmopolitan identities in addition to using BELF to work and maintain/enhance relationships. Whereas these individuals interact with each other in various combinations, communities and networks in the everyday cosmopolitan reality of the MNC, their identities as participants in BELF interactions are in a constant state of flux, transcending individual and collective boundaries and relating to global, professional and national cultures. Hence, the MNC is not only a context for cosmopolitan identity construction, but this context is also being constantly constructed through social interaction among individuals.

The sociolinguistic conceptualization of the MNC as a social constellation (Karhunen et al., 2018) highlights two salient features, namely multi*nationality* and multi*lingualism*. We argue that geographical borders are becoming more fluid in today's globalized world, as associated processes such as digitalization, have produced new, virtual forms of social interaction within the MNC (Faulconbridge et al., 2020). For instance, global virtual teams (e.g. Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013) challenge forms of physical mobility such as expatriation as the traditional basis for cosmopolitanism and, ultimately, the static view of the MNC as comprising physical units in different countries (e.g. Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1990). We argue that just as, on the individual level, professions may downplay national origin as the central axis for cosmopolitan identity-building (Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018), on the MNC level the interaction–be it face-to-face or virtual - between these cosmopolitan professionals shapes the form that the MNC as an organization takes.

Not only are geographical boundaries becoming fluid, our treatment of the MNC as a context for the construction of a cosmopolitan identity highlights the sociolinguistic understanding of the multilingual MNC, in which different languages interact and are mixed (e.g. García & Wei, 2014), and such interaction is valued and embraced. Interestingly, viewed as a social constellation, not only does the MNC provide a context for the construction of individual and interaction-level identities,

the processes involved also shape it by "talking it into being" (Boden, 1994; Heritage, 1984). As Karhunen et al. (2018) note, this view of the MNC as a social constellation (both real and/or imagined) acknowledges that organizational processes and practices are as much a result of grassroots dynamics as of corporate-level initiatives. It also gives a new, more fluid and dynamic meaning to the concept of context involving both real as well as imagined attachment–traditionally regarded as external to the MNC, static and measurable (Delios, 2017).

Indeed, many virtues related to cosmopolitanism, such as openness to other cultures and reconciling the global and the local (Levy et al., 2007), are promoted in contemporary MNCs, in which diversity, inclusion and equality have become integral corporate values (Kelly, 2021). These values become visible through everyday interactions in which the organizational reality is socially constructed through workplace discourse (e.g. Angouri & Marra, 2010). BELF interactions, by definition, imply openness to and an appreciation of different cultures and nationalities. In essence, the MNC provides a fruitful context for the development among individual professionals of belonginess to the real and/or imagined global community in which their skills–language- and business-related – are valued as legitimate.

Highlighting identity construction on the contextual dimension, our third proposition reads as follows:

Proposition 3: The construction of a cosmopolitan identity through BELF interactions projects the MNC as a social constellation with fluid geographical and linguistic boundaries.

In sum, we posit that BELF as a notion could be applied in the construction of everyday cosmopolitanism in the MNC context. First, we acknowledge the designators involved in this process, including the linguistic resources, profession, and national origin of participants in BELF interactions. Second, we emphasize the dynamic nature of identity construction by focusing on BELF interactions manifesting both sharedness and difference in skills, knowledge and social relations. Third, we point out that not only does the MNC provide the context for identity construction in BELF interactions, it is also socially constructed through them.

6 Discussion: Directions for Future Research on Language and Identity in the MNC

This conceptual paper was motivated by the need to enhance understanding of how English contributes to identity construction in contemporary MNCs, in which aspects such as inclusion, diversity and equality call for novel approaches to managing the maze of cultures and languages. Our key argument is that the identities of global business professionals are becoming increasingly cosmopolitan, intertwining the local and the global, as well as the real and the imagined. Moreover, they are constructed in the multilingual reality across national and linguistic borders as the professionals concerned participate in BELF interactions. Our interdisciplinary, multilevel conceptual framework integrating insights from sociolinguistics, cosmopolitanism and IM research (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015), and propositions

make several contributions to existing knowledge. First, we advance theorizing on language and identity in the MNC, which we believe are not intrinsically tied to nationality, but are rather socially constructed by individuals in interactions when they cross linguistic and geographical boundaries. More specifically, it is inferred in our sociolinguistic conceptualization of English as BELF that identity implications connected with the use of English in the MNC are not solely negative, as suggested in much of the existing research. Second, by showing how identities manifest in BELF interactions we enrich IM scholarship on cosmopolitan identities, which has paid scant attention to the role of language in identity construction. Thereby, we add conceptual clarity to the notion of "cosmopolitan" in IM research, which tends to be taken as a given attribute attached to global business professionals without being problematized.

Third, our theorization supports the notion of the MNC as a social constellation (Karhunen et al., 2018) in suggesting a bottom-up perspective on identity construction in and through language. From this perspective, we advance the socially constructed view of context as also shaped by these interactions rather than being an independent and static framework for interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). More specifically, we show how the MNC as a social constellation is constructed in social interaction, from which BELF emerges and consolidates, with participants crossing fluid linguistic and geographical boundaries. English becomes an empowering resource for these individuals who construct cosmopolitan identities in BELF interactions (see Räisänen, 2016; also Gaibrois, 2018; Nurmi & Koroma, 2020). Ultimately, this becomes an alternative to "organizational Englishization" as a vehicle for top-down identity management (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017), which inevitably fosters inequality and friction between native and non-native speakers (e.g. Boussebaa & Brown, 2017; Gaibrois & Nentwich, 2020).

Finally, we show how BELF as a social, multilingual phenomenon contributes to identity construction among global business professionals, and how this shared language and the professional context constitute major components of identity-belonging. As the "B" in BELF implies (see Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018), participants in the interactions are socialized into the global business culture through their education in international business schools, and/or later through their on-the-job experience and consequent learning. Similar thinking is reflected in international business research. As Goxe and Belhoste (2015) argue, for instance, business and management principles are universal in the everyday work of global leaders and managers, whereas knowledge of cultural differences is considered secondary. Moreover, cultural knowledge does not refer to the English language (Goxe & Belhoste, 2015). Fluency in English is not an additional competence, it is a prerequisite for doing the job. Although one could question what fluency means in practice, as a notion it resonates with BELF: getting the job done is primary, grammatical correctness is secondary. Knowledge of other languages and cultures is an extra benefit for global managers, as is the case with BELF scholarship.

Below we discuss the methodological implications of sociolinguistic and cosmopolitan approaches to IM research on identity in general, and how our propositions could guide future research on language and identity in MNCs in particular.

6.1 From Categorization to an Emancipatory Research Approach

In this paper we promote the view that the study of language and identity in the MNC should move forward from categorizing individuals according to predetermined markers of identity such as nationality or native language to conceptualizing identities as socially constructed along individual, interactional and contextual dimensions. This implies a significant methodological leap and the rejection of the practice in which the researcher defines what is relevant for identity construction and what is not. Instead, we argue that studies on cosmopolitan identities and their construction through language should involve the speakers concerned and should generate data through interviews and interactions, which is at the core of the sociolinguistic approach (Bodó et al., 2022). Researchers should take an emancipatory stance and allow categories such as language and profession to emerge from the informants' own accounts of how they become relevant on the individual, interactional and contextual levels. Such an approach gives the individual a voice in defining the degree to which they identify themselves as speakers of specific languages and affiliate with different real and/or imagined professional communities and groups. By implication, cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan identities should be studied as constructs emerging from individual accounts, rather than via measures based on the researcher's understanding of what they constitute (Lindell, 2014).

How, then, should such bottom-up identity construction be addressed methodologically? One possibility would be to develop conceptual IM scholarship, such as Janssens and Steyaert's (2014) work as well as empirical studies including Langinier and Ehrhart (2020) and Gaibrois and Nentwich (2020), to focus on authentic interaction among different languages in the everyday life of an MNC, taking the special position of English into account. A dialogue with BELF scholars would open up new research avenues and produce new methodological tools for IM researchers. As Janssens and Steyaert (2014) suggest, sociolinguistic methods (such as ethnographic approaches that include analyses of authentic interaction) are needed to make sense of the multilingual reality of the MNC. This would shift the focus to the level of interaction and to how individuals use different languages, thereby shedding further light on the purposes behind specific types of language use. It could also prove fruitful in addressing questions concerning the extent to which and what kind of English competence is needed in different situations, as well as the role that knowledge of other languages plays in such interactions.

Moreover, studies of language use and/or the identities of inherently international MNC employees should consider both individual and social factors, including age, gender and job. According to our framework, for example, MNC employees construct cosmopolitan identities in situated BELF interactions by drawing on their individual characteristics and backgrounds as well as aligning with other participants through accommodation.

We further argue that researchers (and practitioners) should question native-like English competence as the yardstick for measuring individuals, and instead view language competence as specific to particular jobs and as only one component of communicative competence (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011). For researchers, the assessment of job-specific language competence would require

methods that imitate the real-life situations in that particular job, or the conducting of ethnographic research in the workplace (e.g. Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Such methods might include role enactment, for example, in which a business practitioner is required to function and communicate in a situation that is typical of the particular job (Ly, 2016). It would also be useful for participants in BELF interactions to adopt an emancipatory view, acknowledging the potential of multilingualism and becoming more aware of the interplay of language and identity (see also Kassis Henderson et al., 2018; Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011) in the MNC context. Self-reflexivity is essential in empowering participants in situated BELF interactions.

Eventually, researchers could help MNCs to develop more emancipatory language and recruitment policies and practices, which would further empower individuals in their identity construction. The acknowledgment of BELF competences as legitimate in the community would play a positive role in helping individuals to see themselves as professionals and as language users. Fostering such policies would also facilitate the construction of the MNC as a desirable work community. Research aimed at identifying and developing practices could thus address language policies on the MNC level by analyzing policy documents and interviewing key stakeholders as well as individual professionals.

Finally, longitudinal approaches would provide an exciting avenue for further studies. Räisänen and Kankaanranta (2020, 2023, see also Räisänen, 2020), for example, paved the way in their study of using English as the corporate language in a 15-year managerial career, clearly demonstrating how the manager's language use changed over time. Another opportunity would be to dive deep into the everyday communicative situations and interactions of individual managers from an ethnographical perspective. This could entail combining interview or focus-group data with authentic texts and/or self-reported recordings based on real communicative situations.

6.2 Testing the Validity of our BELF Approach to the Construction of a Cosmopolitan Identity

Above we have summarized our approach in the form of propositions to be developed into testable hypotheses in future research and assessed in terms of validity and usefulness (Weick, 1989). We acknowledge several boundary conditions as limitations, but we also argue that they open up fruitful avenues for further research on language and identity in the MNC from a sociolinguistic perspective, and even beyond. The first limitation is our focus on MNC managers. By way of justification we point out that most empirical research on BELF (e.g. Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013; Räisänen, 2016) and most IM research on cosmopolitan identities (e.g. Colic-Peisker, 2010; Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018; Zhang, 2005) concern a "privileged" group of global professionals. It would be useful in future research to extend the analysis to other mobile individuals such as low-skilled self-initiated expatriates (Holtbrügge, 2021; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2014), many of whom use English as their working language, as well as to other international business encounters and multinational organizations beyond the MNC context.

Second, we are aware that our conceptualization of English as BELF and our linking it to the construction of a cosmopolitan identity give only a partial picture of the multilingual reality of contemporary MNCs. Although the focus on English is justifiable given its position as "the" language of international business, we acknowledge that the degree to which it is used is highly dependent on contextual factors such as the country of origin. As shown in previous IM research, languages other than English are widely used in international business encounters in MNCs operating in Asia, for example (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013; Selmier II et al., 2015; see also Froese et al. 2016). We nevertheless maintain that our theorization of how English contributes to the construction of cosmopolitan identities is generalizable to other languages used among individuals from different linguistic backgrounds, as long as the lingua franca nature of these languages is understood in sociolinguistic terms, in other words as a shared resource that emerges in interaction.

The above observation is linked to the pertinent debate about the role of national identity in constructing a cosmopolitan identity, thereby inviting researchers to formulate hypotheses about the potential influence of phenomena such as linguistic nationalism related to English and other languages. We further point to the diversity among MNCs in the manifestation of the global and the local as ingredients of cosmopolitanism. As traditional research has shown, the strategies and structures of MNCs vary from the multi-domestic to the truly global and are largely contingent on the industry in question (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989). This calls for a more fine-grained analysis of the MNC as a context for constructing a cosmopolitan identity through BELF, as well as through other languages.

7 Conclusion

Digitalization and world crises have changed lives and the world of work. Individuals connect with each other increasingly via virtual means and through the use of English, which is typically nobody's mother tongue. Global connectedness changes the way people conceptualize themselves and their professional identities. Inevitably, this change has consequences affecting research approaches, key concepts and practical research designs. In conclusion of our quest for a richer understanding of language and identity in the MNC, we posit that cosmopolitan identities in 21st-century MNCs with fluid national and linguistic boundaries are constructed in social interaction among individuals who identify themselves as participants in BELF interactions, drawing from their different linguistic resources, national origins and professions.

Data Availability Not applicable.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest Not applicable.

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