

SUMMARY OF THE MASTER THESIS

Strategies for dealing with multilingualism in virtual project communication

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A case study

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Abstract

Virtual project teams are very likely culturally and linguistically diverse. Their communication, a key element for the success of their joint project, must adapt to these conditions. The following work deals in the form of a case study particularly with the criterion of multilingualism. With help of methodological and data triangulation, the online written and oral communication of a virtual project team was investigated in order to answer the question of which strategies the team members develop in multilingual interaction via different media.

Light is shed on the use of ELF as a genuinely multilingual practice. The central role of pronounced multilingual competence of the project leaders, as well as the advantages of communication in the mother tongue for building a familiar relationship become evident. The communication in the team presents itself as open to language changes, which allows creativity and joy in the use of language.

Keywords: virtual team, e-mail communication, online conference, ELF, multilingua franca, code switching

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1. Introduction

Virtual teams use different channels for their communication because their members are geographically far away from each other. In addition, they are often characterized by linguistic, as well as cultural diversity.

This paper focuses mainly on the aspect of multilingualism. As a case study, it aims to examine in more detail how a specific project team deals with linguistic diversity in virtual internal communication. Which specific challenges arise? And which strategies does the team develop in the different communication media to meet them?

The special feature of the study lies in the attempt to draw a very comprehensive picture of the internal communication of the chosen team by including written as well as oral communication. This is achieved through the technique of triangulation at the data and as well as the method level.

With the collection of mail communication and the transcription of an online conference, two different data sets are analyzed. This approach allows access to both written and oral communication, and also enables both a view of the evolution of communication strategies over time and a snapshot of direct interaction towards the end of the project.

Additionally, methods are triangulated, with a focus on qualitative content examination. Quantitative instruments allow additionally for a capture of structural features of the material.

A corpus of 133 internal communication emails was collected from September 2020 to June 2023, with the core analysis ultimately restricted to the period from February 2022 to June 2023, representing the time of the final constitution of the project team until shortly before the realization of the project. For this purpose, an online conference held on May 5, 2023 was audio recorded and transcribed.

The analysis of both data collections was done by inductive coding. The claim here was to start from the material and initially uncover hidden inner connections.

2. Presentation of the project

The team studied is the project group of one of the artistic workshops organised by the Fief (Foyer international d'études francaises, internship organization of the author), in a Franco-German context every year. It is not a prerequisite for either the participants or the leaders to speak the other language, as the Fief team provides an accompanying translation.

Since this work deals exclusively with the preparatory phase of the workshop, its content will not be discussed further here. More important are the persons involved in the internal communication.

The core team of the workshop consisted of two photographers from the German side, and a mediator from the French side, who lives in the immediate vicinity of the Fief, but originally comes from Scotland. He contacted the Fief back in September 2020 to offer a heritage interpretation workshop. Involved in this initial phase on the behalf of the Fief was the chair of the association. Once the decision was made that such a workshop could take place in the summer program, the organization was taken over by the staff of the Fief. However, due to the Corona pandemic, the idea had to wait a very long time for its implementation. It took until February 2022 for photographers from Germany to be contacted and for the team to finally come together in March 2022.

This point in time of the team's constitution represents the beginning of the investigation. Data collection extended into June 2023, one month before the workshop began. An end was placed here for practical reasons, as there needed to be enough time for subsequent analysis. It is also assumed that the corpus collected by then is already sufficiently voluminous to reflect the strategies developed in the team to deal with multilingualism.

The core team, which does most of the communication during the period under study, consists of D:SP and D:JH for the fief and D:AL and E:SC as workshop animators. It is noticeable that with a ratio of three to one, people with German as their mother tongue are in the majority and furthermore, no one in the core team speaks French as their mother tongue. However, it turned out in the research that all three languages are nevertheless used and that the dominant position of German L1-speakers has little effect, which is to a large extent due to the pronounced multilingual competencies of the members.

The team does most of its work together virtually. Emails, phone calls for more urgent concerns, and online conferences were used. Since it is not possible to reconstruct the

phone calls, this paper focuses on an examination of the mail communication and a transcription of an online team meeting on 5.05.23.

3. Theoretical basics

3.1 Basic elements of communication

The concept of communication has been re-described countless times in various scientific disciplines. There is no ambition here to give a complete picture of the various models and theories related to the term. The aim is to first outline some basic components of interpersonal communication, and then to address the role of communication in virtual and multilingual projects.

The well-known classic communication model of a message transmitted from sender to receiver has been criticized and extended over time. Edith Broszinsky-Schwabe (2017) gathers some critical arguments in her introduction to intercultural communication: real communication is almost always characterized by simultaneity, which makes the strict separation into sender and receiver impossible. Person B can listen to what person A is saying and at the same time frown, which is a message to person A.

Another criticism listed by Broszinsky-Schwabe is that of the intentionality of the transmission. A large part of communication takes place unconsciously, for example through a certain posture when speaking.

Various levels of communication come into play here: in addition to the verbal (what is said with words in written or oral form), there is the nonverbal (body language or even use of graphics in written communication), the paraverbal (tone, tempo, pauses), and finally the extraverbal level (time and space of transmission) (Barmeyer, Bausch, Mayrhofer, 2021).

In general, it is important to point out the difference between the signs used to convey a content and the content itself (Barmeyer et al., 2021). There is no natural connection between the two; the symbolic content of a sign must be learned (Broszinsky-Schwabe, 2017).

This means that even with a perfect command of the vocabulary and grammar of a foreign language, difficulties in communication can occur if the way a word is employed in a specific context has not been learned along with it. Thus, Barmeyer et al.

(2021) emphasize that language, as a part of communication, expresses cultural values and practices.

This is equally true for the non-, para-, and extraverbal sign levels.

According to Swetlana Franken (2019), the goal of any communication is mutual understanding, which is based on two different aspects: understanding, i.e. agreement on the content of the utterance, and acceptance of the significance of the other person's opinion.

3.2 Communication in projects

According to the international Project Management Institute, a project can be briefly defined as a "temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result." (PMI, 2023). Numerous publications emphasize the central role of communication for the success of these undertakings (Franken, 2019; Freitag, 2011; Robbins et al., 2017).

Franken (2019) distinguishes formal from informal communication. The former is institutionalized, for example in terms of who communicates with whom, when, and through which channel. Informal communication, on the other hand, is not regulated and forms the basis for team culture, work climate and employee satisfaction.

Freitag (2011) lists basic characteristics that make up projects and can shape communication in them (based on the definition of DIN 69901 (German industrial standard)).

Following his description, important factors in projects are the uniqueness of their conditions, which are often associated with novelty, indeterminacy and risks that require step-by-step management. Projects are also determined by clear objectives and time, financial and personnel constraints.

In addition, depending on the type of project, there are many other specifics that determine communication. In the following, two aspects present in empirical research will be further listed here: the circumstance of virtuality and multilingualism.

3.3 Multilingual communication in projects

3.3.1 Language practices and language policy

This paper focuses on the use and overlap of multiple national languages. It thus refers to a more classical definition of multilingual teams, such as that of Tenzer and Pudielko (2016), according to which a team is multilingual when at least two different native languages are present and multiple languages are used in communication.

There are specific challenges associated with multilingualism in teams: in the choice of a dominant colloquial language can lie hidden power dynamics: fluent language use creates authority, while team members with lower language skills can be marginalized (Mautner&Rainer, 2017, Barmeyer et al. 2021).

Often, both practical ways of dealing and goal-oriented guidelines play a role in multilingual work contexts. Mautner and Rainer (2017) summarize these two levels in their "Handbook for Business Communication" in the terms of language practices and language policies. Practices are developed in the doing and are always chosen for specific reasons. Four important motivations can be identified:

- Natural/self-evident: use of the language in which both speakers are collectively most competent
- Practice: the desire to practice a particular language
- Prestige: the desire to impress by demonstrating one's language skills or, on the contrary, the fear of losing prestige by speaking incorrectly.
- Adaptation: the choice of the speech code that speakers believe is preferred by their counterpart

In contrast to these practices oriented to the concrete moment of communication are the goal-oriented language policies that seek to shape the way multilingualism is dealt with. The authors draw attention to the fact that language policies that conflict with functioning practices could often ultimately fail to prevail against them.

3.3.2 Strategies for dealing with multilingualism

In presenting the strategies that multilingual teams can use in their communication, the focus here is primarily on English as a lingua franca (ELF), which plays an important role in the project under study.

One of the most cited definitions of ELF dates back to 1996 and describes it as a "contact language" between people who do not share the same language (Firth, 1996). Since then, a large body of research has referred to the phenomenon, which is highly

relevant in today's globalized communication. However, ELF is not the same as English. In a 2010 article, Paul Nerrière develops the approach of „Globish“ and draws attention to the fact that the language used by NNES (non native english speakers) employs only a fraction of the English vocabulary, accepts errors and accents with the sole aim of being understood efficiently. According to Nerrière, the Globish community does not include NES (native english speakers). Regularly problems of understanding would occur between the former and the latter, or blockages due to feelings of inferiority to an elaborate English. Since NES are outnumbered, Nerrière suggests they should adapt to the international community and improve their Globish.

Jennifer Jenkins (2015) proposes another reconceptualization that recognizes the significant role of multilingualism in ELF practice. English would in effect be used as a "multilingua franca" because all the speakers' other languages (native, as well as learned) would be present in the interaction. Even if not directly used, they would influence language use.

Among the consequences of this new conceptualization is a shift from the separation into NES and NNES to the distinction between monolingual and multilingual users of ELF, with monolinguals (like NES in Nerrière's article) being disadvantaged and needing to learn other languages in order to participate fully in international communication.

3.4 Virtual communication in projects

Communication in virtual teams can only take place via different media, which have different characteristics. They can be divided into so-called "rich" and "lean media," which refer to the richness of communicative signs (Barmeyer et al., 2021).

Another important criterion of distinction is that into asynchronous and synchronous media. In synchronous media, interacting individuals share a temporal context and respond to each other immediately. In asynchronous communication, on the other hand, message and response are further apart in time (Skovholt&Svennevig, 2013). Thus, videoconferences that also transmit non-verbal and para-verbal signs are richer and more synchronous than email messages that contain only verbal textual signs and are often days or weeks apart.

Many studies emphasize the importance of choosing the right media depending on the communication goal.

Dennis et al. (2008) describe the suitability of different media in relation to different concerns of communication. They first identify two basic functions of communication in work contexts: the conveyance of information and the convergence of meaning. They then justify the suitability of asynchronous media for the conveyance, since they allow the representation of large amounts of information. For the process of convergence of interpretations, which includes the exchange of opinions, asynchronous media would slow down a discussion. Here, media with higher synchronicity can enable a faster exchange with the assurance of mutual understanding.

Since both communication functions are important in work contexts, Dennis et al. (2008) recommend combining the media.

However, it must be noted that multilingual teams with possible language barriers present a changed situation.

4. Methodological approach

Data triangulation, as well as method triangulation, was used. Emails offer a great wealth of information, so an analysis technique had to be found that would filter out the information relevant to the research question.

Initially, the research was narrowed down to the period from February 2023 to June 2023, which covered the work from the time of team constitution to one month before the workshop took place. Here, 23 threads remained for analysis.

For preparation, the mail exchanges were transferred one by one into Word and provided with a sequence header summarizing important information. It was then possible to create a table by chronology that contained all the information from the sequence headers.

At the beginning, several quantitative observations took place, such as counting the length of the threads and their frequency, the number of mails in each of the three languages involved, along with initial descriptions of the situations in which each was used. Initial notes on a wide variety of conspicuities were made to help provide direction for the investigation. An overview of the communication over the sixteen months with its frequency in the two communication forms, mail and meetings (both online and life), was also created, as far as it could be reconstructed from the correspondence.

The material seemed particularly interesting with regard to the issue of multilingualism: there were many changes between the three languages, in each of which the members

had different levels of proficiency. The research questions can be formulated as follows:
How do team members deal with multilingualism in their internal communication?
Which strategies are developed in different virtual media?
In order to examine the mail corpus in light of these questions, the method of inductive coding was chosen, as can be applied to interviews, to uncover coherent themes in the textual material.
The online conference recorded on 5.05.23 was first transcribed using MAXqda software and then coded using the same methodology to ensure comparability of results.

5. Results

5.1 Mail communication

In general, it can be said that English is used for communication throughout the project team and French and German are each used for individual conversations. In the core period, English and German predominate over French, which is used in one-to-one-exchanges or in some single words incorporated in a text in another language.

The Fief emerges in communication as a multilingual organization with a German-French focus. For example, D:SP repeatedly brings French words into their English mails (S_6). Fief's intern team communication between D:JH and D:SP, who are both native speakers of German, uses German and French and often switches between the languages in the same conversation for no apparent reason. This shows that bilingualism is institutionalized and commonplace in Fief.

In the communication between D:AL and the Fief (first D:SP, then D:JH), the central role of highly nuanced expression between native speakers becomes clear. The relationship quickly seems to be characterized by intimacy, which is reflected in informal, at times very playful and humorous communication in German. Especially at the beginning of the project in the new team, D:AL seems to prefer direct contact in his native language to writing to everyone in English (S_7).

There is one live meeting, during which some short mails are exchanged. It is the first time in the collected correspondence that E:SC and D:AL exchange directly without addressing D:SP from the fief. After the meeting, E:SC writes in a very cordial tone, thanking everyone and wishing D:AL a safe journey back (S_12.1). It seems to have been a good meeting that contributed to building a more direct relationship.

Multilingualism leads to minor confusions in language use, for example using a French word as an English one, but this does not lead to visible misunderstandings.

A very common phenomenon is that of code switching. It happens in the internal communication of the Fief as a bilingual institution, with fixed terms or for writing texts in the two official languages of the project. In some places there is a switch to the native language to save time. Another interesting technique seems to be to signal attention and closeness to the counterpart with a purposeful change of language. In the last category, there are examples of code switching that seem to arise from a creative approach to and enjoyment of multilingualism.

In looking at conflictual situations, it can be seen that very subtle nuances in tone can create tension and that those involved have sufficient language skills to sensitively balance such situations. The source of the conflicts does not seem to be insufficient foreign language skills, but rather time pressure or carelessness in composing an e-mail.

5.2 Analysis of communication in online meetings

The medium of the online meeting clearly affects communication with delays in the connection, creating overlapping talk and awkward pauses. Overall, the cheerful atmosphere in the interaction shows that the team members have become familiar with each other over time.

The distribution of speaking shares is uneven. D:AL only very rarely speaks up if he is not directly addressed. E:SC is very anxious to hear D:AL's opinion and asks him directly for an assessment several times. D :AL's reluctance to express himself could be related to an effort in speaking English, as well as to a poor internet connection or the distribution of tasks in the team.

In contrast to the analysis of the emails, the online conference allows to look at the language skills of the three team members D:JH, E:SC and D:AL in oral, spontaneous language use, especially of the lingua franca English in action.

Overall, all three are able to express themselves fluently and spontaneously, although there are small differences. E:SC has a more varied vocabulary and employs expressions making him recognizable as NES, but no misunderstandings arise connected to that fact.

There is also a substantive discussion of multilingualism when it comes to the language strategy of the planned workshop. D:JH defends the basic principle of the translation of the German-French workshops, which should enable a barrier-free participation of all in

their mother tongue. E:SC counters with the advantages of faster communication thanks to ELF. He describes English as an "equal level playing field for everyone" (Z. 464). Code switching also plays a major role in the oral medium. For example, when a technical obstacle arises or when searching for a particular word. The goal of communication shifts to a quick solution to the problem and everyone lapses into the language they are most familiar with. The different languages cluster at D:JH, who knows all the languages and who, as administrator of the online-conference, has to solve the problem. The Fief's institutional bilingual communication also becomes visible. There is one unconscious switch and at several points the French "voilà" is used in the English discourse.

6. Discussion of results

In the sense of Tenzer and Pudelko (2016), the team can be described as multilingual because several native languages are used in communication.

The language strategies in this particular interaction were investigated in the empirical research with the help of data and method triangulation. The main findings will now be discussed with reference to the thematic literature.

Virtual communication was performed through the channels of e-mail as an asynchronous medium and telephone, as well as online conferencing as more synchronous media (Skovholt & Svennevig, 2013), which corresponds to a mix recommended by Dennis et al. (2008) to serve both the rapid transmission of amounts of information ("conveyance of information") and the convergence of interpretations and viewpoints ("convergence of meaning").

It can be clearly seen that the direct personal meeting had an important meaning for the development of closeness between the team members. After the live meeting, for the first time there is a direct exchange between the workshop animators by mail, which had always been mediated via the fief before. This is consistent with Franken's (2019) view that immediate analog face-to-face communication is not to be disregarded in the mix of communication channels of virtual teams.

Barmeyer et al. (2021) address that in virtual teams, geographical distance creates a risk for a lack of situations for face-to-face exchanges. Franken (2019) sees this under the concept of informal communication as partly responsible for the emergence of a good working atmosphere. In the communication studied, personal exchanges take place in both media between work-related interactions, for example as mail exchanges between

D:SP and D:AL or as short conversations of D:JH, E:SC and D:HK in a break between the two online conferences. A good basic atmosphere in the team can be seen from them.

In this virtual environment, team members had to deal with communication across language barriers.

Overall, in both the written and oral communication examined, English was used for the conversation throughout the project team, and German and French were used for individual conversations. In the observation, the central role of the Fief as a multilingual organization could be worked out at several points. Due to its German-French focus, the bilingualism of German and French is institutionalized within the team. In addition, the two staff members responsible for the project, D:SP and D:JH, have a good command of English, and are thus fluent in all three languages relevant to the project. This ability to use all three languages as needed enables workshop animators D:AL and E:SC to always communicate in their preferred language, which facilitates contact. At the beginning of the cooperation, both sides often make contact with the fief instead of writing in the whole group. Particularly in the contact of D:AL and D:SP from the Fief, the rapid establishment of trust via the use of subtle nuances in expression between L1 speakers is evident. This is consistent with Barmeyer et al.'s (2021) finding that a shared native language can create closeness across physical distance.

Overall, with Barmeyer et al. (2021), the Fief's team members could be described as so-called "boundary spanners" who create connections between languages and cultures.

In the use of English as a contact language, Jennifer Jenkins' (2015) approach of multilingua franca can be seen. Individuals with different language repertoires draw on English, but their skills in other languages remain ever-present. They are used consciously (e.g., in one-to-one situations, in code switching) or flow in unconsciously (when a French word is "anglicized" or when the sentence structure of the native language is adopted). The team thus engages in multilingual practice.

In addition to ELF, the technique of translation is used in the project team. It is generally limited to those situations where English does not help. Only the first email from D:JH to the team questions the ELF practice and makes an attempt to bring the institutional bilingualism of the Fief into the project. However, the team switches back to ELF for practical reasons. Barmeyer et al. (2021) note that translation costs considerable linguistic, cultural, but also time resources. According to Freitag (2011), since projects are characterized by the limitedness of these resources, their use is not always possible.

Regarding the relationship between language practices and language policies, as defined by Mautner and Rainer (2017), it can be said that the French-German language policy desired by the DFJW as a funding agency proves to be impractical within the team. The team internally communicates in English at several points as the simplest method of communication, which can be described as the "natural choice" of the language in which all participants together have the greatest competencies (Mautner & Rainer, 2017). In general, language design is characterized by a bottom-up approach in which participants use their own judgement to choose the language they find appropriate in a given situation.

Code switching, both in written and oral communication, could be frequently observed as another language practice. Different reasons of its occurrence can be identified.

Overall, it can be said that a very large part of the language skills available in the team are used. Although English is set as the team language for reasons of practicality, the rule is permeable to the use of the other two languages, at the discretion of the participants. Already in the first mail to the team, in which English is introduced as the "simplest method to talk together" (S_6.1, D:SP), D:SP repeatedly switches in French words and makes the multilingualism of the project present as a core component of the teamwork. The complex picture of language practices tested in action described by Mautner and Rainer (2017) emerges. Multilingualism does not act as an obstacle in team communication, but is creatively used at many points for the joy of putting into practice one's own language skills. Code switching from different occasions can be described as an integral part of team communication.

Thus, in contrast to some rigid lingua franca models, the team's approach to multilingualism is generally characterized by flexibility and the possibility to switch languages in order to find the best balance in each individual situation between different motivations, such as nuanced individual expression, inclusion of all present, or efficiency in understanding.

7. Conclusion

As an empirical case study, this paper addressed the question of strategies for dealing with multilingualism in virtual project communication. In order to be able to examine both written and oral communication and to integrate the advantages of qualitative as well as quantitative methods, the triangulation approach was chosen. Thus, both a corpus of mails over the period of sixteen months, as well as the recording of an online conference towards the end of the project work were analyzed with the help of inductive coding.

First, the theoretical foundations were laid. Communication is a sign system with learned meaning, language as cultural expression, the high importance of communication in projects, special challenges in virtual teams.

Overall, the team used a mix of asynchronous (email) and more synchronous media, such as telephone and online conferencing, which can transmit different sign levels besides verbal, such as non-verbal or para-verbal, which facilitated either a focus on pure transmission of information or on discussion and exchange of opinions. In building personal relationships, the live meeting could be identified as central. Thereafter, more informal and personal communication could be conducted throughout the team via electronic media.

Regarding multilingualism, the trilingual competence of the Fief staff could be identified as core to the project communication, allowing the workshop leaders flexibility in language choice according to their concerns. Especially the contact with the German workshop animator in the mother tongue shows the importance of nuanced expression in the quick construction of a familiar relationship.

The dominant language strategy of the team is ELF as a contact language. It could be elaborated both in theory and in data analysis that it is a multilingual practice in which all language skills are present in the repertoire of the speakers. The separation into NNES and NES does not seem significant, all members of the team have multilingual experience.

Unequal speaking proportions are not clearly due to a lack of linguistic competence, but could equally be related to poor delivery in the medium or role distribution in the team. The technique of translation is used to accommodate the Franco-German audience and framework of the project. However, for reasons of practicality, the ELF practice is preferred.

Overall, the phenomenon of code switching occurs strikingly often, with multiple motivations identified. The team generally works with a bottom-up approach, in which language policy emerges from practice and creative use of languages is allowed.

For practical reasons, the present research had to be limited to the three national languages. Differing word use linked to profession, age or gender for example, was beyond the scope and could not be adequately considered with the selected analysis methodology.

The small team offered the advantage of being able to look at individual language strategies and competencies in more detail, but made a comparison between different categories of speakers impossible (as for example in the study of large binational teams). Thus, the hybrid multilingual nature of communication was emphasized above all, in which all languages can be consciously or unconsciously incorporated depending on the situation.

For a more in-depth study, it would be desirable to strengthen both the quantitative and the qualitative aspect. Thus, an analysis of larger amounts of data, which, for example, also depict oral communication over a longer period of time or which allow comparison with other teams, would be interesting. In qualitative terms, the corpus could be supplemented with interviews that could shed light on the individual experience of communication in the team, perceived challenges and learning processes.

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