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Language and talent management: perspectives from MNCs in the Italian food production and distribution sector

Abstract

The rise in cross-border business has led to changes in corporate and working languages and a corresponding surge in research. At the same time, the field of strategic and global talent management has also developed rapidly, but, to our knowledge, this has not included language. This paper calls for the integration of language training as a key element of strategic talent management in multinational corporations (MNCs). The paper presents an exploratory study interviewing employees from three large companies based in the Italian food production and distribution sector. The findings reveal a range of approaches to language, with a particular focus on the roles of English and Italian in the companies, the development of English as a business lingua franca (BELF) and its interplay with the stages of a company's international expansion (see Ehrenreich, 2011). Additionally, we suggest that talent management plays an important role in attracting and retaining excellent employees but that it appears to be in its infancy in Italy. We therefore consider the companies' approaches to language in the context of existing and future talent management programmes, and the implications for language training.

Keywords:

English as a business lingua franca (BELF), language in international business, multilingualism, talent management, multinational corporations (MNCs)

1. Introduction

Globalisation has led to a sharp rise in business across geographical borders and the use of English as a means of communication between people with different first languages. With these developments have come numerous challenges and opportunities for multilingual individuals. While Marschan et al. (1997) identified the centrality of language for multinational management almost 25 years ago, research interest has surged in the last decade, with two broad strands. Continuing Marschan and her colleagues' work, the first strand examines language in international business (e.g., Brannen & Mughan, 2017; Karhunen et al., 2018; Tenzer et al., 2017). The second is embedded in a linguistics and corporate communication perspective, with a particular focus on English as a business lingua franca (BELF; for an overview, see Ehrenreich, 2016; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018; Komori-Glatz, 2018).

To date, however, little attention has been paid to language during the recruitment process (but see Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2014) and less still on the development and training of language skills once new employees are hired. While the field of talent management has gained importance among practitioners and researchers over the last fifteen years (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019), the management of linguistic talent has largely been ignored. This paper attempts to bridge this gap by first highlighting the role of English and other languages in multinational corporations (MNCs) before turning to talent management. It then presents an exploratory study conducted with six interview partners in the Italian food production sector. Drawing on Ehrenreich's (2011) adaptation of Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model of Postcolonial English for conceptualising developments in the globalizing corporate world, we examine the role of language and talent management from the perspective of HR managers and

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employees from functional departments other than HR (namely, marketing, sales and accounting). The paper finishes with brief conclusions and implications for research and practice.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. English as a business lingua franca (BELF) in MNCs

Academic interest in the use of English in international business contexts has highlighted the increasing spread of English as an official or unofficial language for doing business. Drawing on Kankaanranta et al. (2015), Komori-Glatz (2018) argues for “a ‘continuum’ of the linguistic manifestations of English in international business” (p. 52). At one end, this has English as a common corporate language, following Piekkari and her colleagues (e.g., Piekkari et al., 2014; Piekkari & Tietze, 2012) in preferring this term to refer to active language management which has generally been the focus of studies based in the discipline of International Business (e.g., Harzing & Pudelko, 2013; Neeley, 2017; Piekkari et al., 2014). The other end of the continuum has BELF as a working language, with research taking a linguistically-informed approach and examining reported and actual practice with a particular focus on pragmatic strategies and the negotiation of meaning (e.g., Cogo & Vettorel, 2019; Ehrenreich, 2010, 2016; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010, 2013; Takino, 2017).

Current BELF research can be summarised as claiming English is “clearly a must in global business” (Ehrenreich, 2016, p. 136). However, most BELF scholars also note that it is important to conceptualise this “English” critically and that participants in such research largely decouple it from assumptions of “native-speaker” English (Ehrenreich, 2016, p. 136; Kankaanranta et al., 2015, p. 134). In practice, this means that interlocutors draw on English to communicate with speakers of other languages – English native speakers being a distinct minority – but priority is given to transferring information and knowledge clearly over adhering to standard English norms of grammar and syntax. Typically, this implies avoiding idiomatic expressions, complicated phraseology, or complex sentence structures (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010, p. 392), employing “a great deal of flexibility and a high level of strategic competence” (Ehrenreich, 2016, p. 138) and drawing on shared resources from other languages as well as specialist technical jargon (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010, p. 394). Notably, rapport and relationship-building are also often included as integral elements in conceptualisations of BELF (Ehrenreich, 2016; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018; Komori-Glatz, 2018). However, Takino (2017) points out that BELF communication can also be “tough and uncooperative if interlocutors have conflicting interests” (p. 533), a point previously made in relation to native speakers of English (Ehrenreich, 2010), highlighting the dynamic and highly situational nature of BELF communication.

Reasons for adopting English as a corporate standard include competitive pressure, globalisation of tasks and resources, and mergers and acquisitions across national boundaries (Neeley, 2013, p. 480). While some companies allow corporate languages to emerge organically, e.g. through an ever-increasing use of BELF (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012, p. 267), others take a more or less rigorous approach to implementing English with an official language policy. The Japanese e-commerce firm Rakuten is an extreme example because the company changed its official working language virtually overnight, accompanied by an intense language training and acculturation process (Neeley, 2017). Nevertheless, a conscious management decision to introduce English as the corporate language in non-Anglophone firms can be found in many MNCs across the globe (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012).

In their paper on bridging the language gap in MNCs, Aichhorn & Puck (2017) summarise language diversity as “both an asset and a liability” (p. 392). A lack of proficiency in the corporate or working language can lead to cognitive and emotional challenges, including status loss, job insecurity, a reduction in the quality of information, causing offence through ignorance of cultural norms or limited vocabulary, frustration that you cannot express yourself adequately, exclusion due

to code-switching into other languages, information asymmetries or power-authority distortions, and inefficient decision-making processes (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Brannen et al., 2014; Harzing et al., 2011; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Neeley, 2013; Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2014; Sanden, 2020). On the other hand, diverse languages and cultures can reduce decision biases, as researchers have suggested that the cognitive distance of processing information in a foreign language mitigates the effect of manipulative framing (Keysar et al., 2012) and heuristic biases (Volk et al., 2014). Being able to speak a modicum of your business partner's language, even only at the level of social niceties, is widely perceived as an indication of goodwill (Ehrenreich, 2010; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010), although it seems that only high or advanced skills have a notable economic impact (Isphording, 2013; Liwiński, 2019). Several studies report that foreign language skills are particularly valued in customer-facing areas such as sales and customer service (Damari et al., 2017). Introducing English as an ostensibly neutral language, where most – or even all – struggle to some extent, may reduce the power advantage for those who also speak the language of the majority and/or the company's headquarters (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Karhunen et al., 2018; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012). Changing the company language to English (or another non-native language) may also help reveal cultural differences since a shared language can result in “false similarity and erroneous assumptions of shared understanding” (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017, p. 394).

2.2. Multilingualism as a competitive advantage

Though few in number, studies across Anglophone and non-Anglophone contexts have found that competence in multiple languages brings both indirect advantages in the form of access to power structures and information (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999) and concrete financial benefits (Damari et al., 2017; Gazzola et al., 2019; Isphording, 2013; Liwiński, 2019). Much of the existing research does not distinguish between mother tongues and learned foreign languages and is conducted in migration studies or in officially bi- or trilingual regions such as the Basque country (Isphording, 2013). Gazzola et al. (2019) identify three general trends in an earlier review of literature examining the relationship between individuals' language skills and outcomes on the labour market: (1) “the earning differentials associated with language are positive and substantial” and seem to have a positive impact on employment status; (2) “a very good level of language knowledge is rewarded more than basic or intermediate skills”; and (3) “the range of languages bringing about benefits to individuals in the labour market and their magnitude depends on the country considered” (Gazzola et al., 2019, p. 618).

In particular contexts, knowledge of certain languages brings a higher earning differential than knowledge of others. The European Commission's (2006) oft-cited ELAN report from over a decade ago found that English was widely regarded as a “key language for gaining access to export markets and frequent reference was made to its use as a *lingua franca*” (p. 6). Wage premia for English proficiency among non-native speakers are reported as being 12% in Poland (Liwiński, 2019, p. 699) and 53% in Spain (Isphording, 2013, p. 457). At the same time, “demand for skills in languages other than English is greater than the demand for English itself” (European Commission, 2006, p. 7). This was confirmed by a follow-up study identifying best-practice models, which found that English is used as a “default language of international business” and a “given” or “essential requirement”, but in many contexts “not enough” (European Commission, 2011, p. 58). In Poland, Liwiński (2019, p. 699) also found that advanced knowledge of less commonly spoken languages such as Spanish (32%), French (22%) and Italian (15%) brought higher returns than English (12%) or German (11%).

While being able to speak additional languages brings benefits for individuals, the lack of language skills has been shown to incur costs for firms. The figures for European countries vary; ELAN found that 10% of German companies claimed to have lost business as a result of language or cultural barriers, while the same figure amounted to 19% in Spain (European Commission, 2006,

p. 12). Though not a comparable study, Incelli (2008) found that over 7% of the small and medium-sized enterprises in her study in the Lazio region in Italy had lost trade (p. 109), and 30.6% reported barriers to trade (p. 108) resulting from a lack of skills in the relevant foreign language. Most of these figures are calculated in terms of quantifiable sales/export potential, thus focusing on external communication with foreign clients or suppliers. Nevertheless, the qualitative research mentioned in the previous section (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Neeley, 2013; Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2014; Sanden, 2020) reporting on internal communication suggests that lacking sufficient language skills can also present challenges within companies, particularly in terms of accessing higher levels of management.

2.3. Talent management

The field of research into talent management has grown rapidly since Lewis and Heckman's (2006) seminal review, though it can be argued that even today, interest in and discourse on talent management is largely driven by consultant and practitioner research (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Makram et al., 2017; Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo (2019) argue that while academic interest in the topic has surged since 2012, the field is characterised by being "an incoherent and scattered community populated with 'newcomers'" (p. 173) with many scholars only writing a single paper on the topic and/or using the term as a buzzword without a solid theoretical foundation or lacking clear and transparent research methods. This suggests that there is considerable potential for developing the study of talent management as a robust academic discipline. Additionally, the strong basis in consultant and practitioner research could create interesting affordances for collaboration. Indeed, while they found a notable lack of consensus on defining the concept of talent management, Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo's (2019) review found that most scholars who do provide a concrete definition base their approach on a combination of academic and practitioner research, namely, Collings & Mellahi (2009) and/or the early Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, the UK body for Human Resources professionals) factsheets (CIPD, 2006, 2008). We thus follow the majority of established scholarship by using this conceptualisation of talent management:

activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organisation's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organisation. (Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 304)

Perhaps reflecting its strong origins in Anglo-American practitioner and consulting research, the field has had a strong US-centric focus. This has been critiqued (Stahl et al., 2012), leading to the emergence of global talent management as a separate field, defined in broad terms as including "all organizational activities for the purpose of attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining the best employees in the most strategic roles (those roles necessary to achieve organizational strategic priorities) on a global scale" (Collings & Scullion, 2011, p. 6) and exploring the role of talent management with regard to immigrants and diversity. In doing so, organizations must balance their global strategic priorities with the unique demands of national contexts (Collings & Scullion, 2011). Yet it has been argued that "academic research on contextual factors affecting TM [talent management] implementation or its effectiveness is practically absent" (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019, p. 177).

While talent management is often seen as the remit of the CEO rather than HR (e.g., Joyce & Slocum, 2012), Mellahi & Collings (2010) argue that "social and geographical distances isolate subsidiary level talent from the centre and as a result limit the opportunities of talents at subsidiary

to serve at the upper echelon management team of the [MNC]" (p. 147). Similarly, Minbaeva & Collings (2013) believe that "corporate HR should retain a central role in the operationalisation of [global talent management]" (p. 1763) and recommend that it "must be linked to the core and differentiated architectures of HRM [HR management] systems that aim to support and develop the knowledge, skills and competencies needed" (p. 1764). Regardless of who is ultimately responsible, Hoyce and Slocum (2012) note that many organizations "fail to capitalize on the opportunity for strategic success that a talented management team can bring to their organization" (p. 183; see also Makram et al., 2017). Maximising employee talent, in contrast, is "a source of sustained competitive advantage" (Al Ariss et al., 2014, p. 174; Collings & Mellahi, 2009) and a potential resource for increasing employees' identification with and commitment to the organization, and thus retention (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Festing & Schäfer, 2014). At the same time, Minbaeva and Collings (2013) note that:

the reality of the twenty-first century is that employee mobility has become – and is likely to remain – more pronounced owing to increased globalisation, demographic shifts, changing career norms and new trends in education. (p. 1769)

This has led them to echo Collings & Mellahi's (2009) call for talent management to be refocused on positions rather than people.

As well as adapting global strategies to national cultures where appropriate (Stahl et al., 2012), organizational cultures play an important role in the development and management of talent. Highly talented employees should not only be encouraged to improve their existing skills but also to learn new ones in order to create business value for themselves and their organizations (Makram et al., 2017, p. 369). Expectations regarding career development are higher among Generation Y than Baby Boomers, and thus training and development opportunities may be an "extremely important and indispensable element" of talent management for Generation Y employees (Festing & Schäfer, 2014, p. 268). That said, almost half the participants in the latest CIPD (2020) study listed "career development opportunities" in their top-three most important elements of employer brand for attracting candidates (p. 17). Regardless of age, the opportunity for developing existing and/or new talent is an essential strategy for maximising growth, increasing employee engagement and retention, and creating value for organizations.

Nevertheless, while academic interest in the topic has increased rapidly since 2006 alongside growing clarity in expert practitioner literature (e.g., CIPD, 2020), it seems that many managers remain somewhat unclear about what talent management actually is and, even when aware of the need for it, how to implement it effectively (Makram et al., 2017). As businesses become more and more international, language management is playing an ever-increasingly important role in external and internal business operations. In the study below, we examine this interplay of language and talent management in a specific context, namely, internationally operating MNCs based in Italy.

3. Study design

The empirical study at the heart of this paper aims to investigate the role(s) of language and talent management in three large¹ companies operating in the Italian food production and distribution sector. In each company, two employees were interviewed, one HR manager and one from another department. Though a relatively small sample, the findings obtained display a range of approaches to language training and development in the company and are thus considered a valuable starting point for integrating language into suitably designed talent management programmes.

¹ "Large" here refers to the standard company-size categorisation of micro (less than 10 employees), small enterprises (10 to 49 employees), medium-sized enterprises (50 to 249 employees). Large enterprises employ 250 or more people. See <https://data.oecd.org/entrepreneur/enterprises-by-business-size.htm> (accessed 6 May 2023)

The project was designed as an exploratory study with the aim of investigating the role of English in internationally operating companies based in Italy. Table 1 provides an overview of the companies represented in the data set, while Table 2 introduces the individual participants. All three parent companies are public limited companies, although Company A is a subsidiary while Companies B and C are the companies' headquarters. To allow comparability within an industry, all companies were chosen from the food production sector. Access to the companies was gained through Author 1, who contacted potential interview partners through personal and professional networks. While this might raise concerns about eliciting socially desirable responses (Gray, 2014, p. 245) from the participants, there was little risk of this and the possibility to obtain primary data from the companies was deemed to outweigh the potential for bias.

Company	Size	HQ	Subunit	Ownership	Operations and sales channel	Languages used inside the company
Company A	2,300	Germany	Subsidiary	Family-owned	Manufacturer and retailer; local and foreign markets	Italian German English
Company B	1,364	Italy	HQ	Family-owned	Manufacturer and retailer; local and foreign markets	Italian German English Spanish French Russian
Company C	350	Italy	HQ	Sole shareholder	Manufacturer and wholesale; imports	Italian English

Table 1. Overview of companies in data set

Respondent	Company	Gender	Age	Mother tongue	Level of English skills (self-reported, according to CEFR ²)	Position	Interview language	Length of interview (minutes)
1	A	Male	56	Italian	B2	HR manager	Italian	25
2	A	Male	41	Italian	B2	Marketing manager	Italian	25
3	B	Female	29	German	C1	HR manager	German	20
4	B	Male	31	Italian	C2	Sales analyst	Italian	28
5	C	Female	29	Italian	B1	HR manager	Italian	24
6	C	Male	24	Italian	B2	Junior accountant	Italian	31

Table 2. Overview of study participants

Purposive sampling was thus used to obtain expert views that allow the researchers to “identify information-rich cases which can then be studied in depth” (Gray, 2014, p. 174) and thus develop such a “conceptualization from the standpoints of the actors at work” (Doz, 2011, p. 587). A reasonably balanced range across age, gender and level of English skills allowed us to gather diverse perspectives while also triangulating data in a cross-case comparison within a single industry. Additionally, we were able to gain a nuanced understanding of talent management as an HR issue by

² CEFR: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions> (accessed 3 October 2023).

comparing the perspectives of the company's HR managers and those of employees from another department in the same company.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the method of collecting data in order to open “the black box” of organizational processes and “the ‘how’, ‘who’ and ‘why’ of individual and collective organized action as it unfolds over time in context” (Doz, 2011, p. 583). Of course, the extent to which findings from qualitative studies can be generalised is restricted (Gray, 2014, p. 388), and our sample of six interviewees also falls at the short end of Malterud et al.'s (2016) suggestion that “six to 10 participants with diverse experiences provide sufficient information power” (p. 1756). Nevertheless, given that accessing practitioners represents a major challenge for international business researchers (Fjellström & Guttormsen, 2016), the range of participants within this small sample can be considered adequate for an exploratory study that does not aim “for a complete description of all aspects of the phenomenon we study”; rather, we are “satisfied when a study offers new insights that contribute substantially to or challenge current understandings” (Malterud et al., 2016, p. 1759).

The interviews were conducted via online video calls, recorded and then transcribed and translated into English. While there is “a range of views about the effects of foreign language use on an interview” (Welch & Piekkari, 2006, p. 430), we believed that the quality of the data would be optimised by using the interviewees' mother tongues. Firstly, providing interviewees with the opportunity to express themselves in their mother tongue can be expected to produce more authentic answers with “more subtle nuances” (Welch & Piekkari, 2006, p. 428). Secondly, as the researcher conducting the interviews had also previously worked with the experts using Italian, this was seen as supporting the natural flow of communication and a conduit for rapport (Gray, 2014; Welch & Piekkari, 2006). Finally, the participants were fully informed about the focus and purpose of the study, their names and the companies they work for are anonymised, and they knew they could withdraw at any time. Participation was thus on the basis of informed consent (Flick, 2009; Gray, 2014).

The data was analysed according to the constant comparison analysis method first proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This allows the researcher to identify and build new theories according to the various relationships found in the data (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2015). Both researchers coded the data separately as an additional measure of quality. Based on Leech's and Onwuegbuzie's guidelines (2007, p. 565), data was divided into “smaller meaningful parts” in order to assign a different descriptive title or “code” to each section. Coding was done both deductively and inductively. First, each part of the interview was transcribed and translated following the interview guides, allowing a first round of reflection (Gray, 2014). Then for each section, smaller meaningful units were identified, typically one or two sentences representing a distinct idea (e.g., *English as official corporate language, language tested in interview, financial recognition of talent*), and labelled with a code for this idea. Initially, codes were based on questions in the interview guide, but then adjusted according to what emerged from the data. Some codes that only had one instance in the data were collapsed with similar codes, while some initial codes were expanded into several sub-codes. The final coding tree can be found in the Appendix. Similar pieces of data were labelled with the same code and then thematic similarities and differences were summarised. The next section presents the key findings from this cross-case comparison.

4. Key findings

4.1. Roles of English

Not surprisingly, respondents from all companies reported that English is used by non-native speakers in order to facilitate communication with other countries, especially when working with other departments and international HQs or subsidiaries. The participants described the importance of English in various ways, ranging from “reasonably important” (respondent 5) to “more important

to us than other languages” (respondent 3) and to “increasingly becoming the main language of the company” (respondent 1). This seems to contrast somewhat with findings from MNCs in Northern Europe, e.g. in a similarly large, publicly listed, but family-owned firm in Germany (Ehrenreich, 2010, 2011), where English is “a ‘must’ for managers and employees in all locations and at practically all levels” (Ehrenreich, 2010, pp. 416–417). In Finland, a large survey study across five globally-operating companies found that “the majority [of respondents] needed two languages at work: their mother tongue and English”, their mother tongue being used somewhat more than English on average, with wide variation amongst the respondents (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011, p. 253). These findings highlight the need for further differentiated in-depth cross-case studies to gain a nuanced understanding of the role of English in European MNCs.

The diversity of descriptions regarding the importance of English given above reflect the role of English in different phases of internationalisation identified by Ehrenreich (2011, pp. 28–30). This framework builds on Schneider’s (2007) Dynamic Model of Postcolonial English, which identifies and demonstrates “an overall development from ENL [English as a Native Language]-norm orientation to endonormative communicative effectiveness” (Ehrenreich 2011: 28). In other words, English is no longer perceived as belonging to Inner Circle countries (e.g., the UK and US), but emerges as a dynamic and hybrid tool for communication among speakers of many different mother tongues, typically constituted by and constitutive of (often multilingual) communities of practice. While acknowledging that some modifications are necessary, Ehrenreich (2011) draws on Schneider’s (2007) framework to suggest that “the Dynamic Model can help to conceptualize developments in the globalizing corporate world” (p. 28).

In contrast to Companies A and B, which are producers and retailers, Company C is by far the smallest and operates mainly as a wholesaler, buying products from a large number of foreign countries and only producing a small proportion themselves. These factors might explain why Company C is still firmly in Ehrenreich’s (2011) foundation phase. Organisational hierarchies are clearly in place, and the key difference in its ownership and senior management appears to have had profound effects on the role of language within the company. The language used in internal communication is primarily Italian, the language of the sole shareholder. English has become the principal method for enabling communication processes with foreign clients, suppliers and subsidiaries, but for employees who do not have outward-facing roles, they may not need to speak English at all. In line with Ehrenreich’s (2011: 28) framework, English is seen as an asset rather than a *sine qua non* and some employees might struggle, especially if they only learned English at school and did not expect to use it in the workplace. A self-perception as learners rather than confident users of English is still at the forefront, for instance, when Respondent 6 reports that “[w]hen we do business with customers or suppliers in the North, we need someone who knows English better, and so we pass the call on to a manager who is more qualified in English”.

In contrast, Company A is in Ehrenreich’s (2011) phase of “transitional exonormative orientation” (p. 30), where English is being introduced as an official corporate language, and thus proficiency in English may be reflected in the power stratification and “shadow” hierarchies (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999). Indeed, Respondent 1 describes the company as being “in a transformation phase”. Employees at Company A, an Italian subsidiary of a German MNC, still tend to use more German with the parent company than English. However, this is now changing rapidly, and employees with proficient English skills may soon find themselves with new opportunities. In particular, using English is seen as essential for those interacting with the HQ, and English is thus also a reason for promotion. Additionally, the company’s expansion into international markets suggests that the German-HQ/Italian-subsidary relationship is giving way to an emerging international group identity:

From my point of view, I believe that knowledge of English has become an almost indispensable requirement for filling roles with high responsibilities within a multinational company. If an employee does not have sufficient knowledge of English, they will find it increasingly difficult to interact and collaborate with other people in the company, meaning that this also contributes to their personal growth. (Respondent 2)

Finally, though not the biggest, Company B is the only one of the three with English as an official corporate language. Respondent 3 explains that the adoption of this language strategy was the only way to work efficiently with subsidiaries located in other countries. Indeed, “there is actually no other possibility” (Respondent 3). This suggests that Company B is already in the endonormative phase, which Ehrenreich (2011) describes as follows:

The degree of international cooperation is intensifying, managers and employees identify as members of a multinational organisation, and in some corners, highly integrated communities of practice emerge. Speakers develop into confident users of ELF [English as a lingua franca, [and] their target is communicative effectiveness. English is clearly a must and no longer an asset on CVs, which is something the younger generation is well aware of. (p.30)

English is seen not as the responsibility of language experts or reserved for certain hierarchical strata, but as a tool for inclusion. The company has taken a proactive approach to language management, specifying minimum required levels of English for every position in the company and standardising acronyms in English across the company, effectively contributing to a community of practice through establishing a shared repertoire. There is an understanding that language use is flexible, pragmatic and inclusive, reflecting the hybridity, code-switching and a goal of communicative effectiveness noted by Ehrenreich (2011): “Between colleagues we always adapt to each other, so that we can avoid any communication problems, switching from Italian to German, German to English and so on” (Respondent 4).

In short, the official roles of English in the companies in this study make a substantial contribution to Ehrenreich’s (2011) tentative conceptualisation of language development in globalising corporations, drawing on Schneider’s (2007) Dynamic Model of how English develops away from Anglocentric norms in postcolonial contexts. It could be argued that size plays a role to some extent, since Company C, which is by far the smallest, is also the company that is still in the foundation stage in terms of both internationalisation and language development. However, size is not the deciding factor in the two larger companies, since the biggest company (A) is still in a transitional phase, while Company B appears to have already made the change towards an endonormative orientation, with English firmly in place as the company’s official corporate language, existing comfortably alongside – and often interchangeably with – several other languages. It is likely that Company B’s status as a parent company rather than a subsidiary means that it can be more proactive in implementing concrete and company-wide language management policies. Examining the role of English in the three businesses thus reveals considerable differences, highlighting the value of a cross-site analysis. Moreover, this study responds to Ehrenreich’s (2011) call for additional research to support her conceptualisation of Schneider’s (2007) Dynamic Model by examining its phases in a different country and a completely different industry, i.e., that of food production and distribution.

4.2. English in relation to other languages

Notably, respondents from all three companies drew attention to the role of English in specific departments, suggesting that these firms lag somewhat behind enterprises in the North, where Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013) found that most of the enterprises in their study “chose to use English for their organization-wide communication” (p. 19; see also Harzing & Pudelko, 2013). For example, Respondent 3 (in the company with the widest use of English) explains:

We have different departments: local departments, which are only responsible for the local area, and corporate departments, which take care of the whole site. For the corporate departments, English is a very important requirement for every position, whereas in the local departments it is only a requirement for certain positions.

Specifically, sales departments tend to need English most, reflecting findings that these functional areas typically require foreign language skills more (Damari et al., 2017). In fact, Company C employs several native speakers of English in its sales department. The two companies where English still plays a lesser role (A and C) also share a tendency to use and prefer English as a written language, more than a spoken one: “until a few years ago I used almost exclusively the written language. So it was much more difficult to make mistakes, because I could always reread what I have written in order to correct any errors” (Respondent 1); “I use English to write e-mails because I have a lot of contact with foreign countries [...] I don't use the spoken language at all” (Respondent 6).

In contexts where English is required, this may be “very basic”, when “the main purpose is to communicate an understandable message” (Respondent 6). Even in our small sample, however, self-reported proficiency levels range from B1 to C2. How the participants interpreted “very basic” is thus not entirely clear, and some BELF communication involving these participants can be expected to be highly sophisticated and fluent. At the same time, all participants reported that being able to inform, converse, and express their opinions in English is valued much more than a high proficiency level or careful adherence to grammatical norms. Technical language, terminology of English origin (Respondent 5) and internal company-speak (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017), such as acronyms, play an important role in supporting smooth communication. Additionally, building and maintaining rapport with colleagues and business partners “allow us to have a space for clarification and to avoid many problems” (Respondent 1). The participants generally claimed not to have experienced misunderstandings due to language, although Respondent 2 noted that cultural differences had caused some issues: “misunderstandings have often manifested themselves when talking about market visions or the habits of Italian consumers as opposed to foreign ones”. These findings are broadly consistent with previous BELF literature (Ehrenreich, 2010, 2011, 2016; Kankaanranta et al., 2015; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Komori-Glatz, 2018; Takino, 2017).

4.3. Language requirements, development and evaluation

Entry requirements for language skills varied within and across the three companies. Company A does not require any specific levels of English, although for certain positions candidates are required to declare their level of English in their CVs. Company C demands an intermediate level of English for higher positions, but not for others when English is not necessary. When it is, candidates are required to hold a conversation in English during the interview for their competences to be assessed. As already indicated, Company B shows a much more formalised approach to recruiting, with each position having been assigned a specific level of English based on the CEFR. Nevertheless, even Company B accepts prospective employees' self-assessments regarding their language skills, and perceives a business degree as evidence of English language competence (Respondent 4).

While respondents from both Companies A and B see English as “almost indispensable” (Respondent 2), especially for higher positions, in Company C, the HR manager states that “we consider [English] an added value, but not an essential component of the CV”, reflecting Ehrenreich's (2011) observation that “English is an asset on CVs” in the foundation phase (p. 28). Respondent 6 suggests that this means employees with a higher level of English – and also other languages – have better chances of being promoted within the company: “they give you more responsibilities if you are fluent in more languages”. Assuming such responsibilities are remunerated accordingly, these observations broadly support the data on wage differentials/premia mentioned in Section 2.2. Any additional language skills are thus perceived as an asset. However, we can also see the effect of

English becoming ‘normalised’ in the transitional and endonormative phases. In these stages, English is barely considered an ‘additional’ language skill or ‘added’ value, and other, less commonly spoken languages bring a stronger competitive advantage.

4.4 Talent management – or the lack thereof

As might be expected, questions about talent management in the company also met with a variety of responses. Currently, none of the three companies have an explicit talent management programme, although Companies A and B offer a range of professional development and training courses: “In the parent company, we have an academy where training and refresher courses for any subject can be held in order to train and develop talent within the company” (Respondent 2). Reflecting its transition to using English, Company A does not yet offer an English course program as part of this academy, but independent training through external courses is fully supported and reimbursed by the company, with an ultimate goal “to provide language training courses for everyone” (Respondent 2). Company B already offers voluntary in-house and external English training for each employee, as well as specific workshops for particular needs. While these companies support the development of their employees’ language skills, language training is neither incentivised with financial rewards nor included in assessment and appraisal. In contrast, Company C does not show a particular interest in language training for workers and does not offer any opportunities to take courses or practise communication skills. This may be attributed to the fact that “there are not many representatives who go abroad to present the company. In fact, the owner takes care of these matters, leaving little room for other managers to make business trips in foreign countries” (Respondent 6). Of course, investing in talent can incur significant costs and, particularly for a small company, distract from essential day-to-day business operations. However, this lack of recognition regarding employees’ talents and the lack of opportunities for them to participate in the international business has led to dissatisfaction among Company C’s workers, as will be seen later.

Considering talent more generally, the HR manager in Company B showed the most awareness of the concept as a concrete strategy: “Talent management is certainly high up in our company. We have not yet added a concrete talent management strategy, but there is one. This will certainly come in the next few years” (Respondent 3). Respondents 2 and 4 recognised that their respective corporate academies support the development of talent within the company; in Company A, both respondents were highly conscious of the company’s growth potential, reflecting its transformation processes. The HR manager stated

I've heard of [talent management], but I didn't go any further. Because we are in a phase of transformation of the company, all the activities within it are developing. One reason is that at the moment we are giving priority to other practices that are more important for the company's growth, such as sales strategies. (Respondent 1)

This highlights (opportunity) cost as one of the key challenges of introducing talent management, particularly with regard to areas that are not directly linked to measurable outcomes. However, sometimes the reason is simply a lack of interest. In Company C, talent management appears to be conspicuous by its absence:

There is a lot of owner’s authority, which greatly influences the projects proposed by the employees and does not give the possibility to develop individual talents. So, it depends on the company culture. [...] Honestly, my company has missed out on a lot of qualified and talented people because of the internal management and the owner. Most of these people had the desire to change the working environment because they didn't feel sufficiently taken into account. (Respondent 6)

Far from managing talent effectively, Company C's lack of interest in developing and supporting its talent has considerable potential to have a negative effect on its employee retention and thus, presumably, the company's success and growth. This is particularly the case with regard to language, as the owner does the bulk of presenting the company abroad himself, leaving little room for other managers to develop their skills and limiting the amount of potential exposure to attract new business partners. This confirms Joyce and Slocum's (2012) observation that organizations are failing to capitalize on opportunities for strategic success due to a lack of talent management (see also Makram et al., 2017), while the company's failure to encourage and direct talent has a detrimental effect on employees' commitment to the organization, and thus their loyalty (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Festing & Schäfer, 2014). In contrast, Companies A and B's employees recognise and appreciate their employers' commitment to training and development. Nevertheless, developing language talent in these companies is still employee-initiated rather than proactively managed.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In our study, we found that the roles and uses of English varied considerably, as did attitudes towards talent management, thus highlighting a need for both further in-depth cross-case comparisons and a differentiated view of English as a business lingua franca in large Italian MNCs. Firstly, while our respondents' reflections on how they used English with other stakeholders presented very similar findings to extant BELF research (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2010, 2011, 2016; Kankaanranta et al., 2015; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Komori-Glatz, 2018; Takino, 2017), the extent to which they do so belies claims that English is "clearly a must in globalized business" (Ehrenreich, 2016, p. 136). While one company has made the transition to adopting English as a corporate language and another is in the process of doing so, the third still has Italian firmly as the company language and only requires English in particular functions such as sales, despite having subsidiaries and business partners abroad. In contrast to Company B, where BELF seems to be used comfortably and flexibly alongside seven other (less widely used) languages, when Company C uses English, it often draws on native speakers as a resource, seeing proficiency in English as a source of power (Ehrenreich, 2016; Takino, 2017; Komori-Glatz, 2018). This begs the question whether Company C's limited reach is the reason for its generally monolingual language policy and practice, or if a lack of (interest in) foreign language skills is limiting its international expansion. A very different approach can be noted in Company A, where Respondent 2 draws a direct link between talent management and growth: "We realise that human resources are very important to the company, our company invests a lot in human resources. We need talented people for the company's growth". At the same time, Respondent 2 also notes the challenges of assessing the language aspect since it can be difficult to set and define measurable targets. Consequently, as noted by Tenzer et al. (2017, pp. 832–833), there is still a need to examine the role of language policy on firms' outcomes.

As well as differentiating between functions, English (and some other languages such as German) are used differently at different levels in the company hierarchy, especially in the two companies that are in the foundation or transitional exonormative phases (Ehrenreich, 2011). Speaking additional languages, especially English, is seen as opening doors of opportunity for promotion and increased responsibility (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999). Even in Company B, local departments usually speak local languages while the corporate departments managing the whole site operate in English. Thus, while English is essential to work in the parent company, having the language skills to communicate effectively across corporate and local departments can also be assumed to be an asset. With the seat of power so strongly concentrated in Company C's CEO, it is not surprising that their mother tongue, Italian, remains the main language of the company, even as English becomes increasingly important for external business relationships with suppliers and clients.

From a talent management perspective, it is essential for (HR) managers to gain clarity about the concept in general, as many of the participants in this study were rather vague about what talent is and what managing it strategically implies, reflecting findings in Makram et al. (2017). Turning to language as talent, a key step is first to identify what languages are needed in which functions, and which can best support the company's expansion. While the managers in Company A argue that "at the moment we are giving priority to other practices that are more important for the company's growth, such as sales strategies", we suggest that including strategic language talent management can contribute to expansion and thus also has a place in transition phases. Taking Collings and Mellahi's (2009) focus on "the identification of key positions which have the potential to differentially impact the competitive advantage of the firm" (p. 305), identifying how language talent management could benefit key strategic positions and support expansion, e.g., by gaining access to untapped markets, firms can then recruit in a targeted fashion and/or upskill current employees (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; CIPD, 2020). Likewise, the differentiated HR architecture of Company B, which identified the required level of English for every position, allows the company to distinguish between positions and invest where high levels of proficiency will have the strongest impact. Particularly in times of crisis, internal skill development helps "support retention and hold you in a more competitive position" (CIPD, 2020, p. 8). From the employee perspective, wage differentials and premia seem to be greatest for additional languages other than English (and German). Investing in developing these languages could thus represent a competitive advantage for employees and employers alike, with the opportunity to improve their remuneration through upskilling representing an attractive offer for young talent.

In contrast, a lack of interest in talent management can be highly detrimental to the company's success and growth, as illustrated by Company C. On the one hand, Company C is incurring substantial opportunity costs by limiting "business trips in foreign countries" to the owner only. Additionally, it is also in danger of losing employees because "they didn't feel sufficiently taken into account" (Respondent 6). An effective strategic language talent management programme could represent a solution to both problems. Firstly, as companies get larger and more international, English takes on an increasingly important role, particularly in management roles, as evidenced by Companies A and B. Thus, by ensuring incumbents are getting the language support they need, the company can optimise its internationalisation processes and operate more effectively across the headquarter-subsidiary divide. A comprehensive language audit is valuable in this respect, as it identifies specific language needs for specific positions within the company (Reeves & Wright, 1996; Marschan et al., 1997; Koster, 2004). An example of this can be seen in Company B, which conducted an extensive survey to determine the language level needed for every position in the company. Ensuring employees' language and communication skills are sufficient is essential to complete the transactions and avoid losing business from a lack of language skills (see statistics in Section 2.2.). Secondly, as English becomes ever more present, if not quite ubiquitous, its added value gets lost, as can be seen in the difference in perceptions of English in Companies A/B and Company C. Respondent 1 noted that "there is a fairly recurring problem that is that 'old' employees do not have high language skills in both English and German", whereas "the younger generation [...] is doing very well in both languages". This intergenerational gap reflects the shift in attitudes between foundation/transitional companies and endonormative companies, where there is an expectation of bilingualism. As a result, added value shifts to languages other than English and the mother tongue (Damari et al., 2017). Companies which do not support the development of language talent are thus at risk of being left behind.

While employee mobility may be becoming a greater threat (Minbaeva & Collings, 2013), resulting in calls for talent management to be refocused on positions rather than people (Mellahi & Collings, 2010), the promise of language training for certain positions and the possibility to create business value for themselves may act as a pull factor to attract and retain high potentials (Makram

et al., 2017), particularly among younger generations, who place increased value on training and development opportunities (Festing & Schäfer, 2014). Previous research has shown that recruiting people with language over technical skills can be a false economy (Ehrenreich, 2010; Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2014), meaning that it may be easier and more effective to teach technical experts the language skills they need than to rely on multilinguals to be competent in technical spheres. Furthermore, at the very least, any language training should be supported and reimbursed by the employer, and ideally offered as in-house, customised and/or specialist programmes to develop talent for a specific position. It is recommended that (language) training take place during working hours to maximise employee motivation and engagement (Neeley & Kaplan, 2014). Additionally, strategic language talent management should be integrated into 360° assessment and evaluation processes, with appropriate incentives and rewards. This is particularly important for enterprises in transitional phases such as Company A. While many voices criticised the speed and suddenness of Rakuten's conversion of the corporate language from Japanese to English virtually overnight, there is little doubt that it was only possible through intensive language management and a corporate culture that valued innovation as well as commitment to and from its employees, fostering employee buy-in (Neeley, 2013, 2017).

This initial exploration of language and talent management in three MNCs in the Italian food production and distribution sector has provided insights into a region and an industry that have so far been underresearched with regard to language. While many of our findings reflect those of previous BELF research, such as prioritising communicative effectiveness over adherence to grammatical norms and the importance of building and maintaining rapport, we also found a range of policies and practices even within the small group of companies examined. In particular, the cross-site comparison revealed that the companies were at different stages of internationalisation, reflecting the different phases of Ehrenreich's (2011) adaptation of Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model of Postcolonial English. Understanding these phases also has implications for how to teach language meaningfully in such contexts, since "traditional ELT [English language teaching] formats are not considered helpful" (Ehrenreich 2011: 30) in the endonormative stages, where variability and hybrid, flexible language use are key. At the same time, learning and using additional language skills (i.e., beyond English and the mother tongue) present competitive advantages for both employees and the companies they work for. We thus echo Tenzer et al.'s (2017) call for extending the scope of investigated regions, countries and languages and would particularly welcome larger scale, longitudinal and/or ethnographic studies that bridge the theory-practice divide to offer greater insights into and recommendations for the integration of language management into strategic talent management, as well as their interplay with employee satisfaction and knowledge acquisition evaluation.

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Appendix. Interview questions and coding tree BELF and language strategies

1. *Use of English*
 - 1.1. *as official corporate language*
 - 1.2. *as main company language*
 - 1.3. *as language of HQ*
 - 1.4. *as language of local departments*
 - 1.5. *with suppliers/customers*
2. *Language-related challenges/conflicts & solutions*
 - 2.1. *cultural/legal challenges*
 - 2.2. *specific linguistic issues*
 - 2.3. *generational issues*
 - 2.4. *building & maintaining rapport as a solution*
 - 2.5. *building & drawing on shared repertoire as solution*

BELF and HR practices

3. *Language requirements*
 - 3.1. *English*
 - 3.2. *other*
4. *Proficiency assessment in recruiting interview*
 - 4.1. *formal test/proof of proficiency/CV*
 - 4.2. *informal test during interview*
 - 4.3. *other*
5. *Linguistic priorities*
 - 5.1. *grammatical correctness vs focus on message*
 - 5.2. *other*
6. *Language training*
 - 6.1. *yes, in-house courses*
 - 6.2. *yes, pays for external courses*
 - 6.3. *none*
7. *Evaluation practices & rewards (language)*

- 7.1. *KPIs etc. but not for language*
- 7.2. *motivation/satisfaction*
- 7.3. *indirectly (e.g. through promotion)*

The role of talent

- 8. *Proficiency vs learning*
 - 8.1. *prefer “smart” people willing to grow*
 - 8.2. *encourage innovation and development*
 - 8.3. *importance of desire to learn*
- 9. *Talent management programmes?*
 - 9.1. *yes*
 - 9.2. *no*
- 10. *Recognition of talent*
 - 10.1. *yes, financial*
 - 10.2. *yes, non-financial*
 - 10.3. *no*