

Corporate versus local language:  
Employees' language choices in a multinational corporation in the Netherlands

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Abstract:

**Purpose.** Multinational corporations (MNCs) often introduce a common corporate language, usually English, to stimulate performance and socialization between employees who are speakers of different local languages. This thesis seeks to explore when, why and how employees in MNCs choose between using their local language and the corporate language.

**Method.** The primary data source was 25 semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with Dutch and expat employees of the MNC Mover. Interviewees were based in the Netherlands, primarily at the headquarters, and to a lesser extent, at the subsidiary office.

**Findings.** The findings of the study were threefold. First, three language groups were distinguished, namely Dutch employees, expats, and expats who were native English speakers. The language usage and choices differed for each of these groups. For example the Dutch had relatively more colleagues with whom they spoke their native language. Second, the study linked the three language groups and their language choices to four language choice scenarios: choice, no-choice, inclusion and exclusion. Third, the study found the following five factors that influenced employees' language choices: a) language proficiency, b) written and spoken communications, c) language choice and professionalism, d) social identity: local groups, e) social identity: global group.

**Discussion.** Native English speakers have an advantage over non-native English speakers, as their local language equals the corporate language. For Dutch and expat employees who are not native speakers of the corporate language, advanced proficiency and attachment to local identity are the main reasons to choose local language instead of the corporate language. Future studies should investigate the role of attachment to local and global identity in relation to language choice further, while making use of the language choice scenarios presented in this study. MNCs are advised to pay attention to and prevent possible exclusion of employees due to the use of local languages.

*Keywords:* Dutch, English, corporate language, language diversity, multinational corporations

## **Introduction**

### **Language usage in Multinational Corporations**

This study focuses on language differences within a multinational corporation (MNC). An MNC is defined as a corporation that engages in foreign direct investment and controls activities in more than one country (Dunning & Lundan, 2008). Many MNCs operate globally and they have offices all over the world, usually in the configuration with one headquarters and multiple subsidiary offices. These offices cross geographical, cultural, and linguistic borders and as result MNCs' employees form a multicultural and multilingual workforce (Angouri, 2013). Commonly accepted is that differences in culture form a barrier in global business (Hofstede, 1984). Surprisingly less attention has been paid to differences in languages in multinational corporations (Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011).

Recently, multilingualism in MNCs has been the subject of studies focusing on discourse between employees working at the subsidiary offices and employees working at the headquarters (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Feely & Harzing, 2003; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Kulkarni, 2015). Research shows that employees at the subsidiary offices commonly are native inhabitants of the country where this subsidiary office is located, and usually communicate in their local language. The employees at the headquarters represent the whole workforce and consist of a multilingual workforce. Similar to a subsidiary office, a group of employees originates from the country where the headquarters are located, but also a large part of employees working at the headquarters originate from different countries. In order to overcome the problem of multilingualism MNCs introduce one corporate language, this language is usually English. Therefore, employees at the headquarters of MNCs need to be able to communicate in English. Next to English, employees also use their own local languages.

A couple of studies focused on language usage within the headquarters of MNCs', including the ethnographic study of Lønsmann (2011) at the Danish MNC Lundbeck and the research of Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen, and Piekkari (2006) at the German MNC Siemens. Both studies show that employees located at the headquarters of an MNC encounter situations in which they can choose to either use the corporate language or a local language. MNCs should pay attention to the usage of local language in the organization, since it has a lead to undesired

effects, such as the exclusion of employees who are not able to speak a certain local language (Lønsmann, 2011).

Previous studies conducted at the headquarters of MNCs mainly focused on the choice between the corporate language and the local language of the country where the study was conducted (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Lønsmann, 2011). This choice makes sense when the vast majority of employees that work at the headquarters of an MNC originate from the country where the MNC is located. The current study has been conducted at the headquarters of a linguistically diverse MNC with English as corporate language, namely Mober, located in the Netherlands. In contrast with previous studies, Mober's headquarters are characterized by a large amount of linguistic diversity, because expats also use their local language at the headquarters. Due to this research environment this study captures language usage and choices of both the local population, the Dutch, and expat employees. Hence, the current study also distinguishes factors that influence their language choices.

The core of this study focuses on the language choices between corporate and local language made by employees in MNCs. In the literature review previous research will be discussed and divided over the following themes: language proficiency, written and spoken communications, displayed professionalism, cultural behaviors and cultural groups, and global and local social identity.

Data has been collected by conducting 25 semi-structured interviews. Interviewees originated from Argentina, Belgium, France, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.

### **Research question**

In order to structure the research, a research question that focuses on how employees of an MNC use both the corporate language and local languages has been set up. The study aims at identifying employees' reasons for choosing either the corporate or a local language. The research question has been formulated as follows:

*“What perceptions about using corporate and local language are held by employees of a multinational corporation and how do these perceptions relate to their language choices?”*

### **Positioning of the research within scientific traditions**

This research has also been inspired by the intellectual legacy of two scientific traditions, namely social constructionism and symbolic interactionism. Both traditions subscribe to the idea that meaning is created through human interaction (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005).

Social constructionism views the creation of meaning as being a macro level process in which meaning arises from social systems rather than from individuals in society (Allen, 2004). Social constructionists assume that occurrences are natural, unavoidable, universal, and determined biologically (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Social constructionists argue that through discourse humans construct concepts such as culture and identity. Especially in identity construction, language plays a significant role (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995). From a social constructionist point of view, the choice for a language can be influenced by socially constructed factors such as social identity. When for example, individuals choose to speak their local language, they express their attachment to the local identity affiliated with this language. When such language choices are made, the language chosen can strengthen the establishment of this social identity.

Language choice cannot be completely explained from a macro perspective. Therefore, this study is also placed in the line of reasoning of a micro level theory, namely symbolic interactionism. The symbolic interactionism perspective emphasizes that meaning is created through interaction with others (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005). In social constructionism human beings are seen as actors regulating their actions on basis of others and their actions. Language choices can be seen as social actions with a certain meaning behind it (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2001). One meaning that could be expressed is an actors desire to be professional, employees for example can choose to use the language in which they come across the most professional.

In line with the standard practices in social constructionism and symbolic interactionism a qualitative study has been designed in which semi-structured interviews are the central method of data collection.

**Outline of the report**

This master's thesis is organized as follows: first, in the literature review, the current literature on corporate and local language usage in MNCs are discussed. Second, the research design and methodology are presented and discussed. Third, the findings of the study are presented and analyzed. Fourth, this report is concluded with the discussion chapter in which the main findings and implications, opportunities for future research, and practical recommendations are discussed. Last, this research will be summarized in the conclusion.

## Literature review

### Language usage and organizational context

In order to be a competitive player in business, MNCs actively recruit a culturally diverse and competent workforce (Ogbonna & Harris, 2006; Som, 2006; Van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010). Having a culturally diverse workforce has shown positive effects on a range of organizational outcomes, such as: better utilization of talent, increased marketplace understanding, and increased quality of team-problem solving (Robinson & Dechant, 1997).

Actively shaping a culturally diverse workforce is inherent to creating a multilingual workforce. Language plays a critical role in MNCs because employees use language to discuss, exchange information, ask questions, and conduct business in general (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). To enable a multilingual workforce to perform optimally, MNCs formulate a language management strategy, which can be either multilingual or monolingual. A multilingual strategy allows employees to use multiple corporate languages, where the monolingual strategy allows usage of one corporate language, the latter is the current standard for MNCs. Thomas (2008) shows that MNCs' language management strategies focus on two types of languages: corporate language and local language, the latter includes the parent company language. Through introducing a corporate language MNCs are able to coordinate their activities globally (Luo & Shenkar, 2006). Some MNCs officially formulate a language management policy, it serves as a guideline for employees and can help them to make the right choices between using the corporate language or a local language.

Many Western European MNCs introduce a single corporate language, and usually this language is English. All over the world English already functions as a lingua franca, a language which is spoken between people who do not share a native language nor culture (Firth, 1996). The position of English as (global) lingua franca (ELF) is beyond dispute (Charles, 2007). Although ELF is based on English vocabulary, structure, and discourse practices (Jenkins, 2000), it is different from English, as its speakers learn the language as an extra language. On average ELF users speak English on a basic level.

After English established itself as global lingua franca, its influence also expanded towards global business. Consequently, researchers applied the concept of ELF to the business context, using the term BELF: business English as lingua franca (Kankaanranta & Planken,

2010). BELF is used by its speakers in order to “*get the job done*” (Charles, 2007, p. 266), and its speakers develop a common vocabulary which is used in the global business context. Similar to ELF speakers, BELF speakers do not speak English as their mother tongue. BELF usage in MNCs has been widely researched (Charles, 2007; Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2007; Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005; Nickerson, 2005; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Seidlhofer, Breiteneder, & Pitzl, 2006).

Studies have also gone out to English proficiency around the world. The study of Harzing and Pudelko (2013) shows that general English proficiency in Asia is relatively low, in Continental Europe reasonably high, in the Nordic countries excellent, and individuals from Anglophone countries have a strong English-as-native language advantage. The current study is conducted in the Netherlands where 90% percent of the inhabitants speak English as a second language on conversational level. The average usage of English as a second language across the European Union is 38% (*Europeans and their languages*, 2012).

Next to the corporate language, English, also local languages play a major role in MNCs. At MNCs’ headquarters commonly the majority of the employees are native inhabitants from the country where the MNCs’ headquarters are located. These employees frequently find themselves in situations in which they can use their local language amongst each other. Fredriksson et al. (2006) researched language usage within the German MNC Siemens, and found out that although the MNC assigned English as their corporate language, the local language, German, still was used as an important day to day language. Lønsmann (2011) described a similar situation at the Danish MNC Lundbeck where Danish still played an important role next to English. Next to local inhabitants, MNCs also employ expats. Sometimes expats will also get in situations in which they can communicate in their mother tongue.

Besides using strictly the corporate language or a local language, employees in MNCs also codeswitch between languages. Codeswitching is the term used for conversations in which speakers alternate between multiple languages (Myers-Scotton, 1995). Two types of codeswitching can be distinguished (Poplack, Sankoff, & Miller, 1988). The first type is completely mixing sentences between at least two languages, this behavior has been found in MNCs by Lønsmann (2011) and Poncini (2003). The second type is borrowing words from one language and use them while speaking another language. This type of codeswitching has been found by Louhiala-Salminen (2002).



## Language choice

Within the area of languages studies in MNCs, several researchers studied employees' language choices between the corporate language and local languages (Angouri, 2013; Charles, 2007; Ehrenreich, 2010; Fredriksson et al., 2006; Groot, 2012; Hansen & Liu, 1997; Kulkarni, 2015; Lønsmann, 2011; Poncini, 2003; Saville-Troike, 2003; Tange & Luring, 2009). These researchers describe that employees in MNCs encounter situations in which they have the choice to communicate in either the corporate language or their local language. They also describe that such situations emerge unevenly for different employees. In language choice research three language based groups can be distinguished: the local population of the country where the headquarters are located, expat employees, and native English speakers (Ehrenreich, 2010; Harzing et al., 2011; Lønsmann, 2011).

In the study of Charles and Marschan-Piekkari (2002) speakers of the headquarters' country native language were characterized as powerful people. They frequently encounter situations in which they can use their native language, which makes it easier for them to obtain and disseminate information (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002). Research of Lønsmann (2011) shows that the local population sometimes makes the claim that they can use their local language, and that expats should learn the language of their country.

Expats make the opposite claim, they specifically look for a job at MNCs in which they can solely rely on their English skills (Lønsmann, 2011). In general expats will not encounter situations in which they can speak their local language unless they have colleagues who share their local language. Therefore expats use English for the vast majority of their conversations. Expats occasionally have an advantage when they communicate outside the headquarters with subsidiary office where employees speak the same local language (Harzing et al., 2011).

When English is an MNC's corporate language native English speakers have an incredible advantage over non-native English speakers (Ehrenreich, 2010). Interviewees in the study of Ehrenreich (2010) report that native English speakers constantly use their native advantage, which non-native English speakers characterized as extremely irritating. In the study of Harzing and Pudelko (2013), non-native English speakers indicated that language is more acutely felt as a source of power when interacting with native English speakers. Native English speakers will not have to choose between the corporate language and their local language, because they are one and the same.

Language choices emerge unequally for the local population, expat employees, and native English speakers. In case language choices occur, researchers studied factors that influence the choices. These factors will be discussed below and will be connected with the three groups.

**Language Proficiency.** Multiple researchers observed a difference between individuals' language proficiency in their local language and their proficiency in the corporate language (Andersen & Rasmussen, 2004; Ehrenreich, 2010; Marschan, Welch, & Welch, 1997). This language proficiency is twofold and encompasses the ability to make oneself understood, but also someone's ability to understand others, which is especially critical in oral communications (Charles, 2007). In their own local language individuals are expected to have native proficiency, but native speaker proficiency is not expected for the corporate language (Charles, 2007; Ehrenreich, 2010). Instead, employees of MNCs are expected to have the ability to make themselves understood in the corporate language, combined with general communication skills (Ehrenreich, 2010). When communications takes place in the corporate language, native English speakers have superior proficiency over non-native speakers (Ehrenreich, 2010)

Choice situations will only arise if the individuals involved have a shared proficiency level in multiple language at which multiple languages are seen as an option (Gardner-Chloros, 1991). Likely employees who get in choice situations will have a different level of proficiency in the languages that can be chosen. The language in which the conversational partners have a higher shared proficiency level facilitates easier communication, and will thus more likely be chosen.

The proficiency needed in a conversation largely depends on the type of conversation. Du-Babcock and Babcock (2007) created a framework distinguishing between conversations in the professional genre and relational genre. The professional genre encompasses language usage for professional purposes, which is built on a shared knowledge base acquired through similar education and experience. Research showed that non-native English speakers usually have no problems with using the corporate language in professional and technical conversations (Henderson, 2005). On basis of proficiency, the corporate language and local languages can both quite easily be used for work, and in choice situations concerning technical topics both languages are an option.

Du-Babcock and Babcock (2007) also describe a relational genre which encompasses conversations in which personal or social messages are exchanged. Multiple researchers studied small-talk situations, and the general belief is that these are challenging for non-native speakers of a corporate language (Angouri, 2013; Charles, 2007; Henderson, 2005; Lønsmann, 2011). On basis of proficiency it seems easier for employees to communicate in their local language. In choice situations concerning relational topics employees will probably more likely choose their local language to communicate in.

**Written and spoken communications.** Researchers also examined differences in written and spoken language in relation to language choice. In studies of Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) and Lønsmann (2011) in respectively a Finnish and Swedish merger MNC and a Danish MNC, non-native English speaking employees frequently used English, the corporate language, in their written communications such as e-mails. The interesting part is that employees who share a local language also frequently used the corporate language in e-mail communication. Research by Nickerson (1999) on language choice in e-mail communications in a Dutch MNC showed different results. In this study, Dutch employees used Dutch amongst each other, and in communications with non-Dutch colleagues they used English. In language choice situations concerning written communications both the corporate language and local languages seem to be chosen by employees.

In the studies of Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) and Lønsmann (2011) employees indicated that in spoken communications also local languages were commonly used. In their studies the usage of local languages in spoken communications was accepted by the workforce. In a choice situation, speaking corporate language when it is also possible to use local language could be experienced as forced and fake.

Research on the area of media richness states that different media used for communication have various ability in enabling users to communicate (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). Usage of different media brings along a different experience. For example face to face communications and information are experienced as personal. (Daft & Lengel, 1983; Daft & Wiginton, 1979). Opposed to face to face communications, usage of written language is experienced as more distant due to absence of audio and visual cues (Daft & Lengel, 1983). The

characteristics of the used media could also influence employees to use local language in spoken communications and corporate language in written communications.

**Displayed professionalism.** Several researchers discovered a relation between employees with superior English language skills and power (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013; Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999; Marschan et al., 1997). Superior skills in English, the corporate language, display individual employees' professional competence (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, & Sääntti, 2005). Following this line of reasoning, English native speakers could spread an impression of being competent, which is partially based on their superior language proficiency. MNCs do not expect that their employees speak English on native speaker level (Charles, 2007; Ehrenreich, 2010), still employees could use the level of native English speakers as reference point for their own language competency.

Since everyone speaks their local language on native speaker level, it is expected that usage of local language is not related to displayed professionalism. Since employees have different linguistic backgrounds, it is often not possible for them to compare language skills in local language. When employees perceive themselves as possessing good corporate language skills and they want to display professionalism, they could choose to use the corporate language over local languages. Displaying professionalism can especially be done in professional conversations. As discussed at the proficiency factor, non-native English speaking employees in MNCs in general are confident about their corporate language skills in professional conversations.

**Cultural behaviors and cultural groups.** Individuals with different backgrounds display a wide range of different communication behaviors. Researchers studied cultural differences in MNCs and found that employees from different cultural backgrounds show different behavior in forms of address, decision-making processes, communication during meetings, and communication networks in organizations (Miller, 2008). Bjørge (2007) shows that individuals from high and low power distance cultures address their colleagues differently in e-mail correspondence. Employees from high power distance cultures address more formally (*e.g., Dear Sir/Madam, Yours faithfully*) where individuals from low power distance cultures address more informally (*e.g., Hi, Cheers!*).

Researchers found that employees in MNCs show interest in the culture and local language their colleagues speak. A good example of this interest has been found by Louhiala-Salminen (2002). In this research, non-native speakers of a local language developed small vocabularies in several local languages. They exchanged a few words in a local language with a native speaker of that local languages. Such exchanges were meant as a gesture of goodwill and acceptance towards this person and the local language this person spoke. However, this behavior should not be seen as a language choice, but rather a form of codeswitching; mixing local and corporate languages.

According to Schein (2010) cultural groups come to exist when multiple individuals create a pattern of basic assumptions which they learned through solving problems by adapting externally and integrating internally. They teach these basic assumptions to new members such that they learn to perceive, think, and feel the same way as the group. Miller (2008, p. 88) clarifies that within the view of Schein (1992) cultural groups can exist on multiple levels. Cultural groups can range from a broad level such as countries, to the level of small social or organizational groups. Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, and Gibson (2005) studied the concept of cultural groups in MNCs. Within MNCs they distinguish different cultural groups including groups focused around global and local culture. Employees could specifically search for other individuals who share their local culture and language and therefore more often encounter situations in which they can speak their local language.

Research on culture and language usage in MNCs focuses on communication behaviors and language usage, but not necessarily on language choice. Nonetheless, it makes sense that persons who are members of a cultural group and speak the language associated with this group use this language amongst each other. In such a case, language choice is seen as an individuals' behavior to express identification with members of a certain group.

**Local and global social identity.** According to Tajfel (1978) a social identity is most commonly seen as that part of the self-concept of an individual which is derived from being a member of a social group. Individuals attach value and emotional significance to membership of a group. Individuals categorize themselves, and others, as being members of social groups, which is done in order to moderate uncertainties and to establish and maintain self-esteem

(Brown, 2000). Self-esteem is derived through comparing groups on basis of characteristics that favor the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Language is an important concept in social identity theory, since it serves as the main agent to integrate into a cultural or social group (Lauring, 2008). The concept of social identity and language choice in MNCs has to the best knowledge of the researcher been addressed in four studies (Heller, 1982; Lauring, 2008; Vaara et al., 2005; Van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010). Heller (1982) studied language choice and social identity and stated that language choices serve as indicators of social relationships which are based on shared or unshared group memberships. Usage of a certain language symbolizes group identity, which arises especially in case there is contact with groups with different languages and ways of being (Heller, 1982). Within an organization individuals belong to multiple social groups associated with social identities and group prototypes (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Within MNCs two types of groups can be distinguished that are centered on language usage. These are local identity groups and the global identity group.

Attachment to local identities and languages should not be overlooked when studying language usage in MNCs (Van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010). Giles and Byrne (1982) argue that such local language based identity groups are equal to ethnic groups. Additionally, Vaara et al. (2005) emphasize that within a group language can be seen as a symbolization of national identification. Membership of a local group can be obtained only through native level proficiency. When connecting local identities and the concept of language choice, employees' choice to speak their local language with colleagues with a native language proficiency in this local language can be seen as an in-group behavior. Choosing to communicate in the corporate language can be seen as an out-group behavior.

Local inhabitants of the country where the headquarters are located will more frequently be able to use their local language and thus express identification with the local community. Expats will encounter fewer situations in which they can use their local language. In the few occasions it is possible for them, their need to express identification could be extra important.

Next to groups based on local identity, employees in MNCs also show signs of attachment with a group based on global identity. The global identity group encompasses employees who see themselves as member of the global community. They portray themselves as world citizens who are able to communicate effectively and appropriately in multiple countries

(Sussman, 2000). Gupta and House (2004) note that globalization of language contributes to significant convergence in cultural practices, as well as norms across societies. Currently globalization of language happens through the usage of English as lingua franca. As found by Lønsmann (2011) expat employees expect that MNCs arrange that they are able to work completely in English. Expected is that global identity will mostly be relevant in situations in which individuals with different local backgrounds and local languages communicate. As discussed before employees in MNCs generally show interest in colleagues' cultural background. It is most likely that the majority of employees in MNCs will feel part of the global community to a certain extent.

### **Conclusion of literature review**

MNCs introduce language management strategies in which they integrate corporate language, usually English, and local languages. Three language based groups are important in MNCs' headquarters: the local population of the country where the headquarters are located, expat employees, and native English speakers. Employees belonging to these groups make language choices, and on basis of the current literature on language choice, it is clear that multiple factors influence their choices. This study incorporates the following factors: a) language proficiency, b) written and spoken communications, c) displayed professionalism, d) cultural behaviors and groups, and f) global and local identity. On basis of the literature it is believed that these are central factors that influence language choice.

Through a qualitative research method language choices are researched. The method will be discussed in the following chapter. This method is designed to study employees' perceptions about corporate and local language usage, and to study how these perceptions are related to their language choices.

## Method

### Research overview

The researcher started out with finding an interesting international research context before settling on the topic of language choice. The researcher managed to gain access to Mobovers' headquarters in The Netherlands. The first two months of the research, May and June 2015, were characterized by an ethnographic approach in which the researcher was submerged in the MNC and observed the behavior of its employees (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The researcher was captivated by how employees used both corporate and local languages at Mobovers' headquarters. Consequently the researcher wrote a research proposal on the topic of language usage in MNCs. In July and August 2015, the researcher conducted a small document study. Simultaneously the researcher started with designing a semi-structured interview script. Participant observation, the document study, and insights from the literature were used as input for the semi-structured interviews (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). In September till halfway November 2015, the researcher conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with Mobovers' employees. A short time after all interviews were conducted the researcher concluded his employment. The transcription of the interviews was finished in January 2016. Following up the researcher started with analyzing the data, which included the development of a codebook, coding interviews, and a validity check in the form of coding by a second coder. The data analysis was finished halfway April. In March till July the reporting of the research took place. In this stage the researcher expanded the literature study and connected the current literature with the findings of the research.

### Organization and participant selection

**Organization.** THIS PART HAS PARTIALLY BEEN REMOVED BECAUSE OF CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION.

Mobover' Headquarters could be best described as a very international work environment. Mobovers' workforce was very interesting in relation to this study because of two factors. First, individuals in the workforce spoke a lot of different languages, with a lead role for Dutch. The workforce was characterized by the existence of a lot of language based clusters. These clusters consisted of persons who were able to speak their local language amongst each



other. A large Dutch cluster could be distinguished, but also clusters of expat employees who had the possibility to communicate in their local language. Second, Mober specifically recruited employees with a high proficiency in its corporate language: English.

**Participant selection.** The main method of data collection concerned semi-structured interviews. A total of 25 participants were selected through using a purposive sampling strategy (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). These participants were also sampled sequentially (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The research started with an initial sample consisting of 10 employees. After this initial sample, the researcher aimed at inviting interview candidates who added to the heterogeneity of the sample (Patton, 2014).

The researcher was able to purposively compose a heterogeneous sample from a network of colleagues. The most important selection criterion was languages spoken by the candidate. Next to spoken languages nationality, gender, age, tenure and the location where the participant worked were taken into account.

The final sample, 25 participants, was characterized as follows: 14 Dutch native speakers participated, and 11 participants who were native in other local languages. Amongst those with a different native local language 2 participants also spoke Dutch as a third language. Furthermore 2 native English speakers were included. Participants were asked to rate their English language proficiency, 21 participants rated themselves as having full professional proficiency in English, and 2 participants as having a professional working proficiency. An overview of the languages that were spoken by the different participants in the sample can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

<i>Language proficiency distribution in the sample (25)</i>			
Language	Native or Bilingual	Full professional	Professional
Dutch	14	1	1
English	2	21	2
German	2	2	1
Hindi		1	
Kannada	1		
Spanish	1	1	1
Italian	3		
French	1	2	2

Polish	1	
Swedish		1
Indonesian	1	
Hebrew		1
Tamil	1	

Outside of languages other selection criteria have been used. First of all nationality, which not surprisingly was mostly in line with the native languages spoken by participants. 12 persons with the Dutch nationality were included and 12 persons with different nationalities were included. One participant had both the Dutch and a different nationality. Gender was the next selection criterion, the sample includes 14 male and 11 female participants. Heterogeneity of the sample was also expressed in terms of age. The youngest participant was 21 years old, and the eldest 51 years old, the average age of the sample was 33.5 years. Also the duration of employment has been taken into account while sampling. Both relatively new employees, employed at Mober for less than half a year and employees who already worked more than 5 years at the organization were included in the sample. On average, the interviewees worked 38 months at Mober. Finally, the place where the participants were located was used as a selection criterion. To gain extra insights employees working primarily in the Dutch subsidiary office, but at the same time holding a job with a global focus, were also included in the sample. Abovementioned demographic variables have been summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

*Demographics of the sample (25)*

Category:	Nationality		Gender		Age	Tenure	Location	
	<u>Dutch</u>	<u>Other.</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Avg.</u> <u>Years</u>	<u>Avg.</u> <u>Months</u>	<u>Headquarter</u>	<u>Subsidiary</u>
Sample:	13	12	14	11	33.5	38	18	7

Note: Avg.: Average

### Data collection

In line with previous researchers focusing on language usage in multinational corporations this study made use of both observational and interview methods (Charles, 2007; Ehrenreich, 2010; Lønsmann, 2011; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002).

**Participant observation.** In this study, the role of participant observation was focused on getting a better understanding of the subject. According to Jackson (1989) it is assumed that through personal experience only, rich understanding of a cultural environment can be reached. Through observations the researcher developed an understanding of how Movers' employees used both the corporate language and local languages. To get a better view of language usage at Mover, the researcher observed language usage in different organizational contexts. Next to working and observing in the open office space, the researcher visited the canteen on a daily basis. The researcher also visited one of the subsidiary offices in order to observe differences in language usage between employees in the headquarters and subsidiary offices.

The researcher was employed as an intern, and thus was entirely embedded in the organization, therefore the research can be categorized as a complete observer (Gold, 1958). The presence of the researcher and his own involvement in the environment is sometimes seen as a threat to the reliability and the validity in research (Dooley & Vos, 2009). Being an active part of the organization helped the researcher to develop a rich understanding of the research context, but simultaneously the researcher developed affective involvement with observed participants, which could lead to observer bias (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955). Therefore participant observations have not been used directly in the research, but have proven to be valuable input for the semi-structured script. Additionally, observations have helped the researcher to make sense of data collected through semi-structured interviews.

**Document study.** The document study was small scaled and focused on language management in the MNC. In the document study the researcher focused on Movers' language policy, language usage in internal management communications, language usage in internal communication tools such as the intranet, language settings for computer related work tools, and language usage in support from the human resources department. The document study was used to collect data, but its main function was to serve as input for the semi-structured interview script.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

**Interview procedure.** Possible interviewees were contacted either face to face or via Movers' internal chat program. After a candidate confirmed his or her participation in the

research, an appointment was planned via Mobovers' shared agenda system. The appointment also included the briefing document for the interview. Next to the briefing a short questionnaire was included in which interviewees were asked to fill in their demographics and the languages which they spoke.

The interviews were conducted in two different languages. The interviews with the Dutch interviewees were conducted in Dutch, including two interviews with participants who were non-native, though very advanced, Dutch speakers. The interviews with non-Dutch speakers have been conducted in English. Through conducting the interviews in Dutch with Dutch speakers, the researcher was able to collect the highest quality information for these interviews, since they were held in the shared native language (Welch & Piekkari, 2006). Interviewing in a different language than the reporting language had the downside that interview material had to be translated before it could be used in reporting. To prevent translation mistakes and interpretations, all materials that have been used have been checked by a second translator.

The interviews took place in either the head office or the subsidiary office. All interviews were conducted in a private room, and were audio visually recorded with the consent of the interviewees. Before an interview started, the interviewee was provided with a short introduction to the topic. After the interviews ended, interviewees were thanked for participating.

**Interview instrument.** The semi-structured interview script consisted of several topics, namely: work context, languages spoken by interviewee, language management policy, motives, situations and incidents, and national and organizational culture.

The researcher started with the topic of work context. Interviewees were asked how long they worked at Mover, and to describe a typical workday. This helped the researcher with creating a perspective of how and when different languages were used by an interviewee.

The next topic concerned the languages the interviewee spoke. Interviewees were asked which languages they used to communicate with colleagues, and if they had colleagues whom they shared a native language with. All interviewees were asked about the colleagues whom they communicated most frequently with and where these colleagues were located within Mover. Based on participant observations, this seemed to be an important factor for the possible languages which employees could use.

The next part addressed Mobaovers' language management policy. In the document study the researcher found the policy in the employee manual. Interviewees were asked if they were aware of the language management policy and its content, if they weren't they were asked what they thought this policy would include. Following up, the researcher presented the language policy to the interviewee and asked the participant for an opinion. Additionally, the researcher asked if interviewees encountered situations in which it was hard to follow the policy, and if they had seen colleagues in situations where they did not follow the policy. Concluding this part, interviewees were asked about their expectations on usage of English and local languages before they started working at Mobaover.

The next topic concerned interviewees' motives to either communicate in the corporate language or a local language with colleagues. Based on participant observation, interviewees were asked about three specific motives, namely: "*connecting with colleagues*", i.e. forming relationships with colleagues, "*expressing yourself as an expert*", i.e. how important it was for a person to make a professional impression in general, and "*expressing yourself as an expert in your field*", i.e. how important it was to a person to come across as knowledgeable in the professional field of this person. On the second motive "*expressing yourself as an expert*" interviewees were not able to respond and to avoid confusion among interviewees, it has been removed from the script after five interviews.

The next part of the interviews was concerned with specific situations and incidents related to the usage of corporate and local languages. For this part, critical incident technique (CIT) has been used. CIT is an interview technique used to collect direct observations of behaviors, which can be used in problem solving and understanding psychological processes (Flanagan, 1954). CIT is also used in order to determine the most critical communication behaviors (Downs & Adrian, 2012). In this study participants were asked to describe positive and negative situations where the corporate language and/or local languages were used. Through using CIT the interviewees could easily come up with specific examples. CIT started with the following question: "*Could you perhaps give examples of specific moments where you or one of your colleagues used either English or a different language in an appropriate or inappropriate way?*". For each incident specific questions were asked to better understand the displayed behaviors, these questions included when the incident took place, where it took place, who was involved, consequences of the incident, communication channels that had been used, and the

significance of the incident. Included in CIT were questions that focused on interviewees' job satisfaction and performance. Interviewees did not notice effects on satisfaction and performance from specific language related incidents. Therefore, this part has been separated from the CIT. Instead interviewees were asked if speaking corporate or local languages had effects on job satisfaction and performance in general.

The final part of the interviews addressed the role of culture on language usage. Interviewees were asked about their national culture, and if their national culture influenced the way they communicated with their colleagues. In case interviewees were struggling with answering this question, the interviewer provided a stereotypical example about the Dutch way of communication: being very direct on the work floor, thus leaving out politeness markers (Van Mulken, 1996). Next, interviewees were asked how Mbovers' culture influenced employees in the way they interacted with colleagues in the corporate and their local language. Concluding the part of organizational culture, the interviewees were asked to what extent Mbover encouraged the usage of the corporate language.

After the interviewer had no more questions, the interviewees were asked if they wanted to add anything to the interview. Also they were asked if they thought that the interviewer missed a certain topic.

**Interview topics and example questions.** Table 3 summarizes the abovementioned interview topics, and for each topic example interview questions are given.

Table 3

<i>Interview topics and example questions</i>	
<u>Interview topic</u>	<u>Example question</u>
<u>Work context</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>How long have you been working here?</i></li> <li>- <i>Could you describe a typical work day?</i></li> </ul>
<u>Communication and languages</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>In the short questionnaire you indicated you are proficient in the following languages, which languages do you use to communicate with your colleagues?</i></li> <li>- <i>Within your function, which part of the organization do you have the most contact with?</i></li> </ul>
<u>Policy</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>To the best of your knowledge, what is Mbovers' policy on the use of languages?</i></li> <li>- <i>When you started working, what were your expectations about language usage?</i></li> </ul>
<u>Motives</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Could you give me your personal motives which would make you use English?</i></li> <li>- <i>How does language influence expressing yourself as an expert in your field?</i></li> </ul>
<u>Critical Incident Technique</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Could you perhaps give examples of specific moments where you or one of your colleagues used either English or a different language in an appropriate or inappropriate way?</i></li> <li>- <i>Via which communication channel did this moment take place, F2F/Conference Call/E-mail/Messenger?</i></li> </ul>
<u>Performance and satisfaction</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Do you prefer corporate language or native language for job performance?</i></li> <li>- <i>Do you prefer corporate language or native language for obtaining job satisfaction?</i></li> </ul>
<u>Culture</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>How do you think your national culture influences the way you communicate with colleagues?</i></li> <li>- <i>How do you think Mbovers' culture influences the way employees communicate with each other?</i></li> <li>- <i>Do you think Mbover should encourage the usage of English even more?</i></li> </ul>

### **Data transcription and analysis**

**Participant observation and document study.** Participant observations has not served as a data source, but rather as input for the semi-structured interview script. Data collected in the document study has been analyzed, and used in reporting when it did not contain confidential organizational data.

**Interview transcription and analysis.** All interviews were transcribed verbatim, except for names, dates, and locations, which were substituted by pseudonyms and functional codes to ensure confidentiality (Ford & Reutter, 1990). In total 16 hours and 43 minutes of interview data were transcribed, covering 213 pages. Interviews were transcribed in Microsoft Word and afterwards transported to Microsoft Excel for data analysis. Before the analysis, the researcher reread all the interview materials and checked if all information was correctly displayed.

The next step in the research process was coding the material. Fragments have been coded with an open coding strategy (Boeije, 2009). Codes were characterized by a high level of detail, consequently a wide list of codes has been composed. An example of a code is: *“Native English speakers have an advantage when they use corporate language”*.

Following up a codebook was developed. The codebook was partially constructed a priori, thus based on the set up of the interview categories (King, 1994). Codes were divided over categories such as “Proficiency”, “Motives” and “Identity”. Within the categories there were further categorizations, for example “Proficiency – Corporate language” and “Proficiency – Native language”. Codes were placed under a category, and if necessary new categories were created.

After 17 out of 25 interviews were coded, the researcher started with axial coding (Boeije, 2009). In this stage the codebook was reviewed and codes with high similarity were merged, for example the codes *“A lot of communication for everything”*, *“A lot of written communication”*, and *“In Mbovers’ culture there is a lot of alignment”* have been merged, the merged code became: *“A lot of meetings, alignment and written communication”*. For the same set of 17 out of 25 interviews, the researcher applied a selective coding strategy (Boeije, 2009). The researcher reorganized the categories to match both the research question and insights from literature in order to determine key themes (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000).

Only codes which were applied at least two times in at least two different interviews have been used. Moreover, a second independent coder recoded the material. For each category that has been mentioned two or more times by two different interviewees, two or more fragments were selected for being coded a second time. The researcher provided a second coder the complete transcription, and marked the fragments that needed to be recoded. The second coder additionally received the researcher’s codebook. This happened after 17 out of 25 interviews were coded. The researcher selected 77 different codes for revision, spread over 158 fragments.



Cohen's Kappa has been calculated over the 158 fragments, and had a value of 0.67. According to Landis and Koch (1977) the strength of the agreement for Kappa values between 0,6 and 0,8 is substantial.

After the second coder finished the coding, the researcher and the second coder discussed similarities and differences in the coded material. As a result some fragments were assigned a new code when there was agreement between the researcher and second coder. Additionally some codes were merged when the researcher and second coder agreed that codes had too much overlap and could not be distinguished. For example the codes "*In a certain culture there is direct communication*" and "*Direct communication is interpreted as rudeness*" have been merged. The new code became "*Example of direct communication*". In the final stage of data transcription, the researcher coded interviews 18 up to and including 25, using the renewed codebook.

The codes have been used as input for reporting in the form of authentic citations. Using verbatim passages is crucial in qualitative research, because they are the most authentic form of interview data (Ritchie et al., 2013). Since a part of the interviews were conducted in Dutch, the Dutch passages have been translated to English. In this process the translations have been checked by a native Dutch and near-native English speaker.

## Findings

In this chapter the findings derived from the semi-structured interviews are presented. Within the results, three key themes have been distinguished. The findings are presented in the following order. First, the organizational context, overall language usage, and language based groups at Mover. Second, language choice, language choice scenarios, and the way in which language choices are established in conversations. Third, factors that determine how and why employees make language choices between the corporate language and local languages. These factors are a) language proficiency, b) written and spoken communications, c) language choice and professionalism, d) social identity: local groups, e) social identity: global group.

### **Organizational context and overall language usage, and language based groups at Mover**

**Organizational context and language usage.** The research has been conducted in the organizational context of the headquarters of the Dutch MNC Mover. Within Movers' headquarters the majority of employees held positions in which they communicated with colleagues all over the world. Interviewees indicated that communication with colleagues was an essential part of their jobs. On average, interviewees spent half of their workdays in meetings, both face-to-face and in the form of conference calls. In addition to meetings, e-mails were often used. Some interviewees mentioned that they received over 150 e-mails a day. Additionally, the internal chat messenger was frequently used for short one-on-one questions. Frequent communications were part of the organizational culture:

*“Mover culture to me is for a part the over-communication about everything. The one hundred thousand e-mails every day. I sometimes get the feeling that we spend more time sending e-mails than working.” (Belgian, female, 33)*

Because of frequent communications, employees often had to make language choices. The vast majority of the conversations took place in the corporate language, which included both communication among employees located at the headquarters and communications between employees working at the headquarters and subsidiary offices. At the headquarters only a small part of the conversations were held in local languages.

While recruiting personnel for positions and the headquarters, Moberver made sure that new recruits were able to communicate in the corporate language. Interviewees with senior positions were involved in recruiting personnel for their teams, and indicated that advanced English proficiency was a requirement for being hired:

*“The one thing we do at job interviews is that English is a requirement. Maybe it is important to know that you actually won’t get in the company when you don’t speak English.” (Belgian, female, 33)*

At Mobervers’ headquarters, job interviews were usually held in English, even between a recruiter and applicant that share a local language. All employees had English proficiency at an advanced, and usually beyond advanced level. This is interesting, because when the proficiency gap between the corporate language and local language narrows, employees choosing their local language do this for reasons beyond proficiency.

Although all employees were able to communicate in the corporate language, sometimes they still had the tendency to communicate in their local language. In order to prevent the exclusion of employees through the usage of local language, and to encourage the usage of English, Moberver set up a language management policy. This policy was formulated as follows: *“English is Mobervers’ spoken language of choice in all situations in which not everyone present understands the local language. In (English) written communications, American English should be used (such as in choice of word, spelling and in general grammar).”* Surprisingly, almost none of the interviewees were aware of the existence of this policy. Interviewees indicated that this policy was in line with the language usage of most of the employees, and judged its contents to be common sense.

Mobervers’ higher management set the right example in their communications. Quarterly all employees received an internal e-mail from the CEO that concerned broad organizational developments and achievements. These updates were written in English, the corporate language.

The interviewees described the workforce at Mobervers’ headquarters as very international. Interviewees also indicated to be interested in the culture and language of their colleagues, so they developed a very limited vocabulary in a lot of different languages, hence they became polyglots on a very basic level. Throughout Moberver employees learned and used

snippets of local languages, such as greetings. Local language usage in this sense can be seen as a sign of acceptance and goodwill towards colleagues:

*“Sometimes I use a couple of French words, although really limited. I use it to break the ice, or to comfort people, and also to create a better understanding”*  
(Dutch, male, 45)

**Language based groups at Moberver.** Within Mobervers’ headquarters three major language based groups could be distinguished: the local population of the country where the headquarters are located, expat employees, and native English speakers. The local population, i.e. the Dutch, formed roughly half of the workforce at Mobervers’ headquarters. As a result, the Dutch frequently were able to use their local language among each other, which made communication easier:

*“I think it makes things easier when you speak the local language. You have more contact with people. You are going to talk business-like and you can do better business.”* (Argentinian, Italian, Dutch, male, 51)

Since all employees, including the Dutch, held positions in which they communicated with colleagues globally, advanced English skills were both a requirement and a necessity.

The second group were expats, and they only sometimes had colleagues who spoke the same local language. Among the interviewees three Italian, one German, one Indonesian, and one Indian speaker indicated that they had colleagues within the headquarters with whom they spoke their local language. Other expat interviewees did not have an opportunity to use their local language. Overall, expats did not often encounter situations in which they could speak their local language, they usually had no other choice than using the corporate language. One French interviewee indicated that within the office there were other French employees, but that there were almost no occasions in which they communicated:

*“There are not so many French people around. But in my corner we have Emma, who is in the social care team, who is French. But I mean, we are never working together on stuff. If I would need something from her then it could be like general Mover guidelines or something like that. In that situation I would ask in French.” (French, male, 23)*

The expat interviewees in this study all indicated to have advanced English proficiency. Having advanced English proficiency seemed to be a necessity for expats because they relied almost exclusively on their English skills. Next to the necessity in their work, they lived and worked in a foreign country where English was the primary language in which they could make themselves understood.

The third group were the native English speakers. This group was very small, but they held a powerful position within Mover. Because of their native proficiency in English they had a huge advantage compared to non-native English speakers, when communication took place in English:

*“A swordsman is as good as the sword that they have. And you know for Americans and native English speakers, English is their sword. When you hear them speak then it is totally different from what anybody else would speak and communicate. Hence they put it always to their advantage.” (Indian, native English, male, 30)*

The proficiency difference between native English speakers and non-native English speakers also caused problems. Non-native English speaking interviewees mentioned that they sometimes were overwhelmed while speaking with native English speakers, which led to misunderstandings:

*“Then sometimes you notice that in the fuzziness in his language usage you miss the nuances. I have been angry with him because I interpreted what he wrote down differently than what he meant.” (Dutch, male, 48)*

### **The concept of language choice, language choice scenarios and initial, unestablished and established language choice**

On basis of the data derived from semi-structured interviews and the participant observations this study clarifies the concept of language choice. The researcher formulated the concept of language choice as follows: language choice exists when two (or more) employees involved in a conversation share at least a basic proficiency in more than one language. This study also presents four language choice scenarios which cover the choices that employees in Mover made, these scenarios are an outcome of the study.

**The choice scenario.** The first scenario is the choice scenario. In this scenario the conversational participants shared at least a basic proficiency in one local language and the corporate language. In this scenario a choice could be made between a local language and the corporate language. The interviews showed that choice situations emerged especially for the local population, the Dutch. Also expats encountered choice situations, but only when they had direct colleagues who shared their local language. This choice scenario can be applied to dyadic and group communications.

**The no choice scenario.** The second scenario is the no choice scenario. In this scenario two conversational participants only shared the corporate language and no local language. Hence, in this scenario the only language that could be used was the corporate language. The interviewees indicated that the vast majority of conversations were held in the corporate language, because it was the only language everyone understood:

*“This is only relevant when you have the choice actually. With the majority of the team, which is not my case, I don't really have the choice most of the time. I don't have the choice between English or Dutch. It is normally English.” (Italian, female, 32)*

The no choice scenario applied to the Dutch, expats, and English native speakers. No choice in this study means that English was the only language which could be used. Henceforth, native English speakers as well as employees with very advanced English skills experience had an

advantage over those with lesser skills in English. This scenario can be applied to both conversations on dyadic and group level. On group level, this study also presents two specific no choice scenarios, inclusion and exclusion, which are elaborated on below.

**The inclusion scenario.** The third scenario, inclusion only arose in group conversations where at least two individuals shared a local language and the corporate language, but at least one individual only shared the corporate language. Inclusion took place through speaking the corporate language. In line with research of Lønsmann (2011) inclusion mostly, but not exclusively, happened in the form of the local population including expats in conversations. Inclusion usually took the shape of local employees speaking the corporate language from the start:

*“When there is one English speaking person amongst us then it is by definition always in English. That is the standard, I think of all of us do that at Mover.”*  
(Dutch, male, 48)

Next to inclusion from the start, inclusion could also happen at a later stage in a conversation. Sometimes employees started a conversation in a local language while someone was present who did not speak this local language. Often one of the conversational partners that spoke both the local language that was spoken and the corporate language, directed the conversation towards the corporate language:

*“When we have small talk about the vacation of one of my colleagues, and there is someone who doesn’t speak Dutch, then Frank directly responds in English whereupon everyone starts speaking English.”* (Dutch, female, 29)

Interviewees indicated that especially managers and team leaders took the responsibility to ensure that all their team members were included in conversations.

**The exclusion scenario.** The fourth scenario was the exclusion scenario, equal to the inclusion scenario, exclusion only arose in group conversations where at least two individuals shared a local language and the corporate language, but at least one individual only shared the corporate language. Exclusion happened through speaking the local language. In line with the research of Lønsmann (2011) exclusion mostly happened when the local population, the Dutch, used their local language, hence they excluded expat employees from partaking in a conversation. Exclusion through speaking local language seems to be the most serious language based problem that occurred in Mober, however interviewees noted that it happened rarely. In case exclusion happened, it usually concerned exclusion from informal conversations:

*“We always had these informal drinks on Monday morning. We go for like a coffee together and talk about our weekend. And there were all Dutch ladies and me and my Greek colleague. If I am attending and they are speaking Dutch I just answer in English. I don't mind that much, but he doesn't understand Dutch. So... people were going on with the conversation in Dutch, so he was kind of excluded and left out. That is not a nice feeling.” (German, female, 24)*

One example has been found of exclusion in a work related situation. In this case exclusion happened because of contact with external partners. These external partners expressed a preference for using local language, as a result one employee was excluded from a meeting:

*“Well, it is really hard to tell a colleague, thank you for travelling from **location A** to **location b**, but our partners indicated that they wanted to do the meeting in **local language**. Moreover you have to translate for this colleague that what has been discussed, which doubles the work. Next to that you miss valuable input from one person” (Dutch, male, 24)*

**Initial, unestablished, and established language choice.** Next to understanding the concept of language choice and the scenarios, it is important to understand the way in which employees decided on using a certain language. The findings show that language choices can both be initial, i.e. made for the first time, unestablished. i.e. multiple



languages were used in choice situations, or already established, i.e. one language became the standard choice. For initial language choices the interview data suggests that one of the employees started a conversation in either the corporate or a local language. Based on first and last name employees usually recognized whether or not a colleague had a name related to their country. Interviewees indicated that the first speaker started using either the corporate or a local language. The second speaker usually replied in the same language as the first speaker:

*“I often notice myself that when someone starts speaking Dutch with me, that I reply in Dutch. When they start speaking English, then I reply in English.”*

*(Dutch, female, 23)*

The unestablished language choice concerned conversations in which individuals already had communicated before. In their communications they had not developed, and maybe would never develop, a standard language choice:

*“When I see a conversation at the chat for example and someone speaks English with me and I know this person, then sometimes I just reply in Dutch.”* (Polish,

*fluent in Dutch, female, 34)*

The established language choice concerned employees who already had encountered many language choice situations. Usually employees established a standard language choice, which turned into a habit:

*“Elsa is to me an English speaking person while she speaks Dutch well and she is comfortable in speaking Dutch. I think that a lot of people have something similar, like with you I speak Dutch, with you English, with him I speak German”*

*(Dutch, male, 45)*

### **Factors influencing language choice**

The most important findings cover the topic of why employees chose a certain language. On basis of the literature review and the interview data the following factors are discussed as influencers of language choice: a) language proficiency, b) written and spoken communications, c) language choice and professionalism, d) social identity: local groups, e) social identity: global group.

**Language proficiency.** An important influencer of Mobovers' employees' language choices was a difference in language proficiency, which is in line with previous research (Andersen & Rasmussen, 2004; Ehrenreich, 2010; Marschan et al., 1997). In this study, most non-native English speaking interviewees described that they experienced a proficiency difference between their native language and the corporate language. Using your native language was in general an advantage:

*"I know that if I have something specific to say and I want to say that in French I know exactly how to say it. Sometimes in English you want to say something, but you just don't always have the exact right words. You have a way to say it which is grammatically correct, and people are going to understand you, but it might not be exactly what you wanted to say." (French, male, 23)*

For native English speakers, their local language was equal to the corporate language, which gave them an unconceivable advantage compared with non-native speakers. This advantage of native English speakers has also been found in the study of Ehrenreich (2010). Interviewees pointed out that in overall employees working at the headquarters and the majority of the employees located at the subsidiary offices were highly proficient in English, the corporate language. All the interviewees indicated that they spoke English on an advanced, very advanced or native level.

The interesting part about language proficiency is that interviewees described that their corporate language proficiency level differed for two types of conversation, namely work and social conversation. Corporate language was the standard used language for work purposes, and all interviewees were used to working completely in English. In work conversations employees'

corporate language proficiency was more than sufficient, multiple employees even chose corporate language over their native language in a work setting. This finding complements the results of Henderson (2005). Employees explained that they often chose to use the corporate language because definitions, processes, but also computer programs and web services were all in English:

*“In general English is easier because a lot of definitions, processes or specific aspects of my work are in English. That’s why English is easier”*  
(Dutch, male, 45)

In case interviewees chose to speak their local language with colleagues, they would not translate all the technical jargon:

*“When I am speaking German then it's full of English, because I can't come up with the right words. And then it is all mixed.”* (German, female, 24)

This was because much of the terminology could not easily be translated, and using English words while speaking the local language was the usual way to get messages across. This finding is in line with studies that included codeswitching in MNCs (Lønsmann, 2011; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002).

Although interviewees indicated that their proficiency in English was good in work related conversations, the majority still used their local language in choice situations. This finding both applied to expat employees and the Dutch employees. Proficiency was in this case not the only factor influencing their choice, because on basis of proficiency, both the local language and corporate language could be used.

The choice for local language had an even stronger presence in social conversations. Interviewees indicated a preference for using local language in social conversations:

*“Even though your proficiency in a foreign language can be very good, your native language will always be your native language. So for fast conversation, or if you are joking, non-work related things, Italian for me is much easier.”*  
(Italian, female, 29)

The reason to use their local language instead of the corporate language was that their native proficiency helped them to express themselves better in this type of conversation. This finding is in line with previous studies (Angouri, 2013; Charles, 2007; Henderson, 2005; Lønsmann, 2011).

At the same time, interviewees indicated that they had no trouble in having such conversations in the corporate language. Therefore, similar to work conversations, employees' choice' for using local language in social conversations can only partially be ascribed to proficiency.

**Written and spoken communications.** Interviewees also described a difference between language usage in written and spoken communications. Written communication between employees happened mostly via e-mail and to a smaller extent via an internal chat messenger. The majority of the interviewees wrote all of their e-mails in the corporate language, even when the e-mail was only sent to colleagues who also shared a local language. This type of language choice behavior has also been found in previous studies (Lønsmann, 2011; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). The reason for choosing corporate language in written communications, is that written communications usually covered work related topics. These conversations could start between two individuals who share the corporate language and a local language. Later on in the chain of communication, a written message, had to be forwarded to an employee who did not speak this local language. In order to prevent extra work, namely translating your own e-mails, a lot of employees only sent e-mails in the corporate language:

*“When you write an e-mail in Dutch and it needs to be forwarded to someone who doesn't speak Dutch, then you have to rewrite it again and translate the e-mail in your own words”* (Dutch, female, 23)

Also as presented before, interviewees expressed to have good proficiency in conversations which concerned work related topics. The combination of employees' high English proficiency in written communications and the fact that e-mails often needed to be forwarded made corporate language the standard choice in this situation. In choice situations concerning chat messages, both local and corporate languages were used.

For spoken communications interviewees expressed a preference for using their local language in choice situations. Usually short work related questions were asked in the local language:

*“Yes, I can give an example where speaking Dutch made things easier. That has more to do with making things happen faster. I for example quickly ask: would you please be so kind to do this? Then it is not really about the content.” (Dutch, male, 29)*

However, some of the interviewees were against this form of local language usage, since it happened a lot. Usually all the members of a team were working near each other in an open-office space. Interviewees indicated that often a conversation started when two speakers chose to communicate in their local language, but that they only switched to the corporate language when they needed input from a team member who did not speak this local language. Because of the usage of local language employees were denied the chance to get involved in a conversation from the start.

Spoken communications were mostly used in small talks and informal conversations. For these kinds of conversations it was generally accepted to use a local language:

*“Informal and communal chats and talks don't count because it is not about business.” (Italian, male, 27)*

As stated before, expat interviewees and Dutch interviewees indicated that their native proficiency in their local language made it easier to express themselves, especially in informal conversations.

In choice situations overall, employees chose the corporate language more often in their written communications, and they chose their local language more frequent in spoken communications. One explanation for this pattern can be derived from an experienced distance effect. When using spoken language, especially when it is face to face, employees were much more aware of their language usage. This result is in line with media richness theory, in which face to face communications have been characterized as more personal and direct (Daft & Lengel, 1983; Daft & Wiginton, 1979). This could explain why especially in spoken communication using the corporate language instead of a local language felt weird to interviewees. In contrast with spoken communications, using written language could be experienced as more distant (Daft & Lengel, 1983). This explains why interviewees indicated that the usage of the corporate language in written communications was not experienced as weird.

**Language choice and professionalism.** When individuals with native or high proficiency used the corporate language this was also related to expressing professionalism, which is in line with previous research (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Vaara et al., 2005). In order to determine if their English skills were good, employees compared their English skills with the skills of their colleagues. In a choice situation individuals with high proficiency in the corporate language could choose it over a local language:

*“I just feel more comfortable. I can express myself better. I feel like it comes across more professional” (Belgian, female, 33)*

Especially for native English speakers, language skills could serve as a source of self-esteem. Due to their native proficiency they were confident to come across professionally:

*“I work a lot with written copy that people from outside the company are going to see. So I got much more confidence in myself and my ability to check that, and if I have done it I don’t need to show it to anyone else” (British, male, 28)*

Individuals who displayed lesser skills in the corporate language were observed as being less professional:

*“One director doesn’t speak English that well, this also applies to expressions. When he wants to clarify something, he takes a Dutch expression, saying or word, which he translates literally or doesn’t translate at all, and he creates some sort of flair like it is English, while it isn’t. Because of that you don’t take this person seriously.” (Dutch, female, 29)*

Overall, in choice situations in which professionalism can be expressed, those with very advanced English proficiency were more likely to choose the corporate language, compared with employees with lesser English skills.

Interviewees indicated that with regard to professionalism and language choice, the language choice should depend on one’s ability to do one’s job. Communication between employees should take place in such a way that all parties were able to do their jobs. This included choosing the language that was most suitable for the professional occasion:

*“When you are working it is important that there is instant clarity about the goal, the message or the question at hand” (Dutch, female, 44)*

**Social identity: local groups.** In this study, two types of social identities have been distinguished that were related to local and corporate language choice: local identity and global identity. Within Mover employees identified themselves with local based groups, as suggested by Van den Born and Peltokorpi (2010). The choice of local language seemed to be a way to indicate membership of shared or unshared groups, which is in line with the research of Heller (1982). Also within Mover, choosing the local language seemed to be a way in which national identification was expressed:

*“Language is also part of identification. Sometimes it is good to also speak your own language, not every day, not every hour” (German, male, 27)*

Within Mover identification with those who shared your local identity was important for two groups: the first group were the Dutch. The Dutch employees were large in numbers, which means that they often had the choice to use their local language instead of the corporate language. Usage of other languages than Dutch among Dutch employees was characterized as weird:

*“Yes, you know, you just get a weird feeling when you are with only Dutch persons, and then you start speaking English... Just speak Dutch” (Dutch, female, 44)*

When a conversation was only held between Dutch speakers, Dutch seems to be the in-group language and usage of other languages is seen as an out-group behavior.

The second local based group were expats. They less often encountered situations in which they could choose to use their local language, both in their work and in their private lives. Since they scarcely had the possibility, using the local language could even be more important to them. Speaking your local language with someone with the same cultural background allowed them to fully express themselves:

*“For having a feeling of home. It is just good when you go to work and there is someone to whom just can say what you are facing, what your challenges are, everything that you think. It is an identification, I can be more myself if I speak my language.” (German, male, 27)*

Similar to the Dutch, usage of the local language seemed to be the in-group norm, and usage of other languages the out-group norm for expats who shared a local identity.

Local language was used among in-group members, but interestingly this study also managed to capture out-group language choice behaviors. In order to belong to a local in-group, being a native inhabitant with native level proficiency seemed to be required. If someone did not match these characteristics, the corporate language became the language of choice:



*“It just would be weird to speak a different language with an Italian. I think there is a difference. I have a colleague who is not native Italian, but he speaks good Italian, but also good Spanish and English, all the same languages that I speak. And with him I choose to speak English.” (Italian, female, 32)*

The usage of corporate language seems to be an out-group behavior for local language groups. A similar example of an out-group behavior has been found for a non-native Dutch speaker, who lived in the Netherlands for almost ten years. The proficiency in the Dutch language of this person was very advanced but not at native level:

*“For example with Elsa, who already lives quite some time in the Netherlands. She originates from Poland, she speaks Dutch but it isn’t her mother tongue. Automatically I start speaking English with her.” (Dutch, female, 29)*

**Social identity: global group.** Next to local groups, also a global identity group seemed to be present at Mobover. Within the MNC a lot of employees saw themselves as being cosmopolitans. Through the role of English as lingua franca, employees were able to communicate and learn about one another’s culture, country and language:

*“What you see is that a lot of languages are being used, and that in general persons are interested in what is considered normal for someone from a different country and culture. That people are talking about this, and also that people are open that things work different for someone else. That other things are considered as normal. That can vary from: ‘Do you always have a warm meal at lunch?’ or ‘How do you celebrate Christmas?’” (Dutch, female, 44)*

This process added to the construction of global identity. It seems that this identity was not necessarily shaped through diminishing local values, but rather through accepting that individuals around the world all have a different way of doing things, which is in line with the research of Sussman (2000). The global group focuses on employees with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and therefore global identity is expressed when there is no shared local

identity. When individuals who share a local identity, but also a global identity, they will likely affiliate more with their local identity, hence local language will be chosen.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In this chapter the findings of the study are discussed. First, the most important contributions and the implications of the study are presented and compared with prior research. Opportunities for future research are proposed alongside these implications. Second, the limitations of the research design and methodology are examined. Third, the researcher discusses the practical implications of the study. Last, the chapter is closed with the final conclusion of the study.

### **Discussion of findings**

The current study has been conducted at the headquarters of the MNC Moberver and captures employees' perceptions on using the corporate language and local languages, and also how, when and why these employees make choices between the corporate language and local languages. The most important contributions of this study to existing literature are threefold. First, by distinguishing three language groups in relation to language choice. Second, by presenting four language choice scenarios. Third, by comprehensively researching factors that influence language choice.

**Language groups.** Three language groups can be distinguished at the headquarters of MNCs. These are the local population, expats, and native English speakers. The study shows that language choices emerge disproportionately for employees belonging to these groups, and that language choices are made for different reasons in each group. In contrast with previous studies (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Lønsmann, 2011), the role of all local languages, was truly subordinate to the role that English, the corporate language, played in the organization.

The local population, the Dutch, was relatively frequently able to choose to use their local language. Therefore the Dutch had a slight advantage, because using a native language rather than a non-native language, facilitates easier communication (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002).

For the second group, expats, language choices emerged only when they incidentally had colleagues whom they share a local language with. To the best knowledge of the researcher, this is the first study which captured language choices of expats. This was possible because Moberver's headquarters were characterized by small clusters of expats. This study showed that also expats used their local languages amongst each other, which contradicts the study of

Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) where expats were hesitant to use their local language. The most valid explanation is that local language of expats is accepted because of the very international character of MNCs.

For the third group, native English speakers, language choices between the corporate and the local language did not occur at all, since English is their local language. Nevertheless, in comparison with non-native English speakers, native English speakers have an incredible advantage when communication takes place in English, the corporate language. This is in line with previous research (Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012; Marschan et al., 1997; Rogerson-Revell, 2007).

Future studies could approach language choice using the framework of the three groups: local population, expats, and native English speakers. Approaching language choice from the different group perspectives has proven to be of added value within this study. Future research should especially focus on language choices of expat employees, since it is a relatively under-researched area in the current literature on language choice.

**Language choice scenarios.** This study also contributes through developing four language choice scenarios, namely: no-choice, choice, inclusion and exclusion. These four scenarios cover all language choices in MNCs. Placing a particular example of language choice in the context of one of the scenarios proved to be a useful way to understand the factors that contributed to the language choice.

The added value of language choice scenarios is especially salient when they are combined with the language groups in MNCs. No-choice scenarios were for example always applicable to native English speakers, and also expats often had no choice but to use English. Choice scenarios occurred mostly for the local population, the Dutch, since they were largest in numbers. Choice scenarios also occurred for expats, but on fewer occasions. Exclusion mostly encompassed exclusion of expats by the local population. Through usage of local languages expats were excluded from conversations. Similar results for exclusion and inclusion have been found by Lønsmann (2011).

Especially the inclusion and exclusion situations have implications for MNCs. Language choices that include are made on the basis of an international mindset. These should be encouraged as they are expected to positively influence both socialization and performance of

the workforce in general. Language choices that exclude are the most serious language based problems for MNCs. Expected is that exclusion through local language usage, can lead to problems in the socialization process of employees, lower performance of the workforce, and ultimately loss of personnel.

**Factors influencing language choice.** The most important contributions in this research lie in the factors that influence language choice. Especially the combination between language proficiency and employees' attachment to local and global social identities has implications for research.

Employees who were non-native English speakers had a higher proficiency in their local language compared to their proficiency in the corporate language (Andersen & Rasmussen, 2004; Ehrenreich, 2010; Marschan et al., 1997). Commonly the language was chosen in which employees had the highest shared proficiency level. Consequently employees who share a local language at native level will likely choose to use this language instead of English. The role of proficiency in language choice could be further researched in organizational contexts where proficiency differences between corporate and local languages are either small or big.

When employees shared a language on native proficiency level, they also shared a local social identity. In line with Heller (1982), language choices served as indicators of shared or unshared group membership. Choosing local language could be seen as an in-group behavior. The combination of a higher shared proficiency in the local language and shared group membership of a local group contributes to the choice for local language. Usage of English between native speakers of a local language (other than English) was characterized as weird and uncomfortable because it went against the norms of the in-group. This is especially the case when employees communicated face to face. This counts both for the local population and for expat employees. Future studies should especially focus on attachment to local identities and language choice. It would be especially interesting to research this in different cultural contexts.

Next to attachment to local identities employees also reflected signs of world citizenship and global identity (Sussman, 2000). Global identity focuses on the integration of language and culture from individuals with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This happens through usage of English, since it serves as lingua franca for the global community (Firth, 1996). Global identity formation is not directly related to language choice, since it is about the unification of

individuals with different linguistic backgrounds, thus people who do not share a local language. However, when the formation of global identity continues, individuals' attachment to local identities will likely diminish. Individuals could view a shared local identity as subordinate to their shared global identity. In such a case the usage of English could be seen as normal, rather than weird. Future studies could address the topic of attachment to global identity, and research its ramifications in relation to the globalization process.

### **Limitations of the study**

The research had a couple of limitations with regards to the research design and methodology. The main method of data collection chosen by the researcher was semi-structured interviews. Using semi-structured interviews was accompanied by advantages, interviews provided rich and genuine data on how employees use corporate and local languages. However, interviewees sometimes struggled with explaining their language choices. This can be explained by the fact that employees made language choices without being aware. Once the interviews progressed, interviewees were able to come up with a couple of examples in which they made language choices. Still, interviewees indicated to find it hard to retrospectively discuss their language choices. Therefore, this study could have been improved if interviewees were asked to pay attention to their own language choices before the interviews took place. Future studies are recommended to track language choices over multiple days, this can for example be done by using diary methods combined with qualitative interviewing methods.

Another limitation of the qualitative set up of the study is the generalizability of the data. Although this study was originally designed as an explorative qualitative research, it could have been expanded with quantitative methodology. Especially since this study was able to map factors that influence language choice, it would have been extremely interesting to quantitatively test these factors within the same research environment. Future studies could use a mixed method set-up, combining qualitative and quantitative methodology in order to research language choice and especially factors that influence language choices.

### **Practical implications**

The research also gives some pointers on how MNCs in general can optimally profit from their multilingual workforce.

All MNCs are advised to write out their language management policy and share it with their employees. Mover currently has a language management policy which includes that English should be spoken language in all situations in which not everyone present understands a local language. The contents of this policy are good, though Mover could more actively share it with their employees.

MNCs should grant employees the space to use their local language if no employees are around who can be excluded, since the research showed that through using local language employees are able to speed up their communications. Nonetheless, employees in MNCs should become aware that usage of their local language in the immediate vicinity of others can lead to excluding them. Therefore, MNCs should request their employees to use the corporate language when colleagues are around who do not speak a local language. Usage of the corporate language could both improve performance and socialization across the organization.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore how, when, and why employees in multinational corporations use corporate and local languages. The study has been conducted at the headquarters of a MNC in the Netherlands, namely Royal Mover. Movers' headquarters were characterized by a very international workforce. The contributions this study makes to the current literature are threefold. First, the study creates a better understanding of corporate and local language usage by the local population, namely the Dutch, expat employees, and native English speakers. Second, this study contributes through working towards a clear definition of language choice, and dividing possible language choices over four scenarios: choice, no-choice, inclusion, and exclusion. Third, this study contributed through researching factors that influence employees' their language choices, among which language proficiency and attachment to local and global identities have been indicated as the most important influencers. Multinational corporations are advised to pay attention towards and prevent possible exclusion of employees through local language usage. Implications of this study contribute to research in international business, organizational communication, workplace psychology, linguistics and languages, and ethnic and cultural studies.

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