



MIME

Mobility and Inclusion
in Multilingual Europe

From local context to global work environment

Exploring linguistic distance and its implication for ethics

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The study

Abstract

A growing part of the world population is professionally active in "global spaces" formed by globalization and which has its lingua franca: World English. We, the majority of that world population was born in a geographically and culturally bounded "place" with its local meaning and language.

This research examines the different levels of command of the English language in indicators of emotional (home or work) and tries to assess if these differences or distances are different of ethical tensions, which are relevant for corporate governance. It shows that the participants of the global workplace have their homes and private life in places where the local prevails and that this distance can affect non-native speaker understanding, and sensitivity to ethical dilemmas in English.

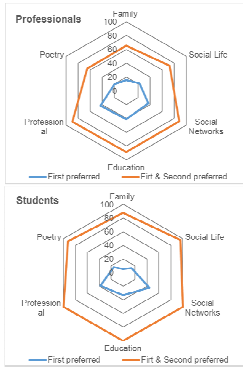
Methods: a survey

- 282 students in economy or management in four universities
- 683 experienced professionals

An important part of the questionnaire covers the linguistic abilities and habits of respondents in different "domains" of life – ranging from reading poetry, family life, social life, social networks to education and professional life

Key descriptive statistics of the sampled population		Professionals	Students
Number of respondents	completed	683	282
	partial	222	26
Gender	Female	29%	38%
	Male	71%	64%
Average (year)	Under 35 years	15%	98%
	35 to 44 years	16%	2%
	45 to 54 years	21%	-
	55 to 64 years	22%	-
	Over 65 years	26%	-
Permanent residence	Switzerland	38%	60%
	Europe	43%	39%
	Outside of Europe	19%	1%
Country of residence	Same as country of birth	66%	93%
	Different as country of birth	34%	7%

The use of English in the six domains



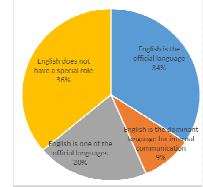
English as second language appears mainly in two domains: professional life and education, and to some extent in social networks. For the population surveyed, as mentioned above, English plays a significantly more important role in professional, educational and social networking domains than in family life domain. Thus, the ability to use a certain language in a specific domain does not necessarily translate to other domains. Moreover, English plays a more central role for the professional population, as the student population uses a higher number of languages across the six domains.

The work environment

Key descriptive statistics of the sampled professional population

	Professionals
Kind of Organization	
Academia & education	35%
Not working or not active	20%
Financial institutions & Commercial service companies	21%
Public administration, Public international organization & Non-Gov Organization & civil society	17%
Other	7%
Single-establishment	67%
Multi-establishment	43%
Position	
Top management / Institution Director	35%
Midde management / Unit Director	37%
Rank employees	28%
Employee at corporation worldwide	
0-100 emp.	26%
101-1 000 emp.	21%
1 001-10 000 emp.	28%
Over 10 000 emp.	24%
Employee at establishment	
0-50 emp.	40%
51-100 emp.	6%
101-250 emp.	10%
251-500 emp.	10%
Over 500 emp.	34%
Importance of jargon	
Jargon is dominant, it extends to all fields, including issues such as ethics	34%
It is only used for technical matters	49%
There is no jargon	17%
This jargon is derived from English	
It is a self-standing code of communication	18%
It is rooted in English	50%
It has no special bonds in English	19%
I don't know	13%

The role of English in the organization



Only 36 percent of the respondents work in organizations where English does not play a special role. For more than half of organizations, English has an official status, whether it is the only language to have that status (34%) or along with other languages (20%). For 9 percent of the organizations it has no official status, but is considered nonetheless as the dominant language of internal communication. This underlines that World English is a de facto lingua franca across corporations and academia in Europe and elsewhere.

For the purpose of this research, we assumed that working in an environment where English plays a role stresses the belonging to a global professional workspace while living in the country of birth indicates a local one.

These two characteristics can be used to group the respondents in four different categories:

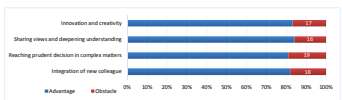
- Those working in their country of birth in organizations where English plays a special role (the locals global, 37%)
- Those working in their country of birth in organizations where English does not play a special role (the locals non-global, 26%)
- Those working in organizations where English plays a special role (the global non-locals (the non-locals global), 29%)
- Those working in organizations where English does not play a special role (the non-locals non-global, 8%).

The participants of the global workplace have their homes and private life in places where the local prevails. So they might experience a tension – with a linguistic component – between these two environments. This suggests that in the global workplace space, the trade-off between mobility and inclusion, central to the entire MIME project, must be studied with special attention.

Result II: linguistic distance as explanation

Respondents were also asked to assess how the linguistic situation at the work place relates to important cultural characteristics of enterprises. For more than three quarters of the respondents, the linguistic situation at work positively influences key aspects of corporate culture. It is viewed as an advantage when it comes to integrating new colleagues, reaching prudent decisions in complex matters, sharing views and deepening understanding as well as spurring innovation and creativity. These proportions do not vary significantly across different fields of professional activity.

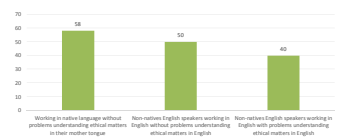
The role of language in corporate culture



Key facts of ethical dilemmas

	Professionals
Fixed Dilemma	Yes: 50%
	No: 50%
Some set of values	Yes, professional and private lives belong to two different cultural and ethical worlds: 11%
	Yes, despite possible tensions and/or conflicts: 22%
	Yes, but it means it is a question of personal identity: 68%
Communication between private and professional life	Yes, it is important to change the decision: 7%
	Yes, it is important to change the decision: 7%
	Yes, it is important to change the decision: 7%
Experiences of such a situation	Yes, directly experience: 37%
	Yes, indirectly experience: 21%
	No experience: 42%
Triggers of this situation	Economic performance or rules and processes: 32%
	Ethical quality of action or social and environmental impact: 41%
	No experience: 27%
Experience of pressure	Yes: 41%
	No: 59%

The concept of "linguistic distance" developed earlier might provide helpful insights in this regard. The longer the linguistic distance, the shorter the "ethical distance". The "ethical distance" relates to the extent to which people consider the values governing their private and professional lives as identical or different.



The results suggest that understanding of, and sensitivity to ethical dilemmas of non-native speaker is poorer in English than in another language – often the mother tongue of the respondent. As shown below, the percentage of respondents who experienced ethical dilemmas is lower among non-native English speakers working in English and who experience problems in understanding ethical issues in English (40%) than among those working in their mother tongue – including English – and who can deal more fluently with those issues.

Implications

Implications for transnational corporations

This research presents the results of a survey administered to a population of students and a population of professionals. It starts from the premise that globalization and its language, World English, increases the distance between professional and private life contexts, between work and home. For certain groups of people, 37 percent of our respondents are local, but have to integrate into a global workplace where World English is the lingua franca. It shows that there might be trade-off between "mobility" and "inclusion" even for a part of the population that does not move. In other words, World English, by increasing the distance between the private and the work context, adds a non-physical dimension of mobility that is required to mentally migrate and bridge from the local context to the professional one. The role of World English role as lingua franca within corporations and financial professions is limited to technical matters of "business as usual". The fact that linguistic competencies in English are biased towards technical contents makes communication in English about soft matters, such as ethical dilemmas, problematic within companies. This situation might derail the efforts of some corporations that consider engaging employees with a value driven corporate culture.

Although English has become the lingua franca of finance and business, it is still not the lingua franca in which people are most at ease to identify and discuss associated ethical and values issues. This increases the asymmetry between technical capacity on the one hand, and the capacity to handle ethical challenges on the other hand. By preventing ethical dilemmas from being addressed when they arise, this practice may sow the seeds of future financial crises. The promotion of "deep" multilingualism (which implies a finer understanding of the language, beyond technical linguistic competences) is therefore an important element of corporate responsibility.

Linguistic competencies in English tend to be biased toward technical competences



Geneva, railway station parking. Early 2017

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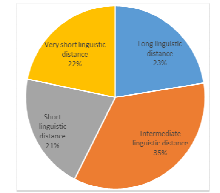
World English, by increasing the distance between the private and the work context, adds a non-physical dimension of mobility that is required to mentally migrate and bridge from the local context to the professional one.

Results I: the linguistic distance

A measure of linguistic distance

The participants of the global workplace have their homes and private life in places where the local prevails. So they might experience a tension – with a linguistic component – between these two environments. This suggests that in the global workplace space, the trade-off between mobility and inclusion, central to the entire MIME project, must be studied with special attention. More than half of the working population interviewed for this research is "included" (in the very specific sense, in this case, of living in one's country of birth) but is also globally mobile as they work in a global workplace where English is the lingua franca. The concept of "linguistic distance" is used by linguists to address the extent to which languages differ from each other structurally. Tremendous progress has been achieved in the way it is quantified (Chen and Miller, 2004; Ishihara and Otten 2011) and seems to have been used mainly in the field of migration and integration studies, and only rarely applied to economic and economic life (Ishihara and Otten 2011). In this stream of literature, languages are the only object of study for which a distance is measured. Neither the individual competences nor the importance of a language at the workplace are factors taken into account. Moreover, the linguistic distance as conceptualized in this literature leaves aside the question of use of different languages in different domains.

Linguistic distance between competences in English and the role of English in the workplace



The "distance" takes also into account the difference between English and its level of command in different domains and the importance of English at work.

23 percent of the respondents have a "long linguistic distance" as they work in organizations where English is the dominant language, but have a relatively low level of command in English, and those English only a second option to use in professional domain. On the other hand, 22 percent of the respondents display a "very short linguistic distance" as they have a very good command of English, chose English as their choice in professional domain, and work in organizations where it plays a dominant role (the centrality of English). In other words, 58 percent of the sample do not move easily between the linguistic local environment and the "global workplace space".

The "distance" used in this research takes also into account the different levels of competences between English and its level of command in different domains and the importance of English at work. It is here assumed that the linguistic requirements one has to fulfil in order to work in a global space are different than the linguistic competences acquired to discuss, understand, and think about local contexts. This distance is entirely the result of this new globalized space which has its language as well.

It is a combination of:

- The level of competence in English
- The choice of English as the first or second language used in professional context
- The role that English plays at workplace

Implications for ethics

Our research opens important avenues for future discussions on how the linguistic (and cultural) dimension interferes with ethical awareness, reasoning and personal and group moral development. To clarify further this issue, a relation should be established by future research with Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Kohlberg's theory is well known, used and also discussed. The author identifies six stages of moral development starting at the lowest level with what he calls "pre-conventional" moral orientation organized around punishment and obedience; the highest level being called "post-conventional" characterized by principled ethical attitude rooted in autonomous moral judgement. The linguistic dimension as explored in this study should be analyzed in the future as a variable potentially impacting - here slowing - the speed of moral development. Following hypothesis should be formulated at this stage: when working in a non-native linguistic environment, agents do not identify as quickly ethical dilemmas as if they would in their native language work environment. If confirmed, such conclusions would mean that non-native linguistic environment would - on average - drive agents to respond to lower moral motions than a similar group working in a native language environment. The question thus to know if and how moral development is influenced by linguistic work environment.

This kind of questions, and results, is of utmost importance both for managers and regulators of financial institutions and more broadly of socially sensitive businesses.

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The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme under grant agreement No. 613334 (Project MIME).