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‘It’s hard for them to even understand what we are saying’(.) Language and power in the multinational workplace

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of language ideologies in negotiating organisational relationships in a Korean multinational company. By adopting an Interactional Sociolinguistics approach, this paper illustrates how language becomes part of a mechanism of negotiating group membership and of perpetuating or challenging power asymmetries through social and ideological processes.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on interview data from an ethnographic case study of a Korean multinational company to understand language ideologies in one working team. The interview data are analysed through an Interactional Sociolinguistics framework to connect the situated interaction to the broader social context.

Findings – The paper shows that participants’ discourse of linguistic differentiation becomes an interactional resource in challenging the organisational status quo. Linguistic superiority/inferiority is constructed through particular sequencing and the systematic production of a dichotomy between two groups – expatriate managers and local employees – at various levels of their company structure. Group membership is enacted temporarily in positioning the *self* and the *others*.

Originality/value – The paper offers a methodological contribution to International Business language-sensitive research on language and power by conducting interactional analysis of interview talk. Through the lens of Interactional Sociolinguistics, it provides insights into how discourse becomes a primary site of negotiating power and status, and a multi-level approach to the study of organisational power dynamics and the complex linguistic landscape of any workplace.

Keywords

Language and power in MNCs, Language ideologies, Workplace talk, Interactional Sociolinguistics, Multilingualism

Introduction

Languages are linguistically equal but socially unequal and some are considered of ‘higher value’ than others. Equally, language use never takes place in an ideological void. Through the linguistic choices we make and our evaluation of the choices of ‘others’, in professional and everyday contexts, we perpetuate or challenge ideologies that correspond to the ‘market value’ of a language, the power associated with their speakers and the manifestations in our local contexts. In high stakes environments, like international professional contexts, language use is an arena where status, power asymmetries and control are negotiated. Particularly in multinational organisations access to a company’s language/s is a powerful resource which speakers mobilise in order to achieve their agendas. Against this backdrop, this article focusses on the mobilisation and negotiation of language ideologies in workplace talk in a

Korean multinational company (MNC) and shows how they become an actual arena to negotiate organisational relationships in the MNC context.

International Business (IB) language-sensitive research has increasingly pointed towards the relationship between language and power in multinational organisations (e.g., Śliwa and Johansson, 2014; Gaibrois and Nentwich, 2020). Yet in the field there is scarce work that approaches participants' talk about language as a situated encounter in which language ideologies are (re)produced or challenged. Our work contributes to this agenda by adopting Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) as a framework and methodology for studying how individuals *do* language ideologies and conducting a detailed analysis of interaction. We draw on data from research interviews which we understand as a co-constructed discursive site where the researcher and participants negotiate their accounts. Our reading of the data is informed by ethnographic fieldwork at the company. In the sociolinguistic tradition, discourse is generally defined as language-in-action or language-in-use (Hanks, 1996; Gee, 1999). Scholars in this field are interested in how language is used "on site" to enact activities, perspectives and identities (Gee, 1999). Sociolinguistic discourse analytic research allows to move beyond 'talking about' language to looking into language use in situ, to analyse its effects and the role it plays in participants' daily work lives; in our case, in negotiating in-/exclusion and perpetuating or challenging power asymmetries at work. We show how this approach organically connects with IB research and make a case for further synergies between the two fields.

The article is organised in four parts. We start by discussing IB studies on language and power in MNCs followed by the sociolinguistic approach we adopt in this article; we then move to IS as our analytic framework and turn to the research context, the case company and the data collection and analysis methods. We report on our findings and show how participants' language ideologies are mobilised in the processes of negotiating group membership and specifically in telling the stories of *us* vs. *them* and positioning the *self/selves* and the *others*. We discuss our contribution to IB language-sensitive research and highlight our methodological approach to participants' discourse about language, more specifically, discourse of linguistic differentiation. We propose a conceptual framework for the study of the discursive negotiation of organisational relationships in MNCs which connects the immediate interaction with the wider ideological order. We close the paper by outlining the practical implications of the study.

Language and power in MNCs

Access to a company's dominant language is associated with participation in decision making and leadership. The implications of companies establishing top-down language policies, typically introducing global languages, have been studied by IB and workplace sociolinguistic studies (e.g.,

Angouri, 2013). The studies show how language becomes an instrument of power and status in the organisation. Śliwa and Johansson (2014), for instance, demonstrate this by examining evaluations made of bilingual or multilingual speakers of English (hereafter L2 speakers for ease of reading) on the basis of their spoken Englsih. Their findings show that a 'lower degree of status' manifested through negative evaluations, be it externally or self-attributed, impacts negatively the speakers' level of participation at work. Consequently, it generates perceptions of L2 speakers as 'professionally less competent' than speakers whose first language is English (hearafter L1 speakers) (p. 1145). Such evaluations are largely underpinned by individuals' ideological positions that attribute and distribute values to the particular language (speakers).

Language ideologies are directly related to 'political and economic interests and by relations of domination and subordination' (Philips, 2015, p. 557). They have direct impact on the way in which language/s are used and the way in which speakers are evaluated in situ. Language ideologies affect speakers' status or privilege in multinational organisations as shown in both IB and sociolinguistic studies. Starting with IB, Neeley and Dumas's (2016) work on an "English only" mandate in a MNC looks at the employees' perception of privilege granted by English competence. The study shows how such perceptions work to elevate the status of L1 speakers in the organisation and conceptualises it 'unearned status gain' – 'an unexpected and unsolicited increase in the relative esteem, prestige, or standing of individuals or groups resulting from the organisational selection and elevation of a specific characteristic as valuable' (Neeley and Dumas, 2016, p. 15). This is commonly observed in other studies (e.g., Millar, 2017) showing the relationship between global ideologies and the local hierarchies in MNCs, suggesting the significance of the role that language ideologies play in constructing power relationships among the speakers at workplace. Through the lens of critical discursive psychology, Gaibrois and Nentwich's (2020) research on privileging effect of language also illustrates the connection between English proficiency and organisational status. Yet, unlike Neeley and Dumas's (2016) reading of privilege as predetermined and retained by dominant language groups, Gaibrois and Nentwich (2020) provide a more dynamic understanding of privilege, arguing that L1 speakers' privileged position is actively enacted by the speakers and also 'contested' by L2 speakers. In this view, privilege is 'not fixed' to a particular social group, but discursively constructed by actors (ibid., p. 470).

We share this dynamic and situated approach to the relationship between language and power and understand language as important 'part' of power dynamics in the multinational workplace and broader socio-political context (Angouri, 2013, p. 574). IB language-sensitive research has thus far shown how social positions are enacted in statements about language/s and the ideological basis of evaluations of proficiency (e.g., Tenzer and Pudelko, 2017). Typically, however, the studies do not delve deeper into how, in the discourse context, ideologies are mobilised and negotiated in the encounter in the sequence of talk. Our study contributes to this agenda by focussing on the interactional processes through which

speakers (re)produce and/or challenge dominant ideologies in their setting. We turn to this next and position our work in sociolinguistic scholarship.

Language ideologies, discourses and IS

Linguistic studies have repeatedly shown how languages are commodified and ranked in relation to dominant ideologies which are (re)produced or challenged in and through situated encounters (e.g., Heller, 2010; Pennycook, 2017). Language ideologies – defined as 'ideas and beliefs about what a language is, how it works and how it should work, which are widely accepted in particular communities' (Cameron, 2006, p. 143) – shape the way people frame their understanding of a language and 'map those understandings onto people, events and activities that are significant to them' (Irvine and Gal, 2000, p. 35). In doing so, language ideologies reproduce other kinds of ideologies and discourses (Hill, 2008, p. 33) and other forms of social differentiation which are perpetuated, and sometimes, resisted in discourse. In line with the social constructionism paradigm that has deeply influenced the development of sociolinguistic thinking, discourse is the site for the reproduction of ideologies and by extension the social order. Speakers use their agency to position the *self* and the *other* in asymmetrical relationships at work. The capital (according to Bourdieu, 1991) associated with the language/s they have access to is a powerful tool to access or fence power centres at work. For instance, linguistics studies (e.g., Roberts, 2010; Duchêne, 2020) have shown that native speakerism (the prioritisation of accents and dialects of L1 users of a language) is related to excluding bilingual and multilingual workers even when they are proficient in the dominant language of an organisation. This is done in macro-level texts (e.g., policy documents) but equally important is the daily routine events in which speakers of the language carry out their roles at work and events which enable professionals to provide their accounts of daily experiences, such as research interviews.

Turning to the research interview, a co-constructed event between the researcher and the professionals, it constitutes a useful site for exploring the process by which accounts on language are associated with daily reality at work. Interviews and any form of social interactions are a 'continuous text', 'developed by at least two people, with an internal structure and an internal logic determined by the context and the theme about which they are talking' (Nessa and Malterud, 1990, p. 70). Accordingly looking into the discourse of the interview is theoretically and methodologically significant for the question we are addressing here. We take an interactional perspective which draws on a detailed analysis of the micro moment of talk. IS, in particular, provides us the theoretical and methodological tools to connect the role of the participants, their account and the organisational and social environment.

In more detail, IS draws on ethnographic tradition and integrates ethnomethodology, discourse, and conversation analysis. It focuses on the micro moment of interaction and seeks to connect the 'here and now' with the wider context in which speakers operate (Angouri, 2018); it shares with conversation analysts the emphasis on turn-by-turn sequential analysis but goes beyond the situated encounter and

draws on the researcher's understanding of the local context for drawing patterns of linguistic behaviour. It is associated with the work of John Gumperz (2015) and has been widely adopted by sociolinguists focusing on workplace studies. IS posits that speakers' background knowledge and contextual presuppositions are signalled or evoked by linguistic cues in immediate interaction, and addresses questions such as 'how and by what signalling devices language functions to evoke the contextual presuppositions that affect interpretation' (Gumperz, 2015, p. 313) dominant in the speakers' local context. In sociolinguistic traditions, context is not only physical and social but also enacted by the interactants' language use indicating the institutional and social contexts. IS bridges organically different discourse traditions, by connecting the micro- and macro-level discourse: the former emphasising bottom-up accounts of communicative practices and the latter interprets communicative practices as shaped by macro-societal conditions (Kwon, Clarke and Wodak, 2009). It, therefore, allows to study organisations at meso-level connecting the interaction order with the realm of ideology.

In this paper, building on local, context-specific background knowledge informed by the ethnographic research, our analysis focusses on how speakers signal and interpret meanings in the research interview setting. We turn to our research context, data collection and analysis approach next.

Research context: Eco UK

Eco is one of the Korean MNCs with a history of more than half a century in manufacturing industry and has expanded its global network across Asia, Europe and Americas with regional headquarters, over 30 sales subsidiaries, R&D centres and production facilities. Eco UK is one of the sales subsidiaries with about 50 employees in four departments – sales, accounting, marketing, and operations. When the first author started her fieldwork in the company, there were three expatriate managers transferred from the global head office in South Korea and 48 locally hired employees, including three Korean employees and one Hungarian employee; and the rest were British. The locally hired Korean employees were involved in providing expatriate managers with a range of support, including language work, for example, creating reports in Korean to send through to the global head office and drafting internal messages on behalf of the expatriate managers. The major role of the Hungarian employee was to communicate with one of the company's production facilities in Hungary.

Whilst three different languages were spoken in Eco UK, there was no official language policy in the company. Like most multilingual workplaces, English was assumed to be used as a lingua franca among those that speak different languages within the subsidiary and between the subsidiary and the headquarters. Korean was exclusively used among the Korean speakers – both local and expatriate Korean employees – in the subsidiary and between the subsidiary and the headquarters. Given the domain of the Korean language – communication with the senior management and the headquarters – abilities to speak in Korean is equally important. Nevertheless, Korean is not expected to be used or acquired by L1 English speakers within Eco UK. This informs ideologies surrounding global and local

languages held within the workplace community as one would expect (e.g., Angouri and Miglbauer, 2014); and they are an important 'interpretive filter' (Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994, p. 62) mobilised in talk exchanges. The same beliefs were observed in the naming practice whereby all Korean managers created and were called by their English name (see Figure 1).

The structure of Eco UK is directly relevant for analysing participants' talk. As shown in Figure 1, the senior management consists of mostly the Korean expatriate managers despite their relatively short employment. In most cases the management changed every three to five years for logistical and visa purposes. They were transferred to facilitate communication between the headquarters and the subsidiary while managing subsidiary activities. This means that local employees, despite their expertise and experience, had little chance to get promoted to a higher position in the hierarchy, as it is taken up by the expatriate managers.

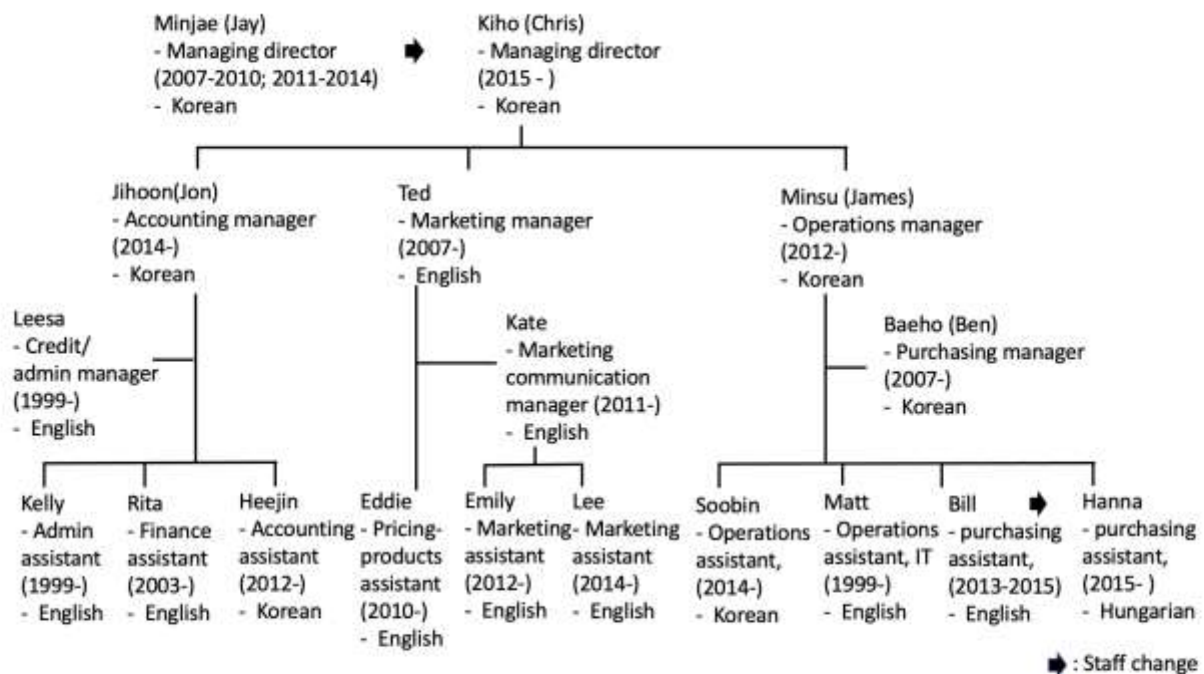

Figure 1 Eco UK hierarchical organisational structure: participants' pseudonyms (both Korean and English names for Korean managers), role, job tenure, and L1

At the time of the data collection, common procedures, such as work approval, had to be signed off by the expatriate managers – Jihoon and Minsu – prior to getting approval from the headquarters. This strict vertical structure provided the ground for negotiating power dynamics and language is an obvious resource for this as we will show in the data.

Data collection

We adopted an ethnographic approach to establish an in-depth understanding of the workplace context and situate participants' talk in the setting. Access to participants' background knowledge is key to applying IS to data analysis as it allows analysts to assess and interpret their use of language in

immediate interactional context in association with wider organisational and sociopolitical contexts. The first author gained access to the company through a Korean community where she became acquainted with Eco UK expatriate managers and shared her research interests. Given the subject position of the author being 'related' to the expatriate managers and as an outsider of the company, the ethnographic approach was suited to building trust with Eco UK employees in the research process. Our view here is that researchers are not a detached actor in the encounter but situated and positioned within the research; similarly fieldwork is a social process in which the researcher and the participants constantly negotiate their roles and identities, and establish common ground (Angouri, 2018, p. 68). The subject position of the interviewer has an obvious impact on the research event, therefore, the speakers' accounts and the interpretation of (the intersubjectivity of) the statements.

The first author spent six months in the company (two rounds of fieldwork), observing a range of workplace practices, interacting with participants in various occasions and collecting observational, interview and meeting data. During the fieldwork periods, her role and relationship with the participants shifted. In the beginning she was as a complete outsider, attempting to make sense of what is going on in the research site and share her research interests with them. As she established a relationship with the participants, she invited them for research interviews and was invited, in turn, to team meetings and lunch, and other social events, such as employee birthday parties and the company anniversary celebration.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the fieldwork. We approach (and discuss elsewhere Angouri, 2018) interviews as professional interactions that are jointly accomplished by the interviewer and the interviewee as co-participants (Silverman, 1973). Approaching interviews as interaction has much to offer in understanding *how* interview participants frame the particular topic – language – in addition to *what* they say about it, allowing to capture 'how' language ideologies are performed for and with the interviewer. The first author carried out interviews eliciting data on workplace practices in the company including within the subsidiary and between the headquarters and the subsidiary. 17 employees were interviewed (approximate length 1 hour), and on occasions follow-up interviews were scheduled over the two periods of fieldwork, which created 30 interviews in total. The interviewees include all expatriate managers and local employees from accounting, marketing and operations teams that work with the expatriate managers and the headquarter employees on a regular basis. The interviewer's L1 is Korean, and she used either English or Korean according to the participants' preference and self-identified L1 as it helps to produce and co-construct meanings (Welch and Piekkari, 2006). The interviews were transcribed in the source languages that had been used for the interviews. We delayed translation processes until the writing up phase of the research to capture more fully how the interviewees constructed meanings and avoid potential distortion of meanings in the translation process (van Nes *et al.*, 2010).

Data analysis

We take a multi-methods approach (Angouri, 2018) to the analysis of the data. Initially interviews were transcribed verbatim for (initial) coding. All the data – interview and meeting transcripts and fieldnotes – were read through and coded in full under a master coding structure using a software programme for qualitative data analysis, MAXQDA to obtain a holistic understanding of the data sets. The process of coding allowed us to identify thematic patterns and make comparisons and associations within and across the data. The process was iterative and non-linear as new codes were constantly emerging, evolving, declining, and integrating, and focal points, such as communicative practices, institutional roles and responsibilities, and the HQ-subsidiary relationships were mapped out based on the code system. Thematic analysis is widely used as an exploratory tool as it provides an overview, a universal outlook of surface patterns based on frequency, yet it typically relies heavily on frequency or recurrence of codes (for a discussion see Edley and Litosseliti, 2018). In our work we consider thematic analysis as a stage one, descriptive level to be followed by an in-depth analysis of the moment of interaction and the sequential design of the encounter. This approach moves from *what* is said to *how* it is said by providing the fine-grained interactional detail of 'key moments' in selected interactions in which speakers recount experiences in relation to communication practices and 'language/s' of the *others*. In our data, speakers' use of the term 'language/s' is rather abstract, often refers to 'national' languages (e.g., English, Korean) and language ability of the *self* and the *others*.

This was followed by IS analysis. Although typically IS focuses on interactional data drawn from non-researcher elicited events (e.g., a business meetings), it allows to approach research interviews as a situated encounter and capture 'how' individuals *do* ideology and what is communicatively intended in the interactional context. Like in any other social encounter, in interviews participants 'use the interactional resources available to them to seek/formulate opinions on specific topics', which then become a critical 'inferencing resource' for their interactant to join the interaction, and for the analyst to make sense of the data (Sarangi, 2003, p. 64).

In analysing the data we pay attention to linguistic cues, including lexcial choices and chunks of text that evoke prior texts, background assumptions or circulating ideologies. Cues carry locally important meanings as interactants design their account according to their own framing of the topics. In addition, we pay attention to membership categorisation – people claim membership in certain groups (and not others) which is directly related to the interpersonal and professional relationships between them and others. Membership categories (such as 'the Korean' in our case) – and the predicates and forms of background knowledge speakers use with them (such as 'not speaking very good English') – form a key element of contextualisation work, invoking and reproducing 'the common-sense knowledge' about 'what people are like, how they behave' (Schegloff, 2007, p. 469). Pronouns such as 'we' and 'they' can be also analysed as membership categories, albeit not common in membership categorisation analysis, as a '*standardized relational pair* – using one part of the pair in interaction invokes the other' (Leudar, Marsland and Nekvapil, 2004, p. 24). Those membership categorisation devices play a key

role in interview talk for positioning the *self* and the *others*. We discuss in the data the inferential aspects of the ways in which membership categories are invoked according to our reading (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2009; Stokoe and Stokoe, 2012). Finally, we analysed interactional sequences to examine 'how a turn or an action is situated and emergently and contingently configured, and how it projects and is followed by another action' (Keel and Mondada, 2017, p. 1). This process enables us to capture how language ideologies are mobilised in the sequence of the talk. We turn to our findings next and illustrate archetypal talk whereby language ideologies.

The case of the accounting team

At the time of data collection, there was a new manager transferred from the headquarters. Periods of change are where the issues of power differential become more visible, requiring negotiation of roles, positions and expertise within the team and the company, and (speakers of) different languages are talked into being.

Accounting team members: Jihoon (Jon), Rita and Kelly

Jihoon (also called Jon by non-Korean speaking employees), the accounting manager, had worked for Eco HQ for three years before he moved to Eco UK. The time he was interviewed was about seven months after he moved to the UK. He was responsible for managing not only accounting and finance but also credit, administration, warehouse, and shipping. Rita and Kelly worked on taxation accounting and bookkeeping respectively and were in the respective role over 10 years (see Figure 1). Ever since they had started to work for Eco UK, they had worked continuously under Korean expatriate managers; one of whom was Minjae, who became managing director afterwards. After working for such a long time in the same team, the two employees established a close relationship, considering themselves to be friends. In addition to the organisational hierarchy, the relationship between the 'old-timer' and the 'newcomer' adds another layer to the power dynamics within the team and further accounts for the participants' mobilisation of language ideologies in the interview encounter.

We draw on five excerpts from interview talk with the three employees and show how language ideologies are enacted in the sequence of the talk and become an arena to negotiate the power relationship in the MNC context. We also draw on observational data to support the analysis.

Discursive enactment of language ideologies in interaction: 'us' versus 'them'

We join the event in Kelly's account of workplace practices, early in the interview.

Excerpt 1. (Transcription conventions are provided in Appendix 1)

```
1   IR      what practices have you found difficult to adjust?
2   Kelly   um:: usually when I first came over, we had a language barrier
3           problem ↑and (2.0) Dan, when he first came, the one before Jon
4           (Jihoon) ↑he didn't speak very good English at all at the
5           beginning and that was really quite hard (.) to get (.) […]
```

```
6   IR     how did you deal with the situation?
7   Kelly  very frustrated ((laughs)) very frustrated ((laughs))
8   IR     so just=
9   Kelly  =just keep going and going and going (.) or (.) walk away
10         ((laughs)) because we've got frustrated ((laughs)) and then
11         we go back again, and try to explain (.) and eventually (.) he-
12         they understand (.) it's only really, I would say in the beginning
13         of the first six months ↑and they are trying to adjust(.)
14         because we don't speak (.) proper English ourselves (.) we speak
15         slang so it's hard for them sometimes to even understand what
16         we are saying as well so(.)
17  IR     do you tend to speak to them slowly ↑ sometimes?
18  Kelly  I forget (.) but yes, I'm supposed to (.) but I don't wanna
19         speak too slowly so they think- I think they are stupid
20         ((chuckles)) or anything (.) I think they all speak pretty good
21         English (.) but we probably speak fast (.) we have accents, so
22         sometimes it's harder (.) for them to understand but yeah (.) I
23         think mainly that's probably the beginning, language barrier (.)
```

*IR: interviewer

Kelly's talk here produces the language ideologies that continue to reinforce the native speaker ideal, i.e., the prioritisation of dialects of L1 users of the language and linguistic differentiation between the two groups – local employees and managers. She starts off talking about a 'language barrier problem' (lines 2–3), which is followed by her assessment of language competence of Dan (Taeho) (lines 3–5) and the illustration of the 'first six months' situation (from line 12). Assessing the others' language, situated in this way, has important implications here. It firstly attributes the 'language barrier problem' to the managers' language ability, not that of herself. Simultaneously, it promotes the perceived benchmark against which individuals' language competence is evaluated and legitimises the assessor's linguistic authority, which then naturalises hierarchical relationship between the speakers of the language.

Although she mentions from line 14 that they 'don't speak proper English' themselves, 'speak slang' (lines 14–15), 'speak fast' and 'have accents' (line 21), the ideological position she takes here is that the onus is entirely on the managers to 'adjust' to the local linguistic norms in the grace period, 'first six months' (line 13). It consequently marginalises the language-minoritised group. Given her ideological position, the utterance 'we don't speak proper English ourselves' (line 14) should not be read at face value, but rather her claiming of the language ownership. In response to Kelly's claim, the interviewer (IR)'s question in line 17 enacts her ideological position, suggesting that Kelly could adjust her speech rate according to that of her line manager. It is taken up by Kelly's short response (line 18) yet dismissed in her account of why she does not want to speak slowly (lines 18–19), which is consistent with her account throughout. This is a useful illustration of how the interviewer is involved in the social and ideological process.

In Kelly's discourse of linguistic differentiation, pronouns become a useful resource. With the pronoun 'they' (lines 12–13, 19–20), the managers Dan (Taeho) and Jon (Jihoon), are ideologically represented

as she picks out specific qualities, such as ‘not speaking very good English’ (lines 4-5) and not being able to ‘understand’ (line 12). In this context the pronoun serves to essentialise the individuals’ language competence. In juxtaposition with ‘they’, the pronoun ‘we’ (e.g., lines 14, 21) constructs a continuum of language competence and position the *self/selves* and the *others*: the *self* is characterised with the native speaker symbols of competence, such as speaking ‘slang’ (line 15) and ‘fast’ (line 21) which are considered to be dominant and legitimate in their setting; whereas the *others* are put at the other end of the continuum (lines 9–16). Linguistic differentiation serves group representation and allows to position the *self* as a language ‘expert’ in relation to the *others*; simultaneously it enables to question the managers’ quality as a manager in the context of the team. Language becomes a useful interactional resource for positioning self as superior to the others and thereby challenging the organisational status quo.

In addition, worth noting here is that the pronoun ‘we’, which is dominantly used for constructing a language group, is also used to tone down threat. For instance, in line 21, the use of ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ distances Kelly from criticism and dissociates the account from the *self*. A similar function is served by laughter in line 7. It provides a 'non-serious frame’ (Myers and Lampropoulou, 2016, p. 84) where her utterance ‘very frustrated’ (line 7) is produced. Without the laughter the utterance could be read as a serious criticism on the manager’s language competence. The interviewer’s reaction in line 8 mitigates the threat (note the echoing of ‘just’) and provides the interactional context for the rest of the account. The role of the interviewer is again evident.

In the next excerpt, we show how the discourse of linguistic differentiation can counteract the hierarchical organisational structure. Following excerpt 1, Kelly comments on ‘the Korean staff’ in a different situation:

Excerpt 2

```
1   Kelly   This is another thing I do found with the Korean- the Korean staff
2           ((chuckles)) they are not very trusty at the beginning (.) Jon I
3           suppose just started (.) and he wants to make sure if everything is
4           okay (.) so (.) he would be like very frustrating because he would be
5           checking our work which we have done for (.) he was checking things
6           even he didn’t necessarily have to do […] but I do find that a little
7           bit with the Koreans (.) when they first come over ↑ I think they
8           have to- we just both deal with trustiness (.)
```

The us-them dichotomy created in excerpt 1 is juxtaposed here with the relationship mandated by organisational hierarchy whereby Jihoon (Jon) and those transferred from the headquarters endowed with institutional authority. From line 2, with a pronoun ‘they’, she depicts the managers with the quality ‘not very trusty at the beginning’ coming into the team and ‘checking’ her and her colleagues’ work – formulated as ‘our work’ (lines 4–6). Given that Kelly had the longest service at Eco UK, it is not difficult to read her struggles in such situations where her work is being checked by a newcomer, putting Kelly in a subordinate position to the ‘Koreans’ (line 7). Again, chuckles in the beginning of

this excerpt (line 2) provide the non-serious frame to bring up 'another thing' she 'found with the Korean staff' (line 1), continuing to construct and challenge the hierarchical relationship between 'us' and 'them'. The national category 'the Koreans' in this (e.g., lines 1, 7) and excerpt 3 (e.g., line 5) and in our corpus in general becomes a useful resource for the subsidiary employees to formulate the organisational hierarchical structure and the status quo in various settings. For instance, Eddie in the marketing team said 'the Korean staff coming over […] he wants to, or she wants to put his or her stamp on things'. The national category demarcates the group boundaries and enacts the institutional authority or the status quo of those coming from the headquarters. In this context, ideological associations made between the 'Koreans' and the negative qualities, including their English language competence, serve to challenge the organisational status quo.

In the closing of the account, worth noting is the change in Kelly's use of pronoun from 'they' to inclusive 'we' in the same utterance in lines 7–8 in expressing that it is both parties that need to deal with 'trustiness' (line 8). Given the subject position of the interviewer – a researcher acquainted with the management team – such mobilisation of pronouns helps her to exit the account without constructing a negative self-image, especially when the managers are depicted negatively.

Taking excerpts 1 and 2 together, as we will also see in excerpt 3 from an interview with Rita, participants' construction of linguistic superiority-inferiority relationship is always followed or prefaced by their account of the hierarchical organisational structure. This suggests that the speaker's discourse of linguistic differentiation is mobilised to counterbalance the hierarchical relationship within the work group and the company. In excerpt 3, Rita explained differences between her previous and current workplace practices and we focus on the way the speaker claims a powerful position:

Excerpt 3

```
1    IR     what differences have you found?
2    Rita   well, I suppose it's just different, because I work- I work for the
3           Korean managers (.) so, of course, it's very hard (.) before (.) I
4           always used to work for English (.) managers (.) and of course, since
5           I've been in Eco, I've always reported to (.) Koreans (.) so:: I
6           suppose it's just different in every way, you know, the way you
7           communicate, you talk, the language (.) you know, with Jon, at the
8           moment, when Jon's arrived, his English wasn't very good in the
9           beginning (.) but I think it's a confidence thing with the Korean
10          (.) staff, when they have first arrived because they have to use it
11          constantly ↑ and Jon puts himself down a little bit (.) because he
12          sort of says "my English isn't too good" "yeah, it's fine. we
13          understand what you are saying." you tend to speak for them (.) […]
14   IR     could you give me an example?
15   Rita   if somebody asks (.) say (.) Kate came over and asked him a
16          question (.) and he may look a bit confused (.) so I would talk
17          like and say to him, "look Jon, she wants", I try to break it down
18          more for him […] so you sort of get to know (2.0) especially when
19          they first come (.) we all talk very quickly (.) you have to tend to
20          slow it down a little bit, you have to try to understand them to begin
21          with, so:: a bit like (.) being a mother to them really looking after
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22          them ((chuckles)) that’s all .hhh bless them .hhh
```

Rita’s discourse of differentiation is produced from the beginning in her account of the hierarchical organisational structure, which then is followed by her linguistic differentiation between the two groups (from line 7). Producing accounts of language differences is associated with the speaker’s perceived realities (e.g., relations of domination and subordination) and with their communicative intent (Irvine and Gal, 2000). Rita’s discourse of linguistic differentiation (from line 5) is similar to that of Kelly’s yet, her communicative intent goes beyond the ideological representation of the groups to claiming a powerful position. In creating the contrastive linguistic images between the groups, Rita constructs a positive image of self through mobilisation of sympathetic phrases, such as ‘we understand’ and ‘speak for them’ (lines 12–13) and portraying herself as offering linguistic help while depicting Jihoon as incapable of participating in the local communication (lines 15–18). The relationship between Rita and her managers is further enacted by her phrases, such as ‘being a mother to them’ (line 21) and ‘looking after them’ (line 22). Those enact her capability to control the managers’ access to the local communication, effectively challenging the hierarchcial relationship described in the beginning of the excerpt. The mother-child like relationship framed here is also enacted in work situations. During the fieldwork the first author often observed Kelly and Rita correcting Jihoon’s pronunciation and making comments such as *“you (Jihoon)’ve got to work on p and h” and “she (Rita) is giving him (Jihoon) an elocutionary lesson”.* Language ideologies can be done in a myriad of social encounters within the local work group, naturalising the hierarchical relationship between speakers.

Similar to Kelly’s, in closing the account, the sign of chuckles (line 22) serves to tone down her claim. It is also possible to read that by signalling the situation as ‘laughable’, it reinforces the speaker’s claim of linguistic superiority. Imagine Jihoon telling the same/similar annecdote; a chuckle would not be expected as it is not a laugable matter to him. The consistency of the pattern and the shared use of the resource between the interactants indicates its dual role in mitigating the effect of a negative account and a threatening act and and simulaneously its reinforcing effect.

In the same interview talk with Rita, following excerpt 3, the superior-inferior relationship is projected onto other areas of expertise:

Excerpt 4

```
1  Rita  It’s hard for me at the moment (.) because I have been training people
2        (.) […] every five years (.) you know (.) they- they turn over (.)and
3        you have to start again, and we’ve always laughed and said (.) just as
4        we get an accounting manager, and they know everything, they know
5        exactly how it works, and they have to go ((chuckles)) and then we start
6        again ((laughs)) so:: sometimes it is hard to begin with when they
7        first come in (.)
```

This excerpt aptly describes the management change situation, a tension between the old-timers and newcomers within the work group. While illustrating the hierarchical organisational structure where

there are new managers coming over ‘every five years’ (line 2), Rita yet again claims her powerful position, constructing herself as an expert, ‘training people’ and her line managers – ‘they’ (lines 2, 5, 7) – as an apprentice. Having new managers coming from the headquarters may not be preferred; Rita needs to ‘start again’ (line 3) and more importantly she remains as an assistant despite her long service. The expert-apprentice relationship mobilised here works in a similar way as that of linguistically superior- and inferior in challenging the status quo.

Throughout excerpts 1-4, we have seen distinctive group boundaries between the managers and the local employees. However the juxtapositions made in the two interviewees’ talk do not define fixed group memberships; they are rather malleable, shaped by the speaker’s intention in the given interactional moment – be it talking about language competence or expertise or institutional authority. They therefore become an interactional resource for the speakers to position themselves in relation to the *other* or critique the corporate hierarchy. Language ideologies that promote native speaker norms allow such acts. We turn to in-group discourse next.

Language ideologies within the work group

Language as a power mechanism only works because of internalised language ideologies that are shared among the work group, by both parties, L1 and L2 speakers, as shown in the excerpt below. In this excerpt, Jihoon talked about his main concerns as a new manager:

Excerpt 5

```
1   IR      What’s the main concern in working within your team?
2   Jihoon  The top priority is to establish my knowledge relevant to the
3           job, so I try to develop that. And I should be more able to
4           understand the language. It is one of my main concerns. In
5           practice, if I can communicate with my team members in English
6           a hundred percent fluently, I can shorten some of the work
7           procedures and I wouldn’t need to ask anyone for anything. My
8           English has improved gradually, but this is still the most
9           difficult part.
```

In Jihoon’s claim of professional roles (lines 2–7), knowledge and language ability are treated as equally important. Under a political-economic condition whereby language is invested in as a key working tool for the management of multinational work activities, language acts as a ‘semiotic marker for a specific quality’ and a ‘source of added value’ (Del Percio, Flubacher and Duchêne 2017, p. 58). Such functions of language are echoed in his utterances, such as ‘I should be more able to understand the language’ (lines 3–4) and ‘if I can communicate […] a hundred percent fluently’ (lines 5–6); and the auxiliary verb ‘should’ (line 3) denotes his ideological position that acquiring a language is a condition for an individual to gain access to their professional role. Such an ideological position significantly frames his belief about how one is supposed to engage in communication across language boundaries at work, which potentially could hamper his participation at work and undervalue his own worth as an employee

(Park, 2013). From the same utterances (lines 3–4 and 5–6), we can infer another ideological position that himself as an L2 English speaker is solely responsible for communication. This resonates with Kelly's remark in excerpt 1 (lines 13–17) which positions Jihoon and other managers as a linguistic minority that needs to adapt to the dominant linguistic norms in their setting. In this way, both parties authorise the local British employees as the 'language owner' that does not need to adjust to L2 speakers' language ability, suggesting that ideologies are collective. Ideologies regarding the status of the L1 speaker and English language are widely shared among other employees stating that, for example, 'we are lucky because English is the language people speak' (Emily, marketing assistant) and 'English is the global language, so we are lazy' (Ted, marketing manager). As also observed by the first author, such discourses are firmly established within the company, reinforcing the condition whereby L2 speakers are held responsible for their own linguistic marginality.

Overall, the employees sent from headquarters to the subsidiary are all proficient speakers of the language, which is a condition for their secondment. Perhaps the 'first six months' in a new role is always challenging as mentioned in excerpts 1 and 3; however, the ideological basis of the accounts we saw earlier, suggests that one's understanding of language use and skills at work is deeply situated in the matrix of ideologies that are connected to the wider social and moral order. We discuss this further in the next section.

Discussion

Language ideologies have a direct impact on the way in which languages are used and speakers are evaluated in situ. Our work has shown how language ideologies are mobilised in interview talk and used to perpetuate or challenge power asymmetries in the MNC context. Language becomes a key arena of negotiating power and in-/exclusion and a tool for perpetuating/challenging asymmetries. In this section, we discuss our contribution to IB language-sensitive research and highlight our methodological approach to participants' discourses about language. We also propose a conceptual framework to link local interaction (interview interaction in our case) to the wider organisational and ideological context, and study discursive negotiation of organisational relationships in the multinational context.

By adopting IS, we have approached interview talk as a situated encounter and connected the immediate interaction with the ideological context (see also Figure 2). This allowed us to unpack the emergent nature of social and ideological processes whereby the speakers produce language ideologies and, simultaneously, position the *self/selves* and the *others*. This distinguishes our work from contributions of IB language-sensitive studies on language and power. As scholars repeatedly have shown, talk about language is never neutral or just about language. In our work, in the situated process, participants' discourse of linguistic differentiation becomes a crucial interactional resource for positioning 'us' and

‘them’ and challenging the organisational status quo. Language ideologies, and particularly a superiority-inferiority binary between the local employees and the managers from the headquarters, are always produced near an account of the hierarchical structure of the MNC and come either immediately before or after (excerpts 1, 2 and 3). Linguistic inferiority is constructed by a particular sequencing in the way that serves to challenge the organisational hierarchical structure.

Further, in all interviews with the three participants, a lower degree of status of managers from the headquarters was enacted through negative assessments of the *others*’ (excerpts 1 and 3) or one’s *own* English language competence (excerpt 5). This resonates with Śliwa and Johansson’s (2014) findings and shows that it is in those assessments that ideologies emerge, allowing to reproduce social order. Linked to this, ‘privileging effects’ of language competence, as discussed in Gaibrois and Nentwich’s (2020) work, were also observed in our findings; L2 speakers of English are expected to adapt to the dominant linguistic/native speaker norms and acquiring native-speaker-like language competence is crucial for performing one’s role. Yet, unlike Gaibrois and Nentwich’s (2020)’s findings that show participants’ resistance practices, in our findings, the status of L1 speakers remains unchallenged. As our analysis illustrates, this can be further explained by the dominant native speaker ideal, firmly established within the workgroup and within the organisation, as our ethnographic information also suggests.

The us-them binary between the two social groups is also constructed in areas other than that of language (excerpts 2 and 4). The dichotomy is recursively reproduced at multiple levels and temporarily employed to claim professional identities or powerful positions. The most relevant are at:

(i) an organisational level, where the expatriate managers are endowed with institutional authority mandated by the corporate hierarchy (excerpts 2 and 3)

(ii) at a team level, where the expatriate managers are constructed as a newcomer (excerpts 1 to 4)

(iii) at levels of expertise (incl. language), where they are constructed as (linguistically) incompetent (excerpts 1, 3 and 4)

At all levels, the managers are pushed to a realm of *otherness*. As mobilised by our participants, pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them’, and the national category ‘the Korean’ are indexically associated with those higher up in the hierarchy (i), but also with a newcomer or a novice that requires a form of assistance or training (ii and iii). While accruing ideological association, the national category binds the social and linguistic images together in a linkage that is presented as inextricable. Categories in this regard are never a neutral labelling system – they are ‘always political, reflecting the wider socio-political status quo’ (Angouri and Piekkari, 2018, p. 13). Linked to this, at a team level (ii) and levels of linguistic expertise (iii), a further ideological underpinning for the dichotomy is the linguistic exclusion of those

from the headquarters who are bilingual speakers. In line with linguistic studies (e.g., Robert, 2010; Duchêne, 2019), our work evinces that discourse of linguistic differentiation is actively involved in the process of constructing majority and minority identities between the social groups, marginalising linguistically minoritized groups.

Figure 2 visualises our conceptual framework which connects the interactional context with the wider institutional and ideological order (Angouri, 2018). It provides a visual metaphor of the process by which organisational relationships emerge in a situated moment through drawing and recontextualising dominant ideologies in the institutional and wider socio-political domain (Kim and Angouri, 2019; Kim, forthcoming).

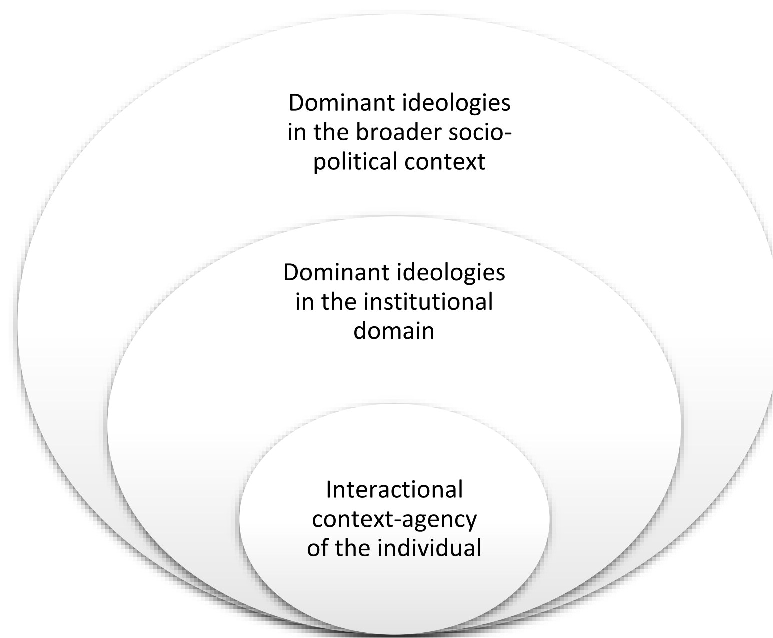

Figure 2. Visualisation of organisational relationship negotiation in the MNC through and in employees' discourses of linguistic differentiation

The framework, in line with IS, suggests that language choices made in the immediate interactional context are associated with institutional and socio-political context. In our findings, participants' framing of 'language' in the interview encounter is interwoven with the structural issues associated with MNC power and politics (e.g., limited access to managerial positions). In other words, discourse and specifically that of language differentiation, is one of the prime sites through and in which employees reframe the organisational relationship, negotiating zones of authorities and reifying or challenging the status quo in the multinational context. Language, therefore, becomes the actual arena where the power relationship is negotiated in the multinational workplace context. As indicated by participants' ideological positions (e.g., how much English one should have; how one is supposed to engage in communication across language boundaries), such a power mechanism is made possible in the wider socio-political context that naturalises the valuation processes of the language and of the

speakers, and by the ideologies that are 'culturally produced and collective' (Cameron, 2006, pp. 141–142); and discourse plays a significant role in (re)producing ideologies and the social order in relation to a linguistic marketplace (Heller, 2010; Phillipson, 2016).

Finally, the subject position of the interviewer – a Korean researcher acquainted with expatriate managers – is also a central factor in understanding how participants frame their understanding of language. Participants systematically use interactional features, such as mitigation and laughter, in reducing any threats which are useful resources for toning down the seriousness of accounts that construct (linguistic) inferiority of *others* while opening space for challenging the status quo (excerpts 1–4). The interviewer is an active agent in this process too. We now bring together the implications of our findings in the last section of the paper.

Conclusion

Our work provides a multi-level approach to the study of organisational (power) dynamics and the complex linguistic landscape of any workplace, through the interactional analysis of employees' talk and by connecting the situated interaction to its broader context. Interactional approaches, with an ethnographically grounded analytical procedure, constitute a powerful tool to unpack how organisational relationships (and by extension power asymmetries) are enacted in and through employees' discourses. We propose IS as a useful approach to unpack the relationship between language and power and we have introduced a framework that allows to capture how language ideologies are enacted in interaction by scrutinising participants' presuppositions and situated interpretation. This has practical implications for multinational organisations and should feed into the design of organisational language policy. Given that language ideologies are produced and consumed in employees' daily lives, language policy and practice need to be sensitive and aware of how ideologies of language are ideologies of in-/exclusion.

In closing, the importance of language and ideology to the ways in which employees negotiate their roles and relationships is not by itself new in the literature. However, there is still a lack of bringing workplace sociolinguistic work, and its systematic analysis of workplace interaction, in IB and IB's dynamic understanding of the international organisation in workplace sociolinguistics (Angouri and Piekkari, 2018). Here, we have provided an approach and framework for the study of organisational relationships and interactions in connection with language ideologies. We have added to the joint research between IB and sociolinguistics which can shed more light on the complex and emergent nature of social and ideological processes at work. We hope future research will continue to explore this agenda.

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Appendix 1. Transcription conventions

Symbol	Meaning
=	Equal signs indicate continuous utterance with no break or pause and/or latch.
(.)	A dot in parentheses indicates a short pause.
,	Continuing contour
[…]	Section of transcript omitted
<u>**emphasis**</u>	Underlining is used to indicate some form of stress or emphasis.
th-	Cut off word
(2.0)	Pause about 2 seconds
:	Sound stretching
(( ))	Other details
↑↓	The up and down arrows mark rises or falls in pitch.

hhh	aspirations
.hhh	inhalations