

## **GEM&L Panel Session**

**50<sup>th</sup> EIBA Annual Conference, Helsinki, December 12-14, 2024**

### **Language in IB and management: Perspectives for the next 50 years**

**Conference track:** Track 7 – International HRM, Cross-cultural Issues and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

#### **Organizers:**

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#### **Relevance and significance of proposed panel:**

Over the past three decades, the significance of language in international business (IB) and management has increased substantially since the groundbreaking 1997-paper by Marschan (now Piekkari), Welch, and Welch entitled ‘Language: The forgotten factor in multinational management’. Today, the now “mature” stream of ‘language-sensitive IB research’, recognizes the crucial role of language in shaping various aspects of international business operations and outcomes (Lecomte et al., 2023). As defined by Piekkari, et al. (2022, p. 146) “[l]anguage-sensitive research investigates how language diversity in organizations – i.e., use of a variety of native tongues – affects workplace interactions, organizational processes, and outcomes.”

Research in this field shows the evolution of language-sensitive IB understanding over time. Reviewing existing language-sensitive IB publications, Brannen and Mughan (2017) provide a chronological analysis of the development of the field, from an instrumental view to a conceptualization of language as a central construct in IB; Karhunen et al. (2018) synthesize a

structural, functional or social practice view of language; Tenzer et al. (2017) scrutinize the fields achievements in terms of theories and methodologies linked to a multilevel analysis. Piekkari et al. (2022) highlight underlying paradigmatic positions among language-sensitive IB scholars. Presbitero et al. (2023) review research that link language to IHRM calling for more robust theory and novel research design (see also Koveshnikov et al., 2023).

Several prominent IB journals have published special issues on language – *International Studies of Management and Organization* (Piekkari & Zander, 2005); *Journal of World Business* (Piekkari & Tietze, 2011); *Journal of International Business Studies* (Brannen et al., 2014); *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*, (Beeler et al., 2017); *European Journal of International Management* (Lecomte et al., 2018), *Critical Perspectives on International Business* (Gaibrois et al., 2023 ); *Journal of world Business* (Skudlarek et al., 2020) and a forthcoming special issue on ‘The future of language in international business management’ in *Cross-Cultural and Strategic Management* (Liu et al., forthcoming) is in the pipeline. What they have in common is a decoupling of language from culture, a shift from the individual to the organization and beyond to society, the cross-pollination of various disciplines with their respective methodological contributions. In addition, they draw on a processual view of language use in the context of global (virtual) work, including migration as a new form of global mobility, on power issues going beyond the individual and associated with political dimensions, as well as on issues of global communication technologies (generative AI).

With this panel, we take stock of this body of research while looking ahead and reflecting upon future directions in the field. The panelists consist of a combination of senior and junior scholars, all working with language and linguistic diversity in various capacities. Through a combination of presentations and interaction with the panelists (see Table 1), we will discuss topics that are central not only to the future of language-sensitive research and business, but also to issues of sustainability and societal impact in a world characterized by increased polarization and grand challenges associated with migration, in particular. These topics include language and technology; language and power; and language and mobility, which we briefly describe below.

Language is intricately linked to technology and digital communication. Technology plays a significant role in how humans communicate, work, and learn, which was further accelerated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Piekkari et al., 2021). These developments emphasize the crucial role of language in the digital age, and open opportunities for researching language in the context

of digital technology, for example with regard to virtual team communication (Taylor, 2021; Tenzer et al., 2024). Despite the benefits of technology, it may also have a lesser known ‘dark side’ when it comes to some language groups. The increase in virtual ways of working and generative AI (Tenzer, 2024) can also lead to further marginalization of minority language groups due to unequal access to or increased language-based sub-groupings (Back & Back, 2024), among other outcomes. Understanding the dynamics of increased use of technology and language can help in harnessing technology as a resource – not a separator - of multilingual organizations.

Language and power is another well-established topic in language-sensitive IB literature (Tienari, 2023). Much of the literature on this topic concerns the implementation and execution of language policies (Vaara et al., 2005), where international managers have the potential to exercise power by acting as translators in the organization (Tietze, 2010). Individual language practices and macro level politics concerning language use are tightly interconnected (Sanden & Lønsmann, 2018). At the same time, language influences self-perceived power in intercultural business interactions, which affects how individuals act in IB relationships (Ivanova-Gongne et al., 2023; Guzman & Reiche, 2024). In exploring power and language, we provide possible explanations for the increased polarization in today’s world.

Another critical theme in language-sensitive IB research concerns the human resource implications of global mobility and language in the workplace, for example related to international migration (Grosskopf, Landes & Barmeyer, 2021) and refugees (Hokkinen & Barner-Rasmussen, 2023). For migrants without language competency in the local language of their new country of residence, language-based discrimination can become a form of modern discrimination (Back & Piekkari, 2024). On the other hand, if recognized by the companies’ leadership, the native languages of migrants can prove to be a valuable resource for internationalization, particularly in the case of small and medium-sized enterprises (Niskavaara & Piekkari, 2023). As increasing migration is a defining feature of contemporary societies and organizations, this focal area allows us to delve into the role of language in solving – or further complicating – the grand challenges associated with migration.

As we look towards the next 50 years in IB, there is much potential for language research to illuminate our understanding of what goes on inside international business organizations. With this panel, we hope to engage and involve the audience with inspiring discussions on the future of language-sensitive IB research and its implications on both business and society. We argue that

language-sensitive research has a lot to offer in terms of solving the grand challenges and producing societal impact.

Introduction by the workshop organizers	10 minutes
Presentations by panelists 6 panelists * 5 minutes each	30 minutes
Questions from the moderator	20 minutes
Questions from the audience	20 minutes
Summary and wrap up	10 minutes

Table 1. Suggested schedule for the panel.

### **List of participants and their presentations:**

The following six panelists have confirmed their participation:

#### **Hilla Back**

Post-doctoral researcher at Aalto University School of Business, Finland ([hilla.back@aalto.fi](mailto:hilla.back@aalto.fi))

#### **Language and global mobility: An equality, diversity, and inclusion perspective**

Migration is a defining feature of contemporary societies, and especially highly skilled migrants are direly needed by countries dealing with talent deficits, declining birth rates, and aging populations. However, migrants without local language skills can easily become targets of language-based discrimination in their new host country. I bring together topics of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and language-sensitive research to discuss moral perspectives on language use. My objective is to steer the mindset away from a focus on language learning as a primary way to improve the inclusion of skilled migrants.

#### **Wilhelm Barner-Rasmussen**

Professor, Åbo Akademi University School of Business and Economics ([wilhelm.barner-rasmussen@abo.fi](mailto:wilhelm.barner-rasmussen@abo.fi))

#### **Technology, mobility, power, linguistic boundary spanning: How will they shape each other in the IB environment of tomorrow?**

Boundary spanners are people who facilitate inter-group transactions and relations. They are held to be pivotal for internal collaboration and coordination in MNCs and may exert considerable power in this role. Among boundary spanners' key competences are linguistic and cultural skills, often accrued during prior international mobility. Through mobility, boundary spanners also build personal relationships that further support their inter-group facilitation efforts. However, new technologies cast some doubt on the future relevance of linguistic and cultural skills while simultaneously gradually weakening the case for international mobility. Will this reshape the power inherent in boundary spanning, and if so, how?

**Johanna Niskavaara**

PhD student in International Business at Aalto University School of Business, Finland  
(johanna.niskavaara@aalto.fi)

**Migrants in internationalizing SMEs**

Extant IB research studies MNEs as multilingual and multicultural organizations, but these characteristics are not often associated with SMEs. However, today, increasing migration brings potential international employees to the reach of SMEs, making the management of linguistic and cultural diversity an issue for them, too. Many studies suggest that migrants' native language skills provide important resources for internationalizing small firms, but few studies have empirically investigated this. I call for future IB research to explore how small organizations on the one hand leverage the language resources brought in by migrant employees, and on the other hand, how they deal with becoming a multilingual and multicultural organization.

**Danielle Taylor**

Associate Professor of Management at Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France  
(danielle.taylor@univ-paris1.fr)

**Language Diversity in the Virtual Context**

The online nature of work affects how languages are used and managed in global virtual teams. Communicating through various media and using technologies informs how these teams work together, how they feel about working together and to what extent they are successful. While some teams attempt to control language use through a functional language, others strive to highlight the language diversity that is

present. Questions are raised concerning how to profit from the inherent diversity of global virtual teams through virtual communication and exchanges.

**Janne Tienari**

Professor of Management and Organization at Hanken School of Economics, Finland ([jtienari@hanken.fi](mailto:jtienari@hanken.fi))

**Language and power relations**

Language is intimately connected to power and resistance. I argue that as scholars we must labor to unravel these connections. A focus on how language operates in different contexts helps us dwell into the in-built tensions in complex organizations such as multinational corporations. I further argue that meaningful language-sensitive analysis in IB entails that we acknowledge the ambivalence that characterizes language relations in the world today. This means that we take tensions, uncertainties, and mixed feelings regarding languages seriously.

**Susanne Tietze**

Emerita Professor of Multilingual Management at Sheffield Hallam University, UK  
([susanne.tietze@shu.ac.uk](mailto:susanne.tietze@shu.ac.uk))

**Voice and method in language-sensitive research**

Language-sensitive research has adopted the methods of social sciences for empirical investigations of the phenomena of multilingual organizations. They have enabled a continuous stream of studies into the complexities, dynamics and (in)justices of multilingual workplaces. This appropriation of social science methods for cross-language research offers has the potential to give voice and render visible its ‘hidden’ contributors (local interpreters and translators, professional interpreters and translators, community-based gatekeepers, informants who act as agents in making sense of data; bilingual research assistants etc.). In doing so, critical questions about contributions, authorship and transparency of research will be raised.

The panel will be moderated by **Guro R. Sanden** ([guro.r.sanden@bi.no](mailto:guro.r.sanden@bi.no)), Associate Professor at BI Norwegian Business School.

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