A review of two decades of research on language in international management (1997-2022)

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Abstract: This research reviews over two decades of research on language within international management. This comprehensive review codes and summarises 263 articles, highlighting the impact of language in various strategic areas of management: language policy; HRM and organisational behaviour; internationalisation; HQ-subsidiary relationship; knowledge sharing; corporate reporting and governance; and mergers and acquisitions (M&A) and inter-firm strategic collaboration. This study also highlights two major needs within the discipline (internal vs. external focus of language and level of analysis – individual, group and organisational), and addressed the call for a broader future research agenda.

Keywords: literature review; language; management; international strategy; communication.

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1   Introduction

Despite its continued role and increased research focus, the state of language-related research within international business is in flux (Hornikx et al., 2023; Brannen et al., 2014; Piekkari et al., 2014; Welch et al., 2005). This flux is grounded in the complexity of language and the drive to understand it in both a theoretical and explanatory way (Hornikx et al., 2023; Park and Lehnert, 2022). Unfortunately, language has not been fully theorised as a construct in international business (Hornikx et al., 2023).

Recent years have seen more and more articles utilising language in international management, reflected by recent reviews on the state of language in management (c.f., Chidlow et al., 2014; Tenzer et al., 2017; Karhunen et al., 2018) and theoretical development in language-related international business research (Hornikx et al., 2023). These reviews highlight the depth and complexity of language in business, with each providing a unique view of the current status of the literature. However, as a testament to the complexity of the field of language within the domain of international management, past reviews were only able to touch upon a small component of language in international management.

Some scholars note that language-related studies may have focused too narrowly on their specific domain (Holmqvist et al., 2017). For example, Chidlow et al.'s (2014) review focused on translation as a singular component. Tenzer et al.'s (2017) broader review of language-related issues in international business does not have a specific focus on linguistic issues within the specific domain of international management. Karhunen et al. (2018) focused on the concept of language and its underlying assumptions within international management, but did not include language-sensitive studies in many strategically important management areas, such as M&A, corporate reporting and governance, inter-firm strategic collaboration, market entry modes, or international entrepreneurship.

While each of the above important and essential reviews extends the literature of language, there is still room for language-related research. The authors themselves (Tenzer et al., 2017) acknowledge the need for more depth in the analysis of the field. To fill this important gap in the literature, we extended and updated the literature on language in cross-cultural and international management. Our review illustrates the importance of the relationship between language and international management over 25 years (1997–2022). Multiple rounds of screening resulted in a final coding of 263 articles on language-related issues in international management, many of which were not captured by the past reviews. Specific content areas were grouped into seven broad research themes based on their relatedness: language policy; HRM and organisational behaviour; internationalisation; HQ-subsidiary relationship; knowledge sharing; corporate reporting and governance; M&A and inter-firm strategic collaboration. As highlighted by both Holden (1987) and Brannen et al. (2014), a fuller picture of the theoretical ramifications of language as a construct in the context of the day-to-day operations of the MNE had yet to be explored. These themes guide how language in international management research can help scholars develop, extend, and explore the theoretical lenses of language in their research.

In addition to providing a review of the language-related management research for more than two decades, this study also reviews studies on language-related management issues in terms of internal vs. external communication. While firms must address language issues not only internally, but also externally, previous reviews largely focused

on internal communication, such as employee behaviour, HRM, language policy, HQ-subsidiary relationships. This work specifically investigates the importance of language issues arising in communications with external entities, such as investors, analysts, regulatory authorities, and business partners.

Finally, we explore the differences between language issues that have strategic implications at the individual level versus the group or organisational level. Through a multiple-level review of the role of language in international and cross-cultural management, we aim to provide a better understanding of the level particular language-related issues that should be dealt with in the organisation.

Our purpose is to provide a thorough and multi-dimensional review of the state of language in international management. We categorise this into seven broad themes wherein language is utilised in international management research and provide a central touchpoint for the state of language-related international management research over the past 25 years. It is our hope that through the categorisation of such themes, researchers are able to begin to not only sees what has been done in this domain, but to also address the challenges of language as a theoretical construct. As noted by Brannen et al. (2014, p.496), "the IB field has long recognized the importance of language barriers in firm internationalization and in conducting empirical research, the interplay between languages in the daily activities of international management remains opaque and poses a critical challenge to IB theory and practice (Welch et al., 2005)". As in past special issues and reviews, this work can serve to allow other researchers a starting point to develop such an important theory. For example, Boussebaa et al.'s (2014) work utilised a postcolonial historical view to highlight how corporate Englishization produces colonial-style power relations, or how Kulkarni and Sommer (2015) utilised social identity theory and language diversity to highlight changes to prosocial behaviour. Through this work diverse theories can be utilised by researchers to ground their own work as we communally move towards developing stronger theories of language.

The next section describes the method, sample and descriptive analysis. Then we provide general article summations, highlighting how language impacts and is utilised by businesses across specific management areas. Finally, we conclude with a general theoretical summation, suggest future research avenues for language-sensitive international management scholars and provide a detailed coding summary of each article reviewed.

2 The method, sample, and descriptive analysis

2.1 Method

The role of language in international management is both complex and broad reaching. Recognising that language can be used in many ways and throughout the management literature, we started our review by having a broad initial inclusion criterion. Following past reviews (Lehnert et al., 2015; Park and Lehnert, 2022), we utilised the business source premier via EBSCO search engine, limiting our search criteria to 1997–2022. 1997 is an appropriate starting point, as it is adjacent to Marschan et al.'s (1997) seminal work which changed the view of language as a cultural distinction to being part of a strategic component within business and research (Brannen et al., 2014).

Our selection of articles was informed by past research in international business (Samiee and Chabowski, 2012; Chidlow et al., 2014; Park and Lehnert, 2022) and the past research on the domain and knowledge areas of international management (Tenzer et al., 2017). We built our search based upon Boddewyn (1999) and then extended by Martínez and Toyne (2000). Boddewyn's (1999) paper characterises international management research that extend across borders. Building upon the International Management Division of the Academy of Management's domain statement, selected articles that fit within the functional areas of management (i.e., entrepreneurship, human resource management (HRM), operations management just to name a few) (Academy of Management Division, 2023). We also characterised the international aspect based upon Martínez and Toyne (2000) where the scope of the analysis was not just upon the international firm, but the multidimensional and multilevel view of international. As such, the cross-national component of the research question was the primary guiding factor. We then limited our analysis to those articles utilising language (either written, spoken or heard) as a component of the research question. For example, we did not include articles examining the HQ-foreign subsidiary relationship that do not utilise language though they have the cross-national component.

From this, we ran a wide range of keyword and abstract queries using 29 sets of search terms, including language AND (management, business, communication, international, translation, knowledge sharing, expatriate OR HRM). Articles were screened based upon the type and scope of publication, removing those publications not fitting the scope of business research (e.g., computer science journals, foreign language education journals). Titles, abstracts, and keywords of the remaining articles were reviewed, further removing those that did not fit the inclusion criteria of language-related international management research (e.g., did not utilise language, or was in a non-management domain). We compared our sample with those of the previous reviews of language-related research in business to ensure the rigor of our searches. The final article sample population of 263 articles from 119 different journals were coded for the review.

To ensure consistency in the coding process, the authors independently coded three articles and cross-checked the coding (Patton, 2002). Discrepancies were discussed, and coding rules were created to ensure consistency across raters. To verify inter-coder reliability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), approximately 10% of the articles coded by each author were cross-checked, with no significant differences in coding. Each coder would code and summarise the article to include: the level of appropriateness for the project, a summary of the research question, specific language-related area, the theory used, methodology, data analysis technique, sample type and size, findings, contributions, and future research. Our interrater reliability was 100% for the main theme and specific language-related area, internal vs. external focus of language, level of analysis, methods and data analysis, sample type and size. For additional content areas, which were determined by findings contribution and future research, IRR was 93.3%.

We then categorised content areas into the seven themes: language policy (including common corporate language, CCL); HRM and organisational behaviour (including expatriates, training, leadership, negotiations, and transnational teams); internationalisation (including international entrepreneurship); HQ-subsidiary relationship; knowledge sharing (including translation); corporate reporting and governance (including investor relations and board of directors); M&A and inter-firm strategic collaboration. We focused on the primary research questions and outcome to

categorise into the relevant theme. For example, Harzing and Pudelko (2014) investigated how HQ-subsidiary relationships are affected by language differences. Thus, this article was categorised into the HQ-subsidiary relationship theme. Recognising that many papers cross into secondary themes and components, we placed each article into a theme based upon that article's primary importance and research question and then highlighted the additional theme as appropriate based upon the individual article's emphasis. So, for the aforementioned Harzing and Pudelko (2014) paper, expatriates were found to help facilitate communication and knowledge transfer between HQ and subsidiaries, thus providing a secondary categorisation of HRM.

2.2 Descriptive analysis

With over 16,800 citations over the past 20 plus years, the impact of language in international management research is incredibly prevalent. As highlighted in Figure 1, even considering a spike in 2014–2015 due to special issues, growth has been continuous and pronounced.

Figure 1 Count of language-related management articles by year (1997–2022) (see online version for colours)
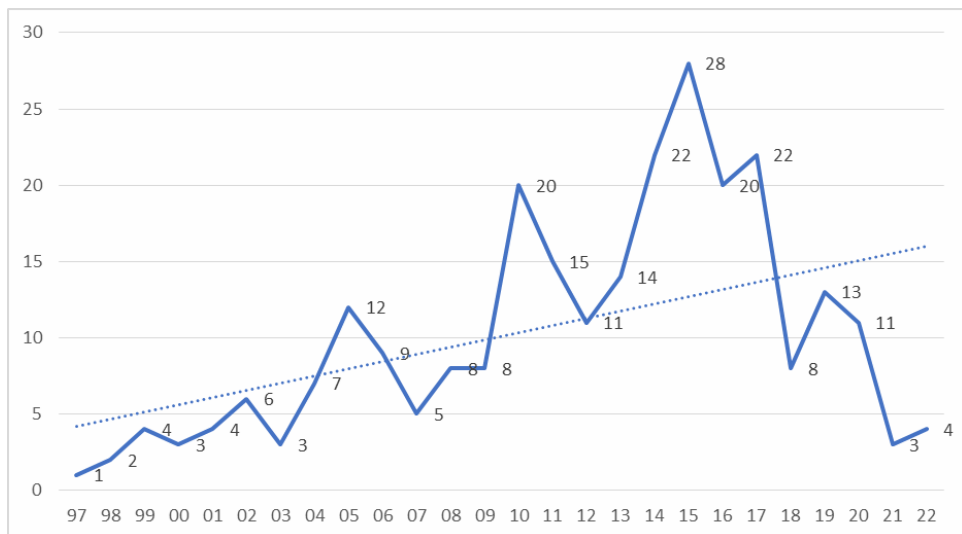
The descriptive analysis also revealed the most prominent journals focusing on language-related research in international management were the *Journal of International Business Studies* (26 articles), *Journal of World Business* (23 articles), *International Business Review* (20 articles), and *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* (16 articles). Appendix lists the journals with two or more citations and final counts of articles in the inclusion in our review.

3   Language for internal and external communication

Firms must address language issues both internally (within an organisational component, i.e., HR, knowledge transfer, leadership, etc.) and externally (such as through strategic outcomes, i.e., profits, efficiency, transaction costs, etc.). Because of this relational focus, the direction of language research (internal or external) has unique strategic implications.

Internal language research reflects those concerns where the firm must address language issues within firm structure. Research focusing on language issues within the organisation has explored the role of language in various management areas: employee behaviour such as anxiety, communication avoidance, trust, exclusion, identity issues, and power relations (Boussebaa et al., 2014; Kulkarni, 2015; Lauring and Klitmøller, 2015; Neeley et al., 2012); subsidiary knowledge sharing (Peltokorpi and Yamao, 2017); decision making (Hadjichristidis et al., 2016); online communication (Davis et al., 2009); human resource issues such as recruitment, career mobility, and expatriate adjustment (Itani et al., 2015; Peltokorpi and Vaara, 2014; Ravasi et al., 2015) HQ-subsidiary relationship (Björkman and Piekkari, 2009); corporate strategy and structure (Luo and Shenkar, 2006); firm performance (Dale-Olsen and Finseraas, 2020).

While the internal language focus reflects language issues within the firm, research highlights that it is not just a matter of direction. Internal issues with language reflect the need for a firm to clearly understand the identity and culture of its employees (Engstrom et al., 2009). Firms must understand the role of language from an employee base, where language is integral to employee comradery (Hinds et al., 2014), facilitates team building (Henderson, 2005) and can create a corporate culture of inclusion (Kulkarni, 2015). In addition, internal focus of language reflects how a firm sees itself regarding relationships within the firm. For example, Harzing and Pudelko (2014) highlight the importance of language in facilitating strong HQ-subsidiary relationships.

External language focus reflects concerns to address markets, partners, or strategies outside of the firm. Management researchers have focused on how linguistic factors affect the firm's communications with a variety of external entities: investors (Grinblatt and Keloharju, 2001), analysts (Cho et al., 2020), regulatory authorities (Aljifri and Khasharmeh, 2006), business partners such as collaboration/joint venture partners (Boode, 2005; Joshi and Lahiri, 2015); parties in a merger or acquisition (Dow et al., 2016), with language diversity and openness generally facilitating and having a positive impact upon these external strategies. Further, language research notes that failing to fully consider language-related issues in such external strategies can present significant barriers to success.

4   Language-related issues at individual/group/organisational levels

Language research has also been the focus of the impact of language on individual, group, and organisational levels. For many researchers, there is a focus of language issues on the individual organisational member. This level of research focuses on how that individual integrates their language to other organisational members. Individual-level research expands employee-focused issues, highlighting the role of culture, identity, and interpersonal relationships. It has focused on the role of bilinguals within the organisation (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014), language-based conflict/identity issues (Glinow et al., 2004; Kulkarni, 2015) and cognitive/emotional impact of linguistic factors such as

anxiety, trust, self-regulation (Kroon et al., 2015; Tenzer et al., 2014; Volk et al., 2014), where language commonality and openness has, in general, had a positive impact on these constructs. Individual language research has also highlighted how a common or shared language can improve leadership/decision making (Hadjichristidis et al., 2016; Zander et al., 2011), positively facilitate knowledge sharing from managers (Makela et al., 2007), job performance (Presbitero, 2017).

Group language research focuses on how the group dynamic is enhanced or challenged by within-team language issues such as team cohesion/performance and group dynamics within multilingual work teams (Henderson, 2005; Hinds et al., 2014; Lauring and Selmer, 2011), and language policies in a subsidiary (Peltokorpi, 2015b). This research broadly finds that language commonality enhanced group dynamics and language differences present barriers (Lauring and Selmer, 2013a, 2013b; Tenzer and Pudelko, 2016). Further, openness to language diversity, such as awareness of differences in language conventions, can provide new insights and improve communication and socialisation (Chen et al., 2006; Hinds et al., 2014).

Finally, organisational research focuses on how the overall organisation is influenced by language concerns, highlighting a CCL and organisational multilingualism. A CCL provided at best mixed results in organisational structure, failing to guarantee meaningful communication (Marschan et al., 1997; Bielenia-Grajewska, 2013; Welch et al., 2001) and often hindering knowledge sharing (Welch and Welch, 2008). Organisational research notes that language-sensitive recruitment practices influence hiring and training decisions (Cocchiara et al., 2016; Peltokorpi, 2017), can improve organisational performance (Ward, 2010) and develop organisational strategy and structure (Luo and Shenkar, 2006; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a, 1999b). Organisational literature also investigated foreign market entry modes (Slangen, 2011), HQ-subsidiary relationship (Björkman and Piekkari, 2009), M&A (Kedia and Reddy, 2016), and communication barriers with external stakeholders (Jimenez et al., 2019).

Table 1 shows different lenses that researchers have utilised to investigate the implications of language-related issues in various management areas in internal vs. external communications and at the individual/group/organisational levels. Table 1 also provides a snapshot of domain-specific investigations of language that may enrich the international management literature. This table highlights the seven management areas where language served as a focal point: language policy; HRM and organisational behaviour; internationalisation; HQ-subsidiary relationship; knowledge sharing; corporate reporting and governance; and finally, M&A and inter-firm strategic collaboration.

5 Strategic areas of language in international management

5.1 Language policy

Corporate language policy plays a critical role in addressing challenges posed by the multilingual nature of MNCs (Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio, 2011; Steyaert et al., 2011). Language policy covers a wide range of language-sensitive strategic management areas, including HRM, internationalization, corporate governance, HQ-subsidiary relationship, knowledge sharing, M&A, and inter-firm collaboration. Studies highlighted the importance of having language policy for linguistically diverse firms to manage

language-related problems such as language-based internal division, increased communication costs, confusion, and conflict (Bobek and Devitt, 2017; Dale-Olsen and Finseraas, 2020; Feely and Harzing, 2003).

Several studies focused on factors that can determine the multilingual firm's language policy, such as the nationality of the top manager or the firm. For example, Peltokorpi (2015b) found that subsidiaries with expatriate top managers have more language policies than those with local top managers. A separate body of research explored the strategic implications of the choice of language for various aspects of linguistically diverse firms, such as the impact of different languages in which firms communicate with investors on the investors' behaviour (Grinblatt and Keloharju, 2001), the role of language (English vs. native language) in leadership decisions (Zander et al., 2011), and the effect of the CEO's language choice on the perception of the firm's response to crisis (Barkley, 2020).

Choosing a CCL is a central language policy that can have major strategic implications. While some studies highlighted the benefits of CCL, such as reduced turnover intention, increased organisational credibility and knowledge sharing, and enhanced diversity climate (Froese et al., 2016; Lauring and Selmer, 2012a; Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta, 2012), a large body of research focused on the costs of CCL. Specifically, studies suggest that mandating a common language, (e.g., English-only policy) may result in identity-based fault lines (Bordia and Bordia, 2015; Boussebaa et al., 2014; Kulkarni, 2015), reduced knowledge transfer (Welch et al., 2001), anxiety and communication avoidance among individuals with low language proficiency (Neeley et al., 2012; Swift and Wallace, 2011), and unearned status gain and career mobility for native English-speakers (Latukha et al., 2016; Neeley and Dumas, 2016). Other studies focused on the impact of adopting common language in specific management contexts, such as use of e-HRM systems (Heikkilä and Smale, 2011) and cross-border mergers (Piekkari et al., 2005).

A separate stream of research highlighted the importance of integrating an MNC's language policies with its international strategy (Bouchien de Groot, 2012; Dhir and Gòkè-Paríolá, 2002; Marschan et al., 1997). Van den Born and Peltokorpi (2010) suggested that MNCs with language policies that align with their strategic orientation and HRM practices can reduce communication difficulties, while Andersen and Rasmussen (2004) reported that firms with no language strategy had to struggle with day-to-day communication problems.

Several studies went further to investigate the interrelationship between MNCs' language policy and their strategic decisions, such as the impact of international strategy on the choice of functional language (Luo and Shenkar, 2006) and the influence of language standardisation on international HRM strategies (Chitakornkijsil, 2010). From a resource-based perspective, Maclean (2006) asserted that language is a major issue that affects a firm's core competencies. In a similar vein, Selmier et al. (2015) explored the influence of language resources on an MNC's ability to bridge cultural and institutional boundaries.

5.2   *HRM and organisational behaviour*

Strategic management of human resources and employee behaviour is the foundation of strong business performance. HRM and organisational behaviour was the area with the largest number and studies investigating a variety of strategic implications of the role of language in international management, including HRM strategies, hiring, career

development, expatriates, job performance, organisational commitment, group dynamics, identity, inclusion/exclusion, leadership and decision making, power, negotiation, and other organisational behaviours.

In the context of HRM strategies and practices, Van den Born and Peltokorpi (2010) highlighted that alignment between an MNE's language policies and its HRM strategies is important in effective strategy. Heikkilä and Smale (2011) explored the impact of MNCs' language policy on e-HRM systems in foreign subsidiaries.

Hiring is another strategically important area that has attracted great attention of language-sensitive researchers. Studies explored job applicants' sociolinguistic cues, such as accent, as a crucial factor in hiring and promotion decisions (Cocchiara et al., 2016; Hosoda et al., 2012) while some of them highlighted the counterproductive effects of language-sensitive recruitment (Lockwood, 2012; Peltokorpi and Vaara, 2014). Peltokorpi (2017) found that language sensitive recruitment is positively associated with knowledge-transfer, which in turn improves absorptive capacity, i.e., 'the ability to recognise the value of new external information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends' [Cohen and Levinthal, (1990), p.128].

Employee career development is another area of HRM where language can play a key role. Several studies focused on positive impact of language training on major HRM outcomes, such as enhanced expatriate adjustment, absorptive capacity, and competence (Peltokorpi, 2017; Puck et al., 2008; Rozkwitalska et al., 2016). Relatedly, Itani et al. (2015) and Latukha et al. (2016) suggest that language skills facilitate career development through enhanced career mobility.

A large body of research has focused on the impact of language on expatriate success in the host country. The literature has highlighted the role of expatriates with the host country language ability as cultural mediators, primary boundary personnel, and communication facilitators between HQ and subsidiaries (Harzing and Pudelko, 2014; Hunt et al., 2000; Okamoto, 2011).

Several studies highlighted the importance of host country language ability in expatriate adjustment through enhanced intercultural communication and relationship with host-country nationals (HCN) (Ishii, 2012; Peltokorpi, 2007; Selmer and Lauring, 2015; Shaffer et al., 1999; Zhang and Harzing, 2016). A separate stream of research has further explored the impact of host country language ability on different facets of expatriate adjustment and the results have been mixed. Peltokorpi (2008) found that language proficiency enhances both work-and non-work-related adjustments. Takeuchi et al. (2002) reported a direct effect of language proficiency on expatriate work adjustment and an indirect effect on interaction adjustment through work adjustment. However, more recent studies showed that the influence of language fluency on general and work adjustment is either insignificant or weaker than interaction adjustment (Ravasi et al., 2015; Selmer, 2006; Wang and Tran, 2012). Separately, researchers have highlighted the importance of pre-departure language training as a crucial factor of expatriate success (De Eccher and Duarte, 2018; Graf, 2004; Hutchings, 2003). In the same vein, Puck et al. (2008) found that language ability significantly affects expatriate adjustment while cross-cultural training does not.

A separate stream of research focused on the relationship between host country language proficiency and expatriate performance. Here the findings have also been mixed. Some studies found a positive effect of language proficiency on expatriate performance (Chen and Lin, 2019; Ishii, 2012). Relatedly, Malul et al. (2016) showed

that the linguistic gender marking gap between home and host country is negatively associated with expatriate performance. By contrast, Wang et al. (2014) suggest that language proficiency is not directly related to expatriate performance.

Another stream of research specifically examined the role of language in individuals' and multilingual teams' performance. Language ability was positively associated with performance through enhanced self-confidence and communication (Chen et al., 2006; Li et al., 2019; Presbitero, 2017) while lack of language ability reduced work accomplishment (Davis et al., 2009; Pudelko and Tenzer, 2019; Śliwa and Johansson, 2015). A team's openness to language diversity was found to be positively associated with the performance of individual team members and the team (Lauring and Jonasson, 2018; Lauring and Selmer, 2011) while language ostracism reduced performance particularly in group situations (Dotan-Eliaz et al., 2009).

Highly committed and satisfied employees are critical to a firm's strong performance and research explored the impact of language-related issues on employee commitment and satisfaction. Froese et al. (2016) suggest that firms can reduce inpatriate turnover by using English as a CCL in the headquarters. Noting the double-edged sword of language diversity, Ritz and Alfes (2018) caution that language diversity can reduce employees' commitment to their organisation.

Team dynamics are major forces that can influence the direction of a team's performance and language has been found to have a significant effect on team dynamics. Studies reported that for team dynamics there was a significant positive effect of using a CCL though results were mixed. Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) found that the use of a CCL enhances trust within teams while Neeley et al. (2012) noted conflicting evidence for teams with a CCL reducing trust in teams by activating negative emotions. Several studies specifically focused on the impact of language-related issues on the dynamics of multilingual virtual teams. For example, Tenzer and Pudelko (2016) found that language barriers affect the choice of communication media that multilingual virtual team members use for their inner-team interactions.

A separate stream of research explored identity issues that language diversity can cause. Several studies highlighted identity-based conflicts resulting from language-related challenges, such as varying common language proficiency and conversation style differences (Aritz and Walker, 2010; Aveiga et al., 2011; Bordia and Bordia, 2015; Boussebaa and Brown, 2017). Relatedly, studies suggest that language proficiency differences in multilinguals organisations may result in social categorisation based on the us vs. them mentality (Dotan-Eliaz et al., 2009; Hinds et al., 2014; Kroon et al., 2015; Kulkarni and Sommer, 2015; Lauring, 2007). Such identity-based conflicts, however, can be reduced by enhanced language proficiency (Barner-Rasmussen and Björkman, 2007; Holtzhausen and Fourie, 2008; Voss et al., 2014).

The role of language regarding leadership and decision making has been another fertile area of research. A stream of research suggests that the language-leadership relationship may be bi-directional. For example, linguistic factors may affect leadership styles (Du-Babcock and Tanaka, 2017; Rao-Nicholson et al., 2020) whereas leadership competency may influence workplace foreign language competency (Ward, 2010). A separate stream of research suggests that foreign language use can affect decision outcomes and behaviours, such as the cost, speed and quality of decision making, and decision-making biases (Hadjichristidis et al., 2016; Harzing et al., 2011; Keysar et al., 2012; Volk et al., 2014).

Language can have implications for strategic HRM by playing a significant role in power distribution in multilingual organisations. Individuals with higher language fluency gained status and power, which led to higher centrality in the organisation (Brock et al., 2000; Neeley and Dumas, 2016; Śliwa and Johansson, 2014; Tenzer and Pudelko, 2017; Vaara et al., 2005; Virkkula-Räisänen, 2010). Studies also found that varying language corporate language proficiency among organisational members can have a structural impact on the organisation. For example, Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999b) suggest that varying language skills, such as fluency, can create a shadow structure in which individuals with higher fluency in both the company language and the subsidiary country's language have capacity to influence the formal communication lines.

Finally, a large body of research suggests that varying language proficiency in a multilingual firm can have a significant impact on individuals' affective experiences, attitude, and behaviour. Wang et al. (2020) reported that both native and non-native English speakers experience anxiety in intercultural communication. Lauring and Selmer (2012b) found a positive relationship between language diversity and positive dissimilarity attitudes. Several studies explored behavioural outcomes of lack of language proficiency, such as communication avoidance, code-switching, and reduced cooperative behaviour (Aichhorn and Puck, 2017b; Akkermans et al., 2010; Gargalianou et al., 2017; Lauring and Klitmøller, 2015). Studies also explored the impact of varying levels of fluency in a common language on various behaviours in meetings that involve both native and non-native English speakers (Rogerson-Revell, 2010; Sweeney and Hua, 2010; Swift and Wallace, 2011). Aiken et al. (1998) and Lim and Yang (2008) suggested that computer-supported cooperative work systems can be effective in reducing language barriers in negotiations and meetings.

5.3 Internationalisation

The importance of foreign language proficiencies for success in international business cannot be overemphasised, especially in terms of global expansion and internationalisation. As a result, a large body of research explored the role of language in operating in foreign markets, the choice of foreign market entry modes, and international entrepreneurship. Specifically, studies explored the impact of language distance and barriers on multinational strategy and structure, international opportunity recognition, export performance, and the performance of international cooperative projects (Hejazi and Ma, 2011; Hurmerinta et al., 2015; Jimenez et al., 2019; Maley and Kramar, 2010; Stoian et al., 2011). Language proficiency has also been found to positively affect online firms' strategic decisions in the international market, including selection of a target country and the number of language versions of a company's website (Schu and Morschett, 2017; Usunier and Roulin, 2010).

Several studies investigated the impact of language barriers on MNCs' international entry-mode choice (López-Duarte and Vidal-Suárez, 2010; Vidal-Suárez and López-Duarte, 2013). For example, Slangen (2011) found that communication barriers are positively associated with Greenfield, i.e., establishing a new subsidiary (vs. acquisition) entry. A separate stream of research focused on the impact of entrepreneurs' language ability on their internationalisation efforts. Specifically, language ability has been found to positively affect entrepreneurs' international success, export performance, speed of internationalisation, trusting cross-cultural relationships, and higher-quality

exchanges (Asasongtham and Wichadee, 2014; Ellis, 2011; Francioni et al., 2017; Johnstone et al., 2018; Musteen et al., 2010; Sui et al., 2015).

5.4   *HQ-subsidiary relationships*

Studies on HQ-subsidiary relationships highlight HQ-subsidiary control relationship and knowledge transfer. A stream of research has focused on the influence of language on various aspects of subsidiary control in MNCs, such as the degree of control and process compliance at the subsidiary (Björkman and Piekkari, 2009; Gray and Massimino, 2014; Harzing and Feely, 2008). For example, Harzing and Pudelko (2013) and Logemann and Piekkari (2015) found that HQ and subsidiaries use language and translation to increase their power over each other, which can lead to power-authority distortion between HQ managers and subsidiary managers. Andersen and Rasmussen (2004) highlight the importance of having a language strategy as a way to reduce the power-authority distortion problem. Peltokorpi and Vaara (2012) identified four types of recontextualisation, i.e., changes in meaning of practices when adopted in a new context – of language policies and practices in subsidiaries contingent on HQ-subsidiary control relationship.

From a knowledge transfer perspective, a stream of research explored the role of language in knowledge sharing between HQ and subsidiaries. Studies found that language differences hinder HQ-subsidiary knowledge transfer while HCNs' corporate language proficiency is positively associated with reverse knowledge transfer (Harzing and Pudelko, 2014; Peltokorpi, 2015a). Contractor et al. (2016) suggest that the use of common language can facilitate transfer of intangibles between HQ and subsidiaries whereas Langinier and Ehrhart (2020) caution that the mandated use of the parent language can motivate subsidiary employees to engage in translanguaging, where those who speak multiple languages utilise and access different linguistic features. Studies also suggest that the relationship between language and HQ-subsidiary knowledge transfer may be affected by other factors. Shared vision and media richness were identified as mediators, and subsidiary type and communication frequency as moderators in the relationship between language and HQ-subsidiary knowledge transfer (Peltokorpi, 2015b; Peltokorpi and Yamao, 2017; Reiche et al., 2015).

5.5   *Knowledge sharing*

Cross-cultural knowledge sharing is a critical factor of international success of a firm and individuals with higher language skills and the ability to utilise such skills as fluency and translation facilitate knowledge sharing by playing various boundary-spanning roles (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Dhir, 2005; Welch and Welch, 2008). Studies found that shared language facilitates knowledge sharing while linguistic distance hinders knowledge sharing effectiveness (Ambos and Ambos, 2009; Klitmøller and Lauring, 2013; Makela et al., 2007). In the same vein, studies showed that poor language skills or lack of knowledge of each other's language. leads to reduced knowledge sharing or unequal distribution of knowledge (Civico, 2019; Sunaoshi et al., 2005; Welch et al., 2001). Interestingly, Schomaker and Zaheer (2014) found that linguistic distance is negatively associated with ease of knowledge communication but is positively associated with knowledge understanding.

From a language policy perspective, Ahmad (2017) showed that individuals with multilingual (vs. monolingual) knowledge-sharing networks perform better and Peltokorpi and Vaara (2014) found an inverted U-shaped relationship between language-sensitive recruitment and knowledge transfer. Lauring and Selmer (2013a) showed that openness to linguistic diversity is positively associated with knowledge sharing. Other studies highlighted the importance of translation for effective cross-cultural knowledge transfer (Holden and Michailova, 2014; Zhong and Chin, 2015).

5.6 *Corporate reporting and governance*

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the impact of linguistic factors on corporate reporting and corporate governance. From a corporate reporting perspective, researchers have explored firms' decisions regarding disclosing their financial information in English (Aljifri and Khasharmeh, 2006; Jeanjean et al., 2010), the impacts of dual-language or English language reporting on corporate disclosure behaviour, foreign ownership, analyst following, information asymmetry, and investors' information processing costs (Jeanjean et al., 2015; Leventis and Weetman, 2004). Several studies focused on the comparison between English language and native language reporting with regard to various consequences, such as the audience's reading behaviour, purchase of the company stock, analysts' forecast errors, and corporate information disclosure during conference calls (Brochet et al., 2016; Cho et al., 2020; Courtis and Hassan, 2002; Grinblatt and Keloharju, 2001). Separately, researchers have investigated the role of linguistic factors in the interpretation of international accounting standards (e.g., International Financial Reporting Standards) and translations.

From a corporate governance perspective, a stream of research explored the role of language in the corporate board room. Volonté (2015) suggests that linguistic factors can affect corporate governance by determining board composition. Santacreu-Vasut et al. (2014) observed a significant influence of gender marking of the HQ's home country language on female presence on the MNC's board. Piekkari et al. (2015) highlighted the challenges that worker representation on the corporate board poses due to their lack of language proficiency. Separately, Kang and Kim (2010) observed a positive influence of shared language between the acquiring firm and target on post-acquisition governance activities. Burke et al. (2020) showed that low English proficiency of foreign component auditors leads to adverse audit outcomes, such as lower audit quality.

5.7 *M&A and inter-firm strategic collaboration*

A considerable amount of research has been published on the role of language in M&A and inter-firm collaboration. In the context of M&A, a stream of research has investigated the impact of shared language and linguistic distance between the acquirer and target on post-acquisition governance activities, and the acquirer's equity stakes in the target (Cuypers et al., 2015; Dow et al., 2016; Kang and Kim, 2010). Several other studies explored the impact of linguistic factors, (e.g., linguistic distance and language fluency) on various outcomes in the context of M&A, such as post-acquisition performance, unbalanced opportunities between employees of merging firms, employee anxiety, and identification with the merged firm (Kroon et al., 2015; Piekkari et al., 2005;

Welch et al., 2005). In general, throughout these interactions, language barriers are detrimental to employee performance and opportunities, increase anxiety, and reduce firm identification.

A separate stream of research has focused on the impact of linguistic factors on various aspects of cross-cultural inter-firm collaboration. Hwang (2013) found that language barriers hinder interorganisational collaboration while Downey and Bedard (2019) reported little impact of language barriers. Joshi and Lahiri (2015) found an inverted U-shaped relationship between partners' language friction index and likelihood of cross-border R&D alliance formation. Comu et al. (2010) suggest that multilingual project networks outperform monolingual networks. Separately, Boode (2005) indicates that language can affect the organisational design and communication in an international joint venture.

6   General discussion and research trends

Clearly language is an essential component throughout all aspects of international management. This review highlighted the content areas across seven broad research themes relating to language: language policy; HRM and organisational behaviour; internationalisation; HQ-subsidiary relationship; knowledge sharing; corporate reporting and governance; and M&A and inter-firm strategic collaboration. This clearly highlights the importance of language as a strategic construct and one that should not be relegated to an afterthought within business strategies.

In addition, this study directs language-sensitive researchers' attention to the role of language in an external focus, reflecting markets, partners, or strategies outside of the firm, where language is an important component, which has been under-researched and largely ignored by previous reviews (Chidlow et al., 2014, Karhunen et al., 2018; Tenzer et al., 2017). By highlighting the language issues that have been explored regarding external, as well as with internal entities, this review provides a more complete picture of the strategic implications of language issues in management. Finally, the current review conducted a multi-level analysis of the role of language to help MNCs address language issues at the right level of the organisation (individual, group, or organisational level).

This research also highlights the trend of language-related research in management. Some specific issues have continued to attract attention over time (1997–2021). These include research projects focusing on the benefits and limitations of adopting a CCL, language issues in the context of M&A, and language barriers as a major factor of communication problems, expatriate adjustment, knowledge sharing, organisational behaviour (including power/control, identity, conflict, communication behaviour, exclusion, and emotions), corporate governance and reporting, HRM (including hiring, training, performance, and career mobility), and internationalisation (including exporting, entrepreneurship, and market entry modes). These themes have been and remain common and important components of language related research. It is noteworthy that M&A and corporate governance and reporting have been largely ignored in the previous reviews, though they have been productive language-sensitive research areas for more than two decades.

On the other hand, some trending research topics in the early years have not continued into later years. For example, the numbers of studies urging firms to integrate language policies into the strategic loop of the MNC, other functional activities, or

systems such as e-HRM systems fast increased in the early years of our review. But the initial thrust of research has shifted, as many multilingual firms have recognised the importance of addressing language issues in connection with the firm's strategic objectives and needs. Where we see a shift is from exploring language related to broader strategic issues, (e.g., the importance of the integration of language strategy into the firm's strategic loop) toward looking into language's impact in specific contexts or functional areas (e.g., knowledge sharing, corporate governance and reporting, HRM, and internationalisation).

Several areas that did not garner much attention in the early years have fast gained traction in the latter half of the 1997–2021 period include inter-firm strategic collaboration, translation, and language policy. Researchers are utilising these dominant research streams and focusing them on specific instances that impact the world at the time of research. As highlighted above, shifting research contexts also reflect broader conversations that are happening throughout management, where language is a critical component. Research is expanding its lens to include organisational strategies in addition to individual or group dynamics and internal impacts of language alongside external influences.

7 Conclusions

7.1 Theoretical implications

Our analysis highlights several important methodological – specifically, external validity – issues that future language-related international management studies should be alert to. First, there was a lack of consideration of factors such as countries, cultures, and industries, in examining the impact of language on international management (Deeter-Schmelz et al., 2019; Neeley and Dumas, 2016; Peltokorpi and Clausen, 2011; Tenzer et al., 2014). The role of language may be more or less important in certain contexts. Countries and nationalities are essential factors in language-related research because they may be highly correlated with the language proficiency (especially in English) of the respondents. Recognising cross-industry differences of required levels of English proficiency is essential too. For example, researchers should use caution when generalising their findings with industries requiring high English proficiency to other industries where high English proficiency is not crucial. Further exploration of the complex interplay between language and other factors that can affect the role of language is another promising future research area.

7.2 Managerial implications

This paper provides important implications for managers who craft and execute strategy in multilingual contexts. This study reviews studies on language-related management issues in terms of internal as well as external communication. We particularly highlighted the role of language in external communications. This will alert MNE managers to the challenges arising when they formulate and implement strategies that involve external entities, such as investors, analysts, regulatory authorities, and business partners. Such a grouping is of value to industry and managers, as they may not always think about language issues in terms of internal or external communication strategies. Such a

viewpoint can provide insight into managerial decision and highlight where potential blind spots may be present for management in their communication strategies.

We also grouped the articles in the sample into seven key strategic management areas where language plays an important role: language policy; HRM and organisational behaviour; internationalisation; HQ-subsidiary relationship; knowledge sharing; corporate reporting and governance; M&A and inter-firm strategic collaboration. A systematic review of how language-related issues interrelate with various factors in each strategic management area will help MNE managers make more informed decisions in their functional areas. This is of particular value to a cross-section of managers who struggle with a myriad number of challenges relating to language in their role. Such a segmentation of ideas provides managers with a quick assessment of those studies that directly affect their specific strategic need.

7.3 *Future research*

Future research is encouraged to explore the inter-relationships between language and culture. Even with the incredible body of literature on culture and international business (Hornikx and O'Keefe, 2009; Kirkman et al., 2017; Taras et al., 2010), there is still the opportunity to explore those aspects of culture where language can either facilitate or hinder communication (Aichhorm and Puck, 2017; Froese et al., 2016; Klitmøller and Lauring, 2013). In particular, we call for more research that embraces language as a theoretical component in international studies (Hornikx et al., 2023), rather than a control or demographic variable which may serve as a proxy for culture (Park and Lehnert, 2022).

The effect of foreign or second language processing on various areas of organisational behaviour, such as negotiation and leadership styles, is a good avenue for future research (Du-Babcock and Tanaka, 2017; Tenzer and Peltokorpi, 2016). In particular, future researchers can explore how non-native language processing influences strategies and approaches used in the negotiation process, which may, in turn, determine the negotiation outcomes.

Further exploration of interplay between language and other factors, such as organisational culture, leader-member exchanges, linguistic identity, and personality, is another promising future research avenue (Bordia and Bordia, 2015; Luo and Shenkar, 2006; Peltokorpi, 2010; Presbitero, 2017). Finally, non-native English speakers may show different behaviours when using different communication channels (e.g., face-to-face, email, videoconferencing, mixed-mode form of communication. Investigating language-related behaviours across different communication channels is a good avenue for future research (Lauring and Klitmøller, 2015; Li et al., 2019; Tenzer et al., 2014).

As Tenzer et al. (2014) noted, research on language in international management has predominantly used qualitative methods such as case studies. We call on future researchers to delve into the research on language in international management utilising more quantitative methods, such as experimental designs that can isolate the impact of language from other factors. Also, many studies noted the possibility of validity issues because of self-report methods (Horn, 2017). This is an especially important issue in language-related research because, in most studies, language ability was measured based on self-evaluation of the respondents or perception-based items rather than their actual levels of language ability (Peltokorpi and Yamao, 2017). Future research should

endeavor to ensure accurate information on language proficiency by using objective measures as well as subjective measures.

7.4 Limitations

This work is not without limitations. While we endeavoured to review and code as many articles as possible, there is always the possibility of missing an article. Further, while we have a strong coding rubric and engaged in intercoder reliability, many articles crossed disciplines and had many outcomes and contributions across many different areas, which may have been minimised in our coding process. We worked to minimise this by cross-referencing codes, engaging in focused article searches and inter-coder reviews. We also engaged in a manual coding process, which allows for a specific determination of inclusion and coding. However, we recognise that computer-assisted technologies would benefit this research and could enhance our content areas and themes. However, resource constraints limited our ability to engage in this. Lastly, our search was limited to English language articles only; as such articles in other languages were excluded.

In closing, we explored two major needs within the discipline (internal vs. external focus of language and level of analysis – individual, group and organisational), and addressed the call for a broader future research agenda. As highlighted in other reviews (Park and Lehnert, 2022), there is a need for a broader explanatory synthesis of language within international management. We extended this synthesis by identifying seven themes across our content areas.

Each of the studies reviewed highlighted many different theoretical viewpoints to explain the role of language in management. These diverse lenses give breadth and expand the scope of how language is utilised in management. In truth, our seven broad research themes – language policy; HRM and organisational behaviour; internationalisation; HQ-subsidiary relationship; knowledge sharing; corporate reporting and governance; and M&A and inter-firm strategic collaboration – speak to all areas of management, with no domain untouched by language research.

This diversity is both a strength and a detriment to future research of language in international management. The diverse perspectives allow language research to reach all areas. However, there is a great need for movement towards an underlying theory within this diversity. Often, we see language as a control variable, or a proxy for cultural or structural contrast. Language often becomes a means to evaluate another desired outcome. Such a view can discount how important language is, seeing it as a descriptive component rather than an explanatory and theoretical one. Researchers should clearly note when language serves as a descriptive variable/component or a theoretical one.

Within the theoretical domain, future research should explore how language can serve as a domain in itself, and work to ground the research in a theory of language (Hornikx et al., 2023), looking at how language is a component itself, rather than a proxy. It is our hope that this work helps drive this conversation, looking at the synergies of language within these themes. Researchers can extend this and begin to develop mechanisms or explanations for the inclusion of language, prompting the growth of the field and seeing how this important construct is essential to the function of business.

Table 1 is available on request by emailing the corresponding author or can be obtained under https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mkt_otherpubs/3.

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Appendix

Table A1 Journals reviewed and article count

Journal title	*# of articles*
Journal of International Business Studies	26
Journal of World Business	23
International Business Review	20
The International Journal of Human Resource Management	16
Corporate Communications: An International Journal	13
The Journal of Business Communication	11
Management International Review	7
Journal of International Management	6
Int. Studies of Mgt. and Org.	4
Journal of Managerial Psychology	4
Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources	3
Cross Cultural Management	3
European Management Journal	3
Journal of Business and Technical Communication	3
Thunderbird International Business Review	3
Academy of Management Learning and Education	2
Asia Pacific Business Review	2
Cross Cultural and Strategic Management	2
European Management Review	2
Human Resource Management	2
International Journal of Business Communication	2
International Journal of Cross Cultural Management	2
International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management	2
Journal of Communication Management	2
Journal of International Accounting Research	2
Journal of Management in Engineering	2
Journal of Management Studies	2
Management and Organisation Review	2
Multinational Business Review	2
Journals with just one reviewed article	90
Grand total	*263*