

## **Limits of language: Stylistic, linguistic and modal convergence in blue-collar communication**

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**Abstract:** The present study examines how two Danish manufacturing companies communicate corporate information to blue-collar employees located in foreign production units. By drawing on interview and document data from the companies' communication departments, this study investigates whether staff at headquarters take any particular considerations into account when they communicate with blue-collar employees. The findings – which are discussed on the basis of communication accommodation theory (CAT) (Giles & Wiemann 1987) and the concept of foreigner talk (Ferguson 1975) – reveal that communication professionals at headquarters converge towards blue-collar employees in three distinct ways: in the form of stylistic, linguistic, and modal convergence. The findings also suggest that the need for convergence arises due to three sector-specific factors, namely the economic geography of manufacturing, the physical work environment of production units, and the educational level of blue-collar employees.

**Keywords:** blue-collar employees, manufacturing, vertical communication, multinational corporations, communication accommodation theory, foreigner talk

### **1. Introduction**

Multinational corporations (MNCs) made up of geographically dispersed units must address a number of issues related to linguistic diversity. In these organisations, language can create a boundary between different organisational units, and company-internal communication is to a large degree dependent on successful communicative boundary spanning (Barner-Rasmussen et al. 2014). Within the international business and management literature, an increasing amount of interest has been directed towards language as a separate topic of enquiry in recent years, resulting in a string of research focusing on the role of language in MNCs (Brannen, Piekkari & Tietze 2014; Piekkari & Tietze 2011; Piekkari & Zander 2005). In line with this emerging field of research, commonly referred to as language-sensitive research in international business and management (Brannen et al. 2014; Tenzer, Pudelko & Harzing 2014), the present paper sets out to examine the role of language in a particular industry sector, namely manufacturing.

Due to the global nature of manufacturing, companies operating within this sector commonly coordinate activities across multiple geographical locations (Bartlett & Ghoshal 1989: 51–53). This makes manufacturing a particularly interesting site to study cross-language interaction. The present study focuses on communication directed towards a specific group of employees – production workers, also known as blue-collar employees<sup>1</sup> (Toppinen-Tanner, Kalimo & Mutanen 2002). Blue-collar employees are defined by the physical labour they perform, usually in lower-ranked positions, in contrast to white-collar occupations, where employees typically focus on knowledge work, or other managerial or administrative tasks (Lucas & Buzzanell 2004: 274).

All manufacturing companies employ, by virtue of being manufacturers, a number of production workers, and wage premiums can be described as one of the primary cost concerns for manufacturers. In a quest for cost-saving measures, manufacturing companies will typically locate

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the term 'blue-collar worker' is a broad term that encompasses people who perform different tasks and hold different positions in the workplace. The term has been criticized for not taking these factors into consideration, and for being disrespectful to people who perform manual work (see Gonçalves & Schlute 2017; Lønsmann & Kraft 2018). While acknowledging that this criticism has been raised, the designation 'blue-collar' is an established expression in academic and popular literature, and the present paper uses the term in line with existing research in international business and management.

their plants where the costs are the least (i.e. commonly known as ‘the least cost theory’; Weber 1929, in Clark, Feldman & Gertler 2000). For this reason, European manufacturers tend to offshore their production to cheap labour economies, e.g. rural China and South-East Asian countries, where they can employ local blue-collar employees (Blinder 2006).

Several previous studies find that the educational backgrounds of employees often are limited at the lower level of the organisational hierarchy, which in turn has been linked to limited foreign language skills (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio 2011; Björkman & Piekkari 2009; Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen & Piekkari 2006; Hagen 1999). Against this backdrop, one can expect that the characteristics of individual blue-collar employees, such as educational background and foreign language skills, will have an impact on language and communication practices in these organisations. Linguistic differences between employees at the corporate headquarters and employees in foreign production units can make it difficult to establish direct and effective lines of communication, which can impair company-internal collaboration and cohesion. The lack of a shared language between employees can also pose a challenge to the implementation of a company language. As discussed by Sanden and Kankaanranta (2018), a large number of MNCs headquartered in Scandinavia have adopted English as a common corporate language in an attempt to address issues of linguistic diversity in their workforce. However, if certain employees or groups of employees, such as blue-collar workers, are unable to communicate in the common corporate language, this language strategy may be less effective.

The present study aims to look further into blue-collar communication by investigating how communication professionals in two manufacturing companies headquartered in Denmark – a small and relatively linguistically homogeneous northern European country (Thompson 2014) – communicate corporate information to employees working in foreign factories and production units. This gives rise to the following research question: how is corporate information in Danish manufacturing companies communicated to blue-collar employees located in foreign production units? Building on qualitative data from two Danish case companies, *Electronic*<sup>2</sup> and *Sport*, the study investigates whether, to what extent and why communication professionals located in these companies’ headquarters make particular choices in their blue-collar communication. After a brief review of existing research in this area, and an introduction to the case companies, the findings from the study are discussed in the light of communication accommodation theory (CAT) (Giles, Coupland & Coupland 1991; Giles & Wiemann 1987) and the concept of foreigner talk (Ferguson 1971, 1975). These theories are used as frameworks for analysing the various ways in which interlocutors tend to adjust to each other. By drawing on the concept of convergence, i.e. a strategy of adjusting one’s communicative behaviour towards the other party’s communicative behaviour, a theoretical model of convergence in headquarters (HQ) and blue-collar communication is put forward. This model distinguishes between three types of convergence tactics, namely stylistic convergence, linguistic convergence, and modal convergence.

## **2. Blue-collar communication: insights from previous research**

Manufacturing “includes the physical or chemical transformation of materials, substances, or components into new products” (UN 2008). Companies operating within the manufacturing sector produce a tangible asset, a good, which they sell to customers in exchange for money. Thus, manufacturing is typically described as a labour-intensive economy, in which communication may be seen as a means of achieving maximum production effectiveness and generate economic value (Grin, Sfreddo & Vaillancourt 2010). However, as discussed by Duchêne and Heller (2012), the traditional view of production – the ‘old economy’ – characterised by “extreme labour discipline and supervision of work, aimed at minimising production time per unit of commodity” (Duchêne & Heller 2012: 326)

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<sup>2</sup> All names, including people and companies, are pseudonyms.

is challenged by the demands of the emerging 'new economy'. As customers increasingly value individual customer service, target advertising and niche markets, companies in all industry sectors are forced to show flexibility in their communication in order to accommodate the demands of the customers.

Manufacturing is often described as a typical 'global' industry combining high degree of global integration with low degree of local responsiveness. The two dimensions of global integration and local responsiveness are commonly seen as determining criterion for a company's multinational strategy (Bartlett & Ghoshal 1989). Where global integration "refers to the centralized management of geographically dispersed activities on an ongoing basis" (Prahalad & Doz 1997: 14), i.e. the degree to which a company coordinates its activities across countries, local responsiveness, on the other hand, "refers to resource commitment decision taken autonomously by a subsidiary in response to primarily local competitive or customer demands" (Prahalad & Doz 1997: 15), i.e. the degree to which a company adapts to specific requirements within the various local markets. In a 'global company', increased cooperation and coordination of activities across borders may also result in increased cross-language interaction in internal work processes. In this way, manufacturing companies are truly multilingual organisations (Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman 2007: 106), where employees at all hierarchical levels may encounter linguistic diversity and heterogeneity in their everyday communicative situations (Andersen & Rasmussen 2004; Feely and Reeves 2001). Findings from existing research suggest that the composition of employees in manufacturing companies is likely to have an effect on language practices and corporate communication in these organisations due to the employees' individual-level characteristics. As noted by Feely (2004: 329), manufacturing may be particularly vulnerable to cross-language communication problems: "Manufacturing companies characterised by very large numbers of employees and generally modest educational levels, may suffer more than service organisations such as international banking or IT corporations where numbers [of employees] are lower but educational standards on the whole will be higher".

A related problem in blue collar-communication stems from the tendency of manufacturing companies to locate their production units in cheap labour economies. The linguistic distance – which is a measure of how different various languages are in relation to one another – may be large between the local language and the language commonly used at the corporate headquarters. In Chiswick and Miller's (2008) model, linguistic distance is measured on a scale ranging from 1.00 to 3.00, where the lower score (1) is given to languages with the highest linguistic distance to English, and the higher score (3) is given to languages with the shortest distance to English. The national language of Denmark, Danish, has a short distance to English (2.25), compared to for example many Asian languages, where e.g. Japanese and Korean are the two languages with the lowest score (1.00) and consequently the highest linguistic distance to English. As many Scandinavian manufacturing companies have located their production facilities in Asian countries, the linguistic distance between employees at the companies' various organisational units may further complicate inter-organisational communication (on the topic of measuring differences between languages, see also Dow & Karunaratna 2006; Reiche, Harzing & Pudelko 2015).

It is only in recent years that blue-collar communication has become a topic of academic inquiry. Yet, the growing literature on blue-collar workplaces has shown that there are certain characteristics of manual work that makes these workplaces particularly interesting sites to study communication practices. For example, Strömmer's (2016) study of an immigrant worker in Finland revealed very limited opportunities to interact and practise language learning with other workers, due to the isolated nature of the job. In a similar vein, Handford's (2014) study of construction communication found that high levels of noise on the construction site led to limited small talk and relationship-building, and that the most frequent patterns of interaction were related to problem solving. However, Goldstein's (1994, 1996) pivotal study of Portuguese immigrant workers in Canada demonstrated that these employees' language choice was highly dependent on social factors.

In this particular case, most Portuguese-speaking employees preferred to speak Portuguese over English to maintain social acceptance among their Portuguese colleagues, even though the use of English could have provided them with better working conditions and higher salaries. Other studies provide further insight into the management of multilingual blue-collar workplaces. In the two Scandinavian companies included in Lønsmann and Kraft's (2018) study, the authors found a tension between the language policies developed by the management and the linguistic practices of the companies' production workers. Contrary to the English language policy of one of the companies, warehouse workers rarely used English but were nevertheless expected to take part in English courses. Gonçalves and Schluter's (2017) case study of a multilingual cleaning company lead by a Brazilian-American owner shed light on how the management can use language as a tool to control the workforce. Here, the owner's ability to act as a language broker between her Portuguese-speaking staff and English-speaking clients intensified her control over the employees.

Several authors find that employees in blue-collar occupations tend to have lower foreign language competences than employees in 'typical' white-collar positions (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio 2011; Björkman & Piekkari 2009; Fredriksson et al. 2006; Hagen 1999). In particular, Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio's (2011) study of language use in subsidiaries' communication with other MNC units found considerable variation in language fluency level across functions, where general managers displayed significantly higher language fluency levels than employees in the production units. On the background of these findings, Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio (2011: 107) state that the variation in language skills "may have important implications in a situation where MNC units are increasingly expected to communicate laterally and learn from each other – yet these implications may be quite hidden from top managers, who are less likely to encounter language problems in their own jobs and among their own peers". Hagen (1999) found a similar distribution of foreign language skills in a survey of foreign language needs and competences in European countries. In the UK sample, comprising of 423 export companies, the majority of personnel who possessed language skills other than English were found in managerial positions (31 %), whereas only 8 % of 'technical' staff members reported that they had knowledge of one or more foreign language(s).

Similarly, in Fredriksson et al.'s (2006: 410) study of the German engineering company Siemens, the authors observe that "employees at lower hierarchical levels are more likely to speak only the local language". This study found that differences in language skills between employees at the operative level caused "a wide gulf between those who had the necessary language skills and those who did not" (Fredriksson et al. 2006: 417). Varying degrees of language competence of subsidiary staff has also been coupled with control mechanisms emanating from the corporate headquarters. This was one of the findings in Björkman and Piekkari's (2009) study of Western-owned subsidiaries in Finland and China, where subsidiaries with low language competence were found to be controlled by centralisation to a greater extent than subsidiaries where staff members displayed higher language competence levels. Also here, the authors note that the "language competence of subsidiary staff is likely to be associated with the level of education and thus be a factor calling for local differentiation" (Björkman & Piekkari 2009: 107).

Still, increased cooperation within the MNC may require blue-collar workers to find on-the-spot solutions to the linguistic and communicative needs they experience. In a study of communication between blue-collar employees in a Danish manufacturing firm with R&D facilities in India, Søderberg (2012: 247) for instance, observed how employees often had to find a way to communicate despite their different language backgrounds. One of Søderberg's informants explained that: "Sometimes, when tools that have been designed and developed in India are manufactured in Denmark, the Indian team members are required to collaborate with workers at the Danish factory, and the company does not always send a professional translator who can facilitate the dialogue". Malkamäki and Herberts (2014) found similar evidence in the Finnish manufacturer Wärtsilä. While acknowledging that employees usually preferred to speak their native language in the factories, the

management of Wärtsilä found it necessary to also ‘force’ them to read English as the company had adopted English as its common corporate language.

The use of English as a common corporate language, or a lingua franca, has in itself been related to a specific form of cross-language communication in international business. The concept of ELF, i.e. English as a Lingua Franca, and furthermore, BELF, i.e. Business English as a Lingua Franca, which refers to the use of English as a shared corporate language in business, has gained foothold in international business communication research (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta 2005; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta 2011). As BELF represents a shared language for conducting business, “the point of reference for competence must be the language of a ‘business professional’, not that of a ‘native speaker’” (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta 2011: 248). Tietze (2008: 97) comments on the emergence of BELF in international business when stating that “this particular lingua franca is not tied to regional/national, cultural or social groups, but to a particular occupational-professional group, viz. business people and managers”.

Even if native English language proficiency not necessarily is a goal in itself, MNCs may try to improve the English language skills of employees by e.g. offering language training. However, previous studies suggest that it can be difficult for blue-collar workers to find the time to attend language classes. As in the previously mentioned study by Lønsmann and Kraft (2018), the companies’ mandatory English courses soon became a source of frustration for warehouse workers, who watched their work pile up whenever they were away for classes. Also Goldstein (1994) discusses how most employees were unable to attend English language training, in this case after working hours, as they found it physically and emotionally difficult to be away from their families at night. Other studies suggest that the lower educational level of blue-collar workers may limit the benefits of company-funded language training programmes for employees (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio 2011; Björkman & Piekkari 2009; Fredriksson et al. 2006; Hagen 1999). In particular, Grin et al. (2010: 149) argue that “language skills are of greater value to some employees than others [...] for example, employees in the financial sector (which tend to benefit more from language skills than other sectors do)” and furthermore (149): “Generally, it makes sense that language training beyond initial instruction be differently funded by sectors”.

Consequently, previous studies show that a lack of foreign language skills among blue-collar workers: i) can create communicative problems in manufacturing companies, and ii) that the communicative problems of employees in manufacturing companies may be difficult to address through corporate-level initiatives such as language training. These observations indicate that efficient blue-collar communication may depend upon the sender of the information, and the sender’s ability to accommodate the communicative needs of blue-collar employees.

The present study makes use of the analytical framework of CAT, originally developed by Giles and Wiemann (1987) (see also Giles & Coupland 1991) to explain “relational processes in communicative interaction” (Giles et al. 1991: 2). One of the key features of CAT is the differentiation between convergence and divergence, which refers to the extent to which people either adapt to or distinguish themselves from the communicative behaviour of others. Where convergence refers to “a strategy whereby individuals adapt to each other’s communicative behaviors” (Giles et al. 1991: 7), divergence represents the opposite strategy, namely “the way in which speakers accentuate speech and nonverbal differences between themselves and others” (Giles et al. 1991: 8). As the present study sets out to examine whether communication professionals make any particular considerations in their blue-collar communication, this motivation resonates well with the concept of convergence, as defined by Giles and colleagues.

Ferguson’s (1971, 1975) concept of ‘foreigner talk’ can offer additional insights into how employees at the corporate headquarters adjust their communication to employees at foreign subsidiaries. The term ‘foreigner talk’ refers to a form of simplified speech with “registers of a special kind for use with people who are regarded for one reason or another as unable to readily understand

the normal speech of the community” (Ferguson 1971: 117). In his study of foreigner talk in English, Ferguson (1975) demonstrated that the principal characteristics of simplified speech included grammatical omissions, expansions and rearrangement, as well as lexical substitutions. As in the case of convergence, it is worth noting that the speaker’s simplified speech is based on his/her own language competence, and not the competence of the foreigner. Consequently, there is a risk that the speaker’s accommodation through the use of convergence and foreigner talk can be based on false assumptions. The result may be that the accommodation in fact represents a divergence from the recipient’s own speech, rather than convergence (Bell 1984). Another point of critique raised by Fedorova (2015) concerns the impact of social conditions on foreigner talk in particular. Based on the findings from her study of Russian native speakers, Fedorova argues that native-to-non-native communication is much more complex than portrayed by Ferguson, and that social roles and setting also will affect the speaker’s choice of communication strategy. In line with this argument, one could assume that the corporate context is likely to have an effect on the type of communication that takes place between headquarters and subsidiaries, which the present study aims to examine further.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Two Danish case companies*

As the Scandinavian languages are spoken predominantly by inhabitants in the Nordic region, Piekkari, Welch and Welch (2014: 14–22) observe that Nordic-based firms will have to address language and communication at an early stage of their internationalisation processes. The present study examines how two Danish manufacturing companies – Electronic and Sport – address issues of language and communication in their internal modes of communication, i.e. company-internal communication (Sanden 2016). The study therefore gives emphasis to communication that takes place within these two corporations, such as information exchange between various units, departments, divisions or subsidiaries belonging to the same organisation (Bartlett & Ghoshal 2002), with a particular focus on communication patterns between the corporate headquarters and the various production units, commonly referred to as vertical communication (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari 2002).

Case studies offer the possibility to examine the phenomenon – here blue-collar communication – in its own context (Piekkari, Welch & Paavilainen 2009). Including data from two case companies allows for cross-case comparison within the same industry sector, which in line with Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2009) provides a strong basis for gathering compelling evidence. Inspired by a critical realist view on case study research, this study also emphasises the role of context when investigating blue-collar communication in the two case companies (Welch et al. 2011). A brief introduction to the case companies’ background and characteristics is therefore in place.

Table 1: Overview of case companies

	<b>Electronic</b>	<b>Sport</b>
Description	Leading electrical engineering company	Major producer of wearing apparel
Year founded	1945	1963
Number of employees, 2013 (approximate number)	19,000	19,000
Employee composition, 2013	47 % blue-collar employees, 53 % white-collar employees, 4 % employees on special terms	88 % blue-collar employees, 12 % white-collar employees
Revenue in 2013, in million euros (approximate number)	3000	1000
Present in number of countries, 2013 (approximate number)	55	85

Electronic Holding A/S is one of the world's largest electrical engineering companies within their product segment. Today, it employs roughly 19,000 people in total<sup>3</sup>, and consists of more than 80 companies in 55 countries worldwide. The company's matrix structure and high degree of international operations implies regular communication patterns between the headquarters located in Denmark and the various subsidiaries, i.e. vertical communication, as well as between various Electronic companies, i.e. horizontal communication (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari 2002). Electronic uses British English as its common corporate language, which is formalised in the company's official language policy dating from 2002. However, the language policy also states that communication within a subsidiary should be conducted in the local language. Electronic has a translation department that translates external material only.

Sport A/S is a major producer of apparel and sports equipment. From a small start-up in 1960, the company has increased its international outreach significantly, and Sport's products are now sold in more than 80 countries worldwide. The company has also grown dramatically in terms of number of employees in recent years. In 2003, Sport employed close to 10,000 employees, and this number rose to 19,000 by the end of 2013, mostly due to increased recruitment of production workers in the company's largest factories located in Thailand, Indonesia, China, Portugal and Slovakia. Sport does not have an explicitly formulated language policy, but the use of English is widespread for internal communication purposes, according to key informants. The company has recently established a new communication department at the corporate headquarters in Denmark.

In Electronic, production workers make up approximately 47 % of the company's total number of employees, whereas in Sport, production workers account for almost 88 % of the total workforce.

<sup>3</sup> All numbers are from annual reports and other publicly available sources.

The lower percentage of production workers in Electronic is due to their highly technical product line which requires the use of specialised machinery rather than manual work processes, as in Sport. The remaining percentage of employees can be described as white-collar employees, which includes all personnel in administrative and managerial positions as well sales in both companies. In addition, a small group of employees in Electronic (4 %) are employed on special terms and “for whom Electronic installs facilities aimed at the employees’ physical, psychological or social problems” (Electronic’s sustainability progress report 2015).

Despite their different lines of products, the production of goods represents the core of both Electronic’s and Sports’ business activities. Both companies distribute corporate mass communication from their centralised communication departments located at the corporate headquarters. Electronic’s and Sport’s communication departments are thus located in Denmark, but the communication professionals at headquarters may draw on local assistance from the companies’ regional or local administrative departments when needed, and in some cases also external resources, such as local translators and interpreters.

### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

The data material included in this study consists of semi-structured interviews, visits to the companies’ headquarters, and document data. As is evident from the overview of informants presented in Tables 2 and 3, 24 interviews were conducted with managers and employees working with language or communication related issues in the period August 2012–February 2015.

Table 2: Overview of informants Electronic

Informant ID	Job title	Interview language	First language (L1)	Duration
Electronic_1	Communication professional	Danish	Danish	45 min
Electronic_2	Communication professional	Danish	Danish	70 min
Electronic_3	Communication professional	Danish	Danish	55 min
Electronic_4	Communication professional	Danish	Danish	60 min
Electronic_5	Translator	Danish	Danish	50 min (phone)
Electronic_6	Personal assistant	Danish	Danish	40 min (phone)
Electronic_7	HR manager	Danish	Danish	55 min
Electronic_8	Senior vice president	English	Swedish	35 min (phone)
Electronic_9	Project consultant	Danish	Danish	60 min
Electronic_10	Project manager	English	Hungarian	60 min
Electronic_11	Student assistant	Danish	Danish	45 min
Electronic_12	Consultant	English	Spanish	55 min
Total interview time: 10 hours and 30 min				



Table 3: Overview of informants Sport

Informant ID	Job title	Interview language	First language (L1)	Duration
Sport_1	Communication professional	Danish	Danish	90 min (w. Sport_2)
Sport_2	Communication professional	Danish	Danish	90 min (w. Sport_1) 60 min
Sport_3	Communication professional	English	English	270 min 80 min 25 min (phone)
Sport_4	Personal assistant	Danish	Danish	70 min
Sport_5	Personal assistant	English	Danish	40 min
Sport_6	Consultant	English	Chinese	60 min
Sport_7	Consultant	Danish	Danish	30 min
Sport_8	Project manager	English	Russian	30 min
Sport_9	Product manager	Danish	Danish	50 min
Sport_10	Trainee	Danish	Danish	70 min
Total interview time: 14 hours and 35 min				

The interviewees were identified by a snowballing/chain sampling strategy (cf. Patton 2002: 237), where contact persons in Electronic and Sport were asked to reach out to colleagues in particular business areas, for example in the company's communication department, HR department, etc. It should be emphasised that this is a one-sided study of blue-collar communication as the interview data only consists of responses collected from white-collar employees at the companies' headquarters. Thus, the present study is focusing on the management of blue-collar communication, i.e. how employees at the corporate headquarters manage their communication directed towards blue-collar employees at foreign subsidiaries, rather than blue-collar communication as a two-way process between the corporate headquarters and the foreign subsidiaries. The perspectives of blue-collar employees and employees at foreign subsidiaries in general have not been accounted for in the analysis. This can be seen as a limitation in the sense that subsidiary staff members could have provided additional insight into the companies' language management and communication practices. Unfortunately, it was not possible to travel and conduct interviews at the companies' production facilities due to time and resource constraints. Instead, this limitation has been addressed by triangulating interview data from different informants, in particular the responses from informants who have worked in foreign production units, and company documentation.

At the same time, there is also a potential problem associated with interviewing a small number of informants, as the risk of response bias is higher (Yin 2009: 102). This limitation can be reduced by asking follow-up questions during the interview, which gives the interviewees a chance to amend, amplify or critique their own statements. Follow-up questions are particularly useful when interviewing informants about their reported practice, i.e. when informants are asked to give their own account of how they communicate with blue-collar-employees. As discussed by Björkman, Barner-Rasmussen and Li (2004: 453), reported language practices can constitute a method bias if they are not consistent with actual language practices, i.e. how informants actually communicate with blue-collar employees. Although it is difficult to eliminate the response bias altogether, the risk can be managed by being aware of this limitation during the interview situation and when analysing and reporting on interview data.

The majority of interviews were conducted at the companies' headquarters, or over telephone

when physical meetings could not be arranged. The informants were asked some background questions at the beginning of the interview, including questions about their first language. Almost all Scandinavian speakers were interviewed in their first language by the native Norwegian-speaking interviewer who is also fluent in Danish, except one native Swedish-speaker who preferred to be interviewed in English. All non-native Scandinavians were interviewed in English. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in the original interview language, as shown in Tables 2 and 3, and the interview data was subsequently analysed in the original interview language in the qualitative data analysis programme NVivo, version 10 for Windows. Scandinavian language quotes were translated into English as part of the reporting process. Some examples of how the Scandinavian interview data was translated is presented in the Appendix.

In addition to interview data, different types of relevant documentation, such as language policies, communication policies, strategy documents etc., were also carefully analysed in NVivo. A wide variety of documents were collected, both internal material which was provided by informants in the case companies, and publicly available material, which could be obtained from the companies' websites.

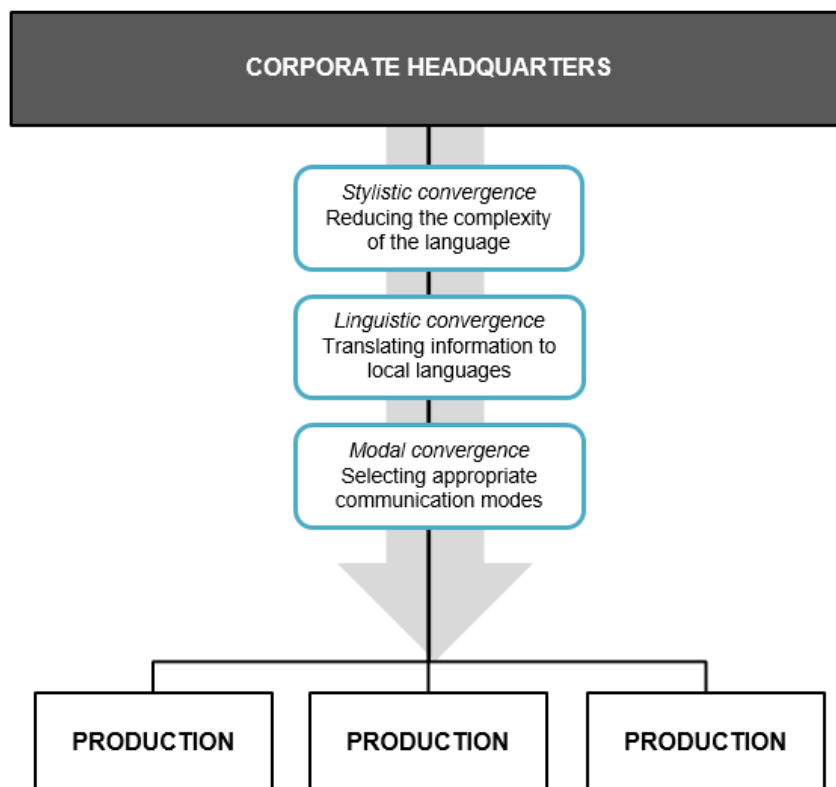
The NVivo coding system was largely inspired by Corbin and Strauss' (1990, 2008) framework distinguishing between different hierarchical levels of codes. The data analysis was based on three coding levels; company-specific codes (level 1); category codes (level 2), and major themes (level 3). An overview of the coding scheme is presented in the Appendix. The distinction between level 1 and 2 codes was made primarily for practical reasons, in order to organise the codes according to the two Danish case companies. The level 2 codes, which are the thematic codes, may therefore be described as aggregated level 1 codes, as they combine the company-specific data from the two groups of level 1 codes. The level 2 codes emerged from three different sources. The first level 2 codes were developed on the basis of insights from the existing literature, for instance in relation to the foreign language skills of blue-collar workers. Moreover, a number of codes were developed based on the semi-structured interview guides which had been prepared prior to the interviews and respondents' replies to the interview questions. Finally, the data itself gave rise to the last level 2 codes.

After having completed the thematic coding, all level 2 codes were carefully reviewed and clustered together according to common topics. The search for these common topics was part of a process that Corbin and Strauss (1990: 14) refer to as 'selective coding', in which codes that are thematically close are unified under a common category to form the next level of codes (Corbin & Strauss 1990; Corley & Gioia 2004). These level 3 codes consequently formed the basis for the presentation of findings and the following discussion.

#### **4. Findings**

The data analysis resulted in a theoretical model of vertical communication flows from the corporate headquarters located in Denmark and the two companies' production units, as illustrated in Figure 1. By drawing on the concepts of convergence from CAT (Giles, Coupland & Coupland 1991; Giles & Wiemann 1987), and foreigner talk (Ferguson 1971, 1975), Figure 1 depicts how employees at the corporate headquarters may alter or change communication towards blue-collar employees through accommodation tactics and simplifications. The following discussion will focus on three types of convergence, as they were identified in the data material obtained from Electronic and Sport, which will be referred to as *stylistic convergence*, *linguistic convergence*, and *modal convergence*.

Figure 1: Vertical communication flow with increasing degree of convergence



The terms stylistic, linguistic and modal convergence convey the type of convergence that employees at the corporate headquarters make use of in their blue-collar communication. However, they also reveal some assumptions that employees at the corporate headquarters base their convergence on, namely assumptions about blue-collar employees. As mentioned in relation to the theory on CAT and foreigner talk, the convergence or speech adjustments made by the sender of information will be based on his/her own evaluation, which may or may not correspond to the actual language competences of the receivers of the information. Although the interview data did not include any examples of overt divergence from headquarters employees, it cannot be ruled out that blue-collar employees experience divergence at their end, if the convergence made by headquarters employees is based on inaccurate assumptions. For this reason, Figure 1 shows a one-way relationship of convergence practices between the corporate headquarters and the companies’ production units.

4.1. Stylistic convergence

Given the highly multilingual environment of the two case companies, it is not surprising that informants indicate that successful language-boundary crossing may require interlocutors to make certain stylistic alterations in order to get the message through. Variances within the common corporate language, English, may be referred to as differences in communication style, which according to Williams and Spiro (1985: 434) can be defined as “the synthesis of content, code, and communication rules into unique and infinite combinations”. Adjusting one’s communication style, register of language or degree of formality can be considered a mild, yet often necessary, form of convergence, according to the following informant:

If you talk to a person that is not that proficient in English, then don’t use too many excess

words, or extra words, because then they will just wonder “what does that mean?”. Instead, say “have you received this? Yes or no?”, but avoid long explanations [say] “you have to do so and so”, but not “if you would like to, it would be appropriate if you would do so and so”.

-Electronic\_7, HR manager

It is clear from this quote that the HR manager’s stylistic convergence towards an imagined interlocutor bears close resemblance to the simplified speech variety described by Ferguson (1971, 1975) as foreigner talk. The interviewee’s choice of style suggests that the adjustment of speech is an example of foreign accommodation, where the use of a simplified register is regarded appropriate for non-native speakers of English.

Another respondent from Electronic, who is in frequent contact with colleagues in foreign subsidiaries, notes that the high degree of international collaboration in the project she is working on affects the material she and her colleagues develop in her department. This informant has explained that project material may be translated into as many as 28 languages when information is targeted and distributed to all Electronic’s employees. The need to communicate corporate information in local languages (as will be discussed in the following section) makes this informant reflect upon her communication style also before the material is subjected to translation:

That is something we have to think about of course, and that is also something we think about when we make brochures and roll-ups and posters, that it is possible to translate the formulations we use – they need to be translatable, and they also need to function in different cultures.

-Electronic\_11, Student assistant

Even if English is said to be the corporate language of both Electronic and Sport, it is evident from interview and document data that the companies employ individuals with different levels of English skills. One of the younger informants in Sport, who is a native Dane and has learned English as part of her compulsory school education, says that she initially felt nervous about her own English skills when she first started working in Sport. However, after having worked closely with several of Sport’s foreign production units, in particular the ones located in Asia, she now feels differently about the situation. The interviewee reports that she often simplifies her English when communicating with colleagues in the factories:

In Indonesia, their English is very basic, and you learn to talk slowly, and find a different way to communicate. You wouldn’t use the same phrases as you do when you talk to other colleagues.

-Sport\_10, Trainee

Avoiding difficult words and complex sentences is clearly one way of adjusting one’s communication style, as expressed in the previous quote. In line with the concept of foreigner talk (Ferguson 1971, 1975), this interviewee makes use of lexical substitutions by replacing her normal phrases with simplified variants when communicating with Indonesian employees. It is clear from her statement that this is a deliberate strategy on her end, which reveals that the stylistic adjustments are made in response to the interviewee’s assumptions about the communicative competences of blue-collar

employees.

These examples provided by respondents in Electronic and Sport show that informants may turn to stylistic convergence and simplifications in their blue-collar communication, which affects how certain messages are communicated in terms of communication style. However, if altering one's communication style in the common corporate language is not enough, the next step may be linguistic convergence.

#### 4.2. Linguistic convergence

Both Electronic and Sport have adopted English as a common corporate language for internal communication purposes. Out of the two companies, Electronic is the only one with a formal language policy document, stating that British English is the company's corporate language. The decision to use British English in Electronic is based on two reasons, according to the company's language policy guidelines; firstly, because British English is the English standard taught in the Danish education system, and secondly, because Britain is "geographically, culturally and historically" close to Denmark. However, the language policy also states that local country-specific communication within one of Electronic's subsidiaries can be conducted in the local language of the country. This is expressed as follows in the company's language policy:

Being an international group of companies Electronic needs a shared corporate language, and this shared language is British English. [...] Corporate language does not mean that everybody employed by Electronic all over the world must speak and write English in all communication. [...] [C]ommunication within a local Electronic company will – and should – be in the local language.

This distinction between group level communication and local country-specific communication can be seen as somewhat contradictory. One informant in Electronic, who took part in developing the company's language policy, explains why the policy encourages the use of local languages in local communication:

It would be artificial if a company that employs Danes only, for example, if they [Danish employees] had to speak English to each other, because it has been decided by somebody higher up in the organisation, that would be artificial and wrong, and it would also prevent us from achieving the best results.

-Electronic\_5, Translator

Evidently, Electronic's language policy should not be seen as a strict regulation, but rather a guideline for how to communicate internally in the organisation. Another informant in Electronic's communication department elaborates on how the language policy should be read in terms of language choice:

The policy was adopted when I started at Electronic, and in principle it is correct that we want to use corporate English for all employees, but those who work in the factories don't speak English. They may understand English but they can't speak English and they can't write English, so if we want to reach all employees, both in the production and in the administration, we have to use the language of the target group. That's the thing with our corporate English – our mass communication to the entire organisation is in English but if we want to reach segmented target groups, for example blue-collar workers or

blacksmiths in the production, we have to approach them in the language they speak.

-Electronic\_1, Communication professional

This informant provides a strong case for linguistic convergence in blue-collar communication, with the result being that Electronic's communication department frequently translates corporate communication that goes out to all employees.

In Sport, the use of English as a common corporate language is described by informants in the communication department as a default choice, and a pragmatic choice prompted by having a highly international and linguistically diverse workforce. In a multilingual organisation, the choice of English was seen as a way of establishing a common communicative ground. Yet, respondents in Sport also report that the English language skills of blue-collar employees may challenge the notion of English as a common corporate language in the company. Two headquarters employees who worked in Sport's production facilities in Indonesia for a period of time say the following about the English proficiency level of locally-employed factory workers:

There are 5000 employees, and the majority of those are locals, and all the bosses speak English because they need to communicate with HQ, but the rest are probably only fluent in Indonesian.

-Sport\_9, Product manager

At the operative level it is all in Indonesian, because they are all Indonesians, and the people in the sewing line are also Indonesians, and it is only the people relatively high up [in the hierarchy] that are actually able to speak English, and they are the ones who communicate with the management down there.

-Sport\_10, Trainee

As stated in these quotes, the interviewees report that English skills tend to be scarce among employees at the operative level, and usually a skill possessed only by the local managers. This has implications for the communication department, which wants to establish tighter communicative lines with the production units. One of Sport's communication professionals elaborates:

They [blue-collar employees] feel very disconnected from the company because they sit and make shoes every day and actually don't make the whole shoe but just a part of the shoe [...] they never see the result of their work. [...] we became aware of the last couple of years that they don't even know what happens to these shoes, where they are sold, how they are sold, how we sell them, what happens to the shoes they make.

-Sport\_3, Communication professional

The scenario described by this informant can be seen as a form of organisational isolation. The absence of a direct communication channel between the corporate headquarters and the company's blue-collar employees leads to a disconnection from the rest of the corporation (Logemann & Piekkari 2015). Interview data suggest that the risk of organisational isolation increases due to the linguistic distance between employees at the corporate headquarters and employees in foreign production units

(Chiswick & Miller 2008).

Also in Electronic, as stated in the following excerpt, the large number of blue-collar employees affects the choice of language, both in Denmark and at foreign production sites. Thus, communicating corporate-level information in the local language of the production workers is often a requirement:

Wherever there is production, there will always be – I mean, there will be unskilled workers who do not have an English language background, or the corporate language you have [if you have a foreign language as the corporate language], there you will always have this problem that you have a large group of employees with whom it is important to communicate, and especially if you have production in several countries.

-Electronic\_7, HR manager

In this excerpt, the informant describes how Electronic, being a manufacturing company, employs a large number of production workers who tend to have limited English language skills. For this reason, the use of the local language is deemed necessary. Consequently, the composition of employees and their language competences can be seen as a criterion for language use internally in the company.

#### 4.3. *Modal convergence*

The term ‘communication mode’ refers to the ‘mode’ one chooses as the format of communication (Altheide 1994; Fjermestad 2004). A distinction is often made between written, oral, and visual communication modes, which also serves as a useful distinction here (Lehtonen 2011; see also Mondada 2006, 2009 on the topic of multimodal resources). A common finding in both Electronic and Sport is the widespread use of visual and oral communication directed towards blue-collar employees. An informant in Sport’s communication department explains why written communication often is unsuitable:

It’s not just the language, but the fact that a lot of them don’t read at all, that’s a consideration that we take into account in the communication department, how we can make some visual material, printed material, that shows different things, how we can convey things to them. But in the end word of mouth is probably going to be a good way to do most things that are important anyway.

-Sport\_3, Communication professional

Communication professionals in Electronic report that they make similar considerations in their blue-collar communication. One informant explains that her department commonly relies on visual communication, in particular videos, to accommodate different target groups internally in Electronic, also those who may be less proficient in English:

We use as much visual and as little verbal communication as possible. There is of course speech in the videos, but everything that is not said by the speaker is subtitled, and I’m considering whether we should also subtitle what the speaker is saying, because not everybody understands English well enough. The speaker has to talk clearly and pronounce words properly when a local person or a group is being interviewed [in a foreign language], so that people can understand it, or if it is difficult to understand, we can subtitle it, but we try to be as visual as possible and use as few words as possible.

## -Electronic\_9, Project consultant

In the existing language-sensitive research in international business and management, the adjustment of communication mode has been discussed to some extent as a way of addressing emergent language needs at the front-line level, i.e. for employees who are directly involved in producing the company's product, or employees who are in direct contact with the company's customers (McGregor & Doshi 2018). Previous research has primarily focused on how written medium communication holds certain benefits over oral medium communication. Charles and Marschan-Piekkari (2002), and Harzing, Köster and Magner (2011) discuss how different speech varieties, such as accents, may cause comprehension problems, and Shachaf (2008: 136) found in her study of global virtual teams (GVT) that "non-native English speakers were able to express themselves better through email than by talking". Sanden and Lønsmann's (2018) study shows that among engineers and technicians, the use of the visual mode, e.g. in the form of sketches, can be useful to overcome communication problems resulting from the language barrier. The findings from the present study adds further insight into the use of modal convergence by bringing attention to how visual modality also can be seen as a form of convergence. Interviewees in Electronic and Sport explain that oral communication is believed to be more efficient than written communication when directed towards blue-collar employees. As is evident from the interview data presented above, the interviewees find that there is a limit of language in their multilingual organisations, as written communication, regardless of what language it is written in, often is an inadequate mode to reach blue-collar employees due to limited literacy skills. Therefore, employees in the two companies' communication departments strongly suggest that there is a need for visual material and oral messages in corporate mass communication.

It appears that the use of oral and visual communication primarily stems from headquarters employees' understanding and assumptions about the preferences of blue-collar employees. While neither of the companies have established formal routines for eliciting information about the communicative needs of employees at the foreign subsidiaries, informants explain that they occasionally ask middle managers for feedback regarding the material that communication professionals at the corporate headquarters produce for all employees in the entire company. Besides this direct feedback from managers at the foreign subsidiaries, informants report on little direct contact between the corporate headquarters and subsidiary employees. This can partly be ascribed to the physical working environment of the production units, which makes two-way communication difficult. Informants in both case companies reflect upon this in the following quotes:

Another consideration is the way they work, you can set up a kiosk or a little stand with a computer with local information or a bulletin board, but when you have 2500 people working on one shift, how much access is there to that one computer, you also have to think about the way they work as well, how you can reach them.

## -Sport\_3, Communication professional

We have the challenge with our production workers that they cannot just run to a computer. I sit in front of my computer almost the entire day, but they don't do that, they do of course have some computer stations, but it is difficult to reach them because they do not work with a computer.

## -Electronic\_4, Communication professional



Here, the two communication professionals explain that they may refrain from using certain communication mediums, such as computer-based communication, when communicating information to blue-collar employees. In this way, opting out of a communication mode may also be seen as a form of convergence.

At this point, the original message may have undergone three stages of convergence; firstly, stylistic convergence, in an attempt to reduce the complexity of the language (usually in the common corporate language, English), secondly, linguistic convergence, where the information is translated from the original language (usually from the common corporate language, English, or Danish into the local language(s)), and thirdly, modal convergence, which involves selecting the appropriate communication mode. The following discussion will examine the implications of these findings.

## 5. Discussion

Electronic and Sport are two manufacturing companies faced with many of the same challenges in relation to the management of blue-collar communication. The findings presented above show how communication professionals located at the corporate headquarters report to accommodate blue-collar employees through increasing degree of convergence in their communication. The findings also bring attention to the outcomes and implications of the different convergence practices, which will be further addressed in the following discussion. After considering the implications of stylistic, linguistic and modal convergence, the discussion will turn to explore the reasons why employees at the corporate headquarters find it necessary to accommodate blue-collar employees in their communication practices.

First, as discussed by Ferguson (1971: 117) all speech communities have simplified speech registers which are used to communicate with people who are regarded unable to understand normal speech. In line with the concept of foreigner talk, the multinational corporation can be seen as a speech community of its own. Stylistic convergence per se appears to be a common phenomenon in multilingual organisations made up of speakers with a multitude of different language backgrounds. As previously mentioned, BELF is seen as a neutral language in the sense that its users are expected to avoid local terminology and culturally-bound idioms (Jenkins 2015; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta 2011). However, findings from the present study have shown that stylistic convergence often represents an insufficient form of convergence in order to reach out to blue-collar employees with limited English language skills.

Despite the choice of English as a common corporate language, informants from both Electronic and Sport highlight the importance of communicating corporate information in the local language of blue-collar employees. This can be related to the value that blue-collar employees create for the two manufacturing companies. Manufacturers are by definition companies whose *raison d'être* is to produce a physical product, which necessarily requires personnel in the production of their business operations. This may seem like an obvious observation, but it nevertheless raises some interesting questions as to what constitutes a corporate language. If we acknowledge that blue-collar workers are vital for producing the goods that lay the foundation for these companies to exist, and we furthermore acknowledge that the professional competence of blue-collar workers is more important than their foreign language competence which, based on what this and previous studies have shown (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari 2002; Fredriksson et al. 2006) often necessitates the use of the local language in company-internal communication, we need to reconsider the meaning of the terms 'English lingua franca' and 'English as a common corporate language' within the manufacturing sector. In the case of Sport for example, the use of English may exclude the majority of the company's workforce, which clearly challenges the notion of a 'common language'. Instead, English as a common corporate language is in fact to be interpreted as the 'cross-border language', or the language one should use when communicating with others across national and linguistic borders. In this way, 'corporate language' refers to the language used by corporate-level functions, i.e. specific divisions

that coordinate activities across national and linguistic borders company-wide (Feely & Harzing 2003; Guadalupe, Li & Wulf 2014), as opposed to the operating functions of the firms – the production units. Hence, it may make more sense to talk about the use of English as a divisional language for personnel who collaborate and maintain regular contact with international colleagues in corporate level functions, such as marketing or finance.

Findings from Electronic and Sport have also pointed to the role of communication modes in vertical communication. Whereas some attention has been given to the preference of written over oral communication in international business (e.g. Charles & Marschan-Piekkari 2002; Harzing et al. 2011; Shachaf 2008), successful blue-collar communication appears to be based primarily on visual and oral communication. This observation calls attention to how contextual factors influence the management of different communication modes, and that no communication mode is superior in all communicative situations. Rather, the appropriateness of the different communication modes appears to reshuffle on the basis of the communicative needs of the target group.

Thus, it is fair to conclude that communication professionals indeed do converge when communicating to blue-collar employees and the previous discussion has demonstrated the various ways in which they attempt to do so. Data from Electronic and Sport also reveal some of the reasons why it is necessary to accommodate for the needs of blue-collar workers in corporate communication. First of all, the two manufacturers are present in a large number of international locations; Electronic is present in approximately 55 countries worldwide and Sport in more than 80. Several of these countries score low on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores (ETS 2014), such as China where both companies have large production facilities. Furthermore, as two very geographically dispersed manufacturers with large shares of foreign production, many of Electronic's and Sport's employees will be speakers of languages with a high linguistic distance to English. Cantonese and Mandarin are for example two languages with high distance to English according to Chiswick and Miller (2008), with scores of 1.25 and 1.50 respectively. The language competences and practices of the companies' workforce are clearly important factors to account for in corporate communication, as high linguistic distance can create feelings of organisational isolation and disconnection from the company's ongoing activities (Logemann & Piekkari 2015). These observations therefore echo Welch, Welch and Piekkari's (2005: 12) statement that managers need to acknowledge that "language skills are people skills" and that "language consequences are tied up with the management of people".

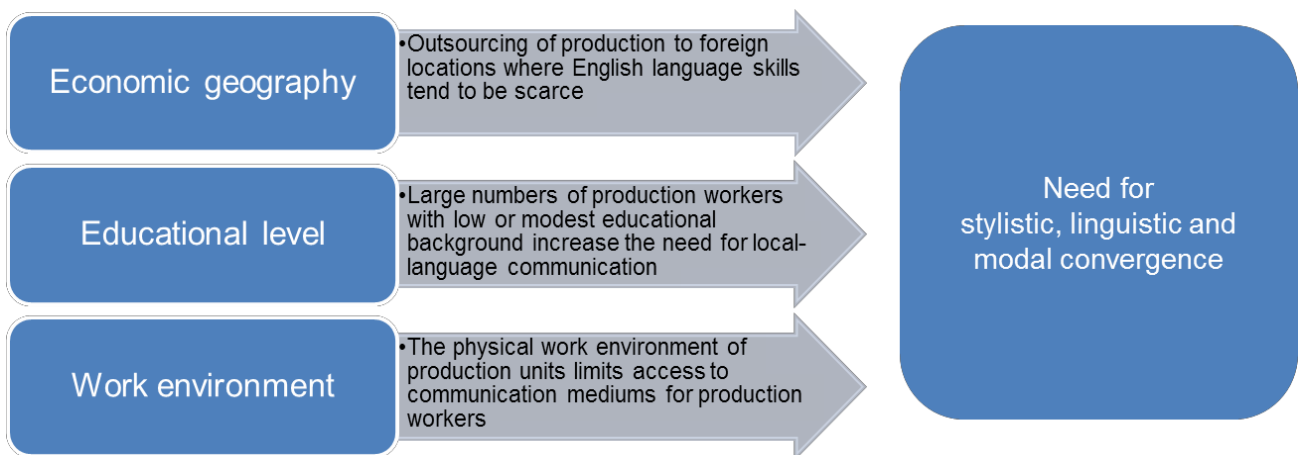
In line with what previous studies have found (in particular Barner-Ramussen & Aarnio 2011), the presented interview data demonstrate that the educational level of blue-collar employees is of particular interest. Manufacturing companies are likely to employ production workers with modest to low educational levels, which has been found to increase the need for local-language communication in production facilities, due to limited English language proficiency among staff members (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio 2011; Malkamäki & Herberts 2014). In comparison, the majority of employees in Denmark have had English language training as part of their compulsory school education, which is far less common in cheap-labour countries, e.g. in rural China and South-East Asia (Chaganti 2004: 2221–2222; Phillipson 2012: 6). Thus, the educational background of employees in the manufacturing industry is likely to affect the way in which manufacturers handle linguistic diversity (cf. Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999a; Piekkari & Tietze 2012; Welch et al. 2005), which is reflected in the findings from Electronic and Sport.

Finally, the particular work environment of production workers, referring to the physical working conditions of blue-collar employees (Nordlöf, Wijk & Lindberg 2011), also appears to have an impact on blue-collar communication in the two case companies. Informants in both companies explicitly state that access to communication channels is a significant challenge in vertical communication due to the physical work environment of the production units, especially in foreign subsidiaries. Manufacturers are what Chandler (1962: 8) calls "industrial enterprises", meaning

“large, private, profit-oriented business firms[s] involved in the handling of goods in some or all of the successive industrial processes from the procurement of the raw material to the sale to the ultimate customer”. Compared to a white-collar office environment, the industrial work environment is by nature a more difficult communicative setting when it comes to cross-language interactions and language barriers.

In sum, data from the present study demonstrate that three sector-specific characteristics of manufacturing trigger the need for convergence towards blue-collar employees, as depicted in Figure 2. We can refer to these factors as firstly, economic geography (Clark, Feldman & Gertler 2000), which captures the international expansion strategies of the two manufacturing companies; secondly, the educational level of the workforce (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio 2011), which has been related to limited English language skills; and finally, the industrial work environment of blue-collar employees (Chandler 1962), which also has been found to have an effect on blue-collar communication.

Figure 2: Triggers for convergence in blue-collar communication



The findings presented in this study and the discussion above call for a more nuanced approach to the development of corporate language strategies, and corporate communication in general. It is evident that blue-collar employees have different communicative needs than headquarters employees, and these needs are further accentuated by the linguistic-communicative environments in which blue-collar employees operate. The three triggers for convergence in blue-collar communication – economic geography, educational level, and work environment – do not only imply that employees located in the corporate headquarters need to adjust their communication towards blue-collar employees. It also means that company-wide language strategies that aim to address the language practices of all employees are likely to be successful only if the companies’ leadership takes the communicative reality of blue-collar employees into consideration. This could be achieved by adopting more diversified language strategies at the company-level. Instead of opting for monolingual English-only policies, a diversified language strategy could open up for the use of multiple languages and alternative communication channels when needed.

## 6. Conclusion

In the international business and management literature, the need for global integration in manufacturing is largely explained by relatively standardised consumer needs, investment intensity in research and development, and pressure for cost reduction (Harzing 2000; Prahalad & Doz 1987;

Yip 1989). These are factors that result in what Prahalad and Doz (1987: 25) refer to as ‘product emphasis’, expressed through “integrated product strategy and worldwide business management”. However, a string of language-sensitive research in international business and management (see e.g. Brannen et al. 2014; Piekkari & Tietze 2011; Piekkari & Zander 2005) has shown that managing large, geographically dispersed organisations usually leads to a series of language and communication related questions. As transnational models of management contribute to push foreign language contact down in the organisational hierarchy (Feely & Reeves 2001), global strategies and increased international collaboration is likely to also affect front-line employees at foreign production sites – the ones who produce the products manufacturing companies sell to their customers. The most important practical implication of this study is therefore that it draws attention to the role of language and communication in the production of goods, the foundation upon which manufacturing companies exist.

In terms of theoretical implications, the present study contributes to international business and management research by focusing on a group of employees who have received limited attention in the existing literature. This is a level of analysis that gives emphasis to individuals and their needs in multinational organisations, which tend to get downplayed in large-scale studies focusing on the strategic needs of the firm as the unit of analysis (Björkman, Barner-Rasmussen & Vaara 2010). Findings from Electronic and Sport on the topic of blue-collar communication have shown that micro-level analyses also contribute directly to some of the most pressing issues in multinational management. Within a broader picture of managing large, multinational corporations, the present study of blue-collar employees has also touched upon issues of inclusion, integration and a sense of belonging to a global family (Ferner, Edwards & Sisson 1995; Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999b), as well as organisational isolation prompted by geographical distance and separation from daily activities at the corporate headquarters (Logemann & Piekkari 2015: 42; Young & Tavares 2004).

By drawing on CAT and the concept of convergence (Giles, et al. 1991; Giles & Wiemann 1987), as well as foreigner talk (Ferguson 1971, 1975) the present study has also contributed to the sociolinguistic literature by offering an international business perspective on theories that traditionally have been more concerned with the socio-historical context in which communication takes place, such as cultural norms and values (Gallois, Ogay & Giles 2005). Whereas previous studies of CAT often have focused on interpersonal elements of convergence, such as voice pitch (Gregory & Webster 1996), speech rate (Street 1983), and verbal and non-verbal psycholinguistic features of communication (Ryan, Hummert & Boich 1995), this study has demonstrated that convergence may also occur in more institutionalised forms, and that convergence may be extended to also encompass the choice of communication mode (see also Sanden & Lønsmann 2018).

The findings from the present study only show one side of the picture. By solely focusing on white-collar employees at the corporate headquarters, the perspectives of blue-collar employees have not been accounted for in this case. Yet, employees working in different parts of large multinational corporations are likely to experience different realities in terms of language and communication. It would be a fruitful avenue for further research to consider the subsidiary perspective and especially the perspectives of blue-collar employees with regard to corporate language management in manufacturing companies. Data presented in this study have demonstrated that the language and communication needs of these groups of employees have profound consequences on the management of blue-collar communication.

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**Appendix: Overview of codes**

Level 3	Level 2	Description	Examples of quotes
<b>Company background, organisation and practices</b>			
	Communication department	Statements about how the communication department works, areas of responsibility, etc.	<p>We have an editorial meeting every day, where we talk about the stories we have, what is happening, what we have heard, what is coming up, what we have to do and why.</p> <p><i>Hver dag da har vi et redaktionsmøde, hvor vi snakker om hvilke historier er der, hvad sker der, hvad har vi hørt, hvad er der på vej, hvad skal laves, og hvorfor.</i></p>
	Company history	Information about the company's historical background	It was a small company founded 50 years ago with only 35 employees locally in Denmark, and it has grown into this huge, multinational corporation.
	Company organisational structure and operations	Information about the company's organisational structure and operational processes	We are a corporate department, but we are not globally based, we do not have any branches locally.
	Company ownership	Statements about the ownership structure of the company	The company isn't listed, this has a lot of influence on the communication because they feel that the annual report doesn't have to be traditional, because it's not a listed company.
	Headquarters language use	General statements about how interviewees experience language use and communication in the company's headquarters	<p>You won't get far with Danish in these big companies. Maybe in this building, at headquarters maybe to an extent, even though we have many foreigners [here].</p> <p><i>Man kommer ikke så langt med dansk i sådan store virksomheder. Jo her i huset, i headquarters gør man</i></p>

			<i>måske til dels, ja, selv om vi har mange udlændinge.</i>
	Headquarters-subsidary communication	General statements about language use and communication between headquarters and subsidiaries/factories (i.e. vertical communication)	We haven't been communicating with them at all. The closest we come to that is through the portal, the intranet page, but that's very limited, and a very limited number of people have access to a computer or to the internet.
	Internationalisation of firm	Statements which describe increased internationalisation/globalisation of the administrative and operational processes	As Sport becomes more and more international, why should an education like this be for Danes only?  <i>I takt med at Sport bliver mere og mere internationale, jamen, hvorfor skulle en uddannelse som det her være kun til danskere?</i>
	Subsidiary language use	General statements about language use and communication in the company's subsidiaries/factories	At the operative level it is all in Indonesian, because they are all Indonesians, and the people in the sewing line are also Indonesians.  <i>På operationsniveau er det alt sammen på indonesisk, fordi de er alle sammen indonesere, og i folkene i sylinien er også indonesere.</i>
<b>Stylistic convergence</b>			
	Accents	Language and communication difficulties due to different accents, at a communicative level	I remember during the first two days of the introduction, I simply could not understand what they were saying, because the workers have an extremely strong Chinese accent when they speak English.  <i>Jeg kan huske jeg sad i de første to dage i introduktionen og kunne simpelthen ikke forstå hvad de sagde, fordi arbejderne har ekstrem kinesisk accent på deres engelsk.</i>

	Communication style	Statements about different styles of communication, cf. Williams and Spiro (1985): ‘Style is the synthesis of content, code, and communication rules into unique and infinite combinations.’	I think there’s a sort of circus English in the business world [laughter], which doesn’t belong anywhere [laughter], but which nevertheless enables us to talk to each other.  <i>Jeg tror det er sådan et cirkus-engelsk i forretningsverdenen [latter], som ikke hører til [latter] nogle steder, men som dog gør at man kan tale sammen.</i>
	Sector-specific language	The use of sector-specific terminology or jargon (cf. Welch, Welch and Piekkari 2005)	There are a lot of technical terms in our world, and we should of course be better at avoiding such technical terms when we write [to customers].  <i>Der er jo mange fagudtryk indenfor vores verden, og vi skal selvfølgelig være bedre til at skrive [til kunder] så det ikke er fagudtryk.</i>
<b>Linguistic convergence</b>			
	Language use employee level English	The use of English at the front-line level, irrespective of the company’s official language policy	I mean very few Danes, Norwegian and Swedes know Finnish for instance, so if it is a meeting with a Finn, then it is, well, I would say 99 % of the meeting will be in English, if the Finn doesn’t know Swedish, but normally it is done in English.
	Language use employee level multiple	The use of languages other than English at the front-line level irrespective of the company’s official language policy	I can’t be bothered to write in English with my Danish colleague when we are corresponding, if we need to write 15 emails during one day, I really can’t see why we should write in English when we’re both Danish.  <i>Jeg gider jo heller ikke for eksempel, at sidde og skrive på engelsk med min danske kollega, når vi skal sidde og skrive sammen, hvis vi skal skrive 15 mails i løbet af en dag, så kan jeg ikke se hvorfor skulle vi skrive på engelsk sammen når vi begge to er danskere, altså.</i>

	Linguistic diversity problems	Severe problems related to language and communication issues, i.e. problems beyond the communicative level	<p>English may be the corporate language, but that will make us inefficient. People are not going to work as effortlessly as they did before, and people are going to get annoyed in their everyday lives about something that is not really necessary.</p> <p><i>Det kan godt være at engelsk er koncernsproget, men så bliver vi ineffektive. Folk kommer ikke til at arbejde lige så let som de har gjort før, og folk bliver irriteret i deres hverdag over noget som egentlig ikke er nødvendigt.</i></p>
<b>Modal convergence</b>			
	Communication channels	The use of various channels for communication between employees	<p>Hong Kong has a fantastic telephone reception, and the one in India is terrible. It really makes such a difference.</p> <p><i>I Hong Kong har de fantastisk telefonforbindelse, og i Indien har de forfærdelig. Altså, det gør så meget forskel.</i></p>
	Communication mode	Statements about oral, written or visual communication.	<p>Passwords and things like that, send it as a text message, because if you have a password with 12 characters with lower and upper case letters, there is a 99 % chance that you won't be able to communicate it over the phone to somebody who doesn't speak English very well.</p> <p><i>Passwords og sådan noget, send dem på en sms, fordi hvis man har et password på 12 karakterer med store og små bogstaver, er det 99 % chance for at man aldrig kan give det over en telefon til en der ikke kan engelsk særlig godt.</i></p>