

# Explaining Employees' Reactions towards a Cross-Border Merger: The Role of English Language Fluency

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we focus on the role of language in cross-border mergers and acquisitions and explore how organization members' language skills, or fluency, in the adopted lingua franca may impact their reactions to a merger. Drawing on a qualitative study of the post-merger integration between a French and Dutch airline where English was adopted as a lingua franca, we illustrate how language fluency influences the ability of individuals to give meaning to their changed circumstances. Moreover, we elaborate on how language fluency indexes social groupings and identities, and may thus be a driver of perceptions of status inequality and identity politics between different groups of employees. With our study we draw attention to the multi-faceted role of English as a lingua franca. Our findings also contribute to research on sociocultural dynamics associated with post-merger integration and the role of language in mergers and acquisitions, as well as in multinational companies more generally.

**Keywords:** English language fluency, cross-border mergers and acquisitions, identity politics, status attributions, perceived anxiety, post-merger integration

## **Introduction**

Cross-border mergers and acquisitions (M&As) have become an essential means through which multinational companies (MNCs) can grow and stay competitive, and have as a result received sustained scholarly attention (Haleblian et al. 2009). This overall interest has stemmed from frequent problems and high failure rates (Calipha et al. 2010). A significant part of recent research has focused attention on post-merger integration in general and sociocultural integration in particular to be able to better understand the causes of success and failure of M&As (Björkman et al. 2007; Brannen and Peterson 2009; Sarala et al. 2014; Teerikangas and Very 2006).

One distinguishing feature of cross-border M&As is that they typically involve multilingual environments in which multiple cultures and languages come together (Brannen and Peterson 2009; Vaara et al. 2005). Previous research has illustrated that the decision of introducing a common language in such a context is important, yet can be associated with all kinds of negative reactions from employees that can jeopardize the success of the post-merger integration effort. For example, when it leads to a perception of one language being given a dominant position over another, employees at one side of the M&A may feel threatened or excluded (Brannen and Peterson 2009; Piekkari et al. 2005). From a managerial point of view, the choice of a common corporate language is also a delicate one as for example can be seen in the Daimler-Chrysler case. When both companies merged in 1998 the corporate lingua franca became English. However, German top managers kept using the German language at press conferences and in internal communications, which significantly undermined the integration process (Welch et al. 2005).

Within international business research interest in the role of language, and specifically in English as a lingua franca in MNCs, has grown steadily in recent years (Bordia and Bordia

2015; Brannen et al. 2014; Cuypers et al. 2015; Feely and Harzing 2003; Henderson 2005; Janssens and Steyaert 2014; Neeley 2013; Welch and Welch 2008). Yet, there has been far less research on how language fluency in the adopted lingua franca affects strategies, interactions, collaboration, and coordination in MNCs (Brannen et al. 2014; Cuypers et al. 2015; Hinds et al. 2014; Janssens and Steyaert 2014; Peltokorpi and Vaara 2012; 2014). In the case of post-merger integration, language fluency in the lingua franca in a newly formed company may however be central to the merger integration process and its success (Vaara et al. 2005).

In the present study, we therefore set out to study the effect of language fluency in a lingua franca on people's reactions to the merger in the context of a Dutch firm being acquired by a French company where English became the lingua franca. In the study, we not only focus on the senior management level of the merged organization, but also on organization members of six organizational units of the acquired organization. This allows us to explore how middle managers and employees on the ground reacted to the merger, both individually and collectively, and how their reactions were to a greater or lesser degree influenced by their command of the English language.

With our study, we aim to contribute to research on the role of language in the human integration process within cross-border M&As. We specifically respond to the call of Neeley (2013) and Janssens and Steyaert (2014) who ask for more detailed studies of the effect of the adoption of a lingua franca on a workforce. In the present study, we take up this call in the context of a cross-border M&A and highlight that language fluency influences the way in which individuals make sense of their changing circumstances. Where previous studies often focused on how people from both companies react to a merger (Brannen and Petersen 2009; Vaara et al. 2005), we generally find that employees with lower levels of fluency in the adopted business language had greater difficulty in coming to terms with the merger, and in

large part because of the significant change brought about by the adoption of a business language in which they were not fluent. In particular, individual employees with low levels of fluency in English felt constrained and under pressure in the merged company, not only because of their own limitations in articulating their thoughts and in voicing and expressing their concerns in English to others in the merged company, but also because they associated their lack of fluency with less career opportunities within the merged company in the future.

When we coded the data in detail, we found that across different organizational units lower levels of fluency in English corresponded with anxiety about the merger and with perceptions of status (in)equality between the two merged companies. We also discovered that when employees in a unit are fluent in English and do not speak many other languages at work, it led to strong support for the new merged company identity. In contrast, we observed outright resistance when organizational members' level of fluency in English was low and significantly lower than other spoken languages.

With these findings, we suggest that language fluency in a lingua franca may be an explanation for why sociocultural post-merger integration may succeed in some instances and fail in other cases (Birkinshaw et al. 2000; Björkman et al. 2007; Brannen and Peterson 2009; Sarala et al. 2014). In particular, our findings illustrate how language indexes social groupings and identities, and may act as a driver of perceptions of status inequality and identity politics between different groups of employees. In turn, these perceptions and behaviors seem to influence the extent to which employees accept or (actively) resist the merger. These findings have, we believe, significant implications for MNCs, their M&A activity and their collaboration across borders (Brannen and Doz 2010; Brannen and Peterson 2009).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We first provide the theoretical backdrop to our study by drawing on previous studies on international mergers and acquisitions, post-merger integration, and on language and communication research in

international business. Then, we introduce the case, describe our data, and explain our approach to the data analysis. The subsequent section reports on member's reactions to the merger as a function of their English language fluency. Based on this section we develop testable propositions around the role of language in post-merger integration and we answer our main research question: 'How do language skills impact employees' reactions in a cross-border merger?' We conclude the paper with a discussion of our findings and their theoretical and managerial implications.

## **Theoretical Background**

### Post-Merger Integration and the Role of Language

The low success rate of M&As effectively implies high levels of risk. Traditional financial and strategic perspectives are, however, limited in terms of explaining these disappointing outcomes (King et al. 2004). Therefore, scholars have increasingly begun to focus on social, cultural and psychological factors related to the integration of merged and acquired firms (Birkinshaw et al. 2000; Cartwright and Cooper 1993; Sarala et al. 2014).

Post-merger integration, defined as the "the integration or blending of processes including the management of human resources, technical operations and customer relationships" (Epstein 2005, p. 40), has been studied from multiple perspectives. The more strategically oriented studies focus on synergy realization (Larsson and Finkelstein 1999), value creation (Graebner 2004), and knowledge or capability transfer from one organization to another (Bresman et al. 1999). More human resource-oriented researchers have concentrated on the uncertainty and anxiety that people involved in post-M&A integration processes experience (Schweiger and DeNisi 1991). In closely related studies, researchers

have sought explanations for post-M&A integration problems in terms of cultural clashes between merger parties (Schweiger and Goulet 2005) or as a result of a perceived lack of justice or fairness towards one of the parties (Monin et al. 2013). In international settings, studies have furthermore focused on national cultural differences and cross-national confrontation (Sarala and Vaara 2010; Very et al. 1997). Finally, scholars have highlighted the political aspects of post-merger decision-making (Graebner 2004; Vaara et al. 2005).

Where language is arguably also an important element in most of the aforementioned studies, it has received limited attention as a direct topic of study (see Piekkari et al. 2005 and Vaara et al. 2005 for exceptions). Yet, some scholars have recently become more interested in the role of language and communication as possible determinants of success in M&As (Hardy et al. 2005). For example, language is seen to play a crucial role in shaping the process of identification and in transforming an organization's identity (Fiol 2002). Cross-border M&As add further cultural complexity to this process since employees do not only have to deal with an overall change in identity but also with the fact that they have to interact with colleagues from a different language and cultural background in forming a new identity. Research has also identified language as a source of power in M&As. In a merger between a French and English company, Kingston (1996) describes feelings of exclusion experienced by English speakers when French co-workers spoke French among themselves. In addition, studies suggest that individual language skills may provide esteem and status to those mastering the language vis-à-vis those with lower skills (Brannen and Peterson 2009; Piekkari et al. 2005; Vaara et al. 2005).

(Business) English as a Lingua Franca

In a recent paper, Harzing et al. (2011) discuss the 'language barrier' when individuals

belonging to different language groups interact and identified potential solutions in the relationship between the MNC's corporate headquarters and its subsidiaries. One of these solutions is the adoption of a common corporate language such as English, the idea being that such a lingua franca might enhance communication and foster a sense of belonging to the larger whole (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999). However, the implementation of such a common language may not necessarily lead to a strong and wholesale adoption of the lingua franca across a MNC (Bordia and Bordia 2015; Fredriksson et al. 2006). Moreover, Henderson (2005, p. 76) points out that "language standardization through English can have negative consequences". Her study of international management teams illustrates that managers from culturally distant countries may interpret expressions in English differently, with direct consequences for feelings of trust and inclusion amongst those managers.

Furthermore, by adopting English as a lingua franca in previously non-English speaking companies, communication may in fact be hampered. This is the case as non-native speakers may have some proficiency in English but not as much as native speakers have. They may accordingly resist the use of English or emphasize their ties to their own language and the social identity or group that this language signifies (Harzing and Feely 2008). This may in turn lead to certain social identities being made salient, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. Vaara et al. (2005) argued that a polarization of group identities is even more likely if the language groups have a 'post-colonial' history such as in the merger between a Swedish and Finnish bank in their study. Hinds et al. (2014) in turn elaborated on a model that captures how asymmetries in language fluency contribute to an 'us vs. them' dynamic in international settings. In sum, the 'language barrier' (Harzing and Feely 2008) is likely to have an important influence on how people identify with the newly merged organization.

In a business context, Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) conceptualized the use of

English by mostly non-native speakers as ‘business English as a lingua franca’, or BELF in short. BELF is defined as the linguistic resource used by managers and employees in an international context and is characterized as ‘simplified English’ (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005) that is pragmatically tuned to its purpose; to communicate and exchange ideas between non-native speakers who come from different language and cultural backgrounds. Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005, p. 404) empirically showed that “BELF speakers bring into business interactions their own culture-bound views of how encounters should be conducted but also discourse practices stemming from their respective mother tongues”.

Whilst a lingua franca can be seen as culture-neutral in the sense that these languages do not directly convey cultural ties or identities (Crystal 1997), when they are spoken by non-native speakers they may still in terms of word choice and sentence structure bear the mark of a different language (Akkermans et al. 2010). The question of what broadly speaking constitutes individual competence in BELF has been studied in the context of the MNC (Harzing et al. 2011; Henderson 2005) but as we suggest in our study it may also directly affect the ability of individuals involved in cross-border M&As to make sense of the organizational changes, to understand each other, and to build up a new collective organizational identity.

Moreover, despite the recognition in recent research (Hinds et al. 2014; Janssens and Steyaert 2014; Steyaert et al. 2011) that non-native English speaking members of an organization have various degrees of fluency, we still lack insight into how these different fluency levels influence people’s reactions, attributions and behaviors, in particular in times of post-merger integration. In the present study, we therefore focus on the role of language in cross-border M&As with a special interest in how employees’ language skills, or fluency, in the adopted lingua franca impact their reactions to the merger. In order to answer this



question, we conducted a qualitative study of a merger between a Dutch and French airline where English became the common business language.

## **Data and Methods**

### Research Setting

This research is based on an in-depth qualitative analysis of the merger between a French and Dutch airline (we use Frenchco and Dutchco as pseudonyms). Although legally it was a friendly acquisition of Dutchco by Frenchco, the integration process itself was defined and managed as a merger. The official indication of the merged organization used by top management was the “Combination”. Almost immediately after the merger was announced English was mandated as the common corporate language, for two main reasons (based on the “Framework Agreement between Frenchco and Dutchco” established in 2003): First, to illustrate a certain balance of power and to address the political unrest that could otherwise have emerged following the merger. Second, the industry was already international and top management wanted the company “to become a world-wide leader” (as explained by the CEOs of both companies during a press conference) that required English to be the officially spoken language.

The Frenchco-Dutchco merger can be considered as a revelatory or generative case (Miles and Huberman 1994; Weick 2007) for exploring how the adoption of English as a lingua franca influenced managers’ and employees’ reactions towards the merger. With the exception of a few native speakers, most of the employees on both the Dutch and French side were non-native speakers with various levels of fluency in English.

## Data Collection Procedure

We gained access to the company immediately after the merger was announced through direct contact with top management. A team of three Dutch researchers followed the previously Dutch side of the company, who were in the process of being merged with the operations from the French side. For the purposes of this paper we decided to focus on six embedded cases (i.e. so-called “Outstations” as organizational units) across different European countries. On the one hand, the similarity of these organizational units<sup>1</sup> allowed for meaningful comparison. On the other hand, the diversity of the units in terms of the language environment and differences in English language fluency of the respondents provided a basis for contrast and thus for theory development. In the UK Outstation there were a number of native speakers of English and as a result English was easily spoken and also dominated as a business language. In the Swedish Outstation managers and employees overwhelmingly followed the instructions by top management regarding the singular use of English. As a result, both these organizational units were operating in a mono-lingual environment. The Spanish and Italian Outstations were characterized by a relatively low level of English language fluency of our informants. Next to English, French also dominated as a business language in these units. Finally, in the German and Swiss Outstations we observed a variety in (business) languages being spoken, with varying degrees of fluency of our informants. In sum, the latter four organizational units were operating in a multi-lingual environment where French, Dutch and ‘local’ languages were spoken alongside English. Our intention in conducting such a multiple case comparison is first to analyze how different language fluency levels among organization members lead to different reactions to the merger. The embedded

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<sup>1</sup> These units focus on ticketing and on servicing international clients and Dutchco members within these units were ‘living the merger’ in their daily jobs as they had to interact with Frenchco members on a daily basis.

cases further lead us to examine how the use and impact of BELF is conditioned by the language environment within which it is spoken.

To answer our research question we gathered interview data that served as the primary source of data. To understand the wider context of the merger we however also collected unobtrusive data in the form of documents about the merger. In particular, the company newsletters at Dutchco provided interesting information on the framing of decisions and issues as part of the integration process. Furthermore, the CEOs of Frenchco and Dutchco gave several public speeches and official interviews that were recorded, transcribed, and diffused through several media. Throughout the research project, we remained in close contact with Dutchco's top management, and this proximity provided us with numerous opportunities to discuss issues, formally and informally. We used these documentation data and discussions with the top management team as important sources of triangulation and supplementary sources for understanding the background to events mentioned by managers and employees in the interviews (Miles and Huberman 1994).

### *Interviews*

The selection of interviewees was an iterative process, in which we indicated to the contact person of a particular unit how many interviews we wanted to conduct, and they proposed a number of names based on criteria like their depth of involvement with the merger. In some cases we explicitly asked to interview a particular manager or employee more than once, but in most cases we asked for 'fresh' interviewees. Altogether, we interviewed 77 informants across the six embedded cases in the period 2004-2008. They represented Dutchco in a cross-section of businesses, functions, and hierarchical levels. The key purpose behind these semi-structured one-on-one interviews was to let the interviewees express their experiences in their

own words.

An interview protocol was designed for this purpose, and it included broad questions about post-merger integration but also specific questions about language such as: “What is the role of language in collaborating with Frenchco?” and “To what extent do language issues play a role in the integration?” Similar to the study of Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999) a high percentage of respondents (> 80 %) mentioned language as an important issue in the success of post-merger integration. We also included specific questions regarding employees’ reactions to the merger such as: “How has the Frenchco-Dutchco merger influenced your job?” and “Do you already start developing a new group feeling?” The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

All interviews were conducted in English with the exception of ten managers who we interviewed in Dutch and whom we therefore excluded from the further analysis. Although previous studies recommend conducting interviews in interviewees’ native language (Welch and Piekkari 2006), we opted for the use of English for two main reasons. First, in a number of instances it was simply not possible for the team of researchers to conduct interviews in the interviewees’ native language because of their lack of language fluency in these ‘local’ languages. Second, the use of English allowed us to measure informants’ English language fluency and to examine how these language skills influenced their reactions towards the merger.

Once we had gathered all interview data, we distinguished between our informants according to different hierarchical levels: higher management (executive vice presidents, country managers and division heads), middle management (general managers and heads of departments) and front-line employees. We believe that our focus on managers and employees from a variety of hierarchical levels is a useful complement to the tendency in published research to primarily focus on high-level managers. Table 1 provides an overview

of the profile of our informants across each of the six embedded cases.

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## Method of Analysis

### *English Language Fluency*

Our analysis proceeded in stages, successively refining our coding and analysis of the data. We first coded the English language fluency of our informants. For this part of the analysis, we followed prior research (Neeley 2013) and incorporated both subjective self-assessments with an objective assessment of individuals' communicative competence in English. The motivation behind this combined measurement is that, first of all, subjective assessments provide a guide to gauging whether individuals feel comfortable in expressing themselves in a particular language and in engaging in inter-personal communication. At the same time, subjective assessments may carry within them a biased account of one's own abilities, and thus an objective assessment of fluency was added to ensure that we would arrive at a robust identification of the English language fluency of each individual in the six embedded cases.

The subjective self-assessment is based on questions in the interviews that directly and indirectly asked individuals about their ability and comfort in speaking English. Direct questions involved asking individuals whether they speak English fluently. Indirect questions involved asking individuals about their experiences in liaising in English with their counterpart or any other colleagues from the other company. We subsequently categorized as 'high fluency' the individuals who expressed comfort with the English language, which included in a small number of instances native speakers. We categorized people who

expressed less confidence in their English language proficiency as ‘medium fluency’. Finally, we categorized as ‘low fluency’ the individuals who expressed real discomfort in using the English language.

We also followed studies in linguistics to assess objective fluency levels in English. There are generally various protocols for assessing objective fluency that include command of English grammar, an individual’s sociolinguistic competence (i.e. a person’s ability to use and interpret cultural references and figures of speech), and illocutionary competence (i.e. an ability to not just understand the words one is using, but the message that one is trying to convey through those words) (e.g., Bachman 1990; Littlemore and Low 2006; Molinsky 2005). In the first instance, we followed conventional linguistic protocols that focus on grammar and basic vocabulary and that assess fluency through a speaker’s rate of speech, pause structures (hesitancy) and the number of times they reverted to their native language (code switching) during the interview (e.g., Brown et al. 1985; Neeley 2013). However, besides their general predictive ability, these protocols may not differentiate sufficiently between levels of fluency if the target subject of the discourse relates to familiar cases (e.g., perceptions of the merger) that individuals may have been describing before. In response, we ensured that we also asked individuals in the interview for impromptu responses, for example by asking individuals to view a visual image of the proposed merger (two airlines were representing Frenchco and Dutchco and one of the two companies was clearly more dominant) and to articulate ad hoc their own thoughts.

In addition to assessing basic competence in grammar and speech (e.g., rate of speech, pause structures and code switching), we calculated the frequency of idioms and figurative expressions in each interview compared to the overall number of words in the interview (Littlemore and Low 2006). We categorized individuals again as ‘high’, ‘medium’ or ‘low’ in their fluency levels. Speakers who are ‘highly’ fluent have a high rate of speech (between

110-150 words per minute) and hardly pause for extended periods (to find the right words and syntax whilst speaking), and have no need to switch codes (unless for illustrative purposes towards the interviewer). They also use figurative and idiomatic language automatically and pervasively as part of their ongoing speech. 'Medium' fluent speakers have a moderate rate of speech (between 80-110 words per minute) and leave marked pauses between utterances. They also engage in occasional code switching when they find it hard to articulate an experience that was previously encoded in their native language. Their use of idiomatic language is also more occasional and largely based on oft-repeated business idioms (e.g., "the best of both worlds"). This category of our coding scheme approximates the description of the level of fluency that is typical of BELF when spoken by non-native speakers (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010). Finally, 'low' fluent speech manifested itself in a low rate of speech (less than 80 words per minute), extended pauses between utterances and a repeated reference to one's native language, either directly by using the equivalent words or indirectly by circumscribing the experience in rather forced expressions. Individuals in this category hardly used idioms, and when they did they often used the idiom incorrectly compared to its typical usage in English (e.g., "the best of two worlds"). Table 1 lists the overall assessment of English language fluency for each individual across the six organizational units.

### *Organizational Reactions to the Merger*

To analyze organization members' reactions to the merger we subsequently coded our interviews using the qualitative software program Atlas.ti. Following the 'Gioia methodology' (Gioia et al. 2013) we began by identifying first-order codes (i.e. in the language used by our informants), illustrated with simple descriptive phrases or quotes. Next, we searched for relationships between these categories, which facilitated assembling them into higher-order

themes. Figure 1 below provides a summary of the coding structure of our data.

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This coding process led us to identify and elaborate on three main types of organizational reactions to the merger: perceived anxiety, attributions of status and status (in)equality, and identity politics. We define *perceived anxiety* as typical fears and worries expressed by our informants as a result of the change brought about by the merger. This included fear about one's own job, general integration tensions and perceptions of uncertainty as to what the merger would mean for them as well as for the company. *Status attribution* is the result of how informants see their status being affected or changed relative to their colleagues and counterparts. Finally, we define *identity politics* as implications on informants' identification with the newly merged organization. This included feelings and expressions of resistance or ambivalence towards the identity of the newly merged organization as well as in other instances support for the merger and the formation of a new collective identity.

After the categories had been defined, the authors coded the interview data independently which yielded a very high reliability (> 90 %). We then combed through the data to see whether levels of seniority, function or the units themselves affected the type of reactions as expressed by individuals in the interviews. We finally intersected the organizational reactions with the English fluency levels that we recorded across the interviews. To examine how language fluency in English, and thus also in speaking BELF, and the language environment of the different units influenced members' reactions, we also focused on our informants' accounts of interactions with coworkers from Dutchco as well as Frenchco (for a similar approach see Neeley 2013). We will now lay out the findings that emerged inductively from our data.



## Findings

In presenting our findings we first focus on organization members' (English) language fluency, and use this as a measure to capture the general ability of individuals in an organizational unit to "get by" in the new company. The following sections then highlight key patterns in organization members' reactions to the merger. More specifically, we draw out the implications of language fluency in terms of perceived anxiety, attributions of status and status (in)equality, and identity politics. To summarize, Table 2 provides a detailed overview of reactions to the merger across different English fluency levels accompanied with further illustrative evidence of our emergent themes.

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### English Language Fluency

Managers and employees at Dutchco often experienced difficulties with the wholesome change to English and particularly sensed a loss of ability in articulating themselves clearly for themselves and towards others. They in fact frequently voiced frustration about their inability to make sense of the merger without the same degree of eloquence in their native language. A sales manager in Sweden explains: "It's true. Of course, you can express yourself more subtly [in a native language] but then in English it gets more blunt. That's also true and ... and in Sweden it is of the same actually ... Yes. It is clear yet of a smaller choice of words and things like that."

This inability or loss that was experienced directly corresponded to levels of fluency in the common idiom within which one expressed oneself at work. The difference amounted

to more animated forms of language use and the use of idiomatic and metaphorical language in particular for organization members with a high English language fluency (e.g., “we are [standing] on the eve of further collaboration” and “we are slowly moving towards integration”), versus more interrupted forms of language use marked by frequent pauses, hesitation and the articulation of isolated thoughts for organization members with low to medium English language fluency (e.g., “tensions”, “two sides” and “us versus them”).

What this pattern suggests is that lower levels of language fluency appear to restrict individuals in their ability to use language fluidly, and specifically figurative expressions and idioms, as a way of making stressful and changing situations such as a merger understood and emotionally bearable. An example of this is provided by two sales managers in the UK and Spain Outstations, the first a native speaker and the second a non-native speaker with a low level of fluency in English. Both describe the change in operations, which the UK manager compresses into a single image through figurative language (e.g., “united we stand” and “build the foundations”) whereas the manager in Spain engages in a more drawn out process through which she describes how it has affected her daily work.

*“But, it was non-optimal for, both parties [Dutchco and Frenchco] that we each contract with every travel agency. So we have learnt from that process; that is, [...] certainly the more united we stand in every approach, the stronger the positioning of our joint brand philosophy, or even [having] a singular company philosophy. My counterpart [at Frenchco], she worked very, very hard to build the foundations that the people who are now coming in are benefiting from.”*

*“So the biggest changes are, we are able to combine a group [Frenchco-Dutchco], but obviously every time we want that we have that, we have to call Frenchco for a fare that we agree. [...] It is not so quickly, it is not so fast and I cannot do it with myself, which is always you have to depend on others, which is not so nice. I think, I know all the colleagues think same as me because we talk about the same thing, normally between*

*employees, with the staff we think that it will go at the end it will be a completely Frenchco.”*

These observed differences in English language fluency in the six organizational units had furthermore, as we show next, important implications for individuals' perceived anxiety, status attributions, and identity politics.

### Perceived Anxiety

Informants with low English language fluency often referred to the emotional strain and anxiety as a result of the merger. They expressed concerns about how the merger would affect their personal state and well-being. A marketing manager, for example, noted: “I am not that good in English but I know some people who are perfect in expressing themselves and they also can speak French. Also my French is non-existent. This makes it hard for me.” The emotional anxiety was often also brought about because of the question whether areas of activity would shift to the other side of the merged company or whether certain jobs would become redundant. As a sales agent in Spain expressed: “For me the biggest threat is that in the merger, you have people that you don't need any longer, because you are duplicating your jobs.” Finally, organization members with a relatively low level of English language fluency frequently expressed uncertainty about the future state and form of the company. As a sales manager in Sweden noted: “Even though I think there is a good spirit here, people are a bit uncertain. There is a bit of insecurity.”

In contrast to organization members with low to medium English language fluency, respondents with a high level of fluency typically referred to the opportunities arising from the merger. Apart from the emphasis on future growth, a manager in E-commerce in the UK illustrates this newfound feeling: “There will be other opportunities, I assume, that will stem

from the merger. So, for example, in terms of moving around the company.” A senior manager in Germany suggests something similar: “No, I don’t see it [the merger] as a threat at all and I don’t think that our people here see it as a threat. Of course you think: ‘what is my position within this organization?’ This is normal. But not as a threat. We’re getting bigger.”

### Status Attributions

Managers and employees with relatively low English language fluency often emphasized the perceived status inequality that they themselves began to feel in interacting with Frenchco counterparts. This effect was most clearly marked in those organizational units in which French remained important as a business language (i.e. Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and Italy). A sales manager in Spain expressed this as follows: “So in the end you feel like those people [i.e., French speaking colleagues] are trying to eat us up you know.” Feelings of exclusion were emphasized, both in business meetings as well as in informal talks with counterparts. The following excerpt from a human resource assistant in Germany expresses this experience: “I wouldn’t mind talking English to them [to managers from the French side] but [with] French I have a problem and most of us have and it just, you feel left out at that moment and kind of like [feel] what are they talking [about], are they talking to me?”

For informants with relatively high English language fluency we found a different pattern across the organizational units we studied: individuals generally referred to the perceived equality between Dutchco and Frenchco. A pricing and revenue manager in the UK explained that “everything has very much been on a discussion basis; [to] search what’s best for the bottom line of both companies.” Overall, these respondents appreciated the way they had been treated by their French counterparts: “Frenchco has been extremely courteous about the whole process... very careful, very respectful.” (customer manager). Moreover, they often

referred to the willingness of their French colleagues to adopt English as the new business language: “You often see documents in French. But I have to say that my [French] counterpart is very consistent in using English. Also the documents they produce are in English. It works really well. I also appreciate that.” (IS manager)

## Identity Politics

Organization members with low to medium English language fluency frequently went back and forth between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ work situation leading to ambivalent feelings among staff. As a result most managers and employees reverted back to Dutchco as a stand-alone company which they emphasized as the preferred frame of reference. Rather than building up a revised basis for understanding, these informants were either skeptically complying with the merger or became resistant and marked their own identity as separate from the other company in the merger. A sales agent in Italy emphasized that employees continued to identify with their pre-merger organization: “No, there is no ‘group feeling’ with Frenchco, nor is there any evidence for a group identity. Eighty-five percent of the employees still have a ‘we versus them’ feeling.” Organization members with relatively low English language fluency also increasingly became resistant towards the merger and the partner company. A sales manager in Italy reluctantly argued: “if you want to compete like on one side [Frenchco] and on the other side [Dutchco], I wouldn’t care.” One of the consequences of this resistant attitude was that a number of employees also started to actively oppose the merger, and this led to frictions in how they worked with their counterparts from the other company. As a commercial manager in Italy told us: “I still receive e-mails in French but I just delete them.”

Conversely, our informants with relatively high English language fluency were often able to put the differences between both companies to one side and, as a result, a group

identity started to emerge. A sales agent in Sweden noted: “I am both Dutchco and Frenchco. Sometimes I wish we could be more proactive in communicating to the market that we are together.” These managers and employees were also willing to look at the overarching goals of both companies in order to realize synergies and create something positive out of the merger: “We are all very much staging one face to the market. We try and push the fact, that they [i.e. the companies] are complementary, so a passenger, a client can fly out through [Frenchco], and come back via [Dutchco], or vice versa.” (manager e-commerce). By having a shared understanding and clarity about how the integration should proceed, they were more able to define transcendent goals for the joint company. This in turn allowed them to redefine their work in the context of the merger and to pro-actively take actions towards integration.

This process not only led to (increased) identification with the new organization, but also offered a collective resource for pragmatic inferences about the operational changes that could be made to speed up and facilitate the integration process. A marketing communications manager in the UK pointed out that “at the end of the day the bottom line is the [Frenchco-Dutchco] group and that’s what matters.” A revenue integrity executive in Sweden goes one step further and illustrates the proactive action that people were willing to take: “I think that I am more eager to do my job well now than before. Because now I know that it gives me something back. I see positive effects and I see that it changes.”

In sum, because of the low English language fluency of individual employees some organizational units remained multi-lingual. Here, most managers and employees with a relatively low to medium English language fluency referred to status inequalities and tended to oppose the ‘new’ collective Frenchco-Dutchco identity by reverting back to their pre-merger organization or at times their own profession as a target for identification. Whereas in principle the shared professional space may have facilitated communication among BELF

speakers, the multi-language environment in fact decreased the potential for BELF speakers to share experiences in a common tongue (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010). A middle manager explained this process as follows:

*“No, it’s my profession, then Dutchco, then for a long time nothing at all, and then Frenchco. They are really far away. It has nothing to do with the fact they are French but the way in which they approach the business is so different. It also does not help that you cannot communicate at an equal level. I have worked in Switzerland and there they translated everything in German. The English concepts commonly used in IT like data processing, they [the French] have no idea what it means. That makes it very difficult to say: ‘this is my world’.”*

This stands in stark contrast to the mono-lingual units in which the singular use of English as a business language appeared to foster identification with the collective organization: “You can really see that the business language is English. I think it also promotes a group feeling. The connection I had with Dutchco has changed so that I am now supportive of the Frenchco-Dutchco group.” (IS manager).

## **Discussion**

In this paper, we have examined the role of language, and specifically language fluency, on the post-merger integration process of two MNCs. Drawing on a generative case of a merger between a Dutch and French airline, we stipulate how the switch to English as the default business language affected individuals in the merged company and how, depending on their language fluency, it enabled or stymied them in their reactions to the merger. In the following section, we develop testable propositions around our three emergent themes.

## Organization Members' Language Fluency and its Impact on Reactions to the Merger

In explaining the differences in individuals' perceived anxiety we draw on the observations we made regarding English language fluency. We found that the metaphors and idioms that more fluent speakers use help them compress difficult, uncertain and complex circumstances into easily understood scenes that settles understanding and reduces uncertainty (Cornelissen and Clarke 2010). The consequence is that in doing so they may limit or neutralize negative emotions, yet also trigger positive affect in marking the active involvement of individuals in the developments as they take place. At lower levels of fluency, on the other hand, the inability to use idioms and metaphors freely presented a clear difficulty, forcing employees to use time-consuming and more drawn out processes of communication in an attempt to work around emotions and sensitivities. Based on this reasoning we propose the following:

***Proposition 1: In a post-merger integration context, individuals with low to medium levels of language fluency in the new business language are likely to experience more anxiety compared with individuals with higher levels of language fluency in the new business language.***

Our findings related to status attributions suggest that when organization members are fluent in English, such as in the UK Outstation, they tend to frequently use idiomatic phrases and figurative language to exchange alternate viewpoints, to address common uncertainties, to manage inter-personal sensitivities and arrive at a common understanding. For example, the marketing communications and sales managers in the UK office used metaphors and idiomatic phrases such as “things being thought through”, “somewhere down the line” and “we are on an equal footing” that neutralized any emotional sensitivities, created a common



goal-directed focus and provided very little opportunity for uncertainties to linger. The managers and employees who, in interacting with Frenchco counterparts, had a medium to high level of English language fluency were thus better able to use BELF and realize its potential in developing a collective understanding. In this case BELF featured as a contact language to create common understanding, to foster collaboration and to bridge between Dutchco and Frenchco managers (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010). Hence, these individuals appeared to experience relatively rarely status inequality. Informants in this English language fluency category were as well less inclined to mark differences between the cultures and organizational identities of Dutchco and Frenchco. Instead they often referred to each other as *equal* partners in a “marriage” or as “neighbors”.

In contrast, when managers and employees had a relatively low level of English language fluency they could not easily switch between languages. As a consequence multilingual environments were created in which the persistent use of French and local languages led on occasion to separate conversations happening in languages other than English. This strengthened feelings of exclusion on the part of those who did not speak either of those languages: “I don’t care, they say French is not important, English is the language. I don’t care what they say I feel it every day, I see it every day, they talk in French and receive messages in French, and so, I feel it like that [excluded].” (marketing coordinator). This resulted in increased feelings of *status inequality*, in our case usually to Dutchco’s disadvantage. We therefore propose the following:

***Proposition 2: In a post-merger integration context, individuals with low to medium levels of language fluency in the new business language are less likely to see themselves equal to the partner company compared with individuals with higher levels of language fluency in the new business language.***

The persistent use of other languages besides English also hindered the identification of Dutchco employees with their Frenchco counterparts. Moreover, the continuing importance of the French language led to feelings of distrust towards native speakers at Frenchco (Neeley et al. 2012) and this increased identification among Dutchco employees with their ‘own’ pre-merger organization, in particular for our informants with relatively low English language fluency. As a sales agent in Italy noted: “Sometimes I have this ‘we versus them’ feeling. I still feel Dutchco.” This stands in contrast to individuals with a relatively high English language fluency who were better able to subscribe to the overall aims and rationale of the merger of becoming a single company. Finally, some informants with low to medium English language fluency who resisted the new collective group identity directly attributed their lack of identification to the new business language: “I still feel more Dutchco. But it’s just the language barrier.” (service agent) This leads to our final proposition:

***Proposition 3: In a post-merger integration context, individuals with low to medium levels of language fluency in the new business language are less likely to identify with the newly merged organization compared with individuals with higher levels of language fluency in the new business language.***

#### Theoretical and Practical Implications

In all, our study makes the following sets of theoretical contributions with implications for further research. First of all, we connect with recent contributions on language in international business (Bordia and Bordia 2015; Brannen et al. 2014; Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1997; Neeley 2013; Peltokorpi and Vaara 2012) and underscore the issues and challenges associated with the adoption of a lingua franca. We highlight with our study the differential outcomes

associated with having a common business language for individuals across various units of the same organization. Specifically, we add to nascent research on lingua franca by illustrating that a lingua franca affects the identification with the collective organization, as an important collective outcome, but only in circumstances where co-workers have comparable levels of medium to high fluency. Significant variations in fluency across speakers and the presence of multiple languages within the work unit, on the other hand, negatively affect the ability of a lingua franca to serve as a medium towards collective identification and a joint commitment towards the merged organization.

The implication of these findings is that the context in which a lingua franca is adopted matters in terms of whether and how the language is taken up and spoken, and whether in turn it serves as a platform for collective processes of sensemaking and identification. Thus, our analysis adds to recent research on the contextual dynamics around the adoption of a lingua franca in a company (Janssens and Steyaert 2014). A further, but related implication is that a common business language, such as English, is not necessarily a neutral medium or ‘contact language’ (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005) and thus a harmonizing force within an organization. In fact, its adoption and use may be far from neutral (Hinds et al. 2014; Peltokorpi and Vaara 2012). In an inter-personal context the adoption of a lingua franca affects the relative status that the informants perceive they themselves have, or rather exercise by speaking a language, and also similarly what status they attribute on that basis to others (Hinds et al. 2014; Neeley 2013).

The basis for these effects is the language fluency of employees, and how this affects not only their ease and comfort in speaking the language, but also their ability to use the language to make sense of complex or changing circumstances. However, with a few exceptions (Cuypers et al. 2015; Hinds et al. 2014; Neeley 2013), language fluency and the competence of employees in speaking English have not been studied in any great detail,

although significant differences exist in fluency levels between speakers (cf. Ehrenreich 2010; Tietze 2008). In the present study, we draw on work in linguistics and the literature on English as a foreign language (e.g., Littlemore and Low 2006) to examine and measure English fluency in international business settings. This measure allowed us to assess fluency levels of speakers and its application to the case draws out the paradoxical impact of BELF. On the one hand, comparable medium levels of fluency in English across speakers helps them to create common understanding, eases collaboration and provides more generally a bridge between different nationalities within the MNC. On the other hand, basic levels of fluency are not the whole story, as the use and impact of BELF is conditioned by the language environment within which it is spoken. In the German, Swiss, Spanish and Italian Outstations we observed a significant use of the French, Dutch and sometimes 'local' languages alongside English. In some of these units (such as the Spanish and Italian Outstations) even people with high English language fluency talked about the uncertain future of the company and worried about their personal well-being. When we dug deeper in the data to find out why this was the case we found that in these units French and sometimes 'local languages' maintained an important role as a business language in the company. This environment not only affected the way in which employees from Dutchco and Frenchco interacted with one another, but it also held employees back from reaching a shared understanding and establishing a collective interpretive frame of reference (organizational identity) associated with the merger. As such, even whilst they embarked on operational steps towards integration, they did this in a compliant and at times skeptical way. This was the case even in Germany and Switzerland, where employees with a medium to high English language fluency were still clinging on to their own organization as a source of identity.

Conversely, in both the UK and Swedish Outstations the singular use of English as a business language played an important role in identification with the collective organization.

Thus, when BELF is used alongside other languages that are informally and formally spoken in a group, department or business unit, its ability to foster or cement a post-merger integration process are significantly curtailed. These findings add to our understanding of language diversity (Hinds et al. 2014; Henderson 2005; Janssens and Steyaert 2014) as well as of the post-merger sociocultural integration process (Björkman et al. 2007; Brannen and Peterson 2009; Sarala et al. 2014; Teerikangas and Very 2006) and explain why, as a result of language differences, integration appears to be enabled and realized in some organizational units but not in others.

#### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our analysis and focus on a single case obviously comes with a number of limitations. First of all, our findings are suggestive in the sense that the associations between language fluency and post-merger dynamics may take different forms in other cases. Our case study is one in which the adoption of English as a lingua franca was not highly regulated or policed by senior management. As such, it perhaps contrasts with other cases (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1997; Vaara et al. 2005) although one could argue that it provides for an interesting quasi-experimental design that allows us to explore variation in the adoption of English across work groups or units characterized by differences in their English fluency levels and language environment.

Furthermore, our findings stipulate that as part of the adoption of English as a lingua franca language fluency had quite significant, and in some senses dramatic, effects on post-merger integration. However, language fluency may not always have such a significant and marked impact within international business settings as in our case. Conceivably, the cross-border merger situation may have intensified the role and impact of language fluency,

whereas the effect may be less pronounced in the context of a single MNC that decides to adopt a common language policy. Similarly, the context of a merger between two previously separate corporations may also have heightened the cultural status and identification associated with speaking either the Dutch or French language alongside English. However, we think that this aspect of the case makes it also a generative setting.

Our findings and conclusions will, we hope, inform further research on the adoption of a lingua franca and on language fluency in international business settings, including international M&As. In particular, there is a need to test our propositions in other contexts and with other types of cases. One interesting line of research that extends from our study is to explore the variation in cultural and multi-lingual settings in which BELF, as a lingua franca, is adopted and how it impacts organizational outcomes such as the formation of an organizational identity, increased collaboration, coordination, and the like.

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**Table 1** Summary of the profile and language fluency of informants across each organizational unit

<b>Unit</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Tenure (in years)</b>	<b>Number of Interviews</b>	<b>Actual English Fluency</b>
<b>Switzerland</b>						
1	F	Human resource coordinator	Swiss (German speaking)	>2	1	Medium
2	M	Sales agent	Swiss (German speaking)	>2	1	Medium
3	M	Outside sales manager	Swiss (Italian speaking)	4	2	Low
4	F	Account manager corporate sales	Swiss (German speaking)	5	1	Low
5	F	Manager customer trade	Swiss	18	2	High
6	M	Sales agent	Swiss (Italian speaking)	7	1	Low
7	F	Accountant	Swiss	7	1	Low
8	M	Marketing communications manager	Swiss (German speaking)	8	1	Medium
<b>Italy</b>						
9	M	General Manager	Italian	30	3	Low
10	F	Pricing and revenue manager	Italian	4	1	Low
11	F	Customer relations & sales	Italian	13	1	Low
12	M	Sales agent	Italian	8	2	Medium
13	F	Coordinator commercial unit	Italian	5	1	Low
14	M	Sales manager	Italian	3	1	Medium
15	F	Human resource manager	Italian	<1	1	Low
16	M	ICT manager	Polish	11	1	Low
17	M	Commercial manager	Dutch	>20	1	Medium
18	M	Sales agent	Italian	10	1	Low
19	M	Pricing executive	Italian	8	1	Low

20	M	Sales agent	Italian	6	1	Low
<b>Germany</b>						
21	M	Sales director	German	2	1	Medium
22	M	Indoor Sales Agent	German	8	1	Medium
23	M	General Manager Corporate Accounts	German	38	1	Medium
24	F	Corporate Accounts Sales Agent	German	8	1	Medium
25	F	Human resources manager	German	4	2	Medium
26	M	Sales representative	German	6	1	Low
27	F	Indoor sales representative	German	6	1	Low
28	F	Human resource assistant	German	>1	1	Low
29	F	Corporate accounts agent	German	7	1	Medium
30	M	Market manager	French	16	1	Low
31	M	Marketing manager	French	8	1	Medium
<b>UK</b>						
32	M	General Manager	Dutch	20	5	Medium
33	F	Pricing and revenue manager	Irish	10	1	High
34	M	Marketing communications manager	English	1	2	High
35	M	Director of Sales	English	15	2	High
36	F	Manager customer care	Belgian	7	2	Medium
37	F	Manager e-commerce	English	6	1	High
38	F	Business analyst	English	18	1	High
39	F	Marketing communications manager	French	1	1	High
40	F	Pricing and Revenue Executive	Italian	1	1	Medium
41	M	Business analyst	English	>10	1	High
<b>Spain</b>						
42	F	Indoor sales agent	Spanish	12	1	Low

43	F	Sales agent	Spanish	10	2	Low
44	F	Coordinator Group Travel	Spanish	23	1	Low
45	M	Sales manager	Spanish	4	3	Low
46	M	Marketing manager	Spanish	10	1	Medium
47	F	Marketing coordinator	Spanish	>2	1	Medium
48	M	Accountant	Spanish	14	1	Low
49	F	Sales agent	Spanish	14	1	Low
50	M	Regional information manager	English	13	1	High
51	F	Sales representative	Spanish	3	1	Low
52	F	Marketing communications manager	Spanish		1	Medium
<b>Sweden</b>						
53	F	General Manager	Dutch	40	1	Medium
54	F	Outdoor sales agent	Swedish	2	1	Low
55	M	Sales representative	Swedish	6	1	Medium
56	F	Account manager	Swedish	7	1	Low
57	M	IT manager	Swedish	5	1	Medium
58	F	Human resource manager	Swedish	5	2	Medium
59	F	Direct sales manager	Swedish	5	1	Medium
60	M	Pricing and revenue manager	Italian	7	1	Low
61	F	Customer relations manager	Swedish	8	1	Low
62	M	Sales agent	Swedish	1	2	Medium
63	F	Indoor sales agent	Swedish	10	1	Low
64	F	Sales agent	Swedish	35	1	Medium
65	F	Revenue integrity executive	Swedish	1	1	Medium
66	F	Pricing executive	Finnish	7	1	Medium
67	M	Sales support	French	12	1	Low

**Table 2** Illustrative evidence of emergent themes across the three English fluency levels

	<b>Perceived anxiety</b>	<b>Status attributions</b>	<b>Identity politics</b>
<b>Low English language fluency</b>	<p>“It was – the communication, the intentions were not clear. So it seems – yes, they were just not clear. So there was really uncertainty, doubts that most fear among the colleagues, who would be the next one [to be made redundant].” (P&amp;R manager, Italy) – <i>fear about own job</i></p> <p>“I have never seen such a social unrest.” (Sales manager, Spain) – <i>integration tensions</i></p> <p>“People are either demotivated in their job, or scared of the future, or simply uncertain.” (Sales agent, Italy) – <i>integration tensions</i></p>	<p>“AF is the ‘big fish’, KLM is the ‘small fish’. But we have to live with this situation.” (Indoor sales agent, Spain) – <i>feeling dominated</i></p> <p>“I can say there are voices here that say: ‘okay, it’s not Dutchco, Dutchco doesn’t have a voice’.” (Customer relations and sales, Italy) – <i>feeling dominated</i></p>	<p>“I use ‘them’ and ‘us’.” (Commercial manager, Italy) – <i>resistance</i></p> <p>“We have to operate like one company but we have two different organizations with many different policies.” (Indoor sales agent, Spain) – <i>resistance</i></p> <p>“Although we work together on a couple of things we are still two separate companies.” (Manager customer relations, Sweden) – <i>resistance</i></p> <p>“So this is the situation, we are completely separate, so at this moment we are very, very careful with not mixing anything.” (General manager, Italy) – <i>resistance</i></p>
<b>Medium English language fluency</b>	<p>“It could be an opportunity and it could be negative and uncertain.” (Coordinator group travel, Spain) – <i>uncertainty</i></p> <p>“There is always uncertainty about what we will do, and, you know, this is why it also is good to move a bit faster [with the integration].” (Marketing manager, Spain) – <i>uncertainty</i></p> <p>“Stress is terrible, people will get sick I can tell you and when people get</p>	<p>“It’s balanced in the cooperation, but I have a little bit more the impression, that everything that is introduced has a little bit more weight towards Frenchco.” (HR manager, Germany) – <i>feeling dominated</i></p> <p>“Together with Frenchco, it’s quite impressive, that there is definitely a willingness to make this relationship and this marriage last.” (Manager customer care, UK) – <i>equality</i></p> <p>“Actually we are more dominant.”</p>	<p>“We are moving in the direction of [the French company].” (General manager, UK) – <i>support</i></p> <p>“It’s, as for now we are still two different companies.” (HR manager, Sweden) – <i>resistance</i></p> <p>“I cannot emphasize enough that something very special is happening here in the UK in terms of understanding each other and getting the best out of two worlds.” (General manager, UK) – <i>support</i></p>

	<p>sick here with depression and things... It's something you don't recover from in your whole life.” (Marketing coordinator, Spain) – <i>integration tensions</i></p>	<p>(Revenue integrity executive, Sweden) – <i>feeling dominant</i></p> <p>“The only thing, maybe sometimes it could be two people speaking French around me. I always think . . . you know. Pull up with it, it's no big deal. But I have to watch out. Because it can be one way of alienating yourself.” (Sales agent, Sweden) – <i>feelings of exclusion</i></p>	<p>“The market perception is still that we are two companies even if we are having this nice one campaign.” (Sales director, Germany) – <i>ambivalence</i></p> <p>“Unfortunately both parties are fighting for their company. They, for the time being are not fighting for a joint company. Unfortunately.” (Sales director, Germany) – <i>resistance</i></p>
<p><b>High English language fluency</b></p>	<p>“It's not a threat in our area, which is nice. There is trust between us [Frenchco and Dutchco employees].” (P&amp;R manager, UK) – <i>fear about own job</i></p> <p>“Those people who, like me, who are working towards one goal know that nothing will be taken in haste and everything will be duly considered and it does provide me with some relief. So we're facing now this period of a relatively calm and relaxed atmosphere. I think that people sort of taking that to get their breath back and recharging themselves for a period, what looks like, growth and technological development” (Marketing communications manager, UK) – <i>fear about own job</i></p>	<p>“I think the key thing here for us is, that we stand in total harmony.” (Director of sales, UK) – <i>equality</i></p> <p>“We are on an equal footing.” (Marketing communications manager, UK) – <i>equality</i></p>	<p>“We are all very much staging one face to the market.” (Manager e-commerce, UK) – <i>support</i></p> <p>“Identification with the group is increasing.” (Manager e-commerce, UK) – <i>support</i></p> <p>“We are now in a stage where we are deliberately pushing a one-person representation representing both the companies.” (Sales manager, UK) – <i>support</i></p> <p>“I feel more and more Frenchco-Dutchco.” (Regional information manager, Spain) – <i>support</i></p>



**Figure 1** Structure of the data



