

# A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO MANAGEMENT RESEARCH: LEADERSHIP IN INTERCULTURAL ENGLISH MEETINGS IN ASIA

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**Abstract:** *A focus on language based on empirical research and field practices in management and organizational research has already been advocated (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). However, only a handful of management and organizational studies have demonstrated reflective ways to investigate language usage in day-to-day managerial interaction. Accessibility to empirical business interaction data limits opportunities for researchers to explore any detailed examination of language and management. This article suggests simulated discussion as a way to overcome these limitations. It shows an example of a linguistic research approach using mixed quantitative and qualitative methods to understand one aspect of managerial behavior - leadership - in simulated decision-making interaction.*

**Key words:** *management and organizational research, intercultural settings, language, linguistic research.*

## 1. Introduction

This article presents a linguistic research approach to examining leadership in intercultural settings, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. First, we discuss the increasing attention paid to the constitutive role of language in the decision-making processes. Then, we provide an overview of past research and approaches to understanding leadership in business and management communication. Since we have discussed our detailed analysis of the participants' linguistic behavior elsewhere (Du-Babcock and Tanaka, 2013), in this article we will shift our focus to our research approach to explore the relationship between language and managerial behavior.

The notion of management has been undergoing transformation, along with the continuous change in managerial system and business environments. The idea of management, managers, and managing emerges out of the development of a production system. Throughout the developmental process, the labor force was divided into management (concept) and workers (execution), according to Taylor (1919). Three decades later Fayol (1949), a French management theorist, re-defined this emerging

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concept of management in terms of four activities performed by managers; namely, planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. As business corporations became more complex and diversified, managers jobs went beyond Fayol's classic four key actions. Management research in the past few decades has provided a great deal of empirical evidence that shows that managers' jobs in an organizational setting are much more dynamic and sensitive to particular situations (see Fairhurst, 2007). According to Holman and Thorpe (2003), managerial activity aims at achieving the generation of "an intelligible account of the various feelings that surround the contested issues in the organization" (p. 196). Observations of managers' behavior and identity in authentic business situations imply that managerial behaviors involve a substantial list of communicative factors including politeness, strategies for making an impression, metaphors, and storytelling (see, for example, Boje, 2014; Handford & Koester, 2010; Fujio & Tanaka, 2013; Rahman, 2012).

In addition, the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of business has made managers' jobs even more challenging. As a common code for stakeholders from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, English is often the preferred business language (Gerristen & Nickerson, 2009). This idea of English as *lingua franca* is particularly important in the business context of Asia where native speakers of English are not in the majority, so that the constraints and power relations caused by different degrees of linguistic mastery could become critical in any communicative event (Tanaka, 2006).

The inherent power in the use of *lingua franca* English and its socially constructed nature identified in business discourse studies opposes any assumptions of political neutrality in traditional linguistic research. Researchers are in need of a framework to examine English beyond the level of native speaker-based studies in conventional applied linguistics positivist research. Thus, there has been an increasing urge among researchers to improve their knowledge about research approaches to understand the fragmented, diversified and unsystematic nature of managerial communication in the English as *lingua franca* business environment. Linguistic researchers who investigate organizational discourse are increasingly using critical discourse analysis informed by postmodernism. Critical postmodernist language research has demonstrated how managerial communication has been influenced by power relations from a locally situated perspectives (Gimenez, 2009, Mullany, 2007).

In detecting complex power relations, empirical research is substantial. Audio-visually recorded naturally occurring interaction provides researchers with situated context rich data. However, this data is hardly accessible. Especially when researchers target specific managerial practices, such as decision-making, leadership and initiative, it is not always easy to find the very moments in which researchers identify such managerial practices. As an alternative approach, the simulation method is often used to collect data in particular in linguistics (for example, Searle, et al, 2007) and management research (see Onggo and Hill, 2014).

We employed simulation to collect data on managerial behavior, namely leadership, in intercultural decision-making interaction. While simulation as a data collection method has been evaluated as adequate for research methods, there has been some argument as to whether data captured in the manipulated setting is authentic. We will discuss this authenticity issue in the research project section.

## 2. Leadership

Our current study focuses on leadership in multi-cultural contexts. Leadership as a critical element of management has been the focus of a number of studies (e.g., Conger & Kanungo 1998; Knights & Willmott 1992; Fairhurst 2007). Much of past leadership research was conducted in search of outstanding individual leaders' attributes. Such studies treat leadership qualities such as the power to inspire, impress, navigate and control people (Bass, 1990). Leadership is viewed as a talent possessed by the charismatic individual. A critical view of the concept of leadership as a number of personal qualities and capabilities pinpointed a potential risk in overlooking social contexts that may influence leadership (Yukl, 1994). Situational leadership research assumes that a certain leadership style is required in response to a particular workplace situation. Thus the essence of the workplace context, particularly of its workers, was the focus of situational research. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to explore the qualities of individuals, or the essence of situations.

Recent social constructivist research emphasizes the notion that managers situationally create meaning by their managerial behavior. A social constructivist approach which treats leadership as a product emerging out of social interaction was proposed as an alternative (Fairhurst, 2007). In this approach, leadership is examined in terms of a leader's relationship to others, where language and communication are particularly important in the process of leadership construction. For example, Pondy (1978) makes claims concerning the leader as a manager of meaning. In this type of inquiry leadership becomes a language game (Marturano, Wood, and Gosling, 2010) and a key skill required in making the manager an effective leader (Watson, 2001). Watson further argues that language plays an important role in decision-making: by creating, transferring, and sharing knowledge. In view of this, we believe that social constructionism is a useful way of thinking about the role of language in constructing leadership in decision-making meetings.

The notion of social construction is often used in recent research to investigate leadership and language (Fairhurst, 2007). Aritz and Walker (2014) analyzed simulated problem solving discussion by American and East Asian participants. They described three types of leadership - a directive style, a cooperative style, and a collaborative style were all in practice in their data sets. The English native speaker participants who used directive leadership dominated, taking turns speaking during meetings. The numerical data showed a skewed distribution of turn-taking frequency. The East Asian respondents to their questionnaire expressed complex feelings. On the other hand, the cooperative style and collaborative style were more inclusive. Talk distribution was more balanced among the participants. Aritz and Walker's study demonstrates that a focus on language can broaden our understanding of leadership in multicultural business settings.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches have been utilized in past leadership research methods. Quantitative approaches generally rely on testing theoretical propositions. Positivist researchers who perceive leadership as social phenomena which are measureable and generalizable use a quantitative approach (Antonakis et al.). Guba and Lincoln (1985) pinpoint one weakness of the positivism underlying quantitative research; it relies too much on operationalizing and ignores meanings and contexts, and thus tends to reduce observed phenomena to universal principles. On the contrary, qualitative research focuses on meanings as they relate to context, often by reporting detailed views of the informants and the naturally occurring data of interaction. Qualitative research,

however, has been criticized for being biased; bias affects the validity and reliability of findings, and consequently affects business decisions. Qualitative analysis is interpretive in nature; the data can be interpreted to construct the findings that the researcher wishes.

As a result, the researcher may find evidence that the researcher is looking for, and may ignore other potential evidence (Fiske and Taylor 2013). Therefore, in order to ensure the validity of data analysis, triangulation of the data from different sources and methods is critical (Guba and Lincoln, 1981; Davis, 1995). Furthermore, Bargiela-Chiappini (2011) emphasizes the value of mixed methods for reflexivity enhancement. In this study, we demonstrate our use of mixed methods, including qualitative and quantitative data analysis, to understand leadership in an Asian multicultural setting.

### **3. The research project**

Using a mixed method approach, we conducted our empirical research on leadership in multi-cultural decision-making meetings. Viewing leadership as socially emergent, qualitative analysis is followed by our initial quantitative analysis of turn taking. To guide our analysis, three research questions are put forth and they are:

1. How leadership emerges in multi-cultural decision-making meetings.
2. How leadership influences the overall decision.
3. How the participants' language and linguistic behavior affect leadership construction.

#### **3.1. Background of the study**

In two major Asian cities, Hong Kong and Tokyo, we invited business professionals to take part in simulated intercultural decision-making meetings. Tokyo participants signed up to participate voluntarily in the study, in response to an invitation announcement posted on a website, while Hong Kong participants accepted an invitation by one of the researchers. By connecting two sites, Tokyo and Hong Kong, online, we set up the meetings. The data, containing approximately 43,000 spoken word corpora, were collected in intercultural decision-making meetings. In total, 43 business professionals were involved in the five meetings. Each decision-making group was made up of five to eight members consisting of a relatively equal proportion of Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese.

In the simulation meetings, these participants assumed the role of a board of directors attending a board meeting. They are asked to respond to a company crisis - their drug is suspected to have caused 20 to 30 deaths in the past five years. Five options were given to the participants to choose from; they are A. Recall and destroy products. B. Stop production and sell the stocks. C. Stop advertising and continue selling. D. Continue marketing until the drugs are banned. E. Take legal action. They had to make a strategic and ethical decision in determining which option to take up as their reaction to this given problematic situation.

#### **3.2. Research Approach: Mixed Method**

The video-recorded data were transcribed, and our data sets contain transcripts of the dialogues of five meetings. In order to enhance the validity of our analysis, we used the mixed method approach by examining both the quantitative and qualitative data. For qualitative data, we refer to Aritz and Walker's (2014) quantitative data analysis method,

which worked as a strong indicator of leadership construction. We counted the number of turns and the number of words. In addition, we also included the speaking time as a measurement because the participants in our study were all non-native English speakers and their speaking rate might differ depending not only on individual's English-language proficiency but also on other factors such as the participants' social identities, confidence and characteristics.

Past research (e.g. Spencer-Oatey and Xing, 2005) informed us that silence was an important factor in intercultural meetings; in particular, in Asian business meetings. Therefore, we counted the length of silences in between or during the participants' turns. In our qualitative analysis, we examined the participants' behavior, word choice, eye contact, facial expressions, and tone of voice. In this way we coded recurrent patterns of linguistic and managerial behavior using the frameworks of critical discourse analysis.

### **3.3. Authenticity**

There has been a debate as to whether or not data collected in simulation is authentic. The authenticity of simulated role-played interaction is assumed but untested (Stokoe, 2013). Stokoe (2014) suggests that her participants are aware that they may be assessed in terms of their behavior in simulation, which is the reason why the participants in her simulation study did things that they did not do in actual encounters. Félix-Brasdefer (2007) argues that simulation participants may not have as strong a commitment as those who are in a real situation. In other words, what is at stake in simulation is different from what is at stake in the real world.

Linguistic researchers involved in observational studies of social interaction, however, adopt the view that simulated spoken utterances can be treated as naturally occurring data and are therefore worthy of study. Searle et al. (2007) report that an investigation of simulated interaction provides a variety of methods to generate authentic data analysis.

Only a few of the participants in our study are involved in the pharmaceutical business, which indicates an authenticity issue in our data; this can make the discussion liable to not being perceived as a real life problem. However, we propose that the simulation task generated an authentic and realistic results-oriented discussion. We view context as multi-layered, co-created, contestable, and locally achieved (Fairhurst, 2009). Upon analysing the data, we paid attention to contextual factors, such as business experience, manner of speaking, English level, and non-verbal behavior including eye-contact, dress, and positioning around the meeting tables.

The work experience of our simulation participants also was varied, and included senior to mid-level managers and engineers from various organizations such as private enterprises, educational institutions, a pharmaceutical company, and law firms. The communication task represented in this study required all of the participants to engage in decision-making discussions. The participants needed to present information from their respective viewpoints in order to reach decisions.

## **4. The Data Analysis**

In order to investigate how leadership emerges and how it influences overall decisions, we compared the original individual decisions and the group decisions. The five groups did not arrive at the same decisions. We assumed that different contexts of leadership led

to different decisions in spite of the detailed instruction and background information provided with the decision-making task.

Because the current article focuses on our research approach, we choose two sets of meeting data recorded in December, 2009 and in March, 2010. These data provide a good showcase to capture socially constructed meaning in intercultural meetings. Our mixed method approach reveals that underlying discursive leadership factors influence the decision-making process and consequently affect the overall process of arriving at a decision.

Pseudonyms are employed for protection of the participants' privacy. In the process of arriving at decisions, a majority of the participants changed their minds; and by the end of the meeting, a majority of the participants had chosen an option different from their original choice. As seen in table 1, the number of participants in the December meeting was seven: four in Hong Kong and three at the Tokyo site. At the beginning, five out of seven participants chose A (or A and E) as a solution for this problematic situation; but by the end of the meeting, four participants had changed their choice to A. The participants were split in their decision (five chose C and two A). They did not finally agree upon a group decision. Rather they voted for their final decision.

Table 1  
*December, 2009 Meeting Participants, Initial Individual choice, and Final Decision*

Participants	Site	Initial Choice	Final choice
Tom	Tokyo	A	C
Yukio	Tokyo	D	A
Haru	Tokyo	A	C
Sally	Hong Kong	A	C
Dale	Hong Kong	(C)	C
Nancy	Hong Kong	A	A

Table 2 presents the quantitative data of the March meeting. It shows that, in the process of decision-making discussion, all six participants aligned their ideas and agreed upon their final decision, a combination of choice C and E.

Table 2  
*March, 2010 Meeting Participants, Initial Individual choice, and Final Decision*

Participants	Site	Initial Choice	Final choice
Norma	Hong Kong	C	C+E
Amy	Hong Kong	C	C+E
Rachel	Hong Kong	C	C+E
Kan	Tokyo	D	C+E
Kota	Tokyo	E	C+E
Yumi	Tokyo	E	C+E

Adopting the mixed method approach, we first examined quantitative data, turn distribution, speaking time distribution, and word count distribution among the participants.

#### 4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

Chart 1 and 2 show quantitative analysis in terms of word count, speaking time duration, and numbers of turns for each participant in the December and March meetings. As seen in Charts 1 and 2, the two groups showed an interesting contrast in the distribution of the participants talk.

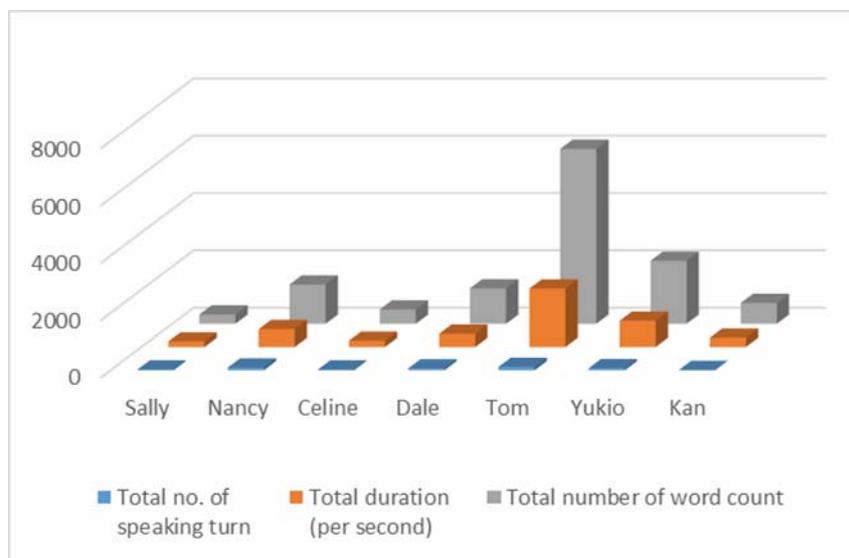


Fig. 1. *December Meeting participants turn, speaking time and word count distributions*

In the December meeting, from the quantitative data, it could be interpreted that Dale dominated the discussion. His number of turns, talking time, and word count stand out among the participants. An intercultural difference is also apparent. Hong Kong participants speak more than Tokyo participants generally do. In comparison, the turn distribution in March is not as skewed as in the December meeting.

The data show that the turn distribution is less skewed. Although the three participants, Yumi, Amy and Kan talked more than the others, the differences are smaller.

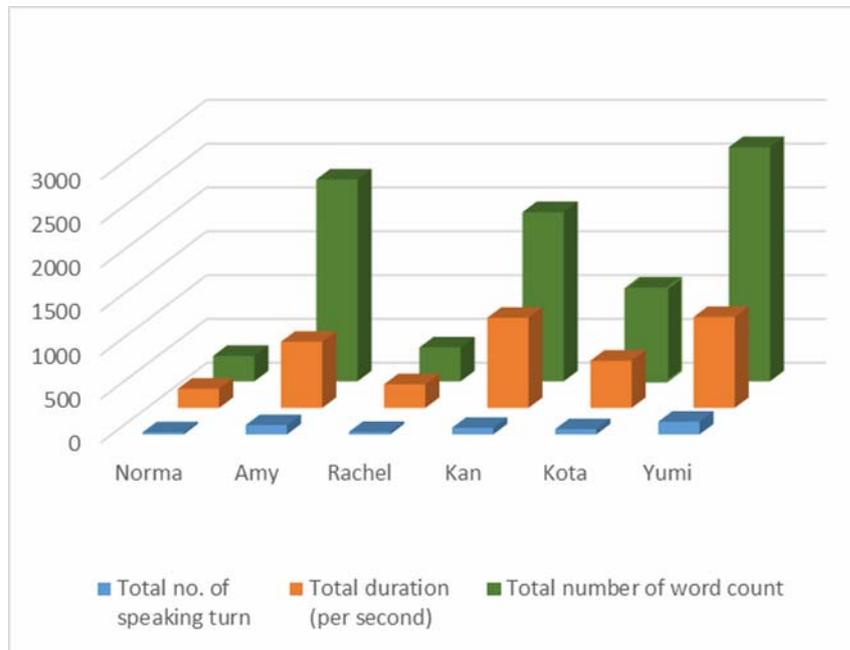


Fig. 2. *March Meeting participants turn, speaking time and word count distributions*

We also found interesting differences in average word counts in each turn as seen in Table 3. The length of discussion for each member of the group to make a final decision was different; it took 22 minutes and 18 seconds for December participants and 58 minutes and 21 seconds for March participants. Interestingly, the total numbers of participants' turns are similar. Moreover, the number of total words spoken during the meeting in December is larger than in the March meeting. This means that the interaction in the December meeting was very abrupt while it was rather slow in March. Assuming the amount of talk and talk distribution is an indicator of exercised leadership, we interpret that two different types of leadership were practiced.

*Turn Words Average*

Table 3

	Total turns	Total words	Average words by turn
December	423	12469	29.47754137
March	440	8638	19.63181818

## 4.2. Qualitative Analysis

### Soliciting Participation, framing interaction and checking agreement

Our quantitative analysis focuses on recurrent linguistic behavior, which influences participants' decision-making. A few linguistic strategies captured our attention as a key linguistic behavior. One of these is asking questions to solicit participation. As is clear in Chart 2, there are two participants who spoke relatively less. In order to listen to these quiet participants' opinions, questions to solicit participation were often asked not only by

the active speakers but also by others who took a relatively smaller number of turns. We understood that these questions were strategically used in order to include all meeting participants no matter how well they spoke English. Excerpt 1 shows three instances as examples in which the participants asked that these strategic questions be included (they are underlined).

### **Excerpt 1. Questions to solicit participation**

Norma: Yea that... yea yea yea... That's what I think as well. So hum... maybe we can ... (omitted) that's why we could still ar... allow doctors to continue prescribing the drug. And... what do you think?

Kota: Yea hum... hum actually I agree with hum... the 2 ladies., (omitted) of our advantage to find out ar aum ar... the appeal with the er FDA. So what what what do you think?

Kan: ...how about...ho Actually..at the same time..we have to make ar...(omitted)..right. How about you?

It is interesting that this type of question was not frequently observed in the December meeting. We found that the difference in the use of this strategy makes average words seem by turn different. When questions to solicit participation are asked less in the meeting, active speakers' turns tend to be longer and their speech rates became faster. This could be because active speakers' listening was minimal and because less active speakers did not obtain an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. One of Dale's turns recorded 659 words and continued for three minutes and 48 seconds in the December meeting. Excerpt 2 shows the beginning and end of his longest turn. Not only was Dale's talk lengthy but he also at the end attempts to direct other participants to his choice.

### **Excerpt 2. Directing others**

Dale: Okay, so which means that it's not exactly our fault in terms of the drug itself, it's the doctors ar... responsibilities, in terms of .....(omitted)..... And don't forget that hey, they die because they probably being ar overdose by the doctors. So it's also the doctors' fault here.

Dale's leadership behavior, including his long and fast-paced talk and domination in turn taking minimized others' opportunities to offer their ideas and opinions. In particular, participants with rather weak command of English elected to remain silent. Minimal listening is one of the factors that Aritz and Walker (2014) found in their data set in which directive leadership was exercised. We also noticed that such directive leadership accompanies non-linguistic or para-linguistic factors. These factors include loudness, direct eye-gaze, dressing, and rhetorical strategies. In the research site, he came late and was quiet for the first nine minutes. When he was asked to disclose his choice, he refused by saying 'Ar why don't you go first? Why why why don't you go ahead first? I I I like to listen to you, yes, please.' After everybody opened up about their choices, confirming that the majority chose option A, Dale opened his mouth and asked a rhetorical question: '...if we all choose A, that means that we are actually applying that the company has done wrong. We are producing a poison drug, a death drug.....'. As the participants were acting as board members of the company, it might not have been easy to answer 'yes' to this question. This way, he started to direct people to his choice. At the end four of the group members changed their choice. We interpret all this to mean that Dale's linguistic, para-linguistic, and strategic behavior were quite directive.

The longest turn in the March meeting has 231 words and is one minute 32 seconds long. Even in this longest turn, the speaker ends with a question to solicit participation as seen in the following Excerpt 3:

**Excerpt 3. Soliciting participation**

Yumi: I I I think... Okay... I I think we we've just talked about financial lose. Ar... alright, I think .....the advertising, but I think not for the time being. Yes, I I still insist on this. What do you think?

Other marked differences include ‘framing interaction’ and ‘checking agreement’. In the March meeting, the participants often confirm their understanding of the on-going discussion and their alignment in forming consensus. Rachel frames the content of their discussion in Excerpt 4 and in Excerpt 5. Amy confirms that they agree in examining the death issue. Because of space limitation, we do not show exhaustive data of the moments encoded in these two categories.

**Excerpt 4. framing interaction**

Rachel: So we we had suggesting a a combination of the solution?

Norma: Yeah.

**Excerpt 5. checking agreement**

Amy: Er it seems to me that we all agree that we need to em... investigate the death issue, to find out what really happened.

Our data show that an aligned decision was made through leadership exercised using inclusive language strategies, while directive leadership ended up with a split decision. Aritz and Walker (2014) found that the linguistic behavior identified in our data, including questions for soliciting participation, framing interaction, and checking agreement, may be used in collaborative and cooperative leadership.

These two styles attempt to leverage intercultural synergy by minimizing communication problems which might arise out of the diversity of stakeholders. Past research indicates language and culture differences should be utilized as resources rather than obstacles (Blenkinsopp, and Shademan-Pajouh, 2010). Our data demonstrates that inclusive leadership in collaborative and cooperative manners is critical in intercultural meetings.

**5. Conclusion**

This article showed a way of investigating managerial behavior in an intercultural setting using a linguistic approach. Research approaches informed by linguistics tend to focus on details. By using a mixed method, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches, e.g. non-linguistic, para-linguistic, and contextual data, we expanded our scope and were able to examine leadership.

Another methodological argument that we make concerns the authenticity of simulated meeting data. The data indicate that even in a simulated discussion, when people from various cultural backgrounds get together and talk, there are a number of contextual and cultural factors for researchers to investigate. Rather than hold out for for an adequate setting and conditions, investigating simulated discussion as an arena for making meaning full of the struggles and cultural variables can indeed provide discursive data.

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