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When distance is good: A construal level perspective on perceptions of inclusive international language use

Anders Klitmøller^{a,*}, Jakob Lauring^{b,1}

^a Department of Language and Communication, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark

^b Department of Management, Aarhus University, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Virtual work has become an increasingly important part of the international business environment. In particular, two components of virtual work; workplace mobility and distributed work, depicting physical and psychological distance to the workplace, have gained substantial scholarly attention. However, while the main stream of the international business literature, studying global virtual teams, has used mobility and distribution as predictors for negative work outcomes, there are indications that virtual work can have positive implications for the organization. In this study, we explore how workplace mobility and distributed work can affect employees' perceptions of their colleagues and of managerial activities. More specifically, we focus on inclusive language use by managers and employees since this is a theme of growing interest in international business research. Relying on responses from 676 individuals from five Danish multicultural business organizations, we demonstrate a positive association between workplace mobility and perceptions of employees' openness to language diversity as well as between distributed work and perceptions of consistent common corporate language at management level. This is consistent with construal level theory predicting that distance between employees and the organization will lead to more objective and goal-oriented perceptions whereas individuals that are more emerged in organizational social life will view issues more in relation to goal irrelevant factors.

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1. Introduction

Virtual work is becoming an increasingly important part of doing business internationally (Gilson, Maynard, Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015; Sidhu & Volberda, 2011). Consequently, a stream of literature has been concerned with management issues related to technology mediated collaboration between geographically remote employees (Fiol & O'Conner, 2005; Henderson, 2008; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). In particular, studies on global virtual teams have added important insights to our understanding of possibilities and pitfalls of international virtual work (Maynard, Mathieu, Rapp, & Gilson, 2012; Maznevski, Davison, & Jonsen, 2006; Oshri, van Fenema, & Kotlarsky, 2008). Thus, virtual collaboration allows the MNC to tap into geographical distributed resource pools and offers a cost reductive and sustainable alternative to face-to-face collaboration

(Au & Marks, 2012; Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013). Yet, virtuality also poses a range of challenges for global teams (Scott & Wildman, 2015). The lack of physical face-to-face interaction within the organization combined with coordination challenges related to communication across spatial and temporal boundaries negatively impacts virtual collaboration (Mockaitis, Rose, & Zettenig, 2012; Zander, Mockaitis, & Butler, 2012). Therefore, international business researchers have become increasingly interested in how different dimensions of virtuality affect virtual work, and in particular two aspects of virtuality have drawn considerable attention: workplace mobility and distributed work (Chudoba, Wynn, Lu, & Watson-Manheim, 2005; Schweitzer & Duxbury, 2010; Zolin, Hinds, Fruchter, & Levitt, 2004). Workplace mobility refers to the degree to which employees work in environments other than their regular office, and distributed work represents the degree to which individuals rely on basic communication technologies to work with people that are distributed over different geographies and time zones (Chudoba et al., 2005). Thus, the combination of the two dimensions provides an understanding of how distant individuals are affiliated to their organization with regard to physical and psychological presence.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +45 28 83 52 33.

E-mail addresses: klitmoller@sdu.dk (A. Klitmøller), jala@badm.au.dk (J. Lauring).

¹ Tel.: +45 87 16 51 13.

Virtual teams are groups of geographically and/or organizationally dispersed coworkers that are assembled using a combination of telecommunication and information technologies to accomplish a variety of critical tasks (Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005). Thus, central to existing conceptualizations of virtuality is the geographical separation between team members and their reliance on information and communication technology (Cohen & Gibson, 2003; Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; Gilson et al., 2015). Studies have consistently found a strong correlation between the degree of virtuality and team outcomes (Gilson et al., 2015; Schweitzer & Duxbury, 2010). Thus, geographical distance combined with a reliance on communication technology has proven to reduce trust (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999), increase task conflict (Mortensen & Hinds, 2001), intensify coordination problems (Cramton, 2001), decrease performance (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005), and limit extra-role behavior (Ganesh & Gupta, 2010). More specifically, workplace mobility has been shown to have negative influences on communication, commitment, and performance (Chudoba et al., 2005), while distributed work has been argued to lead to uncertainty, isolation, and reduced performance (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005; Mortensen & Hinds, 2001). Although the bulk of literature has, thus, focused on the negative consequences of these central dimensions of virtual work, studies indicating positive aspects of virtuality have also emerged. Hence, virtual work has been connected to greater flexibility (Hill, Miller, Weiner, & Colihan, 1998), reduced stress (Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004), improved individual creativity, and increased positive perceptions of managers competence, and team member satisfaction (Henderson, 2008; Jia, Hirt, & Karpen, 2009; Wilson, Crisp, & Mortensen, 2013).

In accordance with this emerging stream of research, which seeks to counterbalance the predominantly negative view on virtual collaboration, we set out to explore positive aspects of workplace mobility and distributed work. We do this by basing our research on construal level theory (Henderson, Waksalak, Fujita, & Rohrbach, 2011; Trope & Liberman, 2010) arguing that being distant from something can make one evaluate it more positively. The aim with using construal level theory in an international business setting is two-fold. *First*, the theory allows us to address recent calls for more studies that explore the potential positive effects of distance on central aspects of international business and management (Ambos & Håkanson, 2014). *Second*, while construal level theory provides an alternate explanation of potential positive outcomes in distributed work, no efforts have been expanded to use it to empirically understand international virtual work (Wilson et al., 2013). Also, we specifically focus on how working virtually can affect individuals' perceptions of their surroundings. Thus, so far little has been done to gain an understanding of how working virtually affects employees' subjective perceptions of collaboration and management in international organizations. This is problematic since employees' perceptions could be as important to understand as the actual functioning of organizations (Hobman, Bodia, & Gallois, 2004). This is because individuals are guided by their perception rather than by objective facts and thus take decisions based on how they see things rather than on how things are – especially when things are at a distance. Therefore it can be argued that perceptions are highly important to include in theory building in the field of international business in general and for virtual teams in particular. Not least because results of management policies and practices are subjectively formed in the minds of organizational members (Hambrick, 2007).

Accordingly, we follow the notion that different individuals who are situated differently in relation to the organization (more or less away from the actual setting) may also perceive the role and functioning of management initiatives differently (Henderson, 2008). In doing so, we aim to add knowledge to the international business literature on global virtual teams where a void exists concerning factors affecting team members' identification with

and evaluation of the organization (Cramton & Hinds, 2014; Mukherjee & Hanlon, 2012).

Here, we focus on the perception of inclusive language use which is the inclusion of all organization members in communication despite their linguistic origin. We choose to focus on language management because this is increasingly acknowledged as an important field in international business research (Barner-Rasmussen, Ehrnrooth, Koveshnikov, & Mäkelä, 2014; Tenzer, Pudelko, & Harzing, 2014; Volk, Köhler, & Pudelko, 2014). The present study of virtual work's effect on perceptions on organizational language use is important for several reasons. *First*, studies on the potential positive aspects of virtual work are still scarce (Henderson, 2008). Hence, despite that conceptual articles have called for an understanding of how working virtually affects perceptions of organizations and their members, little has been done to empirically explore this field (Wilson et al., 2013; Wilson, O'Leary, Metiu, & Jett, 2008). *Second*, language and language management is still a developing theme in international business (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2014; Lopez-Duarte & Vidal-Suarez, 2010). Thus, Piekkari and Tietze (2011) maintain that there is yet little common thrust in developing research agendas on linguistic issues. Similar notions are put forward in a large number of recent articles that call for more research on the topic (e.g. Björkman & Piekkari, 2009; Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011; Lauring & Selmer, 2010; Zander, Mockaitis, & Harzing, 2011). Finally, while the connection of language management to virtual work is a highly important theme, very few studies have combined the two fields (Hinds, Neeley, & Cramton, 2014; Peltokorpi, 2015; Zander et al., 2012).

The remainder of this paper will commence with a literature review of the conceptual parts of this investigation: Virtual work (including workplace mobility and distributed work) and perceived inclusive language use (including management's use of common language and employees' openness to language diversity). This conceptual framework is succeeded by a description of the theoretical foundation and the generation of hypotheses to be tested. The methods section delineates the target group, sample and measures applied. Results are displayed and subsequently discussed in terms of main findings, limitations and implications. Finally, the conclusions of this study are drawn.

2. Conceptualization

2.1. Virtual work and distance

A universal assumption underlying the term 'virtual' is distance (Chudoba et al., 2005). The distance concept has become central in business and management research as the physical void between individuals during social interactions has grown dramatically with access to the internet and mobile telecommunication (Henderson, 2009; Quelch & Jocz, 2012).

In general, distance can be said to relate to similarity or difference in regard to the degree of separation between two points. However, in international business research, distance is not theorized solely as a physical variable (Ahhammad, Tarba, Liu, & Glaister, 2015; Godinez & Liu, 2015). With the psychic distance concept (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977), distances have become related also to subjective orientation and perceptions of business partners, markets, and foreign units (Drogendijk & Martín, 2015; Nordman & Tolstoy, 2014). According to Evans and Mavondo (2002), the definition of psychic distance should include two central elements, namely a psychological and physical understanding of the separation of individuals (see also Blanc-Brude, Cookson, Piesse, & Strange, 2014). From this definition it becomes evident that it is not only the geographical factors which determine the degree of

distance. It is also mental processing of cultural, linguistic, and other societal differences (Avloniti & Filippaios, 2014).

The distinction between physical and psychological distance follows Descartes' classical body/mind split. According to this line of thinking, the physical world can be seen as having both extension and location in space whereas psychological reality does not have spatial dimensions, and its location is only metaphorically in the mind (Velmans, 1998). This way of distinguishing between the physical and the psychological is also mirrored in the research of distance on perceptions and relations between individuals. Here it has been shown that physical distances increase psychological distances (Latané, Liu, Nowak, Bonevento, & Zheng, 1995). This is also true the other way around so that individuals feeling psychological disconnected will maintain greater physical space between each other (Walberg, 1969). However, empirical research has documented that the relation between physical distances and psychological distances is not a simple one that can be described in a linear model (Zauberman, Kim, Malkoc, & Bettman, 2009). Hence, one cannot necessarily assume that physical distance increases psychological distance in all situations.

When developing a unified construct for virtual work, Watson-Manheim, Chudoba, and Crowston (2002) also focused on discontinuities that may be classified as physical (location, time zone difference) and psychological (national culture, professional culture). This work was used as conceptual basis for the scales by Chudoba et al. (2005) which is used in this study. Hence, in line with extant research, we focus on two different dimensions representing physical distance and psychological distances between the individual and the workplace.

Workplace mobility refers to the degree to which employees work in environments other than their regular office, including corporate sites, hotels, airports, planes, etc. (Chudoba et al., 2005). Hence, workplace mobility captures geographical dispersion and how physically distant individuals are to their company. Thus, when employees have high workplace mobility, they can be argued to be more physically absent from the organization (Gilson et al., 2015).

The term distributed work describes the degree to which individuals work with people that are distributed over different temporal and culturally distinct localities (Chudoba et al., 2005). Thus, this notion includes working with distant partners. When employees' work is highly distributed, it can be argued that individuals are more psychologically detached from the organization since their interaction happens virtually with individuals outside the home organization.

2.2. Inclusive language use

Language is central to all aspects of life since actions and thoughts are all shaped in language (Chomsky, 1992). Therefore, it has a profound effect when individuals' linguistic abilities are insufficient to maintain a strong connection to the social context around them (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977; Luring, 2008; Mäkelä, Kalla, & Piekkari, 2007). Accordingly, a number of recent studies have explored the exclusive effects of language use in organizations and how to deal with this (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Luring & Klitmøller, 2015a; Tenzer et al., 2014). Inclusive language use, however, has been the focus of only a few studies.

In a national language policy context, the concept of inclusive language was coined by Clyne (2005) to describe a contrast and alternative to the language of exclusion often applied by nation states when confronting immigration issues. Building on the work of Clyne, Lane (2009) discusses how legislation against discrimination through language use can lead to a greater inclusion of all citizens regardless of their background. In an organizational setting, Luring and Selmer (2012) explore how language

management activities may stimulate inclusive language use and found that conscious use of the common language by the management level increased inclusive attitudes in multinational organizations. Luring and Klitmøller (2015b) linked inclusive international language use to creativity and performance in multicultural organizations.

Based on the above literature, we argue that inclusive language use may be conceptualized as a form of communication that allows others to take part in the dialog in spite of inherent language differences. It may thus involve an attitude of being open and acceptant of variations in styles of speaking, vocabulary, and proficiency levels (Luring & Selmer, 2012; Sawyerr, Strauss, & Yan, 2005). Moreover, inclusive language use in organizations should comprise the use of a shared means of communication by managers and employees in formal and informal situations so that linguistic minorities are not excluded from the communication flow (cf. Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen, & Piekkari, 2006; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Luring & Selmer, 2010, 2011). In other words, inclusive language comprises open attitudes among employees and the consistent use of a generally shared language by organization managers. As such, inclusive language use should be conceptualized at employee and management levels respectively (Luring & Selmer, 2012).

3. Theory and hypotheses

The theoretical foundation of this article is built on construal level theory (Henderson et al., 2011; Trope & Liberman, 2010). This theory holds that physical and psychological distance between the self and the object of attention (people, organizations, actions) will impact the perceptions of the individual. Thus, the greater the distance between the employee and the organization, the more likely it is that the individual will apply a high-level construal to a given phenomenon. Hence, employees will tend to perceive organizational practices in a decontextualized and abstract manner (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Wilson et al., 2013), and focus on the essence and *why* an action is performed as it is. Also, individuals will base predictions and evaluations on more general trends and a few superordinate goals (see Wilson et al., 2013). Conversely, when actors are close to the object of attention, they tend to apply low-level construals. Their perception will lean toward concrete, contextualized, and incidental features of the object and focus on *how* an action is performed. Thus, individuals' predictions will be based on local temporary deviations, and evaluations will be biased toward a range of context dependent, peripheral, and goal-irrelevant issues. In other words, when individuals are physically or psychologically far from the organization, they will perceive activities and decisions in the organization in a more neutral and goal-oriented perspective. On the other hand, if individuals are emerged in the social life of the organization, their perceptions will be biased by their own critical engagement in activities. This is similar to events being perceived more positively and objectively in relation to overall goals if they happen to others or if they happened a long time ago.

3.1. Workplace mobility

Workplace mobility refers to the degree to which employees work in environments other than their regular office (Chudoba et al., 2005; Schweitzer & Duxbury, 2010). Thus, mobility represents a spatial distance to the organization. As such, individuals with high workplace mobility will be more physically absent from the organization and thus more distanced toward managers' and employees' behavior (cf. Henderson, 2009; Henderson & Wakslak, 2010).

Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, and Liberman (2006) showed that greater physical distance led to a more abstract construal of social events. In their study, individuals who watched a video that was purportedly taped in a geographically distant place used more abstract language to describe the content of the video as compared to individuals who thought the video was taped in a location geographically near to them. Henderson, Fujita, Trope, and Liberman (2006) found that individuals expected a greater likelihood for typical events and a lesser likelihood for atypical events in a geographically distant rather than near location. In other words, a specific event was believed to resemble a prototypical event, which represents a higher abstraction level.

In relation to management, it may be assumed that the physically distant individual will see more mildly on leaders' failures to use inclusive language. For example Henderson (2008) found a positive relationship between geographic dispersion and team members' perceptions of their manager's decoding competency. Because they apply a higher level construal, physically absent personnel will see that making mistakes and using the local language will in some situations not have too important functional implications for the general informing of organization members (Trope & Liberman, 2010). However, the individual who is emerged in the organization will evaluate management inclusive language not only in terms of information quality but will focus more on symbolic aspects of the language use (Lauring, 2008; Tenzer et al., 2014). They will, in other words, see inconsistent use of the common language as symbolic expressions of exclusion and may link this to other actions and activities, that they may be opposed to, performed by the management (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999).

With regard to perceptions of employees' inclusive language use, individuals that are physically distant from the organization will not be as condemning of group members' reluctance to work with individuals with insufficient language skills. They will see this from a more objective perspective focusing on the problems it can cause a person if one has to collaborate with someone who has poor language skills. For example, it can be highly time consuming and may damage an individual's career in the long run. However, the person who is more present in the organization will, according to construal level theory, focus less on objective reasons for why some individuals will be reluctant to work with others who have a low language proficiency level (Trope & Liberman, 2010). They will instead focus on specific individuals' attempt to avoid taking their share of the burden related to working with individuals who have difficulties with understanding or expressing themselves in the common language. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1a. Individual workplace mobility is positively associated with the perception of the management's use of the common language.

Hypothesis 1b. Individual workplace mobility is positively associated with the perception of employees' openness to language diversity.

3.2. Distributed work

Distributed work represents the degree to which individuals work virtually with others that are distributed over different national locations (Chudoba et al., 2005). This adds to the individual being psychologically absent from their organization since they are engaged in work processes with personnel that are not physically near them. In relation to this, recent studies have shown how spatial and temporal distribution adds to the psychological distance, which in turn might also have positive consequences for individuals' perception (Wilson et al., 2013).

Thus, psychological distance has been found to reduce individuals' task anxiety and perception of task complexity (Thomas & Tsai, 2012) as well as stress (Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004). Moreover, it has been shown that verbally induced social proximity affected individuals' perceptions of actual temperature (Ijzerman & Semin, 2010).

With respect to the management's use of common language, individuals who are psychologically distant to their organization will tend to see managers' potential language deficiencies in a more positive light compared to individuals who are psychologically absorbed in the organization. This is so since distributed employees are disposed to applying a high level construal. Thus, they tend not to focus on managers' individual mistakes, but rather on the general understandability and essence of the communicated message (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Conversely, individuals who are psychologically closer to the organization will be inclined to focus on how the managers communicate and thus register and emphasize minor grammatical mistakes and linguistic inconsistencies. These will most often be linked to goal irrelevant issues not related to the core of the transferred information and be subjectively interpreted in relation to other aspects of social interaction in the organization such as exclusion, power struggles, and group formation processes.

In a similar vein, perceptions of employees' openness to language diversity will also differ in relation to whether individuals are psychologically distant from the organization or not. Thus, distributed employees will be more acceptant toward group members who are less willing to work with individuals of different proficiency levels. This is due to the fact that dispersed virtual workers are more psychologically detached from the firm and thus merely focus on the objective consequences that a lack of common language proficiency may create in the encounter such as less frequent and poorer communication. On the other hand, individuals who are psychologically absorbed in the organization's everyday life will tend to disregard these reasons of why some workers have problems interacting with individuals of different proficiency levels. Instead they will be more attentive to goal irrelevant aspects of the international virtual encounter and focus more on, for example, the strategies deployed by individuals who avoid interacting with low proficiency colleagues. Accordingly, we state the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a. Individuals' degree of distributed work is positively associated with the perception of the management's use of the common language.

Hypothesis 2b. Individuals' degree of distributed work is positively associated with the perception of employees' openness to language diversity.

4. Methods

4.1. Sample

Our study uses a self-constructed database of e-mail addresses of white collar employees in departments of Danish private knowledge intensive organizations. We targeted Danish owned companies with more than 1000 employees in Denmark. From this pool we made a list of the ten most internationalized companies in terms of foreign nationals working in Denmark. After contacting the ten corporations, five companies from the list agreed to participate in the survey. From these companies, we selected the most diverse departments in terms of foreign staff in each company. The departments' field of work included: IT (organization no. 5), biochemistry (organizations no. 2 and 4), and engineering (organizations no. 1 and 3).

The data was collected electronically. A total of 981 employees were invited to participate in the survey and eventually 676 responses were received amounting to a response rate of 69%. The average age of respondents was 41.4 years and the average tenure was 11.2 years. 68% of respondents were male and 74% of the respondents came from Denmark. Non-Danish employees represented 51 different nationalities. Of the non-Danish respondents, 50% came from outside the EU. The average percentage of non-Danish employees in respondents' departments was 25.4. This is equivalent to responses in our collected sample. The average number of languages spoken on a daily basis in departments was 2.4. Table 1 displays the demographics of the different organizations included in the study.

4.2. Instrument

The constructs were all measured by tested psychometric scales. Independent variables were derived from Chudoba et al.'s (2005) study in Information Systems Journal on how to measure virtuality. As such, the source is highly relevant for the purpose of this study. The dependent variables measuring inclusive language use was selected from a study by Lauring and Selmer (2012) in International Business Review focusing on diversity climate and language use in international organizations. This source was deemed appropriate for measuring perceptions of managers' and employees' inclusive international language use.

4.2.1. Virtual work (physical and psychological distance)

Workplace mobility (physical distance) was assessed by a five-item scale (Chudoba et al., 2005). Response categories were: Daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, yearly, and never. Sample items are: 'Work at different sites' and 'Work while travelling' (alpha = .73). The distributed work scale (psychological distance) included four items with the same response categories as above. One item was deleted to improve the reliability score and conceptual coherence. This was also the item with the lowest factor loading in the original exploratory factor analysis by Chudoba et al. (2005). Sample items: 'Work with people you have never met face-to-face' and 'Work with people via internet conference applications' (alpha = .80). Included in Chudoba et al.'s (2005) original factor structure was also a third three-item factor labeled 'Variety of practices'. We have not included this scale in our study since it is not related to virtual work and thus does not add to our conceptual argumentation.

4.2.2. Perceived inclusive language use (management and employees)

Lauring and Selmer's (2012) measures of language use in relation to inclusion and positive attitudes to language diversity in relation to (1) management and (2) employees were also used. Perceptions of management's use of common corporate language as an indicator of inclusiveness were gauged by a five-item, seven-point scale. Response categories ranged from (1) = strongly disagree to (7) = strongly agree. Sample items are: 'The department manager uses English in situations where more nationalities are present' and 'The department manager issues instructions and

guidelines in English (alpha = .81). Perception of employees' openness to language diversity was measured by a four-item scale. Response categories are the same as above. Sample items are: 'Department members enjoy doing jobs with people despite of language barriers' and 'Department members make an extra effort to listen to people speaking different languages' (alpha = .76).

Gender, age, tenure, and organizational affiliation were all applied as control variables. All variables were measured by direct questions such as: 'Are you male or female?' Controlling for demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and tenure seems reasonable since different groups of employees may well have different perceptions of language use in the organization (Lauring & Selmer, 2013). Organizational affiliation is controlled for in order to make sure that results are not linked to any specific organizational culture (Bettenhausen, 1991).

To assess the psychometric quality of the theoretical model, confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement model containing the four constructs (workplace mobility, distributed work, perceptions of management's use of common corporate language, and perception of employees' openness to language diversity) and their respective measurement items were performed. In estimating the measurement model, maximum-likelihood estimation was used.

For evaluating the proposed model, several goodness-of-fit criteria were employed. First, the χ^2 statistics indicated poor model fit ($\chi^2 = 316.51$, $df = 143$, $p = 0.000$). However, since several criticisms have been raised against this measure such as it being inflated by sample size, other fit measures were also employed. The SRMR and RMSEA (SRMR = 0.043, RMSEA = 0.052; 90% CI: 0.045–0.058; $p(\text{RMSEA} \leq 0.05) = 0.336$) both indicated that the model fit the data. Similarly, the CFI and TLI (CFI = 0.951, TLI = 0.941) also indicated good model fit (cf. Hu & Bentler, 1999). Taken together, the goodness-of-fit measures thus indicated that the model fit the data well.

In addition, an examination of localized areas of strain was made using modification indices and standardized residuals. This indicated some possible areas of local strain, primarily in terms of correlated errors. This was to some extent expected because of the large sample in this study. However, due to a lack of substantive theoretical arguments in favor of these modifications, no re-specifications were made to the measurement model. In the proposed measurement model, all parameters are statistically viable, of a substantive magnitude, in the hypothesized direction and statistically significant (except for the covariance between distributed work and perceptions of management's use of common corporate language). In addition, discriminant validity between the constructs of interest is established.

4.3. Data analysis techniques

In order to formally test the hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regression (stepwise regression) was carried out for each of the two dependent variables. This particular technique was considered appropriate as it allows for an assessment of the relationship between the dependent variable and several independent variables at each step of the model construction. Estimation was carried out with a basic least squares procedure, which assumes independence of observations, a constant residual variance (homoscedasticity), a Gaussian/normal distribution of the dependent variable as well as linearity in the estimated parameters. Regression analysis is a standard tool for multivariate analysis in a vast range of disciplines, both within and outside the social sciences. In addition, we use psychometric scales as both predictor and response variables and observed covariates as control variables. Since we operate with variables that are not directly observable, we could have employed a structural equation modeling approach to ensure residual variance estimation for

Table 1
Organizational demographics.

Organization	Percentage of non-Danish employees	Average no. of languages spoken	Percentage of males	Average age	No. of respondents in organization
1	35.40	2.88	72.40	41.16	243
2	27.60	2.45	27.70	40.81	47
3	70.00	2.10	90.00	33.00	10
4	28.10	2.13	59.40	41.59	64
5	15.30	2.17	71.80	41.81	312

Table 2
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables.

S. No	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Criterion variables</i>										
1	Management's communication in English	5.53	1.13	1.00						
2	Employees' openness to language diversity	5.05	1.01	.40**	1.00					
<i>Predictor variables</i>										
3	Distributed work	4.28	1.34	.06**	−0.08*	1.00				
4	Workplace mobility	3.07	1.13	.09*	.17**	.35**	1.00			
<i>Control variables</i>										
5	Gender (male = 0, female = 1)	0.32	0.47	−0.01	0.03	−0.18**	−0.19**	1.00		
6	Age	41.36	10.30	−0.07	0.05	0.04	.16**	−0.08*	1.00	
7	Tenure	11.17	10.29	−0.18**	−0.10*	0.06	0.06	−0.04	.70**	1.00

* $p < .05$ level; two-tailed.
** $p < .01$ level; two-tailed.

each scale item (Joreskog, 1978), but given the high Cronbach alpha reliability tests values (Cronbach, 1951), the good fit of the unmodified measurement models (as is evident from the factor analysis results) and the drastically reduced parsimony associated with structural equation modeling, we chose the more straightforward and intuitive approach of multivariate regression.

5. Results

Table 2 displays sample means, standard deviations and zero-order Pearson correlations of the variables. One-sample t -tests showed that the mean scores for management's common corporate language ($t = 126.79, p < .001$) and employees' openness to language diversity ($t = 130.09, p < .001$) were both significantly higher than the midpoint of their respective scales. This indicates that the respondents generally perceived the common corporate language to be used consistently in management communication and felt that employees were open to dissimilarities in language use.

The hypotheses were formally tested by way of hierarchical multiple regression (Table 3). The control variables, age, gender, tenure, and organizational affiliation, were entered in Step 1. This produced significant associations between three of the control variables and the criterion variables. There was a significant positive association between age and employees' openness to language diversity ($\beta = .19; p < .001$), a negative association between tenure and employees' openness to language diversity ($\beta = -.19; p < .001$) and management's common corporate language ($\beta = -.23; p < .001$). Organizational affiliation for the five companies had significant positive relations with both criterion variables (see Table 3).

In Step 2, the two predictor variables were entered. This produced significant effects on the criterion variables, explaining 12.8% of the variance in management's common corporate language and 17.7% of the variance in employees' openness to language diversity. As displayed by Table 3, there was a strong positive relationship between distributed work and management's common corporate language ($\beta = .23; p < .001$) and a positive association between workplace mobility and employees' openness to language diversity ($\beta = .11; p < .01$). All F -values for the group cohesiveness variables were statistically significant indicating a proper fit between the regression model and the data. These findings provide support for H1b and H2a. H1a and H2b were not supported.

6. Discussion

6.1. Main findings

This study explored the effect of two dimensions of working virtually (workplace mobility and distributed work) on perceptions of two dimensions of inclusive international language use

(management's common corporate language and employees' openness to language diversity). Workplace mobility represents the physical dimension of distance to the work place while distributed work represents the psychological distance. Perceptions were measured in relation to the managements' and the employees' inclusiveness in language use.

We found some support for our general hypothesis and the theoretical notion that the more employees are working virtually the more positively they will see activities and behavior performed by others in the organization. This hypothesis is based on construal-level theory predicting that when individuals are distant, they see behaviors and activities in a more objective and emotionally detached way. Individuals will therefore focus more on information related aspects of communication compared to symbolic aspects of the interaction. They will also be more understanding of individuals' motives for acting in a certain way rather than perceiving them as part of a social system.

Table 3
Results of hierarchical multiple regression for virtuality and the perception of inclusive international language use.^a

Variables	Perception of management's use of common corporate language β	Perception of employees' openness to language diversity β
<i>Step 1 (control)</i>		
Gender (male as base group)	−0.04	0.01
Age	0.08	0.14**
Tenure	−0.20***	−0.12*
<i>Organization</i>		
<i>(Organization 1 as base group)</i>		
Organization 1	−0.10*	0.04
Organization 2	0.17***	0.12**
Organization 3	0.07*	0.03
Organization 4	−0.06	0.10**
Organization 5	−0.21***	−0.29***
R^2	0.107	0.166
F	9.951***	16.613***
<i>Step 2 Virtuality</i>		
Workplace mobility (physical distance)	−0.01	0.08*
Distributed work (psychological distance)	.18***	0.05
R^2	0.128	0.177
R^2 -change	0.021	0.011
	($F(2.665) = 8.11,$	($F(2.665) = 4.425,$
	Sig. = 0.000)	Sig. = 0.012)
F	9.753***	14.312***

* $p < .05$; two-tailed.
** $p < .01$; two-tailed.
*** $p < .001$; two-tailed.
^a All standardized regression coefficients are from the final step in the analyses.

Workplace mobility had a positive association with perceptions of employees' openness to language diversity, and distributed work had a positive association with perceptions of the management's use of the common corporate language. This result is highly interesting because it indicates that temporal and spatial distance to the organization might not only have negative influences on organizational life (Wilson et al., 2013). Thereby the present study answers recent calls in the virtual team literature to understand the impact of mobility and distribution on work group outcomes (Gilson et al., 2015), and pioneers an empirically derived understanding of the potential positive aspects of distance between employees in international business organizations. Hence, the findings indicate that being away, physically or psychologically, may have a positive effect on attitudes and perceptions of behaviors and activities in the organization. Our results are not in opposition to other studies that have found negative implications of virtual work (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Mortensen & Hinds, 2001; O'Leary & Mortensen, 2010). Rather, the results underscore the importance of granting attention to how perceptions are affected by distance in virtual environments and the potential gains individuals can have from working at a distance (Henderson, 2008; Wilson et al., 2008). Thus our results are in line with studies indicating that virtual work will reduce the stress level and task anxiety for individuals in such work conditions because they become detached from the social arena of the workplace (Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004). In addition, the findings support exploratory studies suggesting that communication and information technology might mitigate the negative outcomes and enhance positive interaction effects in global work (Shachaf, 2008)

It is particularly interesting that while workplace mobility had a positive association with perception of employees' openness to language diversity, distributed work had a positive association with perceptions of the management's use of the common corporate language. This means that they have complementary effects on perceptions of inclusive language use, providing an interesting addition to an emergent debate concerning the interrelation between language and virtuality in global work (Hinds et al., 2014). For while studies has started to explore the potential mitigating effect of media choice on language differences in global virtual teams (Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013; Klitmøller, Schneider, & Jonsen, 2015), the present study call attention to the fact the virtuality alter the perception of language use and openness suggesting that not only the media used, but also the distance between individuals might have an effect on collaboration in linguistically diverse work groups. Thus, being distant physically seems to make the view on employee behavior more positive while being distant psychologically seems to favorably affect the perceptions of one's manager's behavior. This can be elaborated on by use of construal level theory. Physically distant individuals of a group apply a high level construal and therefore evaluate the group in more general terms. Consequently, they will also tend to see a more stereotypic image of the employee group and evaluate all members according to their perception of single individuals. In other words, if distant members have gained a positive view of other members' openness to language use, they will tend to generalize and amplify that perception to the whole group (Wilson et al., 2013). In relation to member's perception of a manager's common language use, studies have shown that individuals in an elevated power position will tend to apply a high level construal (Smith & Trope, 2006). According to construal level theory, the reverse will also hold since power difference will add to the psychological distance between the individual and the manager and thus amplify abstract goal-oriented thinking (Trope, 2012). Thus, group members will tend to focus even more on the essence of the communicated message and even less on irrelevant issues such as linguistic mistakes and inconsistencies when evaluating their manager's communication.

6.2. Limitations

As always, this study may have a number of potential shortcomings that could limit to what extent it may be generalized. A potential problem of this study could be common method variance (CMV) since all the data were collected by cross-sectional self-reports. However, the general and automatic condemnation of cross-sectional self-report methods has been found exaggerated to the extent that it may have achieved the status of a methodological urban legend (Spector, 2006). Nevertheless, some procedures were implemented in this study to lessen the potential bias of CMV. As usual, the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents were assured. Also, the different items measuring virtual work and perceived inclusive language use were spread throughout the questionnaire at different pages. Moreover, a number of the items also had reverse polarity. This design of the questionnaire may have contributed to diminish effects of CMV (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). To investigate the potential for remaining biases of CMV, Harman's single factor test was applied (Aulakh & Gencturk, 2000). The exploratory factor analysis of the items, corresponding to all the variables of the study, resulted in a four-factor, unrotated solution where none of the factors accounted for the majority of the covariance among the factors. Additionally, response categories for the independent variables are formulated as relatively objective categories, e.g. daily, weekly, monthly, etc., and may not be affected substantially by subjectivity or mood. Finally, we found varying effects for two sets of variables, and this cannot be explained by any method bias. Hence, although CMV could have had some effect on the study, we estimate that it was not a serious problem.

A second limitation is that this study has been carried out only in Danish multicultural business organizations. Since Danish is a relatively small language area, Danes are generally known to have a high English language proficiency which may differ from other countries. In order to test the generalizability of the current study, more research is needed taking departure in countries with different types of language use patterns. This could be countries where English is spoken as a native language, or countries where the native language has a broad and more dominating position worldwide such as China, Spain, France, or Germany.

6.3. Implications

This study has important implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, this study has responded to an important research void in linking virtual work and international language use. While language has a profound effect on the management of virtual work groups, only few studies have dealt with this issue so far (Hinds et al., 2014; Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013; Peltokorpi, 2015). Hence, by showing that employees who work virtually will see the language use as more inclusive than those who are physically and psychologically present in the organizations, we have provided relevant new knowledge to a scanty studied area.

The finding that workplace mobility positively affects perceptions about employees' openness to language diversity and distributed work positively affects perceptions of management common corporate language is highly useful for increasing our understanding of the effect of virtual work in general. While virtual work has long been understood as being more challenging than non-virtual work, the perception differences that arise from being distant to the organization, physically and psychologically, might also have positive implications (Gilson et al., 2015). This novel insight has not been touched upon in international business literature where the tendency has been to view all types of distance, including geographical dispersion, in a negative light (Ambos & Håkanson, 2014). However, as noted by Wilson et al.

(2013), spatial and temporal separation between individuals may in some aspects function as an organizational advantage rather than as a disadvantage. Thus, studies have e.g. shown that temporal distance can increase individual creativity (Förster, Friedman, & Liberman, 2004; Wilson et al., 2013). The positive effect of distance may even be enhanced by the virtual work situation in itself as communication technologies tend to enhance the cognitive efforts that individuals apply to solve a given task, and thus virtuality may in some instances foster better work outcomes (Kock, 1998, 2004).

In particular, our finding that physical distance makes one's perception of work group members' behavior more positive while psychological distance has a positive effect on the perceptions of one's manager's behavior is interesting. First of all, the findings mandate further studies of to which extent physical and psychological distance is actually overlapping and has similar consequences for members of international business organizations. Thus, the study addresses calls in international business for a more nuanced understanding of the interrelation between different distance dimensions (Zaheer, Schomaker, & Nachum, 2012). Furthermore, this first step seeking a disentanglement of physical and psychological distance is also relevant since the study includes the two most important dimensions of the psychic distance concept central to a vast amount of international business research (Nebus & Chai, 2014). Previously, efforts have been aimed at understanding the counterintuitive positive relation between psychic distance and performance in global virtual teams. It has, for example, been speculated that distance increases the efforts that team member's apply to solve a given task (Magnusson, Schuster, & Taras, 2014). Our study provides an alternative explanation by suggesting, based on construal level theory, that individuals tend to evaluate more objectively when at the distance, and thus might perform better in distributed international work without necessarily applying more effort. In cases where managers need a more-unbiased version of practices and policies, this also means that it might be fruitful to turn to the distributed members of the organization.

The present study gives empirical evidence for the fact that physical distance can actually have a positive impact on virtual work groups. While this has been suggested in conceptual research, no studies in international business literature have, to our knowledge, empirically explored this theme (Wilson et al., 2013). The findings also suggest that while managing at a distance may have many potential pitfalls and challenges, it also has some benefits. Our study suggests that virtual managers will be evaluated more positively by their distributed team member, than would be the case in co-located teams. The positive effect related to psychological distance from the organization also touches upon another scarcely addressed theme in international business, namely global virtual team members' identification with and evaluation of the organization. It has been argued that a strong psychological link between individuals and the organization is instrumental for an acceptance and adherence to organizational goals and initiatives (Mukherjee & Hanlon, 2012). Yet, based on our findings, and in line with construal level theory, we suggest that this is not always the case. This is because the individuals that are more psychologically distant from the organization are more positive and acceptant toward management initiatives.

In relation to practical applications, our study provides managers with some insight into how the degree of virtuality may affect perceptions of the inclusiveness of international language use in multicultural organizations. This means that when dealing with language management, managers and employees who are more virtual in their styles of working should not use their personal perceptions as a proxy for the actual state of the organization as this may be too optimistic (Wilson et al., 2013).

This is especially important since managers are often the ones that are working most virtually. Hence, the managers that make the most important decisions may have a different understanding of attitudes and activities in the organization compared to employees that are more emerged in organizational social life. Based on the results of this study, it is also important that international managers create a construal level fit. Hence, creating a match between the employees' position, in terms of distance to the organization, and how managerial initiatives are communicated is likely to render more effective results (Berson, Halevy, Shamir, & Erez, 2015).

Physical and psychological detachment from the organization may also be used strategically by international managers to enhance performance. It can give members who have been absorbed in the organization time to respite and recharge their emotional battery. Distance may also have important consequences for an individual's perception of organizational initiatives. Thus, employees who are close to the organization tend to see the 'trees', i.e. the concrete every-day and often inconsistent actions of individuals, while distant members tend to see the 'forest', i.e. abstract and general pattern of organizational members' behavior (Wilson et al., 2013). Therefore, distant members can add valuable and often more objective insight into organizational initiatives.

7. Conclusions

This novel study explored the association between two central aspects of virtuality, workplace mobility and distributed work on perceptions of employees' and managers' use of inclusive language. Contrary to the lion's share of international business studies on virtual work, the results highlight the potential positive aspects of physical and psychological distance to the organization. Thus, individuals who are further away from the firm tend to be more positive toward central aspects of working in international business organizations. The presented findings are consistent with Construal level theory and have significant theoretical and practical importance. Thus, the study contributes to the international business literature on global virtual work highlighting the necessity to gain a more balanced view concerning not only the challenges but also the possibilities of virtual groups. Furthermore, the study gives virtual managers a deeper understanding of how physical and psychological distance influence employee perceptions, and how their viewpoints can add important insights into organizational practices and policies.

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