Virtual Team Communication: a linguistic perspective on who holds the power and how
Virtual teams are...

Non face-to-face work meetings held across location and time and enabled by technology.
### Different kinds of virtual teams

#### Low Interdependence vs. High Interdependence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team Type Objectives</th>
<th>Low Interdependence</th>
<th>High Interdependence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting to Leader:</td>
<td>Reporting to Leader:</td>
<td>Sharing &amp; Reporting:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Updates, Task-based</td>
<td>Updates, Task-based</td>
<td>Updates, Task-based</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Performance Management

- Reporting to Leader: Updates, Task-based
- Sharing & Reporting: Updates, Task-based
- Working together: Tasks, Presenting ideas for improvement
- Conceptual Collaboration: Planning, implementation, creative collaboration and knowledge building
Moneylink

A large multinational financial institution with an off-shored workforce of hundreds of staff in India most in high level IT jobs sent there over a decade ago.

Other off-shored staff working in Singapore, Vietnam, and China.
There is evidence that the effectiveness of management in remote or virtual contexts is diminished when people don’t recognize the shift required, or are not given enough space to think about the challenges and can address them specifically.

*Employee survey data has highlighted micromanagement, lack of trust, confused accountabilities stemming from lack of clear direction and poor relationship building in the remote and virtual team environment.*

(RfP, 2012)
Training Needs Analysis at Moneylink

TNA used multiple data sources:

- Review of key corporate internal and external documentation
- Survey sent to 100 on- and off-shore managers and participants about their perceptions of VTM
- 10 follow up interviews with on and off-shore managers
- Observations of 8 virtual team meetings
- Recordings and transcriptions of 6 of these meetings – source of this study
Operational team manager (India):
‘I worked as part of a very collaborative team on-shore, but now that I am back in Bangalore the approach is very directive and top down...The new regional strategy also means job losses on-shore and managers have smaller teams which they want to protect...so they just don’t want to collaborate and cooperate that much’.

Operational manager (Singapore):
‘On-shore managers are very good at ‘acculturalisation’ management, that is getting their teams to think and act as on-shore, but this is not the point in VTM. No one group of managers should feel privileged in that role. I know a lot more about how to handle my team members out of Singapore...I’ve been doing it all my professional life. Maybe there is a great deal they can learn from us as ‘global citizens’ where we’re used to communicating all over the place’.
The business management studies in VTM

- Leadership and management skills (Chutnik & Grzesik, 2009.)
- Nature of VT work (Hertel, Geister & Konradt, 2005)
- Technologies for VT (Klitmoller & Lauring, 2012)
- Intercultural studies of VTs (Shenkar, 2011)
- Trust in VTM (Javenpaa & Leidner, 1998)
- Language in VTM (Darics, 2010; Barner-Rasmussen et al, 2014)
The lack of language studies

Research on global teams documents the challenges of working across cultures and geographic barriers, and highlights the role of potential fissures between distant locations that can lead to unhealthy subgroup dynamics. Work to date, however, remains largely silent on how these dynamics unfold, on how the particular attributes of globally distributed teams contribute to these potential fissures and their activation, and on the role that language plays in these dynamics.

(Hinds et al, 2013)
Linguistic frameworks


The 6 Moneylink transcriptions

Recorded 6 project teams involving on-shore and off-shore colleagues working collaboratively in virtual teams; but all with on-shore managers.

Transcriptions using ELAN (Wittenburg et al, 2006) open source multimedia annotation software to quantify and visualize turn shifts, duration, overlaps.
## Virtual team management transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manager</th>
<th>Turns</th>
<th>Total # of turns (N)</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Self-selecting</th>
<th>Speeches duration</th>
<th>Total Speech Time (T)</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Average time per turn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfred</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>34.60%</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19:41.0</td>
<td>32:02.5</td>
<td>61.40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>20.20%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>04:20.0</td>
<td>16:22.1</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Miles</strong></td>
<td><strong>85</strong></td>
<td><strong>196</strong></td>
<td><strong>44.40%</strong></td>
<td><strong>82</strong></td>
<td><strong>0:28:06</strong></td>
<td><strong>42:33.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>66.00%</strong></td>
<td><strong>0:00:20</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connie</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>33.30%</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10:54.2</td>
<td>26:11.0</td>
<td>41.60%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manfred</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>48.20%</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>25:29.6</td>
<td>29:30.0</td>
<td>86.40%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigel</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>33.60%</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>08:58.0</td>
<td>20:47.0</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>0:00:11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Miles’s meeting

IT project team comprising Australia-wide and India membership (8). Developing a new accounting software package for Moneylink.

Meeting purpose was to discuss how his team could improve efficiencies in the project.

*I want to get input and be collaborative but there is very little contribution from many members of the team... it’s frustrating.*

*(Miles, TNA Interview 2012)*
## Miles’s meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Turns</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Speech duration</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Average time per turn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miles (MS1)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
<td>28 min 6 sec</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
<td>20 sec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt (MS5)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>4 min 26 sec</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>6 sec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom (MS7)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>4 min 31 sec</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>25 sec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajeev (MS3)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>1 min 8 sec</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>8 sec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhav (MS4)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>35 Sec</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>12 sec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>15 sec</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>5 sec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam (MS2)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>5 sec</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>3 sec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard (MS6)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>12 sec</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>6 sec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>3 sec</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>3 sec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>3 min 5 sec</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>6 sec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laughter, chatter &amp; overlaps, etc.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>41 sec</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>8 sec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>196</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>43 min 51 sec</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>11.2 sec</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Speech Duration of Miles' Meeting

- Manager: 64%
- MS1: 10%
- MS2: 13%
- MS3: 6%
- MS4: 7%
- MS5: 0%
- MS6: 1%
- MS7: 10%
- MS8: 1%
- Us: 1%
- Laughter, chatter & overlaps, etc.: 1%
- Non-verbal: 0%
Participation rate in Miles’s meeting

Miles has 4 turns which lasted longer than 2 minutes with the longest one being almost 6 minutes. Apart from M5, no other members were able to take a turn for more than 1 minute; most of them were only able to back channel or give minimal responses to the manager, lasting less than 1 second per turn.
Miles’s turns...no pauses!

Use of ‘so’; 55 uses in filling in the pauses and taking self-selecting turns-

So what I’ll do is...
So one of the key factors was...
So if you actually think about it...
So if you find me not being people enough oriented...
So we spent a lot of time...
So that’s how information gets sent...
Using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004); appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005).

SFL metafunctions that embrace the whole context:

Field: Ideational (relational, mental and material clauses)
Tenor: Interpersonal (e.g. modality, consequentiality)
Mode: Textual (theme/rheme;discourse markers)

Appraisal system that “unfolds dynamically to engage us, to get us on side – not with one appeal, but through a spectrum of manoeuvres that work themselves out phase by phase.” (Martin and Rose, 2007:56)
About ‘appraisal’

Comprises three nodes on the appraisal system;

**Engagement**: (to develop solidarity and alignment)

**Attitude**: (to judge others and their behaviour)

**Graduation**: (to increase/decrease volume or intensity of judgements)
Our focus: ‘engagement’

‘all those language choices (modality, polarity, concession, consequentiality and projection) which provide the means for the authorial voice to position itself with respect to, and hence ‘engage’ with, the other voices and alternative positions construed as being in play in the current communicative context’

Martin & White, 2005: 94
Figure 1: Appraisal system

- **appraisal**
  - engagement
    - monogloss
      - contract
      - expand
    - heterogloss
      - affect...
      - appreciation...
  - attitude/judgement
  - graduation
    - raise
    - lower
    - sharpen
    - soften
  - force...
  - focus...
Concur refers to the choice of language that attunes the interlocutor with the speaker’s own position i.e. a language choice which ‘overtly announces the addressee as agreeing with or having the same knowledge as the same projected partner’ (Martin & White, 2005: 122)
e.g. naturally, of course, obviously, admittedly etc. and sets of rhetorical or leading questions and question tags.
Miles uses concur...

‘which means **of course**, we need to do a lot of forward planning’

‘**Obviously** he talked about that he’s not hearing enough news’

‘they’re **certainly** the right people to be talking to’

‘and if you think about it, Eric, the colour that describes him is red, very people oriented, **why?** Always asking how people are feeling’.
Pronunciation formulations ‘involve authorial emphases which are directed against some assumed or directly referenced counter position...’

Martin & White, 2005; 129

E.g. ‘the truth of the matter is..., ‘there can be no doubt that....’
Miles uses pronounce

‘we have worked out a standard way of doing it’

‘I like facts and I’ll keep playing with my facts’

‘I’ve got no issues with stuff going through as long as you don’t stuff it up’
Endorse

‘those formulations by which external sources are construed by the authorial voice as correct, valid, undeniable or otherwise maximally warrantable’

Martin & White, 2005: 126
Miles uses endorse

To invoke senior manager authority:

Verbal projecting clauses:
* Fred’s not hearing enough news...  
* Brian is keen to hear  
* Fred made it clear

and mental projecting clauses:
* Brian’s got some immediate concerns  
* Brian decided we needed an off-site  
* Fred’s view is that...
Miles uses endorse

To build internal solidarity on-shore:

‘as Matt and I were agreeing about this morning’

‘Tom’s done a brilliant job in that space’

‘Matt and I decided that…’
Use of consequentiality in Miles’s speech

If, unless sentence types. Can construe order, explanation, warning and hypothetical offer. All contracting.

Number: 38 (15 were warnings and orders)

e.g. If the business guys say it is a brilliant job, make sure it gets back to the team (order)

Unless you have a good forward overview of what’s coming up, we’re gonna be banging ourselves up against a brick wall. (warning)
Summary of linguistic findings:

1. Miles dominates the **time of talk and turn-taking**, including high level of **self-selecting turns**.

2. Miles uses a **high level of contracting type language** that closes down interaction by:
   - Building solidarity with one group seemingly at the expense of the other
   - Stating/pronouncing his position
   - Invoking authority

3. Other linguistic features of the meeting that require further exploration:
   - Rich use of **metaphorical language**
   - High frequency use of **idiomatic expressions**
Miles not aware of the kind of language he is using as meeting manager in his virtual team...so how can such an analysis help him?

The team are also perhaps not aware of the kind of language being used and why they may feel disengaged...so how can such an analysis help them?
Use of such findings in training/coaching solutions for virtual team managers/ participants
- individual coaching
- team coaching
- corporate training event
Further applied linguistic research required (we have just explored lexico-grammatical choices in the appraisal system) in one transcribed virtual team meeting.

Patterns across a bigger sample and across regions
Patterns within industry types
Patterns in good versus failed virtual meetings
Forthcoming publication


Thank you!

Questions and answers