

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



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Virtual teams are...



Non face-to-face work meetings held across location and time and enabled by technology.

Different kinds of virtual teams

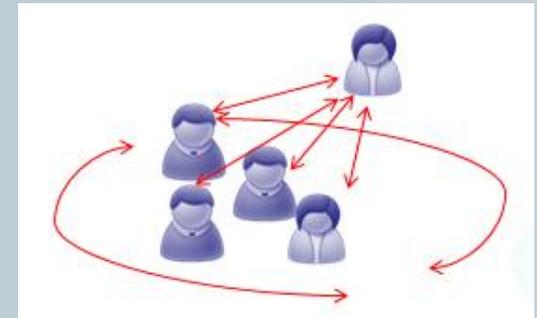
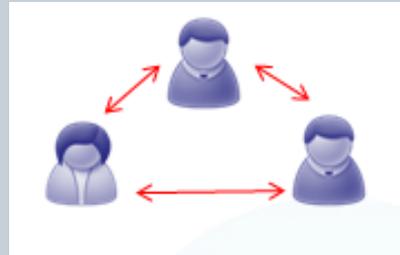
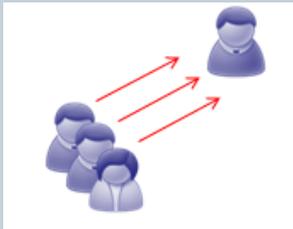
	Low Interdependence			High Interdependence
	1	2	3	4
Team Type Objectives	Reporting to Leader: Updates, Task-based	Sharing & Reporting: Updates, Task-based	Working together: Tasks, Presenting ideas for improvement	Conceptual Collaboration: Planning, implementation, creative collaboration and knowledge building

Performance Management

Meeting Management

Technology

Language & Culture



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.

Moneylink-problems



*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 VTMs
- 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

The interviews off-shore



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 & Luring, 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



1. Turn-taking Analysis: Schegloff, E.A. (2002)
2. Appraisal Analysis: Martin, J. & White, P. (2005)
as part of the systemic functional linguistics (SFL)
(Halliday, 1995)

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



Manager	Turns	Total # of turns (N)	%	Self-selecting	Speeches duration	Total Speech Time (T)	%	Average time per turn
Alfred	36	104	34.60%	34	19:41.0	32:02.5	61.40%	
Aaron	24	119	20.20%	25	04:20.0	16:22.1	26%	
Miles	85	196	44.40%	82	0:28:06	42:33.0	66.00%	0:00:20
Connie	33	99	33.30%	45	10:54.2	26:11.0	41.60%	
Manfred	119	247	48.20%	131	25:29.6	29:30.0	86.40%	
Nigel	50	149	33.60%	61	08:58.0	20:47.0	45.3	0:00:11

Miles's meeting



IT project team comprising Australia -wide and India membership (8).developing an 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.

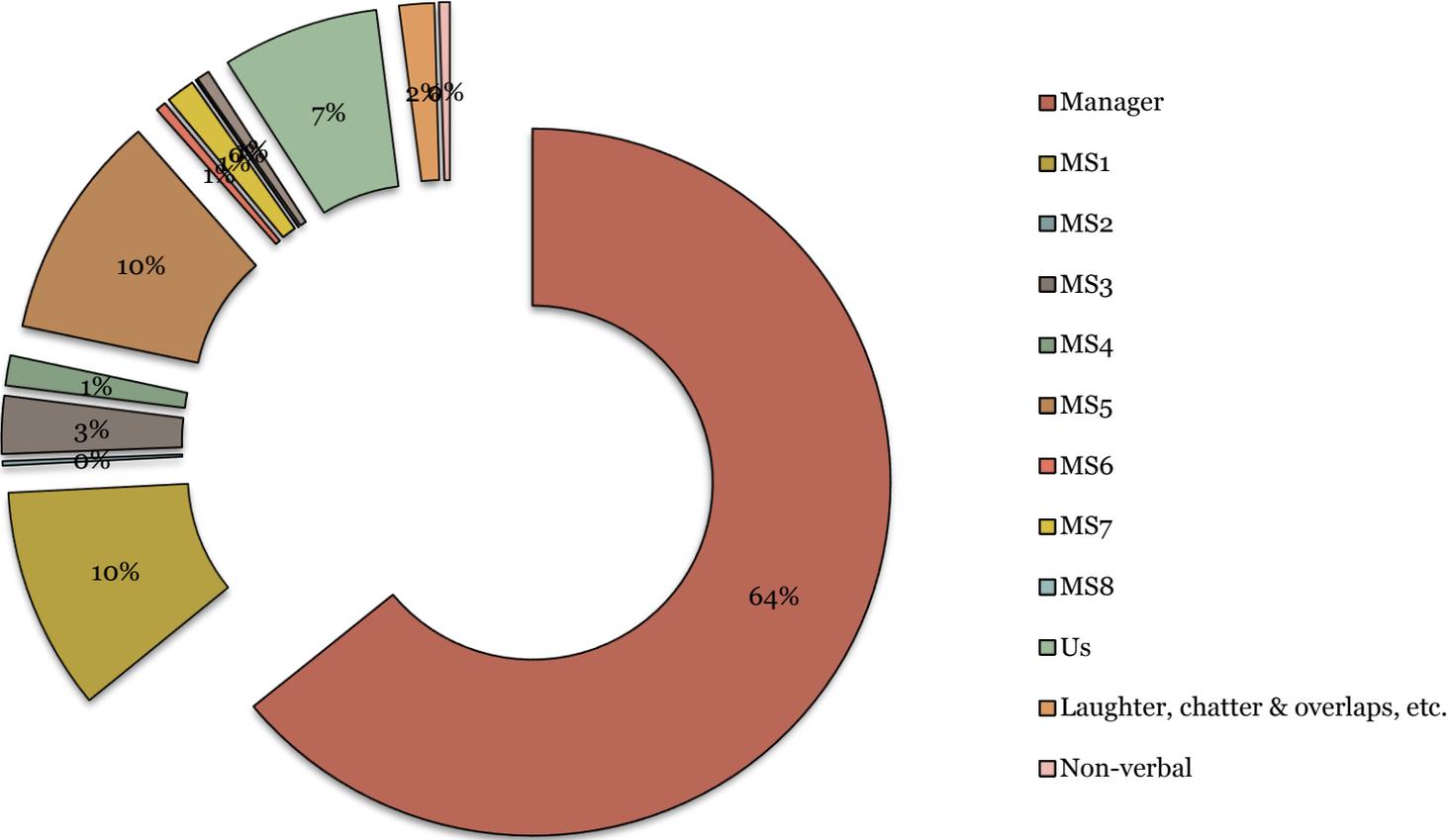
(Miles, TNA Interview 2012)

Miles's meeting



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

Speech Duration of Miles' Meeting



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...

Systemic Functional Linguistics- Appraisal



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

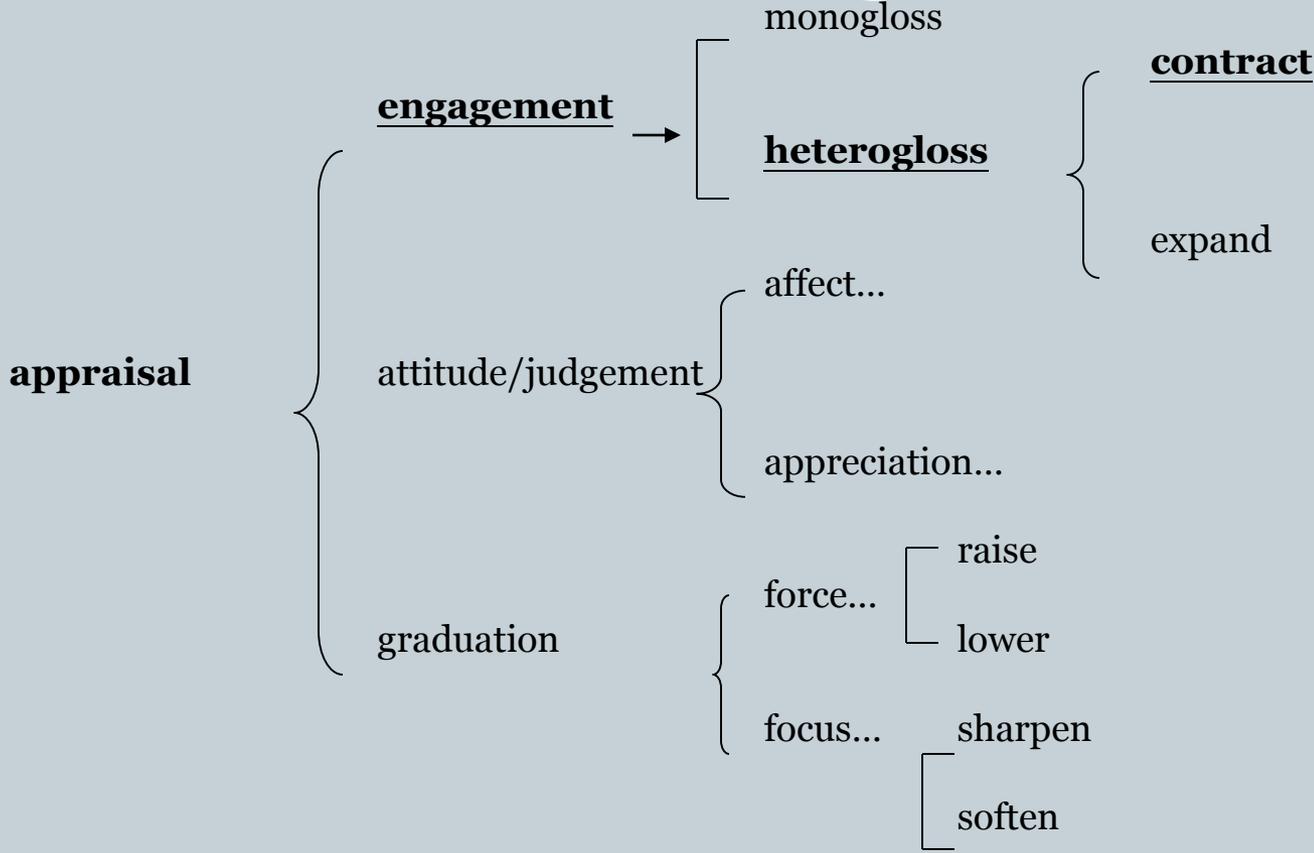
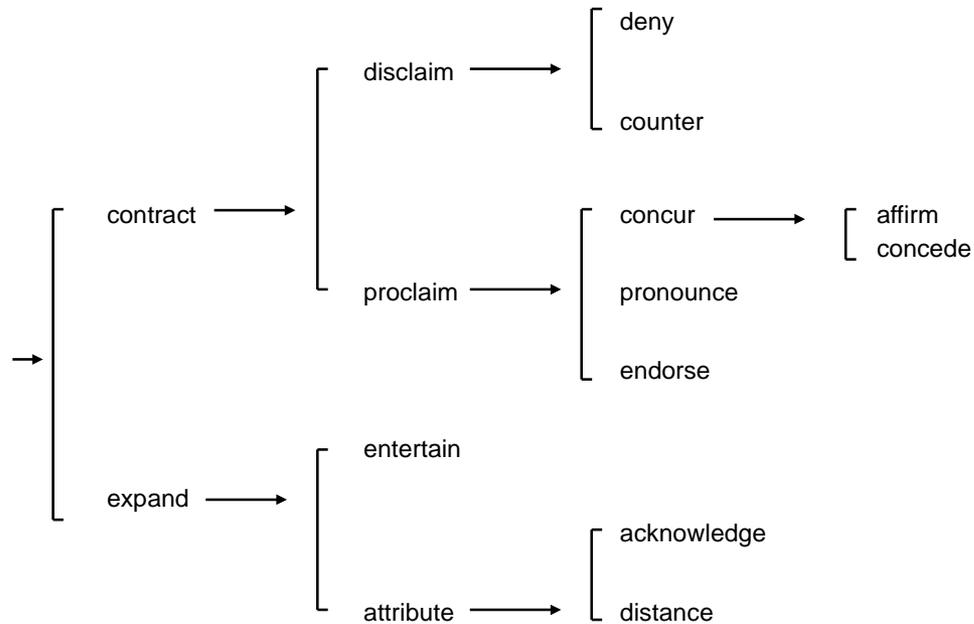


Figure 2: Contract and Proclaim



Concur



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 addresser **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’.*

Pronounce



Pronouncement 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**

So what?



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?

Training and coaching implications



Use of such findings in training/coaching solutions for virtual team managers/ participants

- individual coaching
- team coaching
- corporate training event

Research implications



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



Lockwood, J. & Forey, G. (forthcoming) Discursive Control and Power in Virtual Meetings. *Discourse and Communication*.

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Thank you!



Questions and answers