

**Language Challenges in International Work:
The Impact of Uneven Proficiency in the Lingua Franca**

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine language challenges among collaborators in an internationally distributed organization. Using an ethnographic methodology, we interviewed 143 informants distributed across Germany, India, and the United States, and observed a subset of informants as they interacted with co-workers with whom they were interdependent. Although a lingua franca – a common language mandated for use – is often established in international organizations, our results indicate that a lingua franca is not a panacea and may bring with it its own challenges. In particular, we found that uneven proficiency in the lingua franca led some co-workers to experience situational communication apprehension. We identified three responses to this apprehension: Workers sometimes withdrew from interaction, avoided lingua franca speakers, or when interacting with colleagues more fluent in the lingua franca, alternated between the lingua franca and their native language to more precisely express themselves. We found that these responses had unanticipated effects on co-workers' exchange of work-related information and social relationships, leading some workers to feel ostracized.