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Language as a Source of Epistemic Injustice in Organisations

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Abstract

Although there is now a substantial body of literature exploring the effects of language diversity in international management contexts, little attention has been paid to the ethical dimensions of language diversity at work. This conceptual paper draws on the concept of epistemic injustice in order to explore how language, and in particular corporate language policies, may act as a source of epistemic injustice within the workplace. It demonstrates how language competence affects credibility judgements about a speaker, and also considers how corporate language policies can create situations of hermeneutic injustice, in which marginalised groups are denied the vocabularies to understand their own experiences. Finally, ways in which such epistemic harms can be reduced are discussed, and the possibilities for management education to create epistemically responsible managers are highlighted.

Keywords Epistemic injustice · Language diversity · Resistance

Introduction

Scholarly interest in the impact of language diversity within business contexts has grown exponentially since the foundational article of Marschan et al. (1997), with recent literature reviews highlighting the vibrancy of the language-sensitive international business (IB) literature (Karhunen et al., 2018; Tenzer et al., 2017), and the range of topics investigated by language-sensitive scholars. However, as these same literature reviews demonstrate, until relatively recently, the literature has been dominated by functionalist approaches which consider language as a tool of corporate strategy that can be "managed" by the application of corporate language policies (e.g. Luo & Shenkar, 2006).

Although over the past 5 years there has been much greater consideration of social implications of language use, a significant lacuna in the business and management literature relates to the exploration of language use in the workplace from an explicitly ethical perspective, with the notable exception of Ciuk et al. (2023), who consider linguistic diversity as a component of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policies in organisations. Whilst there are some studies within the language-sensitive literature that implicitly address ethical issues, predominantly those which take a postcolonial approach (e.g. Boussebaa et al., 2014; Vaara et al., 2005) even these are relatively scarce, and thus there has been little theorisation of language diversity as a relevant aspect of business ethics. This is a significant omission, as Böhm et al. (2022) argue that ethical issues are central to international management concerns.

In this conceptual paper, I address this gap in the literature by drawing on Miranda Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, which explores how individuals can be harmed as knowers by the judgements of others. I use this concept to demonstrate how language diversity can be a source of epistemic injustice in the workplace. This synthesises the extensive body of literature on language in IB with the nascent literature on epistemic injustice within the context of business and management (e.g. de Bruin, 2013, 2015; Lamy, 2023; Mussell, 2021; Muzanenhamo & Chowdhury, 2023) and thus contributes to the understanding of epistemic injustice—still a relatively unexplored aspect of business ethics (Wicks et al., 2021). Furthermore, this advances the debate on language-sensitive international business by incorporating an ethical perspective.

Language is a particularly interesting site of enquiry for a consideration of epistemic injustice in the workplace. Despite discourses of neutrality around corporate language policies (e.g. Zander et al., 2011) and in particular, the

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concept of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) (see Komori-Glatz, 2018), there are many examples within the literature of marginalisation occurring on the basis of language.

Language is often used in the categorisation of “us and them”, given that it is an immediately visible marker of social difference (Lauring, 2007). Although an individual may possess grammatical and lexical competence in multiple languages, accents will vary and continue to serve as a marker of difference. Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010) demonstrate how non-native accents lead to the positioning of the speaker as an out-group member and as such create a potential credibility deficit. They argue that this may not be the result of any prejudice about the out-group members, but that accents may reduce “processing fluency”, which leads to the statement being viewed less truthful, rather than simply more difficult to understand. This tendency creates systems and structures which deny credibility not only to specific actors, but also to entire communities.

Research in foreign language acquisition has demonstrated that for adult learners, it is challenging (although not impossible) to achieve native-like proficiency in a foreign language, which includes accent (Alario et al., 2010; Dollmann et al., 2020). I therefore argue that although language proficiency is rarely categorised as a diversity characteristic, which is meritorious of specific protection in the workplace akin to gender or disability status, given that accent in particular appears to be a relatively stable characteristic over time, the injustices that are experienced as a result of language should be considered as a relevant category of injustice.

The paper is structured as follows: In the next section, I introduce the concept of epistemic injustice and explain how it relates to management. The subsequent section provides a brief overview of the language-sensitive IB literature and how it has engaged with ethical perspectives. Following this, I demonstrate the types of epistemic injustice that can be related to language diversity in business and provide illustrative examples from the relevant literature. Finally, I discuss how such injustices may be challenged and the role of business schools in developing epistemically virtuous managers.

Epistemic Injustice

According to Fricker (2007), epistemic injustice occurs when someone is wronged in their capacity as a knower. As McKinnon (2016), further elucidates, “*one way to harm people […] is to harm them in their capacity as knowers, and as epistemic agents. When we systemically exclude people of a particular social identity, such as women, people of colour, disabled people, and many intersectional identities, we enact both epistemic and political violence*” (p. 442).

Pohlhaus Jr (2012) explains how all individuals have epistemic resources, such as language, concepts and criteria, which enable us to know the world. Crucially, although these resources stand outside any one individual, they do not stand outside individual experience. In line with standpoint epistemology, which aims to explore the relationship between one’s positioning in a social system and what one is able to know as a result of such positioning (Toole, 2019), Polhaus Jr explains that “*some persons are situated in positions that allow their experiences to count more in the development and circulation of epistemic resources*” (2012, p. 718). As individuals we can be both privileged and disadvantaged in terms of our access to epistemic resources depending on our social standing. As a result of this, depending on the resources that individuals, and others around them have access to, there is potential for epistemic injustice to occur.

Fricker (2007) argues that there are two primary forms of epistemic injustice. The first is testimonial injustice, which occurs due to credibility judgements which are made about a speaker based on prejudice and stereotypes about personal characteristics, which may include gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and accent. When a speaker is positioned as having a credibility deficit because of such characteristics, a testimonial injustice occurs. Von Kriegstein (2022) highlights how such injustices may occur in a business context and have detrimental effects on already minoritised groups within the business sphere.

Fricker also points out that the same characteristics can lead to a credibility excess, where a testimony is believed more by the listeners due to certain aspects of the speaker’s personal characteristics. Although this may cause embarrassment if later found to be incorrect, this does not constitute an injustice—in such circumstances, the individual has not been wronged, or demeaned in their capacity as a knower. Thus, according to Fricker, it is only in instances of credibility deficit that a testimonial injustice can be said to have occurred. However, this understanding has been criticised by Medina (2011), who points out that the exclusive focus on individual exchanges is overly simplistic, as epistemic injustices “*tend to have temporal trajectories and to reverberate across a multiplicity of contexts and social interactions*” (2011, p. 16). Therefore, there is a danger that although an individual moment may not constitute harm, when these occur across multiple testimonial exchanges, an excess of credibility may promote the development of epistemic vices in an individual, such as arrogance, dogmatism and hubris. In turn, this can have damaging effects on other interlocutors, who may feel less able to participate and express themselves, particularly to dissent, in the face of this perceived authority. Medina (2011) demonstrates how epistemic injustice is an interactive process, which occurs across time and space, and that credibility attributions are influenced by prejudices and norms at the societal level. In contrast to Fricker, he shows how credibility excesses can also lead to the perpetuation of epistemic harms. This is in line with Byskov, (2021) who articulates five conditions which make epistemic injustice an injustice. In addition to the two conditions of disadvantage and prejudice originally established by Fricker (2007), he also identifies the stakeholder condition, in which an individual must be affected by the decisions they are excluded from participating in; the epistemic condition, in which an individual must have relevant knowledge to the decision they are excluded from; and the social justice condition, in which the individual who is discriminated against must also experience other social injustices. In this, Byskov demonstrates how epistemic injustices cannot be separated from broader societal-level injustices, and is an integral part of such discriminatory systems.

Fricker considers epistemic injustice at the societal level with her concept of hermeneutic injustice. Whereas she conceptualises testimonial injustice at the individual level, she views hermeneutic injustice as structural. This is due to the fact that it happens when a group of individuals is unfairly disadvantaged because they lack the conceptual language to make sense of their experiences which are outside of the experience of the dominant group and thus not treated equally as knowledge. As Medina (2017) explains, the harms that are caused by hermeneutic injustices are extremely serious, as the ability to be understood when freely expressing oneself is a core human capacity (Sacks, 1989). Pohlhaus Jr (2012) advances this idea further with her concept of "wilful hermeneutic ignorance" where dominantly situated knowers deliberately refuse to recognise alternate epistemic resources—those that have been created by marginalised knowers—and thus are blind to the possibilities offered to better understand the world using the resources developed by marginally situated knowers making sense of their own experience.

Importantly, this is not just an individual vice, but one which is created and sustained by institutions and norms which encourage and reward such behaviour (Pohlhaus Jr, 2017). Although such concepts have been given scant attention in the management literature (rare exceptions include de Bruin, 2013; de Bruin, 2015 and Mussell, 2021), they have profound importance for our understanding of how organisations work, and how particular social groups within organisations are marginalised and excluded. Indeed, such processes have been studied in a variety of contexts including law (Sullivan, 2017); education (Kotzee, 2017); healthcare (Carel & Kidd, 2017); and disability studies (Scrutton, 2017).

Ethics and the Language-Sensitive International Business Literature

Within the discipline of international business (IB), the domain of language-sensitive work is a relatively young field, which became established after the pioneering work of Marschan et al. (1997), Marschan-Piekkari et al., (1999a, 1999b). Over the past two decades, there has been enormous growth within the field, with scholars investigating a range of topics related to language in the workplace, such as multilingual teams (Henderson, 2005; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2017), knowledge transfer (Holden and Von Kortzfleisch, 2004), expatriation (Vulchanov, 2020), leadership (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015), and social identity (Lauring, 2007). While the vast majority of this empirical work has been located at the managerial level of multinational organisations, with some scholarly interest in the multilingual nature of business schools (e.g. Boussebaa & Brown, 2017; Śliwa & Johansson, 2014), Angouri and Piekkari (2018) remind us that further work is also needed in the context of public sector organisations, NGOs and smaller organisations, which have received comparatively little attention but are also rich sites of linguistic activity and tensions. For example, the international NGO Oxfam have recently launched an inclusive language guide, in which they note that although many of their colleagues and collaborators have to communicate in English, as a colonial language, its usage perpetuates some of the inequalities that they are working to end (Oxfam, 2023).

One of the key topics that has received scholarly attention is the concept of a common corporate language within multinational corporations (MNCs). Sanden (2020) explains that a common corporate language is often focused on internal language use by employees and frequently aims to regulate the choice of language(s) used to so that there is linguistic standardisation within the organisation. However, she notes that the format and degree of this standardisation can vary significantly, between explicit policy documents and protocols at one extreme, to a simple set of informal guidelines and instructions at the other.

An example of the former involves the Japanese MNC Rakuten, who in 2010 announced English as their common corporate language. Unusually, Rakuten required all employees to achieve a minimum score on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) of 650 out of a possible 990 by 2012, or face possible demotion or dismissal (Neeley, 2017). To support the initiative in Japan, where the company expected to face resistance for the move, Japanese language cafeteria menus and floor directories were immediately replaced with their English equivalents (Neeley, 2017).

Conversely, Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999a) discuss how Kone Elevators, a Finnish MNC, adopted English as a common corporate language as the result of an emergent approach in which it simply evolved to become a practical solution for internal communications. Steyaert et al. (2011) discuss the language management practices at an unnamed Swiss MNC where, although employees acknowledge that all internal communication should be in English, a variety of discursive practices are used, including adaptation to the local language (in this case, French).

In terms of the extent of the challenge faced regarding linguistic diversity, previous research evidences this to be substantial. In a study of over 800 multinationals, Harzing and Pudelko (2013) demonstrate that 52% of the companies surveyed use a language other than the language of the country where their headquarters are based as a common corporate language. Furthermore, they demonstrated that 88% of Nordic MNCs, 74% of Continental European MNCs and 16% of Asian MNCs surveyed explicitly designated English as a common corporate language.

However, despite a long tradition of exploration of ethical issues within IB (e.g. Kohls, 1991), to date there has been almost a complete absence within the language-sensitive IB literature of languages at work from an ethical perspective.

This is not, to suggest that ethical questions have been entirely ignored. There is a growing body of work which considers the power dynamics at play in organisational language policies, which explores the impact of such policies on employees, and how these may be resisted (e.g. Wilmot, 2017). Such works implicitly address ethical questions without drawing on ethical frameworks in their analysis. Similarly, there is a small but growing body of work which draws on postcolonial theory in order to demonstrate inequalities which can occur when seemingly rational decisions are made about language use that do not take into consideration the weight of history and colonial relationships between nations, leading managers to present ideological choices about corporate languages as natural solutions (e.g. Boussebaa et al., 2014; Vaara et al., 2005). In a similar vein, there has been work which considers the hegemonic status of English within international business relationships, which is present even within organisations headquartered in countries with which the UK did not have a colonial relationship (e.g. Boussebaa & Brown, 2017; Lønsmann, 2015).

Furthermore, there is an emerging body of literature on language and organisations which considers the micropolitics of language choices and the power dimensions of corporate language policies. Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999b) first pointed out that corporate language policies can lead to employees constructing themselves as superior or inferior based on linguistic proficiency. Since then a range of studies have further explored these processes. For example, Tenzer and Pudelko (2020) discuss how greater proficiency in a working language ensures greater power and reduces the risk of being excluded from decision-making processes, but also show how language proficiency can moderate other power sources. For example, formally assigned leadership positions are affected by language, as there is evidence to indicate that positional power is enhanced if the leader also has superior language proficiency (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2017). Zhang and Harzing (2016) demonstrate how Nordic expatriates in China construct themselves as being in a powerful position due to their frequent proficiency in English, which led to them not making an effort to learn Chinese. Furthermore, in their study of management academics, Śliwa and Johansson (2014) show how conceptions of linguistic proficiency go beyond fluency and intersect with other processes including dynamism, which they define as how enthusiastic and engaging the speaker is considered to be. They highlight that such evaluations have consequences for opportunities for progression and increased status within university environments. Inherent in all these studies which demonstrate the power implications of language choices within organisations is the acknowledgement that language hierarchies exist and that some linguistic repertoires are considered to be more advantageous than others (Erbil et al., 2023). As such, conditions exist for the occurrence of injustices on the basis of language use within organisations.

Pertinently, there is a small body of literature which considers the effects of linguistic ostracism within organisations. Fiset and Bhave (2021) discuss how this is typically unintentional on the part of those who are excluding others from being able to participate in organisational communication. They demonstrate that even such non-intentional behaviours can have negative effects on employee group identification, as those ostracised often feel disconnected from the organisation. Crucially, as evidenced by Dotan-Eliaz et al. (2009), such linguistic ostracism often leads to employees experiencing emotions of anger and resentment to co-workers, even if they outwardly maintain a friendly demeanour. Similarly, in a particularly relevant work for this consideration of language as a source of epistemic injustice in organisations, Kulkarni and Sommer (2015) discuss how language-based exclusion may lower procedural justice, which they define as "*the quality of formal and informal procedures used during decision-making and quality of formal and informal treatment on receives in a specific context*" (p. 641). Therefore, they suggest that employees with lesser language capabilities may not be able to participate fully in organisational decision-making forums, which they may perceive as an injustice. Similarly, they argue that employees who experience linguistic ostracism will feel that they are being treated unfairly, which they also experience as a procedural injustice. Although the propositions of Kulkarni and Sommer (2015) have not been empirically verified, this work is one of the few articles within the field of language-sensitive IB which specifically considers language policies and practices within organisations as a potential source of injustice. Although, in this case, it is discussed as procedural, rather than epistemic, this discussion helps to demonstrate the intersections of different types of injustices and discriminations within organisations, which, as highlighted by Byskov (2021), creates an environment in which epistemic injustices can occur.

As the field of language-sensitive IB has matured, it has moved from a functionalist view of language as a managerial problem to be resolved, to a consideration of language as a social phenomenon which emphasises interaction (Karhunen et al., 2018). However, despite this shift in focus, the literature has largely taken "*a disembodied view of language use in MNCs*" (Karhunen et al., 2018, p.1000) which does not sufficiently consider the individual characteristics of interlocutors engaged in communicative events at work. This may well be due to the fact that work in the field has largely explored language from a top-down perspective in terms of the language policies which organisations put in place in order to manage language diversity, rather than considering matters from a bottom-up perspective in terms of what interlocutors actually do in multilingual environments (e.g. Sanden and Kankaanranta, 2018).

Although language-sensitive IB researchers have engaged with literature from other disciplines in order to explain language as a phenomenon, most notably sociolinguistics (e.g. Śliwa & Johansson, 2014), translation studies (Ciuk et al., 2019, Bjørge and Whittaker, 2017), psychology (Lauring, 2007; Wöcke et al., 2018), there has been relatively little engagement with other business disciplines, despite Piekkari et al. (2014) highlighting this lacuna almost a decade ago. This paper therefore makes a dual contribution in terms of advancing the language-sensitive IB literature by demonstrating the importance of individual speaker characteristics in international business communication, but also furthers previous work by incorporating an explicitly ethical perspective, drawing on the concept of epistemic injustice. The next section therefore uses illustrative examples from the field in order to demonstrate how language is a source of epistemic injustice in organisations.

Language as a Source of Epistemic Injustice

In this section, I draw upon the extant language-sensitive IB literature in order to demonstrate how language use in the workplace can be a source of epistemic injustice. I draw upon Fricker's (2007) categorisations of epistemic injustice as both testimonial and hermeneutic, and evidence how corporate language policies which are imposed by managerial elites can be viewed as examples of wilful hermeneutic ignorance, which contribute to environments in which epistemic injustices can occur.

Testimonial Injustice

Fricker (2007) herself noted that accent is one of the characteristics which can affect credibility judgements about a speaker and lead to situations of testimonial injustice. Although effects of accents on perceived credibility have been widely explored in the sociolinguistics literature (e.g. Lippi-Green, 1997; Rosa, 2019), including in professional contexts (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Ramjattan, 2019) and by management scholars (e.g. Russo et al., 2017; Timming, 2017; Tsialikis et al., 1992), questions of accent have tended to receive less attention in the IB literature, which instead has tended to consider the importance of linguistic competence quite holistically, rather than exploring specific facets such as grammatical correctness and accent. This framing may be a result of the importance of the concept of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) (Komori-Glatz, 2018), which emphasises that the English language, as it is used in an international business context, is not owned by native speakers, but by the international business community who use it. Accordingly, native speakers are not typically considered to claim epistemic authority over BELF, despite evidence to the contrary (Wilmot, 2022). The goal of BELF is to enable communication, and if this occurs successfully, then it has been used correctly, regardless of grammatical constructions or accent which may differ from native speaker usage. While BELF is undoubtedly a pragmatic tool for communication in multilingual environments (discussions about the hegemonic status of English notwithstanding), I argue that the emphasis of BELF on inclusivity has actually led to a scenario in which international business researchers have overlooked the very real injustices, which still occur as a result of accent and grammatical competence in multilingual environments in the workplace.

Peled (2018) demonstrates how testimonial injustices may occur in healthcare settings, where physicians "*may unjustly perceive a patient as less intelligent based on the fact that the patient speaks with an accent that is often associated with less educated populations*" (p.365). Quite aside from the structural inequalities which lead individuals to make judgements about which accents are associated with less educated populations, this demonstrates how accent leads to individuals being wronged in their capacity as knowers, which is constitutive of epistemic injustice. Although less overtly stated, there are indeed examples of this in the language-sensitive IB literature.

For example, there is a body of literature showing how faultlines can occur in global organisations which are created along language lines and how this creates to an erosion of trust. Tenzer et al. (2014) show how employees are perceived as less competent and lacking in credibility if they are not fluent in the dominant organisational language, regardless of their technical competencies in the role. Their study includes a number of quotes from employees in global automotive organisations which demonstrate clear examples of testimonial injustice on the basis of language competence, as explained by a Chinese HR manager in the study:

> "If you speak in a flawed way you don't come across like a professional, don't look competent and secure. This probably also leads to you being evaluated lower

> on your work. My colleagues probably wonder: Does Miss X know the process at all?" This is seen as a lack of competence and knowledge, although it's really just about wording" (p.518).

This quote is particularly insightful as it demonstrates that the employee is aware that others do not consider her to be a credible epistemic agent, and doubt her knowledge specifically as a result of the way in which she expresses herself when using a second language.

In a similar vein, Neeley (2013) demonstrates how language can lead to a loss of credibility in global organisations, which she frames as "status loss". She demonstrates how the introduction of an English language mandate at a French MNC led to employees "*feeling 'stupid', 'diminished', 'reduced' and 'devalued' when communicating and in achieving their work goals*" (p. 484), regardless of their prior level of English. This is not dissimilar from findings in a Finnish context, where managers discuss "*feeling like half our professional competence had been taken away*" (Vaara et al., (2005), p. 609) when forced to use Swedish professionally.

Furthermore, when considering language use in an international business context, testimonial injustice does not only occur in multilingual scenarios. Boussebaa et al. (2014) demonstrate how call centre employees in India are evaluated by both managers at their organisations, and clients, on the basis of their accent, rather than their knowledge, as exemplified by this quote:

> "Once this happened, and this happens many times, a UK customer called and asked me, "where are you from?" I said, "I am Abhinav from India". He said, "I want to speak to a UK person". I asked him "why?" and he said "because Indians have very bad English and they are not able to understand. This is a very English problem and I want to speak to a UK person" (p. 1161–1162).

Such an example is more in keeping with the way in which language has been considered in the social epistemology literature when considering epistemic injustice, which typically frames accent as the chief linguistic issue (e.g. Fricker, 2007). However, as demonstrated by the other examples, in multilingual environments, testimonial injustices can occur due to perceptions of language competences more broadly and are not confined to purely to accent, although clearly accent and perceptions of competence are also linked.

What is interesting however, is that all these examples of testimonial injustice are from the perspective of the victim. This is perhaps hardly surprising, in that privileged groups are unlikely to confess in research interviews that they are prejudiced against individuals with lower language competences and diverse accents in a workplace setting. However, it is sufficient to say that there is significant evidence in the language-sensitive IB literature that employees *experience* testimonial injustice, without there necessarily being any conscious intent on the part of the privileged group. This is in accordance with Fricker (2007) who explains that interlocutors necessarily have to draw on social generalisations (in other words, stereotypes) in order to make credibility judgements about someone of whom they have no personal knowledge. However, there may be identity prejudices held within the stereotype, for which we should consider the individual epistemically culpable if these influence the credibility afforded to the speaker—even though the prejudice may not be part of a conscious decision. Indeed, such judgements may arise due to implicit bias, defined by Elsbach & Stigliani (2019, p. 185) as "*prejudice based on attitudes or associates that are held internally and unconsciously by individuals*". Willard et al. (2015) suggest that such implicit biases may be "underground" in organisations, in that whilst they may not be openly expressed, they still affect organisations in subtle ways, including creating cultures in which discrimination and prejudice can flourish. Given that Storm et al. (2023) stress that bias cannot be eliminated, such a scenario highlights the importance of societal-level structures when considering epistemic injustice, as this influences actions at the individual level, as we have seen in these examples of testimonial injustice. However, they also have a deeper influence and can be a cause of hermeneutic injustice, to which I now turn.

Hermeneutic Injustices

Hermeneutical injustices occur when a particular group lacks (or is denied) the conceptual language to understand their experiences. In the context of the language-sensitive IB literature, this is most likely to occur when a particular language is selected for use at an organisational level, which denies employees the possibility to understand their experiences in terms which are meaningful to them. This can occur when corporate language policies are in place, which may create a discursive void (Tietze et al., 2017) between local languages and the corporate language which employees are obligated to use. Within the international business literature, this is most frequently documented between other languages and English, which, in addition to being the most commonly cited corporate language, is also the conceptual language of most managerial ideas, due to hegemonic publishing practices and the global management education system (Tietze, 2004). As a result, hermeneutic injustices can occur when management concepts—expressed in English—are imposed on non-Anglophone workforces who subsequently lack the conceptual vocabulary in their own language to make sense of their experiences of such concepts, and are denied the possibility to develop such a vocabulary as a result of corporate language policies which mandate English. In such scenarios, although all employees have their own linguistic and discursive resources to draw upon, the imposition of management concepts which are Anglo-centric and may be culturally alien in host country contexts (Tietze, 2004) means that employees experience hermeneutic injustice where their own linguistic resources do not enable them to make sense of externally imposed management practices which originate from a different cultural and linguistic context.

For example, Outila et al. (2021) demonstrate how middle managers in Russia attempt to make use of the concept of "empowerment" which is viewed as a Western management concept which is imposed (in English) by the organisational headquarters based in Finland. There is no single equivalent word in Russian which covers the concept of empowerment, and thus managers drew on Russian proverbs in order to try and make sense of this culturally alien concept. The study demonstrates how managers "*struggled discursively when trying to bridge the large perceived differences between the originating and receiving contexts*" (p. 8), as the managers lacked the conceptual vocabulary in Russian to adequately make sense of the practices in which they were asked to engage in order to facilitate employee empowerment. In other words, the imposition of "empowerment" on a Russian subsidiary meant that managers experienced a hermeneutic injustice, which they were able to resist by drawing on proverbs to contextualise and make sense of a practice which, despite being seen by many as quite contrary to Russian values, was not planned to be changed at the organisation.

Tietze et al. (2017) provide a related example in their discussion of a talent management workshop in an organisation in Slovakia. They note that the discourse of talent management is Anglo-centric and that even when materials were translated from English into Slovakian, they still had to retain multiple English loan words which kept particular meanings in Slovakia, differing from how they are used in Anglophone discourses of talent management. Tietze and colleagues show how it was necessary for a culturally aware translator to play a large role in the workshop to "work around" the challenge created by the discursive void between English-language management terminology and the local language. In this way, the translator was able to reduce the hermeneutic injustice experienced by the participants by contextualising knowledge for which equivalent translations did not really exist.

The examples of hermeneutic injustices that occur in the language-sensitive international business literature mainly relate to questions of translation, and where discursive voids between languages are present. Although, despite some notable exceptions (e.g. Ciuk et al., 2019; Ciuk and James, 2015; Chidlow et al., 2014; Blenkinsopp and Shademan Pahjouh, 2010), translation has largely been overlooked in the language-sensitive management literature (Wilmot & Tietze, 2023), the important issue of equivalence between languages should not be overlooked when considering hermeneutic injustice. Within the social epistemology literature, hermeneutic injustice is frequently considered as a lack of conceptual vocabulary within a particular language that prevents a marginalised group from being able to make sense of their experiences (e.g. Fricker, 2007). However, Medina (2017) argues that a grave hermeneutic injustice is perpetrated when speakers are not just treated as unintelligible, but where, as a result of the community that they belong to, they are also denied opportunities to participate in sense-making activities and thus also experience pre-emptive testimonial injustice where they are simply not invited to share their views in the first place due to a presumed credibility deficit (Fricker, 2017). Within the sociolinguistic literature there is consideration of the effects of both language policies and language ideologies on individuals which prevent their full participation in organisational life (e.g. Humonen & Angouri, 2023; Lønsmann & Kraft, 2018), although this is largely not framed as a matter of hermeneutic or pre-emptive epistemic injustice. Therefore, the effects of corporate language policies in perpetuating hermeneutic harms on employees who are forced to operate in languages in which they may feel uncomfortable expressing themselves, and who may not be fully included in organisational life as a result of some presumed deficit, is not well understood.

At the root of many, but not all, of these hermeneutic harms is the hegemonic status of English within global business. The effects of this are multiple. For example, employees may not be able to fully make sense of their organisational experiences due to the discursive void, which may exist between local languages and English when imposed as a corporate language (e.g. Outila et al., 2021; Tietze et al., 2017, Ciuk et al., 2019). Additionally, epistemic harms may occur when employees in a global organisation are excluded if they do not speak English and are denied the opportunity to fully participate in organisational life, as demonstrated by Gaibrois and Nentwich (2020) and illustrated by the following quote, from a French-speaking employee commenting on the difficulties that most organisational communication being in English presents to them:

> "Some internal internet sites are only in English, so that doesn't incite us to read them […] Of course, we maybe miss some information, or we get it later, or we never get it" (p.8).

This demonstrates how a lack of English proficiency leads to employees being excluded from organisational knowledge-sharing practices. In this case, the epistemic harm stems not from the fact the employee lacks a conceptual vocabulary, but that, in Medina's (2017) terms, the language repertoire which they use prevents them from engaging in knowledge-sharing practices within the organisation.

Although there has been critique of the notion of common corporate language policies within in organisations, and evidence that they create an illusion of a shared context which does not in fact exist (Fredriksson et al., 2006), there has to date been no explicit consideration of the ethical implications of common corporate language policies—even when their imposition has meant job losses for those who fail to comply (Neeley, 2017). One explanation for this lacuna is that within the language-sensitive IB literature, there has been much greater emphasis on top-down policies which have been imposed by senior management, than on bottom-up practices which explore what employees actually do in terms of practices to manage working in a multilingual environment (Kankaanranta and Sanden, 2018). The global managers who impose such language policies are very likely to have high standards of English, due in no small part to the global management education system which also emphasises English (Tietze, 2004), and thus are less likely to have experienced language-based marginalisation at work themselves, and so many be blind to it. Crucially however, because the status quo serves them and facilitates their privilege (Gaibrois & Nentwich, 2020), they may not be interested in interrogating the full ethical implications of language policies on employees.

Wilful Hermeneutic Ignorance

As a result, the language-sensitive IB literature provides examples of "wilful hermeneutic ignorance" (Pohlhaus Jr, 2012), which is perpetuated by managerial elites and the corporate language policies which they enact. Such dominantly situated knowers frequently fail to take into consideration how policies which are seemingly "neutral" to them, because of their social positions, are sources of epistemic injustice to others. This demonstrates not only epistemic insouciance, in which such elites show a lack of concern for potential epistemic harms created by the policies they enact, but also epistemic hubris—the feeling that they simply don't need to know about harms experienced by others (Baird & Calvard, 2019). This is linked to the idea of an "inverted world" (Mills, 1997) in which "*those who have created and benefitted from injustice remain largely ignorant of the unjust arrangements through which they benefit* (p.18).

Therefore, the imposition of common corporate language policies on employees, which are often presented in the guise of neutrality and practicality in terms of creating a shared organisational reality, can, as we have seen, be sources of both testimonial and hermeneutic injustice. They create environments in which speakers may not only suffer from credibility deficits due to their level of competence in the language, but may also may be denied opportunities to fully participate in organisational life, or to make sense of their experiences due to their language competences. Given that these examples are documented in the literature, it raises the question of why there has been such little consideration of the ethical impact of such policies of employees by the managers who impose them. In the concept of wilful hermeneutic ignorance, Pohlhaus Jr (2012) emphasises the importance of positionality and situatedness—in essence, that our epistemic resources do not stand independently of our experiences. Therefore, there is little incentive for those in dominant positions experiencing epistemic hubris—in this case, global managers with high levels of English competence—to understand and recognise the usefulness of resources owned by marginally situated knowers, but also, to understand that their own resources act as a prism through which to see the world that does not necessarily encapsulate the whole of experience. Wilful hermeneutic ignorance occurs when dominantly situated knowers refuse to engage and enter into a meaningful relationship of epistemic interdependence with marginally situated knowers. In this context, global managers refuse to acknowledge the limitations of common corporate language policies because they themselves fail to see the relevance of their own situatedness—and rather than engaging with the epistemic resources (in this case, languages) of others, the prism of their own worldview leads them to see failure to engage with such policies as a deficiency on the part of others, rather than an alternative form of knowing.

De Bruin (2015) demonstrates how corporate epistemic virtues and vices matter, where individuals make commitments to act as a collective (Fricker, 2009). Therefore, corporate language policies are an example of something which can engender a collective epistemic vice in the organisation. It is important to consider vice because a multilingual environment is by necessity a suboptimal epistemic condition—as demonstrated by debates in philosophy of science (e.g. Montgomery, 2013), which not only discuss the production of knowledge in a multilingual world, but crucially highlight the intellectual impoverishment which occurs when one language is positioned (impossibly) as value-free (Tietze, 2022). For example, within the field of philosophy, Catala (2022) discusses how academic migrants may be excluded from knowledge exchange and production as a result of potential epistemic injustices which occur due to their use of English. Similarly, Finocchiaro and Perrine (2023) discuss how English hegemony can lead to the unjust distribution of epistemic goods, pointing out that norms around English use in the academy creates an unjust distribution of credibility, reputation, and prestige unrelated to one's competence as a philosopher.

As Mignolo (2009) points out, there is a need to interrogate how "*eurocentered epistemology conceal[s] its own geo-historical and bio-graphical locations and succeed in creating the idea of universal knowledge as if the knowing* *subjects were also universal"* (p. 160). The same occurs in organisations when corporate language policies are used. Having demonstrated that language is a source of epistemic injustice within organisations and that corporate elites who impose language policies which benefit them but may be harmful to others, this raises the question of what can be done about it, and how such harms can be, if not eliminated entirely, at least reduced.

How to Challenge Injustice Enacted through Corporate Language Policies

Firstly, it is not the aim of this article to argue that common corporate language policies are inherently harmful. From an organisational perspective, as documented in the literature, common corporate language policies can be an effective tool to assist knowledge transfer within organisations (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a). However, the difficulty is that they foster conditions that are epistemically vicious, which increases the chances of epistemic injustices being enacted. As Medina (2011) explains, although individual instances of testimonial injustice are harmful, they can become particularly dangerous when they occur across chains of interactions, which become constitutive of organisational cultures and norms.

Within the social epistemology literature, several potential acts of resistance against epistemic injustice have been identified, many of which are applicable in corporate settings. Chowdhury (2021a) draws on the work of W.E.B Du Bois in order to explore how marginalised groups can resist powerful [organisational] opponents through reconstruction of their selves. He stresses the importance of collective action in developing self-knowledge to develop a political imagination which relies on the capabilities of the group in order to disrupt a dominant system in demanding justice and real change. The central argument is not dissimilar to that of Fleming and Spicer (2007) who highlight that groups who experience subjectification—a systemic form of power which involves those subject to it internalising the values of a dominant group, and thus affecting how they see themselves—can best be resisted by creation, where the application of such power is resisted by the creation of "*something that was not intended by those in authority*" (p. 43). García (2009) introduces the notion of "translanguaging" in which the boundaries between languages are fluid and speakers are able to use their full linguistic repertoire, that is to say, to blend all the linguistic resources they possess in order to communicate, irrespective of whether this confirms to expectations of use established by a dominant group. It is an approach which centres the linguistic practices of an individual, rather than the languages used themselves. Wilmot (2017) argues that this can represent an act of creation and thus become a form of resistance. Encouraging hybrid language use (e.g. Gaibrois, 2018) which emboldens employees to draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire in order to communicate, which, in multilingual environments, is likely to involve translanguaging practices (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014). This would contribute to breaking expectations about the ways in which language should be used, which in turn would foster a more inclusive environment within organisations. While this may indeed be an important form of self-knowledge, which allows marginalised groups access to language(s) which enables them to understand their own experiences, by combining aspects of corporate languages with their own, it still raises the possibility that translanguaging practices result in a perceived credibility deficit, and that testimonial injustices may occur.

Individuals who are able to use this form of resistance are likely to be "outsiders within" (Collins, 2004) in the sense that they may be positioned within an organisation as marginalised knowers, but have the privilege of knowing both their own context and also that of the dominant (organisational) practices at the same time. This double vision (Narayan, 2004) is argued to create epistemic advantage and can indeed lead to resistance through creative practices which centre the individual, rather than the language spoken, and through sharing information and resources with the marginalised group. For example, in the case of the Slovakian talent management workshop (Tietze et al., 2017), the translator played a large role in contextualising knowledge with Slovakian managers due to their historical understanding of the legacies of communism in shaping Slovakian management practices, combined with their experience in the UK of talent management discourse.

Mignolo (2009), who considers epistemic injustice as a form of colonial oppression, argues that it is necessary to engage in epistemic disobedience to resist such injustice, in order to challenge "*what knowledge-making is allowed, disavowed, devalued, or celebrated" (p.176).* He specifically references the oppression perpetuated by language, by acknowledging the construction of knowledge in European languages, underpinned by Greek and Latin, and the subsequent devaluation of Other languages *"Arabic or Mandarin, Hindi or Urdu, Aymara or Nahuatl*" (p. 164). Such arguments are gaining traction within the IB literature, e.g. Tietze (2018); Boussebaa and Tienari (2021), all of whom point to the implications of this hegemony on (management) knowledge production. Mignolo argues that to engage in epistemic disobedience means "*to delink from the illusion of the zero point epistemology*" (p. 160), and thus to engage in standpoint epistemology, which requires an understanding of the situated knower (Pohlhaus Jr, 2012). As part of this, he provides examples of marginally situated knowers who challenge epistemic oppression caused by colonial power matrices. Similar arguments, drawing on Mignolo's work, can be found across a range of disciplines, from feminist theory (e.g. Roshanravan, 2014), to literary criticism (e.g. Poks, 2015), although have only recently begun to gain attention in the context of business ethics (e.g. Chowdhury, 2021b).

Important though such interventions are, a limitation is that they place the burden of resistance and change onto marginalised knowers. Within the context of management, it is also imperative to identify ways in which dominantly situated knowers can act against epistemic injustice. Narayan (2004) discusses how one of the problems of double vision is that it is only acquired by those within a marginalised group. She notes how there is no requirement for the members of a dominant group to understand the practices of the marginalised. Not only this, but she highlights that it is unlikely that even sympathetic individual members of a dominant group can fully understand the emotional complexities experienced by the marginalised, even though they may still theoretically understand the conditions of oppression which exist and wish to change them. Acts in solidarity with the oppressed group do not make one a member of the group. However, this does not preclude that such acts of allyship should take place, although in line with Smith and Archer (2020) it is imperative that this does not take the form of privileged voices—who cannot understand the logic of the standpoint of the marginalised group (Harding, 2004)—simply speaking on behalf of others. Therefore, it is not advocated that further top-down corporate languages policies are put into place without dialogue. Instead, a more effective way for those who are privileged due to their linguistic competences to be allies is to move away from the vice of committing epistemic injustice, to becoming more virtuous listeners. By refraining from committing testimonial injustices, this creates a first step to dismantling the structures which also lead to hermeneutic injustice.

Padilla Cruz (2014) suggests that epistemic injustices can be overcome if listeners change their processing strategies and suggests epistemic vigilance as a tool to do this. According to Origgi, 2012), if individuals engage in epistemic vigilance, which she defines as being "*aware of the heuristics and biases we are using in order to filter information*" (p. 226), it requires them to be aware of the mechanisms and heuristics they use in order to process information, and this awareness can lead to an identification of any biases which may prejudice them against the speaker. It includes an interrogation of both external factors, which may affect credibility judgements, and internal factors. In this case, it is the internal epistemic vigilance which is particularly important in preventing epistemic injustices, as here it is required to be epistemically vigilant towards one's own beliefs. Storm et al. (2023) remind us that both managers and employees alike need to be aware on an ongoing basis that they will be working with their own biases and that they should never consider the problem of implicit bias to be "fixed," but understood to be something of which everyone needs to be continuously aware. In the examples provided in this discussion, this could mean recognising and acknowledging that particular types of accents provoke a tendency to enact a testimonial injustice and to consider the speaker to be less credible. In this way, epistemic vigilance can be considered as a specific form of reflexivity (Woolgar, 1988), insofar as it relates particularly to raising awareness of the way in which individuals make judgements about knowledge claims. This vigilant position provides a mechanism through which managers can become more virtuous listeners by routinely interrogating their own behaviours, rather than placing onus onto marginalised speakers and represents an important tool to challenging epistemic injustices in the workplace.

Furthermore, Erbil et al. (2023) point to the need for organisations to move towards polyphonic and plurilingual approaches that recognise talent. Whilst they view this in terms of resisting exclusion and neo-colonial domination based on language, a truly polyphonic organisation would also present possibilities for reducing epistemic harms and creating more inclusive hermeneutical resources. Xu (2022) draws on the work of Bakhtin (1984) to define polyphony as "*the simultaneous co-existence of multiple voices, not unified or subordinated to the authoritative author's voice. Each voice has the equal communicative capability, narrative weight, and interpretative significance*" (p.44). A truly polyphonic organisation would provide opportunities for "*being different together*" (Xu, p. 43), where all voices are given equal weight and do not suffer credibility deficits for their linguistic choices and linguistic presentation. To achieve this, Erbil et al. (2023) suggest that organisations—and the managers within them—need to use plurilingual, culturally sensitive and responsive communication channels that include missing voices. They also suggest, in line with Ciuk et al. (2023), that organisations must implement flexible HRM policies and practices which enable recruitment, retention and promotion that celebrate linguistic diversity. Beeler and Lecomte (2017) also draw on a Bakhtinian approach to explore "the dark side of language", in particular hegemony and in-group behaviour based on language. They stress that polyphony alone cannot overcome the dark side of language and emphasise that a new managerial mindset is needed, which stresses the responsibility of dominant speakers to embrace communicative possibilities which enable everyone to participate. Following Sullivan and McCarthy (2008), who highlight that polyphony "*is a lesson for organizations to create a space that allows them to listen to as many voices as possible*" (p. 526), in practical terms, this could be achieved by the creation of an environment in which translanguaging practices and hybrid use are both permitted and celebrated. Fredriksson et al. (2006) note the difficulties of imposing any kind of language policy on organisations, and therefore, it is unlikely that formalised, top-down mandates on the use of different languages would achieve this. However, organisations can encourage employees to use their entire linguistic repertoires and to foster environments in which even limited language skills can be viewed as a resource in their own right (Gaibrois, 2018). Similarly, several studies, including Beeler and Lecomte (2017), demonstrate how the active encouragement of less competent speakers can lead to greater participation and a more equitable valorisation of different speaker contributions. As one respondent in a study looking at language and leadership in a German automotive manufacturer put it:

> Just don't pay attention to how long someone takes to speak or if he expressed himself correctly. If you treat foreign colleagues' contributions just like the ones of German colleagues, that does them really good" (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015, p. 618).

Therefore, a solution is not to require employees to all learn more languages, but to create a situation of polyphony by developing greater respect for everyone's linguistic resources and facilitating their use. This may involve linguistic perspective-taking, for example (Wilmot, 2022), in which individuals consider the experiences and linguistic backgrounds of their interlocutors, and recognise the challenges and the struggles associated with working in other languages, which would create more virtuous listeners.

Boduch-Grabka and Lev-Ari (2021) demonstrate how exposure to foreign accents can reduce the credibility deficit targeted towards non-native speakers and thus pre-emptive credibility deficits. For example, Stocker (2017) highlighted that the foreign accents do not appear to affect credibility in the Swiss context, which is characterised by high levels of multilingualism and plurilingual language practices due to the presence of four official languages in the country. This suggests that environments in which linguistic diversity is allowed to flourish, and in which speakers are exposed to a wide variety of linguistic practices which are equally valued, can help to create more virtuous listeners.

In all of this, business schools have their part to play. The management academy has its own traditions of excluding knowledge because of the language in which it is expressed (Böhm et al., 2022). Tietze and Dick (2013) consider the role of the English language in management knowledge production and demonstrate how "*the actual knowledge may be questioned if the academic does not express it in English"* (p. 127). If the global elite receive their management education in English, regardless of their own linguistic backgrounds (see Tietze, 2004), it is perhaps unsurprising that managers are unaware of the potential for harm created by language policies, which assume not only shared proficiency, but a world in which all knowledge can be expressed in a particular language. By drawing attention to this, I aim to contribute to a process of scandalisation (Steyaert & Janssens, 2012) about the lack of emphasis given to this topic and argue that to develop truly virtuous managers, who engage in epistemic vigilance enabling them to create polyphonic environments within their organisations, we need to move beyond the state of epistemic ignorance (Fricker, 2016) which our English-centric curricula create towards language matters. As business schools, we need to provide an "*epistemic education*" (Lamy, 2023 p. 11) to future managers so that they are able to understand their epistemic faults and the harms they may perpetuate, in order to demonstrate epistemic responsibility in their management practice (Lamy, 2023). Dotson (2014) warns us that this will not be an easy process and that the epistemically privileged will not abandon such privileges easily. The epistemic hubris, which is created and maintained by existing power structures and the nature of management education itself (Sadler-Smith & Cojuharenco, 2021), means that the uptake of such ameliorating measures is likely to be slow. Epistemic hubris insulates managers from truly understanding the effects of these practices, providing little motivation for change. Management students may find it a disruptive and disorienting experience to de-centre privilege and authority structures. However, it is incumbent on management educators to "*persevere until there is surprise no more*" (Sadler-Smith & Cojuharenco, 2021, p. 282) if we wish business schools to be truly transformative spaces which develop epistemically responsible managers.

Conclusion

This article has introduced the concept of epistemic injustice in order to explore the potential effects of corporate language policies on employees, following Karhunen et al.'s (2018) call for a consideration of language in the workplace which integrates perspectives from other relevant disciplines in order to avoid a functionalist approach. By drawing on the foundational work of Fricker (2007) and using examples from the language-sensitive IB literature, the article has demonstrated the ways in which language diversity, and the corporate policies which are used to manage such diversity, can be sources of both testimonial and hermeneutic injustices. A consideration of how such injustices can be resisted has also been presented, which requires an attempt from the listener to engage in more virtuous ways of listening. Hitherto, although there is an expanding field of literature which examines the implications of language diversity in business, there has been little explicit consideration of the ethical implications of choices which are made about language use. This article attempts to begin to address this lacuna, with the dual aims of stimulating empirical research which explores the intersection of language diversity and business ethics, whilst also beginning to address language as an ethical matter in business school teaching.

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Declarations

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