

Rebuilding Babel: a constitutive approach to
tongues-in-use

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Abstract

The argument that communication constitutes organizations (also known as CCO) is increasingly accepted in communication studies. However, *what* tongue – idiom – is being used and *how* it relates to the constitution of the organization seems to be overlooked to a large degree. In this paper, we suggest that the Montreal School (TMS) tradition of organizational communication offers a fruitful analytical framework that allows to better take into account the way people practically deal with plurilingual situations as they go on with their daily activities and contribute to shaping their organizations. We identify six core features of TMS and show their analytical power in studying plurilingual interactions. TMS, we argue, is conceptually well equipped to reveal the ways in which multiple tongues are dealt with in everyday organizational settings and to uncover the constitutive nature of tongue-in-use.

Keywords: Languages, Tongues, Plurilingual Organizations, Organizational communication, Interaction Analysis, Translation, Montreal School

Rebuilding Babel: a constitutive approach to tongues-in-use

The moment I set foot at the MSF hospital in Jordan, I realized that my ignorance of Arabic and my far-from-perfect English didn't really matter. Everyone on the project seems to have similar "limitations", even though it has never been explicitly addressed this way by anyone. In fact, it is apparently not an issue for MSF workers. Everyone navigates their way through conversations as well as they can; it's just the norm here. The knowledge of what the organization is there for, that is, its *raison d'être* of treating populations in medical need, is more important than anything else. My ability to speak French, or my limitations in Arabic and English, are far less crucial than my understanding of the organization's mission.

(Field notes, November 2006)

Médecins Sans Frontières (hereafter MSF), also known as Doctors Without Borders, provides medical relief in over 60 countries, many of them affected by war, where it runs hospitals and dispensaries. Each of the Nobel Prize winning organization's sites bring together doctors, staff and volunteers from various countries, including local workers. In spite of their cultural and linguistic differences, all of these people manage to work together with a very high degree of efficiency, to treat hundreds – if not thousands – of patients, and to make MSF present where it matters the most. Such an achievement may appear improbable, and yet it is an almost routine job for many of the organization's workers. It is that feat that we wish to highlight and learn from.

Knowledge of a single tongue has regularly led Western organizational communication researchers to narrow the scope of their studies to more familiar settings and to downplay the importance of what really takes place in "unknown" tongues or in plurilingual settings. Social scientists in different fields, though, have been tackling tongue issues in organizational contexts (e.g., Janssens, Lambert, & Steyaert, 2004) and suggesting strategies for the management of linguistic diversity. However, studies on plurilingual organizations, code-switching and tongue

negotiations (Barner-Rasmussen & Bor, 2005; Mondada, 2012; Piekkari, 2006) have mostly been concerned with the use of tongues themselves and in the ability of co-conversants to understand each other – thus following a conduit metaphor of communication. They indeed have not yet shown how the use of a particular tongue – or many tongues – may contribute to broader organizational phenomena. We argue that, by being attentive to the constitutive role of actors' use of multiple tongues, we may shift the analytical focus to people's concerns and creativity, and allow ourselves to learn from them. These actors practically manage to communicate across different tongues, and our role should be to understand how they do it. In other words, what people *do* when they talk cannot be separated from what they *mean*. It is thus crucial to study *how* people practically deal with plurilingualism.

It is indeed increasingly commonplace to suggest that discourse is constitutive of organizational reality (c.f., Boje, Oswick, & Ford, 2004), in particular under the rubric of the “communicative constitution of organizations” or CCO (Cooren, 2000; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Schoeneborn et al., 2014; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). For instance, Brummans et al. (2013) suggest that:

“Once constituted, *langue* (language) has powerful structuring effects since as people use its categories to decode their own activities, they are also buying into a structured pattern of interaction and its interpretation. Language, in this sense, furnishes what Weick (1979) called the ‘cause map’ that people draw on in both acting on their environment, and making sense of it.” (p. 36)

Yet *what* language exactly – i.e., tongue, code or idiom – is being used in those constitutive practices, and how it is being used, appear to a large extent to be overlooked in organizational communication. This paper thus pursues two goals: the first is to show how the constitutive role of tongues could be taken into account in empirical analysis; the second is to demonstrate how CCO already provides the tools for such an analysis, although CCO scholars have not yet addressed the issue. As Janssens et al. (2004, p. 415) write, “the organizational reality of

international companies is being produced through the communicative process in which multiple languages interact.” The role of tongues in organizations – whether international or not – is not limited to misunderstandings or policies regarding tongues. As prominent vehicles of discourse, they are at the very root of the organizing process itself. In this sense, the apparent lack of attention to the constitutive dimension of tongues-in-use seems hard to explain. In general, scholars interested in the communicative constitution of organizations tend to use — or write as if they used — monolingual data. They indeed do not problematize the fact that the conversations they study occurred in particular tongues and in specific contexts (see, e.g., Cooren, Matte, Taylor, & Vásquez, 2007; Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). Such an omission gives the impression that all participants in the observed interactions conveniently spoke the same tongue, usually English, the lingua franca of academia (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). We contend that if CCO perspectives embraced the practical implications of tongues as an object of study, they could greatly extend existing literature on plurilingualism and code-switching. They would then bring to light the constitutive power of tongues for any organization, but also a constitutive lens to the study of plurilingualism.

In this paper, we wish to draw organizational communication scholars’ attention to tongues by taking the Montreal School perspective as a framework (Brummans, 2006). The Montreal School (hereafter TMS) perspective allows us to insist on what words *do* in a given situation and to explore plurilingual settings in a more pragmatic way. To illustrate our claim, we draw on the case of Médecins Sans Frontières. At MSF, but also in many organizations today, workers have to deal with the challenges of plurilingual work on a daily basis. This issue is thus a concern for every organizational actor operating on a global scale (Stohl & Ganesh, 2014).

In the next section of this paper we will provide an in-depth review of the existing literature on plurilingual organizations. We will then unwrap several of the Montreal School's concepts that allow us to question some of the assumptions made in the aforementioned literature. After that, we will bring to light the way the Montreal School's perspective may tangibly contribute to the study of tongues-in-use through the analysis of our case study. To conclude, we will discuss the constitutive and pragmatic aspect of tongues-in-use.

The plurilingual organizations literature

There has been a growing acknowledgement over the past fifteen years in organization studies literature that tongues are “largely overlooked” (Maclean, 2006, p. 1377) and even “the most neglected field in management” (Piekkari & Zander, 2005, p. 3). Stohl notes that “from the perspective of culture as communicative practice, the pragmatic choice of an official organizational tongue not only has instrumental effects but enacts who and what is respected, validates certain types of knowledge claims, and creates expertise and privilege” (Stohl, 2008, p. 354). However, organizational communication has yet to fully take on the issue, which has been mostly addressed in the fields of international management (Barner-Rasmussen & Bor, 2005; Welch, Welch, & Piekkari, 2005), international human resources management (Piekkari, 2006), business discourse (Nickerson, 2004), or international business and management studies (Holden, 1986). This omission is all the more surprising since, as Tietze (2007, p. 13) notes: “Ultimately, natural language and discourse cannot be separated — they exist together [...]”.

The organizational communication literature has the potential to expand the range of issues raised by the study of tongues. The plurilingual organizations literature has indeed mostly been concerned with organizational members' expression and the management of their interaction. For

instance, Wright, Kumagai and Bonney (2001) show how the use of impoverished English by Scottish and Japanese employees led them to “presen[t] what was to be said in statistical form, usually percentages, creating the impression that the meaning of the statement was hard, unambiguous and factual” (p. 243). Studies regarding the use of code switching, i.e., alternating between two or more tongues, have for their part focused on the way participants negotiate their interaction (Kang, 2003; Pelletier, 2008). In other words, the organizational dimension of the use of tongues, or tongues’ ability to do something beyond the interaction *per se*, is for the most part left aside. Many of the studies that do look at the organizational setting of tongue use adopt a prescriptive style and seem to write mostly for managers. They propose strategies (Feely & Harzing, 2003; Janssens et al., 2004), or suggest ways to manage tongues (Dhir & Gòkè-Paríolá, 2002; Marschan, Welch, & Welch, 1997). Moreover, these studies have mostly limited their empirical cases to Western or industrialized countries (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2003).

Lastly, the theory of communication that underpins many studies has not kept up with developments in organizational communication. For example, some authors seem to adopt a transmission model of communication, and write about “communication channels” (Barner-Rasmussen & Bor, 2005, p. 13) or “senders and [...] receivers” (Kameda, 2004, p. 70; see also Maclean, 2006, p. 1379; Marschan et al., 1997, p. 596). Such views mostly leave core concepts such as tongues (Fox, 2007) or power and identity (Janssens et al., 2004; Luring, 2007; Nunan, 2003; Pennycook, 2004) unquestioned. Finally, the plurilingual organizations literature often takes for granted the very existence of the organizations that it studies.

Some voices within the plurilingual organizations literature are rising to suggest alternatives to the conventional way tongues are being studied. Looking at what tongues actually mean and do to people requires methodological approaches beyond the study of documents (Kankaanranta,

2006) or policy and interviews (Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen, & Piekkari, 2006; Wright et al., 2001). This could, for example, be achieved by examining linguistic tensions in society at large (Harzing & Feely, 2008). New approaches in this literature include conversation-analytical and ethnomethodological studies of the details of tongues-in-use (Mondada, 2012), or ethnography to document power issues in tongue negotiations (Barrett, 2006). While observational studies of the concrete use of tongues are insightful (c.f., Loos, 2007; Poncini, 2003), they remain rare, and calls abound to conduct more of them (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2003).

In particular, it is becoming increasingly clear that what tongues do in concrete interactions may not be just a matter of getting the message across. For instance, Moyer's (2011) study of plurilingualism in a health care clinic shows that people's use of tongue is concerned with the task at hand and its practical implications, rather than with some ideal translation. Koole and ten Thije (2001), for their part, draw attention to the way people interactionally negotiate a common ground to which they may collectively orient. We agree with their suggestion to focus on "the question of how interactors deal with this lack of sharedness" (p. 585) instead of explaining away differences by assuming that they would not matter if they spoke a common tongue.

In the same way as Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013) suggested in their paper on corporate social responsibility, we show how a CCO approach, in particular the Montreal School perspective, may help go beyond a transmission model of communication. In doing so, we respond to Bargiela-Chappini and Nickerson's (2003), as well as to Koole and ten Thije's (2001) calls for different methods and perspectives to study tongues in organization.

CCO and the Montreal School

The Montreal School perspective (TMS) on organizational communication (Brummans, 2006; Schoeneborn et al., 2014) is a fruitful avenue to contribute to the plurilingual organizations literature and complement some of its shortcomings. TMS researchers indeed doubt taken-for-granted assumptions regarding organizations, communication and the various concepts that are associated with these two constructs. For example, authority (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009; Taylor & Van Every, 2014), strategy (Cooren, Bencherki, Chaput, & Vásquez, 2015), project management (Sergi, 2013), and other related concepts are redefined as continuously performed in talk and text. Applying a TMS perspective to the study of tongues-in-use in organizations would allow stepping back from some of the plurilingual organizations literature's assumptions and provide a more detailed analysis of the constitutive role of tongues in organizational settings.

In contrast to some of the plurilingual organizations literature's shortcomings, researchers from TMS have regularly studied contexts that depart from the conventional business setting (e.g., volunteer organizations in McAllum, 2014). These authors have been able to tackle tongues and discourse not only as something that needs to be managed, but also as a constitutive facet of the everyday reality in which action unfolds. Rather than prescribing advice, TMS scholars have paid attention to the way discourse is used in concrete situations, by people involved in different aspects of organizational work.

In fact, this interest in the situational use of discourse comes from the combination of two of TMS' fundamental principles: the first is that "communication is, first and foremost, considered an action" (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 289); the second is TMS' insistence on what Mary Parker Follett (1926) called "the law of the situation," i.e., the idea that "my behavior helps

create the situation to which I am responding” (p. 130) and that people “should agree to take their orders from the situation” (p. 139). This means that communication is not simply about describing situations that exist independently of its utterance. Discourse does things – it shapes reality and it creates the very organizations and situations in which speakers are involved.

By viewing communication from a constitutive lens, CCO, and TMS in particular, has been able to tackle a variety of topics in organizational communication. We argue that the same analytical toolset could also be relevant for the study of tongues-in-use. The Montreal School’s pragmatic emphasis on how people *do things* when they speak (and, thus, how they weave together the very organization “in” which they act), means that whatever makes *a difference* should count in the analysis, including the tongue people use. For instance, a pragmatic view would consider *unilingualism* as significant, as long as it has weight in a given situation (e.g., all participants in Mondada, 2012 turn out to know French). Said otherwise, in the same way as it gives a central role to discourse, we suggest TMS could also pay attention to *tongues*.

While empirically interwoven, the Montreal School’s contributions may be analytically sorted into six core features. The first relates to (1) *discourse and tongues*. In a TMS perspective, discourse is not about representation or information. As briefly mentioned above, discourse *does* things, as proposed in the tradition of speech act theory (c.f., Austin, 1962). This view entails that the meaning of words is not to be found in any particular tongue’s dictionary, but rather in the difference words make concretely when used. This allows elucidating what may appear counter-intuitive in the use of CCO and TMS in the study of plurilingual settings: if there is no common tongue to rely on, how could discourse constitute anything? By looking empirically at the way words *do* things, TMS scholars consider meaning as an interactional outcome, rather

than a basis of discourse (Cooren & Bencherki, 2010). As in Wittgenstein's (1953) example of the construction worker yelling "Brick!" to request another brick, understanding may be achieved when the whole pragmatic situation is taken into account.

TMS's view of discourse and tongues has consequences on its understanding of (2) *translation*. When discourse is understood as a deed, then translation is a matter of maintaining the equivalence between doings: getting a sentence from one tongue to another is but one way achieving such an equivalence. TMS borrows its view of translation from actor-network theory, which is also referred to as the sociology of translation (Callon, 1986). Maintaining the equivalence of an action through a series of transformations is not only a matter of "getting it right," but also and foremost a sociomaterial accomplishment. Thus, translation may be more than a matter of getting words across. It is also an issue of turning a program of action into another, i.e., the realization of one set of actions through a different one. For instance, Cooren's (2004) study of a sticky note is an example of the way an action – reminding myself of something through the sticky note – may be translated into the action of an artifact so that it makes a difference at a later time.

In turn, TMS' view of translation has an incidence on the way it deals with issues of (3) *presence and absence*. The notion of presence is indeed defined as the ability to make a difference in the interactional situation, whether this is done through physical presence, discourse or through someone or something else's translation. Beings and things, like hierarchies, rules or organizational missions, are made present through the actions of others – what TMS scholars have called "presentification". In many cases, this mode of mediated presence may be the only way they can exist: this is the case, in particular, of organizations (Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008) which are made present as someone or something evokes a chart to materialize

hierarchy, verbally reminds someone of a rule, or reads from the minutes of a strategy meeting where the organizational mission was debated. This means that presence and absence are not binary opposites: someone or something may be more or less absent by some criteria – and by virtue of an explicit evocation or on the contrary of an implicit reference – but also present to the extent that she/he/it acts in the current situation.

For something or someone to be more or less present and to make a difference in any given interaction, it has to *matter* or to be materialized in the situation as demonstrated by the notion of (4) *materiality*. As Cooren (2015) explains, *matter* refers to what substantiates a being: “beings come to exist more or less through what substantiates/materialises/mediatises them” (p. 314). Said otherwise, when something or someone is made present, “[t]hese materials are the means by which these beings literally *pass through* or *come across* this presentation” (p. 314). If an organization, a rule, a principle, a hope, etc., can be made present, it is because their actions can be seen in documents, in someone’s speech, in a sign, in a handshake, in numbers, and in other elements that *stand underneath* and provide a material ground for them temporarily.

The way TMS conceives of presence / absence and of materiality is closely related to its conception of (5) *authority*. Authority is associated with the ability of making things present – including the organization – and that potentially gives credibility or reliability by lending weight to one’s actions (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009). In other words, people gain authority by sharing their actions with other people or things that are made virtually or physically present and who / that authorize those actions (see also Cooren, 2010). To concretely observe how authority is performed, then, TMS scholars suggest looking at the way that sharing of action is achieved concretely, including beings who/that may appear to be absent from the interactional scene.

These five notions, when combined, offer a different view of (6) *the organization*. The ability of the organization to exist and do things, therefore, is not a given, but rather the result of situated practices through which it is attributed action (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011), made present through talk and artifacts (Cooren et al., 2008; Cooren & Matte, 2010), populated with members (Bencherki & Snack, 2016) and vested with authority (Taylor & Van Every, 2014).

It therefore appears that the TMS perspective has insightful analytical tools – as well as empirical data, for that matter – to take into account tongues-in-use and to show how they contribute to the constitution of facets of organizational reality such as authority or materiality. An extra effort is still needed, though, to fully unfold the potential of TMS in analyzing plurilingual data. As we will see, focusing on the way people practically deal with a plurilingual interaction reveals that they are not just trying to get a sentence from one tongue to another (i.e., plain translation), or trying to overcome misunderstanding. They are also attempting to figure out with any available means – including gestures and artifacts – how to contribute to their common collective. Furthermore, instead of a conventional and sequential intention-coding-transmission view of plurilingual interaction, a TMS view reveals that people discover what they mean through participation in the interaction. In other words, people do not only co-constitute their organization, but also the meaning emerging from the conversations they are involved in.

A CCO analysis of tongues-in-use

In the following pages, we will show what there is to gain from a more forthright attention to tongues-in-use by illustrating the analytical strengths of TMS notions of pragmatic translation, socio-materiality and authority. We will rely on an excerpt from data collected by Frédéric Matte in his study of the humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières, conducted with François

Cooren, which was the object of many publications based on observations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Kenya, in Sri Lanka, and elsewhere (e.g., Cooren & Matte, 2010; Cooren, Matte, Benoit-Barné, & Brummans, 2013). This ethnographic study focuses on the ways MSF workers organize themselves on a daily basis in order to accomplish their mission, that is, treating patients around the world. More than sixty hours of video recordings were accumulated during this longitudinal study of MSF that extended from 2005 to 2014. This excerpt, which has never been used in a publication so far, was recorded in November 2006 at the MSF mission in Amman, Jordan, during the construction of an operating theatre for the neighboring Iraqis in need of surgery. We chose this particular sequence for three reasons. The first is the representativeness of the excerpt, as setting up hospitals is a sizeable part of MSF's work. Moreover, we also appreciated the fact that participants had to resolve a practical, everyday issue rather than an exceptional situation. Finally, the excerpt shows the constitutive role of communication, given that participants were involved in building an operating theatre. Constitution, here, is taken literally. The Jordanian logistician in charge of the construction is guiding Martine, a surgical nurse from MSF's Paris office, through the construction site. Martine must ensure that the operating theatre meets MSF's hygiene standards. The logistician takes the occasion to ask her about the specific types of plumbing that should be installed by two workers who are already in the room. The persons involved are therefore the French nurse, who speaks English hesitantly and with a strong French accent, the Jordanian logistician, who translates the English instructions into Arabic, and the two Jordanian construction workers who receive the translated instructions. At times, the researcher, a native French speaker, helps the nurse with her English. We modified the transcription initially done by one of the researchers, following his return from the field, by adding our own translations of the French underneath the words, when

needed. We also added gestures in our transcription. Moreover, trusted Arabic speakers transcribed and translated the Arabic, which was omitted from the initial transcription. The Arabic is written here using a Latin transliteration to allow readers who cannot read Arabic to still get a sense of the contributions made in that tongue, if only through their musicality.

Excerpt – Choosing the Taps for the Hygiene Room in Jordan

1 Researcher: Ça va commencer euh::
It'll start uh::

2 Nurse: Normalement samedi.
It should be on Saturday.

((Logistician comes from behind.))

3 Logistician: Pardon euh Martine=
Sorry uh Martine=

4 Nurse: =Ouais
=Yeah

5 Logistician: Hum, for the two basins ((points towards a room))

((As they speak, they move together from the corridor to a room from which the noise of hammers can be heard.))

6 Nurse: [Ouais
Yeah

7 Logistician: [I understood that one of them, the one with the uh

8 Nurse: This=

9 Logistician: =opposite= ((motions with hand towards the room))

10 Nurse: =Yeah=

11 Logistician: =will will come without uh ((makes turning motions with her hands)) the taps, just the *douche*¹?

12 Nurse: Just yes ((also makes similar turning motions)) [yes.

13 Logistician: [the *douche*

14 Nurse: And for this ((points inside the room)) one also.

15 Logistician: With taps (.) this one?

16 Nurse: No=

17 Logistician: =No=

¹ “Douche” means “shower” in French.

- 18 Nurse: =No no=
- 19 Logistician: =Both of them with *douche*.
- 20 Nurse: Oui yes.
- 21 Logistician: Ok. ((To the workers)) Mâ fihsh haja fiha. Fih tantayan.
Nothing else in it. Two of them.
- 22 A worker: ((Responding from behind the semi-closed door)) Tantayan douche!
Two douches!
- 23 Logistician: Tantayan douche, OK!
Two douches, OK!
- [...]
- 24 Logistician: Is there a ((makes holding and turning motion with hands)) specific kind of *douche* that uh you are looking for? Or any whatever they find at the market?
- 25 Nurse: Uh uh a good one, huh. A good one, I don't know.
- 26 Logistician: ((raises her hand, makes a fist and moves thumb))
- 27 Nurse: Maybe with the:: ((imitates holding a showerhead and pushing on a button on top of it with her thumb))
- 28 Logistician: Yes=
- 29 Worker 1: =(inaudible) ((copies the nurse's imitation of a showerhead))=
- 30 Nurse: =((Looking at Worker 1)) Yes, yes, yeah, yes, exact, yes.
- 31 Worker 1: Douche wa:: ((lowers arm))
Douche and::
- 32 Nurse: Not not not tap ((horizontal turning motion with hand)) like that, just like ((motions holding a showerhead)) that for a::
- 33 Logistician: Bes douche.
Only a douche.
- 34 Worker 1: Ah! Douche alla toul. ((raises his hand and moves his thumb.))
OK! The douche only.
- 35 Logistician: ((Describes with her hand a high pole, then a hose hanging from it and a showerhead at the end.)) teshabou ah:: ((imitates the act of spraying water)) wa tanzalha.
You pick it up ah:: and then you lower it.
- 36 Worker 2: Ahraft! Ahraft! Tashabha wa tanzalha ((makes a showering motion))
I see! I see! You pick it up and you hang it back.
- 37 Nurse: Oui c'est ça and uh one one thing=
Yes that's it

- 38 Nurse: =((imitates plugging the showerhead on something)) to to put uh to-
Comment on dit un support? ((looking at the researcher and the camera))
How do you say "support?"
- 39 Researcher: Fix it, [to support them.
- 40 Nurse: [fix it, fix it, tu vois, like that ((repeats plugging motion.))=
you see
- 41 Logistician: =Yes.
- 42 Researcher: For the thing
- 43 Logistician: You fix it from here ((imitates taking the showerhead from support))
[and then you put it back ((imitates putting it back on its support)).
- 44 Nurse: [Oui c'est ça voilà exactement
Yes that's it that's it exactly
- 45 Logistician: Yeah.
- 46 Nurse: Yes, oui.

In this excerpt, the MSF colleagues are trying to figure out 1) whether faucets (which they call taps) or showerheads need to be installed in a hygiene room, 2) and, precisely, what type of showerheads need to be installed. What is particularly surprising and revealing in this interaction is that, while three tongues are being used simultaneously, we are not witnessing a re-enactment of the Babel tower, but rather a coherent conversation that proceeds fairly smoothly. This particular situation, where no one fully masters any of the tongues being used, *forces* actors to be resourceful in their attempt to address the task at hand, which they do by orienting to the pragmatic concern they are faced with. This corresponds to the first feature of TMS: (1) discourse and tongues do things, rather than being the passive vehicles of communication. Indeed, the nurse, the logistician and the workers (as well as the researcher) are communicating and interacting *in order* to build together a hygiene room. This is apparent throughout the interaction as they all orient to the task at hand in their attempts to understand and help each other move through the interaction. For instance, when the nurse apparently understands what the worker says in Arabic (with the help of a hand motion) on lines 35 to 37, she is recognizing

that he is addressing the practical concern that has been developing so far (figuring out the right kind of faucets). The same is true when the researcher “translates” the term *support* by explaining to the workers and to the logistician that they need to “Fix it, to support them”: the assumption here, again, is that what matters is the *effect* of talk, i.e., getting the showerheads in place, rather than getting the literal meaning across. Even if they merely were looking to understand each other outside of any practical situation, such a mutual understanding still relies on discourse and tongues actually *doing* something, rather than on a transmission model of communication. Indeed, as Taylor and Van Every (2000) remind us: “intersubjectivity is something to be achieved. Its maintenance is a practical problem, routinely solved in social interaction through an ongoing process of mutual adjustment of perspectives” (p. 9).

This pragmatic view of discourse and tongues can also be understood in a different, complementary way: tongues do things, but they also must be done. Indeed, when looking at the interaction, it is obvious that the two women (and the workers to a lesser extent) are building a shared repertoire on the fly to facilitate their common understanding. The logistician initially seems to be looking for the confirmation that one of the two basins in the room would have a *douche* (a showerhead) rather than a faucet. When at line 9, the logistician accompanies her utterance “opposite” with a motion towards the back of the room, she draws their common attention to one basin in particular. Then at line 10, the logistician makes another turning motion with her hands before saying “the taps,” a motion that the nurse repeats at line 11, to confirm that they both agree on the meaning of that word. In this way, they constitute and create on the spot a shared repertoire that they draw upon again in the excerpt. At line 14, for instance, the nurse repeats the practices through which the logistician designated the first basin to point at the other one and to say “And for this one also.” The logistician, given the repertoire they have built

together, can now ask “With taps (.) this one?” without having to accompany the word “taps” with a hand motion. Participants are thus interactionally and multimodally (Mondada, 2011) constituting the very resources that they rely on for mutual understanding or, to say it otherwise, they are also *doing* a common tongue as they deal with the requirements of the current situation, and not only drawing from pre-existing ones.

This pragmatic view of discourse and tongues brings us to the second feature of TMS: (2) that translation consists not only in moving from one tongue to another, but also in *continuing the same program of action*. Again, the researcher’s intervention is possibly the most obvious example of this, when, at line 38, the nurse, who wants to make a further request, attempts to say something by gesturing and speaking English, but then turns towards the researcher and asks him in French “How do you say *support*?” The researcher, instead of providing a word-for-word translation, answers “Fix it, to support them.” He is possibly completing the sentence the nurse had begun in English before asking him for help (“to to put uh to-”) or describing the actions required from the workers to build a “support”. This rather desultory conversational move – passing back and forth from tongues to body gestures and signs – is nevertheless positively sanctioned at line 40 when the nurse chimes in and repeats “fix it, fix it” before showing, with gesture, how that needs to be done. Thus, between lines 41 and 46, the participants confirm their mutual understanding of the situation. In particular, at line 43, the logistician repeats the words “fix it” and takes the imaginary showerhead out of the support, where the nurse had plugged it at line 40, before putting it back in, which materializes through their movements that they are both orienting to the same understanding of a “support,” which the nurse explicitly confirms at lines 44 and 46.

In order to understand *how* participants could achieve their pragmatic translation, we must turn to TMS' third and fourth features: what they did is (3) make absent beings present in the interaction through (4) materialization. In particular, through the excerpt, they are making present the absent faucets and *douches*, through the materiality of their hand gestures. For instance, at line 9, the logistician is motioning towards the opposite side of the room where a faucet will be installed, thus making present in the interaction an absent artifact and allowing a form of projective sensemaking and co-orientation. Similar instances may be found throughout the excerpt, in particular in the participants' hand gestures. Furthermore, they are making present the various tongues they speak through the materiality of their utterances. Most interestingly, they are also making MSF's norms, requirements and hierarchies present through the nurse's position to decide on what should be done. This is apparent through the way turns of talk are structured. As exemplified at lines 24 to 28, the logistician indeed *asks* the nurse about the type of "douche" that she needs. Even though the nurse answers that she does not know, the logistician still does not make an overt recommendation, but merely imitates a showerhead (line 26), which the nurse then appropriates as her own suggestion at line 27. This could read as a deferent attempt by the logistician to suggest an answer to the nurse while preserving authority relationships. The nurse's authority is more clearly exercised at line 32 when she corrects a misunderstanding by saying "No not not tap..." It is the shared ability of all participants to make present in the interaction a yet-to-exist MSF-compliant hygiene room with two showerheads that allows them to orient to it, and to know what *it* requires. To say it otherwise, Follett's (1926) "law of the situation", to which we referred above, implies that participants bring about the situation from which they agree to take their orders, therefore making present *here and now* what exists (or will exist) there and then. The "plenum of agencies" (Cooren, 2006) that makes up

organizational reality is therefore made possible through a gradation of presence, which in turn relies on a gradation of materializations. Materialization may be achieved through discourse and tongues, but also provides the situation to which people orient in order to achieve (pragmatic) translation.

At a higher degree of abstraction, it is thanks to the gradation of presence / absence and of materializations that (5) authority takes place, and that the relationship between discourse, tongues and authority may be understood. For instance, the very fact that the nurse is the one being asked questions and who confirms what is required shows that she has a particular authoritative role in the constitution of that hygiene room. In that sense, the nurse's authority does not befall upon the participants like a *deus ex machina*: rather, they all reconstitute it as they are dealing with the very practical concern of figuring out what the hygiene room should look like. When observing, for instance, the second portion of the transcript during which the exact type of *douche* is being decided upon, the way the pragmatic translation process takes place establishes the nurse as the authorized and authoritative spokesperson of MSF's hygiene protocols. Indeed, what happens is that the logistician and the workers make proposals – including through hand gestures – that the nurse approves, or she simply goes with the suggestions made. Therefore, the very way the tongue barrier is overcome, i.e., a series of proposals followed by validation or rejection – is also the very way the nurse is interactionally re-presented as a figure of authority. Through this interactional sequence, organizational norms at MSF – regarding roles, authorities, and hygiene – are therefore made materially and virtually present and active in the situation at hand. In other words, it seems that precisely due to the absence of the shared mastery of a *lingua franca*, the MSF colleagues show less directive authority (and power), and instead work collectively to help each other in reaching a common

understanding. This is done by drawing from a wide range of interactional devices, and in doing so re-present the nurse's and MSF's authority. For instance, on line 3, the logistician introduces herself in the conversation by saying to the nurse "euh pardon" ("uh sorry") in French. By doing so, she not only shows deference or politeness to her colleague in charge of the hygiene protocol – she explicitly excuses herself – but she also materializes her apparent goodwill by speaking some French, a tongue she does not actually know. She also displays her knowledge of the fact that the nurse's mother tongue is French, thus making present in the interaction the history of their relationship (i.e., at least the fact that they know each other's mother tongue).

All these features combine to (6) constitute the hygiene room, the relations between the participants, and more broadly MSF as an international, plurilingual organization with a hospital in Jordan, and where people of various backgrounds can work together. Tongues therefore are not used within a pre-existing organization, but are constitutive of the organization. MSF, or the local Jordanian hospital, "has" a repertoire of terms from which people may draw, hygiene protocols they can orient to, and medical norms that constitute the situation that achieves mutual understanding.

Discussion

Over thirty years ago, Luhmann (1981) wrote about the "improbability of communication". To overcome this improbability, the German sociologist suggested "language", i.e., discourse, as a solution to the "problems of mutual comprehension" (p. 124). However, not everyone speaks the same tongue – and even within monolingual organizations, understanding remains improbable. We must therefore look for an alternative in another of Luhmann's proposals: "Meaning can be understood only in context" (p. 123), or, said otherwise, in a *situation*. The Montreal School

perspective extends Luhmann's intuition by recognizing the "missing masses" (Latour, 1992) that are regularly omitted from the sociological equation: artifacts. As Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren (2009) state: "As the Montreal School maintains, organizational encounters are not merely human. We live in a *plenum* of agencies as we talk with co-workers, utilize space, and operate technologies. The nonhuman agents among us can also be said to communicate" (p. 36). Indeed, the participants in the interaction we analyzed did not only talk to each other, but they also spoke to the situation, and responded to its demands. In doing so, they materialized it, for instance by referring to its physical aspects (the location of the basins, etc.). However, as the analysis revealed, even yet-to-exist realities, as they are interactionally constituted, also *matter*. It is true of the taps, *douches*, and *supports*, which contribute to the situation as they are materialized through hand gestures. However, it is also true of the shared tongue itself, since participants ended up agreeing on a certain number of words: "tap", for instance, apparently had no shared meaning prior to its determination in and through interaction. Even the word "douche" seems to be an ad-hoc term whose meaning has been determined in the recent past. It is because of this constituted repertoire of terms that the participants manage their interaction and eventually are able to both contribute to the constitution and construction of the room.

What we offer in this paper is therefore an analytical approach to the study of tongues-in-use in organizational settings that takes into account the constitutive power of communication. This approach begins with the empirical observation that cross-linguistic understanding is an interactional achievement. Interactants orient to what they are *doing* through talk, i.e., constituting their immediate situation and the broader organizational reality. To paraphrase Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince*, people are not gazing at each other, but look together in the same direction. If they were indeed staring at each other's utterances and trying to figure them out,

then communication would indeed be improbable, as Luhmann noted. Meaning, within a single tongue or across tongues, therefore consists in what the words *do* in the situation at hand, and this discovery work is observable for the researchers. In particular, the Montreal School's six features offer guidelines for the analysis of interactions and of the way people work out a situation together.

Thus, the constitutive power of tongues counters the assumption of many organizational researchers, who study cases where they can assume from the outset they will understand most of the tongues materialized, spoken or written. Since most of these scholars come from Western countries (and in fact from the United States), they have tended to privilege Western-based organizations, and to somehow ignore utterances that take place in a tongue they do not understand. In the above excerpt, eight speech turns are in Arabic and could have been discounted as “((speaking Arabic))”. If we had done so, we would have missed a large portion of the way in which inter-linguistic conversation occurs. It is indeed also *in spite of* the absence of a mutually shared tongue that participants understood each other, for instance through gestures or through a shared constituted stock of terms and pragmatic goals. In addition, ignoring any particular tongue not only perpetuates a subordination of its speakers with respect to more dominant tongues, but also reproduces a disregard of foreign voices in Western (organizational) research.

Besides the ethical consideration of dismissing some individuals' contributions, there are also analytical reasons why it matters to take into account all tongues-in-use. As Janssens et al. (2004, p. 428) note, “the presence and use of multiple languages are performative actions, shaping the international company [and, we argue, any organization] through its cultural and political dimensions.” Thus, the translations that occur in this excerpt *do* something other than

transmitting information. A conventional view of tongues and translation reproduces more or less a representational understanding of communication, which supposes words exist only to describe the world – a world that is already available to be described. This means that there is no room to account for projects, becomings and other things that need to be cared for so that they can be brought into existence. Thus, this constitutive view proposed by the Montreal School, in insisting on the way communication and interaction *do* things as well, allows us to recognize that tongues are not a stable stock of words that correspond to an outside reality, but rather provisional realities that evolve just as they contribute to the collective constitution of any situation.

From an analytical standpoint, the Montreal School's analysis of tongues may resemble what Mondada (2011, 2012) calls "multimodality", i.e., the study of interaction not only through (verbal) talk, but also through bodily movements and other contextual aspects. Indeed, just like ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Garfinkel, 1967; Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997), TMS insists on the situated character of (inter)action. This *situatedness* is revealed, for instance, in participants' use of indexical expressions and of pointing and motioning. Tongues and discourse are therefore not limited to verbal utterances. To the extent that they act as shifters that connect speech to its situation of production, indexical expressions and gestures tie the interaction to its sociomaterial dimension (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). However, TMS extends this intuition by showing that indexicals and gestures, along with other linguistic devices, do not only *refer* to an extra-linguistic materiality, but also *materialize* and create realities that are made present and that enable to make a difference in the interaction. In other words, TMS rejects what has been called "the bifurcation of nature" (see Cooren, 2015), i.e., the idea of two separate realms, one for reality and another for human understanding and communication: tongues are also part of reality.

As such, tongues also need to be constituted interactionally. Participants' utterances and gesticulations overlap frequently as they help each other, and the nurse and the logistician regularly complete each other's sentences. They are actively supporting each other to speak – not English, French or Arabic, but an ad-hoc tongue they are building together. Overlaps, in the case of our participants, are not interruptions that need to be repaired (Lerner, 1989), but rather a collaboration device that organizes a collective achievement (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). This shows that some shared knowledge of a tongue is still needed, but that it may not take a typical form. As Wright, Kumagai and Bonney (2001) showed with the case of the Japanese and Scottish workers, a limited shared vocabulary may also be a relevant device available to workers. In our excerpt, we could argue that the French word “*douche*” serves as such a point of passage for all participants. The formal knowledge of a tongue matters, but it is better understood as a device among others – albeit an important one – rather than as a golden standard for cross-linguistic understanding. As we navigate along with the participants through this plurilingual conversation, going from English to Arabic, with the French word “*douche*” as a passage point, we are far from a simple and direct translation activity. What happens is a co-construction process where all parties, including words, imagined artifacts, authorities, and other entities – present as well as (more or less) absent – play a central part in figuring out what the hygiene room should look like according to MSF standards.

This might be a revelation only to some theoreticians. People who deal with tongues as a practical issue – for instance two travelers speaking different tongues and meeting abroad – are well aware of the resourcefulness that is put to use in plurilingual situations. While TMS calls for attention to the various interactional components of a situation, it could also be said that the situation as a whole also matters. In light of another study conducted at MSF (Cooren et al.,

2013), we could indeed argue that colleagues speaking different tongues on the same mission is something expected by most as it is part and parcel of the organization's culture, that is, what is *cultivated*. Participants, therefore, can also be seen as constituting particular ways of interacting in plurilingual work situations at MSF. They are establishing a repertoire of words, but also a repertoire of interactional strategies: for instance, they are sharing resourceful recourse to gestures as a way of miming objects, but also an emphasis on the work that needs to be done as a passage point and as a resource to reach agreement for all practical purposes. In other words, MSF, not unlike other organizations, also constitutes itself as a plurilingual organization each time it deals with a practical situation where multiple tongues are at play.

Conclusion: The constitutive power of tongues

The above analysis shows that the Montreal School perspective provides a powerful lens for the study of tongues-in-use and, in particular, plurilingual situations. Among others, similar to what Mondada (2012) has done using conversation analysis, a TMS approach reveals the situational dimension of common understanding, along with the role of extra-discursive elements, rather than reducing it to a matter of translation and shared vocabulary. Indeed, as we saw, current literature mostly focuses on mutual understanding, and omits the "organizing properties of communication" (Cooren, 2000) in the interactions they study. However, there are other concerns that are less obviously addressed through a strict interaction analysis, namely the constitutive role of tongues, but also the make-up of tongues themselves. Rather than describing a reality, tongues are part of the reality they contribute to enact. TMS' perspective shows that, instead of attempting to overcome differences, a people draw on their multiple worldviews and perspectives to build a common but diversified world together.

Moreover, our analysis suggests being more careful when assuming that any aspect of communication is a transparent vehicle for understanding. Indeed, CCO literature, including the Montreal School, has tended to treat tongues as mostly unproblematic. It is indeed a paradoxical point that most organizational communication literature highlights discourse but conceals tongues. We showed that tongues have pragmatic effects and in fact participate in organizational constitution, which are dealt with in highly situational manners by those who face them.

Montreal School researchers are starting to look for ways to include apparently invisible and implicit “figures” or matter of concerns such as issues of authority, attachments, tensions, etc., in their analyses (Cooren, 2010). We tried to reveal how this perspective extends such an analysis to the use of particular tongues. However, even though we borrow from TMS research, our argument should be read more broadly as a call to all organizational communication researchers, no matter their school of thought, to explore tongues in organizational contexts.

Our analysis further shows that sharing more of a common tongue is not the only way people deal with inter-linguistic contexts. TMS, when taking into account the insights of the plurilingual organizations literature, shows that, in an increasingly globalized world, the notion of plurilingualism becomes almost outdated, as the phenomenon is increasingly pervasive and as issues of mutual understanding cannot be reduced to the problem of sharing a tongue.

Plurilingual organizations are not special cases anymore (say, multinational businesses). Today, a variety of organizational settings involve the use of different tongues, but also different resources to constitute a common understanding. The boundary between plurilingual organizations and “normal” organizations are increasingly blurry.

More importantly, our study is an invitation for organizational communication researchers to be more reflexive regarding our relation to tongues. For example, our mother tongue and our tongue

of expertise is French, which has led us to prioritize fieldworks in contexts where that tongue is spoken. Others – probably a vast majority of organizational communication researchers – are native speakers of English and similarly tend to favor sites where they expect to find speakers of their tongue. Doing so is understandable but risks encouraging researchers to naturalize the use of their tongue and to overlook the role it plays in the situations they study. A remedy may be to diversify the sites we observe, but also to reflect on our personal relationship to tongues. For non-native speakers of English in organizational communication research, this reflection is done each time we write for English-language journals. In doing so, we contribute to the strong domination of English in academia (Nunan, 2003), but we also engage with interesting scholars from around the world, including other non-native speakers of English. For English speakers, writing academic papers in dominant journals may be easier, but this only means that reflexivity is all the more needed for them to avoid simple theorizing of tongues. The same applies, of course, to scholars in other language communities.

We can thus see that the Montreal School perspective, even though it does not typically pay attention to the matter of the tongue being spoken, can be mobilized to take into account some of the effects springing from the use of a particular tongue, by focusing on tongues-in-use. In particular, it allows us to reveal the situational dimension of common understanding, along with the role of extra-discursive elements, rather than reducing it to a matter of translation and shared vocabulary. However, there are other concerns that are less obviously addressed through a strict interaction analysis. The excerpt that we analyzed, for instance, was drawn from empirical contexts where many implicit and unspoken issues were at stake. We can surely argue that the use of English in Jordan, for instance, is not mere “neutral” conduits for conversation. English is the tongue of those who, for a time, ruled the territory that is now called Jordan. English is also

today's *lingua franca* in most international exchanges, just as French was not so long ago. However, we can assume that the main communication tongue of each interaction is neither the native tongue of most participants, nor is it their tongue of expertise (Rampton, 1990). Even if we assume that people are capable of semantically saying what they want, it is difficult, if at all possible, to observe the impact of using a second tongue on other aspects, such as confidence (Yu & Shen, 2012), humor (Davies, 2003) or others. Finally, and in relation to the notion of “natural” tongues, it could be interesting to study the particular dialect being used in these interactions: for instance, the workers in fact speak a Jordanian dialect of Arabic, which made it a struggle for us to find someone who could understand them; also, while they both speak French, the nurse is from France and the researcher is from Canada, which may have had an impact on their relationship. That being said, even when all participants might understand each other, power and colonial issues may be at play between users of different dialects or variations of the common tongue – or as the Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich's saying goes, “a language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”

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