Emerald Insight

Journal of Organizational Change Management
International business and the Balti of meaning: food for thought
Sid Lowe Astrid Kainzbauer Slawomir Jan Magala Maria Daskalaki

Article information:

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald
for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission
guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company
manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as
well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and
services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the
Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for
digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

International business and the Balti of meaning: food for thought

Sid Lowe

Faculty of Business and Management, University of Wollongong in Dubai, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Astrid Kainzbauer

College of Management, Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand

Slawomir J. Magala

Rotterdam School of Management Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and

Maria Daskalaki

School of Management, Kingston University, Kingston-Upon-Thames, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the interactive processes linking lived embodied experiences, language and cognition (body-talk-mind) and their implications for organizational change.
Design/methodology/approach – The authors use an "embodied realism" approach to examine how people feel/perceive/act (embodied experiences), how they make sense of their experiences (cognition) and how they use language and communication to "talk sense" into their social reality. To exemplify the framework, the authors use a cooking metaphor. In this metaphor, language is the "sauce", the catalyst, which blends raw, embodied, "lived" experience with consequent rationalizations ("cooking up") of experience. To demonstrate the approach, the authors employ the study of a Chinese multinational subsidiary in Bangkok, Thailand, where participants were encouraged to build embodied models and tell their stories through them.
Findings – The authors found that participants used embodied metaphors in a number of ways (positive and negative connotations) in different contexts (single or multicultural groups) for different purposes. Participants could be said to be "cooking up" realities according to the situated context. The methodology stimulated an uncovering of ineffable, tacit or sensitive issues that were problematic or potentially problematic within the organization.
Originality/value – The authors bring back the importance of lived embodied experiences, language and cognition into IB research. The authors suggest that embodied metaphors capture descriptions of reality that stimulate reflexivity, uncover suppressed organizational problems and promote the contestation of received wisdoms when organizational change is pressing and urgent. The authors see the approach as offering the potential to give voice to embodied cultures throughout the world and thereby make IB research more practically relevant.
Keywords Cooking, Thailand, Embodied realism, Metaphor
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In international business and communication research, various approaches to language map a conceptual territory ranging from objectivist to subjectivist approaches, traditions and fields of research (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Griffin, 2006; Janssens *et al.*, 2004). Within these territories, different assumptions have been formulated regarding epistemology, ontology, human nature and methodology. Our aim in this paper is to report from a trip beyond the epistemological boundaries (of objectivism vs

subjectivism) and on into a more hybrid and less explored area of the terrain. To achieve that we support that any lived experience of making life sensible is holistic, imaginative and embodied (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012). People feel/perceive/act (engage embodied experiences) before they make sense of their experiences (cognition) and use language and communication to "talk sense" into their social reality. In order to capture these different aspects holistically, research interpretations require matching embodied, imaginative and abductive processes which are sympathetic to the phenomena of lived experience under observation.

In human interaction, meaning is constructed through the intersection of experience and expression. The competent manager, artist or actor engages in skilful practice co-constituted by tools and artifacts as well as performances of her own being and from being with others (Sandberg and Pinnington, 2009). Hence, all experience is located in individuals but coloured with significance imposed by collective symbolic systems (Geertz, 1973). To accomplish understanding of this process, IB research, we propose, needs to understand the interactive processes between language/discourse, lived embodied experience and cognition. The blended approach that we advocate supports a move towards greater polyvalence and multi-disciplinarity through paradigm pluralism (Brannen and Doz, 2010), paradigm transcendence (Lowe *et al.*, 2007) and a paradigmatic peace initiative between methodologically distinct and warring research tribes in IB. The paradigmatic "peace premium" that this blended reconciliation promises involves achieving more practically relevant IB research through a more paradigmatically integrative approach (Corley and Gioia, 2011).

In order to bring an embodied pre-understanding into the IB research, we adopt a cooking metaphor, discussing IB language in a style not dissimilar to a cooking curry recipe. This recipe suggests that the cooking (sense-making) is dependent upon the flavouring function of the curry sauce (language or discourse – "sense-talking" or "talking sense") and the prior preparation of ingredients (embodied sensing). We combine these aspects in a triadic framework that suggests that sense is made interactively through combined body (sensing/acting), talk (sense-talking) and mind (sense-making), involving consciousness at all three levels of codification. In this schema, language – as an aspect of "sense-talking" – occupies a central and catalytic position in the middle, flavouring all other complexities of communicative phenomena. This triadic schema enables us to explore how cognitive re-arrangement of meaning (cooking/sense-making) is dependent upon the mediation of language/discourse (curry sauce flavouring) as well as the pre-arrangement of the embodied sensing (raw ingredients). Hence, following to a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective in IB and cross-cultural management, we propose that embodied approaches demand further polysemy, heterogeneity and an "ontic/ontological" expansion to account equally for the preparation of embodied ingredients (sensing), flavourings of language and the creation of meaning.

Figure 1 illustrates this triadic process, the "boiling up" of embodied ingredients (sensing or preparation; "Capta") and the flavouring provided by adding the spices of language and other aspects of discourse, rhetoric, conversational exchange ("Acta") which support the creation of meaning ("Data")[1].

This approach poses certain questions: How can lived, ontological experience of "foreignness" in intercultural interactions by IB managers be best understood through the flavoured medium of their language? How should we organize their subsequently cooked cognitive maps of this experience and the second order lenses or "additional flavouring" imposed by the academic discourse and "reheating" through prevailing
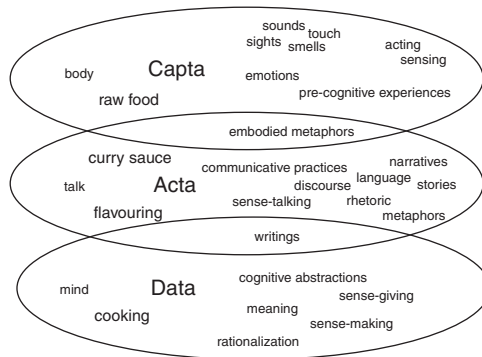
Figure 1.
Capta-Acta-Data

models that IB research operates with? The paper unfolds in three parts: first, the three levels, Capta, Acta and Data are presented and explained in the context of their contribution to our "reconciliation recipe". Then, we present our methodological approach, elaborating on the process of applying embodied approaches in IB research. After that, a case is presented and discussed stressing the ways in which the three levels are blended together through participants' use of embodied metaphors. The paper concludes emphasizing the role of language/discourse as a mediator between corporeal and cognitive engagements.

Cooking in international business research: towards a triadic framework
Preparation: the "embodied ingredients" (Capta)
Heidegger (1927/1996) was the first contemporary thinker to tackle the ontological question of being and the importance of pre-rational, "lived" experience to all subsequent descriptions of realities. He recognized that humans feel their situated experience before they articulate it or rationalize about it. This embodied understanding is largely inaccessible to thought or language but nevertheless critical, as along with thought and language, it constitutes "being-in-time" (*Dasein*) or the lived experience of the moment. Pre-articulated and pre-cognitive embodied experiences include feelings, emotions, intuitions and bodily sensations (sights, sounds, smells, touch and other "proxemics" reactions) as well as "ready to hand" instinctive practices. The fullness of this pre-objective, practically enacted, embodied world precedes all of our conceptual schemas (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and is inaccessible through a dualist subject-object epistemology. Within IB and most of social science, this "felt sense" of immediate, practical, corporeal perceptions and interactions has been somewhat masked, "excluded, marginalized or overlooked" (Styhre, 2004, p. 101).

One recent example of research which follows an embodied agenda includes Cunliffe and Coupland (2012) who demonstrated how lives, selves and experience are made "sensible" in embodied interpretations and interactions with others. Their methodological tactic is to track "plotlines" which trace lived experiences between embodied sensing and cognitive sense-making via narrative sense-making (which equates to what we have termed sense-talking). A similar embodied agenda is also followed by Buergi *et al.* (2005) who advocate a three-level theoretical schema, progressing from the physiological to the psychological and onto the social to explain how strategy is crafted as an embodied practice of recursive enactment. In pursuit of understanding sensing and sense-talking, embodied metaphors have also been

explored by Jacobs and Heracleous (2006) through the use of "collaboratively constructed physical anologues" (p. 207) to build models as physical metaphors to represent perceived situated group (often "silent" or ineffable) realities. Embodied metaphors, in this case, show the "ultimately local, contextual, and situated nature of metaphor rather than being based on assumptions of metaphorical generality and universality" (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2006, p. 211).

180

Cooking: making sense of cognitive data

Cognitive approaches (the "cooking" component) have been the dominant focus in IB and, particularly, cross-cultural management research. The "national cultural model", aimed mostly at categorizing difference cognition in terms of cultural differences using "discipline-based theories and quantitative, positivist methodologies" (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2011, p. 574). Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), Hofstede (1980, 2001), Schwartz (1992) and Trompenaars (1988) are all mainstream and influential cooking styles to the national cultural model or "cross-national comparison perspective" (Sackmann and Phillips, 2004). They mostly subscribe to functionalism as the dominant and "cherished" scientific paradigm (Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991). In Burrell and Morgan's (1979) terms, they adhere to "functionalism" through objectivist assumptions about epistemology, methodology, ontology and human nature. Their purpose in the main is to construct universal nomothetic theory using the legitimized "rigors" of positivism (Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991).

While cognition and abstraction have been the dominant focus in IB in the "cooking" process, such "ontic" approaches have missed the flavouring (Acta) of language and have largely ignored the importance of raw, embodied Capta. However, different cooking styles are now becoming acceptable. More recent symbolic interpretivist and phenomenological approaches also appear to have retained a cognitivist "cooking" focus, but language and discourse begin to appear as an important and more equalized influence. Brannen and Salk (2000) take a "cognitive" approach, which owes its primary influence to "mind" with secondary influence of identity and language. Strauss and Quinn (1997), by contrast, propose a model of culture based upon the assumption that cultural meanings are produced at the interaction (and intersection) of extra-personal and intra-personal ideas, and not all of them are directly translatable into linguistic expression. In a complementary sense-making approach, Osland and Bird (2000) suggest that in different contexts, actors use values in negotiation as one would use cards in a poker game. Such game-playing sense-making means that roles change according to different contexts, not least the actual "hands" being held as deduced by individuals and the abductive imaginations of what "hands" are being held by others. Lamb *et al.* (2011) provide a phenomenological alternative to prevailing positivist "cooking" in IB research. Their paper interrogates the variations in consciousness of small wine producers in Australia involved in internationalization. They show how phenomenological differences have behavioural outcomes and implications for success in international ventures.

At the more critical and postmodern end of the theoretical spectrum, influenced heavily by continental philosophy, language has been taken much more seriously. For example, Westwood's (2001) critical hermeneutic approach focuses upon the influence of language on culture as a principal concern of a culture-sensitive researcher in management. Here language is regarded as the explanatory, constitutive and dominant force that permits explanation of organizational processes as the successful enactment of power inequalities. Language and, in effect, discourse are ways

of ordering a disorderly ontological process; and culture, as a product of language, is an inventive ordering of created difference.

Language and communicative practices in IB research ("sense-talking" – Acta)
In our triadic framework, we can liken language to the rhizomatic roots of the turmeric plant in curry, as it is a main ingredient of sense-talking, discourse and communication. Undoubtedly, curry sauce is a concoction of blended spices. Accordingly, communicative practices are a "sense-talking" concoction of discourse (language, communication, information, power/knowledge) in blends of narratives, stories, metaphors and other tropes along with conversational styles and rules, rhetoric, semiotics and signification. "Sense-talking", therefore, operates at the narrative level of semantic meaning and as a concomitant of discursive Acta and semiotic connotations. Metaphors and narratives/stories are both "tropes of organizational communication" (Gabriel *et al.*, 2011, p. 367) and are complementary elements of "sense-talking" involving the imaginative social construction of ordered reality. An example of sense-talking is the identification of the self in comparative relation to others. For example, Korean communities' rituals of sense-talking involve formalities of address and deference depending upon the age and status of the communicating parties. Indirect exchange of meaning through analogical reasoning in this community is heavily influenced by the hierarchical character of acceptable sense-talking of addressing others that determines where, when and what can be said.

Hence, meaning is a collective accomplishment of traded images and generated truths negotiated as politically viable within a speech community. Words are defined by other words and meanings are conveyed indirectly through other meanings. The main vehicles for the accomplishment of this inter-textuality are metaphors. An example is in the ubiquitous use of body metaphors and corporeal tropes in Thai analogical reasoning. The affective and emotional (embodied) priority of Thai culture emphasizes the "heart" over the rational "head" in Thai language. Just as there are allegedly more than a hundred words for snow in Eskimo and Inuit languages, there are ubiquitous references to the "heart" in Thai discourse, the heart is used ubiquitously as a metaphor. For example, "*Khow jai*" is often taken as "to understand" but literally means to "enter the heart". In the non-Cartesian Thai life-world, embodied tropes are pervasive. Concrete bodily sensual impressions are preferred to abstractions, so, for example in Thai language, a diabetic articulates his or her condition as *Bao-waan* or "sweet pee"; an embodied metaphor expressing an abstract condition through a corporeal experience. Another example is when going to a meeting where criticism is expected, some young Thais in Bangkok use the term *Hong Yen* which translates as "cold room". Others in the same situation would use the term *Kuen Kiang* which literally translates as "to be put on a chopping block". In harmony-oriented Thai culture, disagreement is often masked by friendly words, as evident in the embodied Thai idiom *Bpaak-bpraa-sai..nam-jai-chuerd-kor* which literally means "friendly mouth but the heart wants to cut your throat". Linked to this is *Bpaak-waa-dtaa-ka-yib* which literally means "mouth chatting but the eye blinks" and *Bpaak-waan-gon-bpriaw* which literally means "sweet mouth […] sour bottom".

Therefore, if metaphors provide the territory of web-like analogical meaning, narratives and stories provide a means to navigate this territory. Boje (1995, 2001, 2008), Gabriel (2002, 2004) and Czarniawska (2002, 2004, 2006) provide the methodological resources for exploring such a dynamic, inventive complexity of narrative, storytelling and sense-talking. For example, narratives and stories of the

past are often re-told to accommodate present stories and/or changes in narratives and stories of the future. When, for example, an "atmosphere" changes between international business partners then the past, present and future narratives of the relationship and the identities involved will be re-formulated. In such a transformative tale, past heroes can soon become present villains, past successes can be re-told as "false dawns" and future prospects for the relationship can be downgraded through plots of relationship ending. Most of the narrative theorists already mentioned have a way to deal with this constant re-invention and re-telling of identities and other constructed realities over time. Gersten and Søderberg (2011) explore, through narrative inquiry of the storied exchanges between two managers, such dynamic sense-talking and negotiation of polyvalent knowledge, cognitions, values and actions within a Chinese subsidiary of a European MNC. Thus, as a principal aspect of sense-talking, narratives and stories are the principal vehicle for sense-giving/sense-making because they, in terms expressed by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1995), can facilitate the questioning of obsolete interpretive schema and the signalled legitimation of a newly approved schema and the framed consequences for changes in action and practice. In their web-like totality, narratives and stories of past, present and future are "panrelational" networks of mutual fictions.

The lived experience within a Chinese multinational: an "embodied" case approach
Epistemological flavourings
Hermeneutic phenomenology and embodied realism appear to prefer to draw upon interpretive case methods (Stake, 1995). Hermeneutic phenomenology requires the researcher to recognize the dilemma that she does not have direct access to the lived embodied experience of the interlocutor but she must find a way of accessing this critically important ontological view by some means. She is charged with understanding how the actors felt in a situation through their memories of it as expressed in mediation through their articulated discourses and manifested in their rationalizations. Welch *et al.* (2011) distinguish between case approaches that vary (as strong/weak) in terms of their focus upon contextualization and explanation. Embodied cases can be regarded as a hybrid form between interpretive sense-making cases and contextualized explanation cases in that they seek "explanation" in terms of causal embodiment and posit contingent, limited theoretical generalizations as identified by Welch *et al.* (2011). An embodied case approach assumes that explanation of social phenomena is both causal and interpretive and does not support dualistic differentiation between structure and agency. Embodied realism assumes that causation also lies in empirically accessible sensory perceptions, feelings and emotions, tacit "gut reactions" and holistic intuitions. Interpretations and abstractions, semiotics, discourses and cognitive schema are assumed to happen subsequent to embodied experiences. As a result, combinations of objectivist and subjectivist paradigms are necessary in order to benefit from the synergies of combining embodied causes and interpretive understanding.

This facilitates case analysis between subsidiaries, countries and cultures and is, we would argue, highly appropriate for the examination of discourse within MNC organizations. Building upon Brannen's (2004) semiotic notions of re-contextualization, we add phenomenological and embodied components. We propose that transformations in semiosis as a consequence of cross-cultural transfer have accompanying morphologies in three domains; namely embodied, discursive and

cognitive experience. This complementarity lends itself to an "up-close and grounded" (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2011, p. 575) qualitative methodology, sensitive to tacit and contextual knowledge within MNC organizations and avoiding the "blunt instruments" of generalized, conceptual abstractions. Its main addition is in encompassing emotions, immediate perceptions and other embodied sensory influences as a primal trigger for experience and consciousness, which combined with expression, produces meanings, knowledge and realities.

Methodology and the research process
In our empirical study, we opened a "window" (Czarniawska, 1997) on the role of language and discourse in IB and studied a case of how employees in a Chinese MNC in Thailand ("Zhuóyuè", a pseudonym for a leading information and communications technology solutions provider in over 100 countries worldwide) cooked their concerns and tensions through embodied representations of their employment relationship. Privately owned, the company has been very successful in its international expansion strategy, however, the company follows a rather ethnocentric HR policy and key positions worldwide are solely entrusted to home country nationals. The methodology applied "analogically mediated inquiry" (Barry, 1994), through the use of "embodied metaphors". This involves using "physical analogues" (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2006, p. 207) that participants can make, handle, move and engage with interactively to construct shared spatial understandings through storytelling. We used Lego bricks as our "physical analogues" and began with a pilot study and then extended the methodology with an in-company empirical study.

The pilot research participants were a group of five (two Zhuóyuè employees and three employees of stakeholder organizations of Zhuóyuè). All of the participants were Thai postgraduate students who, as a group had been to visit Zhuóyuè and had interviewed managers and other employees within the company (with the purpose of working together on a consultancy project aimed at discovering reported reasons for problems with staff motivation and satisfaction). The Lego models they built together represented their embodied perceptions about Zhuóyuè after these interviews and the group returned to discuss their Lego models with their Zhuóyuè interviewees who participated along with them in the project. The main study was subsequently conducted with eight Zhuóyuè employees (two Chinese and six Thais) in the Zhuóyuè Thailand Headquarters in Bangkok.

The pilot study mainly served to test the methodology, i.e. to see if using Lego to embody emotions would work well within a Thai context. Our assumption was that Thais as members of an embodied culture would have a preference for an embodied rather than a cognitive approach to expressing their emotions. The overwhelmingly positive feedback and results from the pilot study confirmed that the methodology seemed to be highly appropriate and we then applied the same approach during the main study at Zhuóyuè. During both the pilot and the main study, participants were asked to use their imagination to collaboratively construct physical representations of their experiences in "Zhuóyuè" Thailand using Lego bricks. Possible tropes that participants might consider using were suggested (as summarized in the list below) but it was emphasized that this list was not exhaustive. Individuals then narrated their interpretation of their own model with colleagues (through storytelling) and answered questions related to the model (reflective conversation – encouraged by the moderators or by other group members).

184

Tropes and some possible contexts of use:

(1) Metaphors – body, senses and mind, dancing, drama and movies/cinema, courtship, marriage and family, sport, magic, art/pictures, literature and music /jazz, animals, cooking /food, time, travel and journey, places and spaces, morgan's organizational metaphors (machines, organisms, cultures, etc.).

(2) Synecdoche/metonymy – part/whole analogies.

(3) Irony – comedy/jokes/counter-rationality.

In the second stage, group members combined individual models to form a combined view of the perceived problem/create a vision of a desired future. At this point the group spent some time on building a model and discussing their consolidated understanding of the perceived image (issue framing). In the third stage, the groups negotiated a consolidated understanding of the organizational issue. Finally, they were asked to theorize and make rationalizations about what they had learned about themselves and their organization from the exercise. In both the pilot study and the main study, participants chose to use English as the language for explaining their models but the locals often spoke in Thai among each other and for group discussions. We used two moderators and a Thai interpreter for each of the studies.

The development of our participants' embodied perceptions into articulated reasoning resembled the movement of a "yo-yo" which is held in the palm of the hand and the string is connected to a finger (see Figure 2).

To use the toy, you must release it so that it extends out and then when it retracts, you must catch it and begin the process again. Similarly the "preparation" of embodied metaphors through the building of physical analogies, the "flavouring" of narrative and stories and the "cooking" of abstract reasoning were stimulated in an iterative, "yo-yo" process. In this circular and iterative sequence, the method began with (1) and proceeded through the sequence to (4) as in the following list.

Methodological sequence:

(1) Pre-configuration – select location, questions, polytropal mix and interlocutors.

(2) Event configuration – develop critical incidents.

(3) Configuration/emplotment – combine critical incidents, tropes and narratives to encourage reflective judgement.

(4) Reconfiguration – evaluate/reflect/review/return to (1).

During the first stage, related to what we earlier called Capta, participants were asked individually to use Lego bricks to represent their embodied experiences in the company. Several questions guided the Capta stage. The first question was intended as a warm-up exercise to familiarize participants with the method. "I feel my company is like […]" encouraged participants to build their perceived images of the company. The
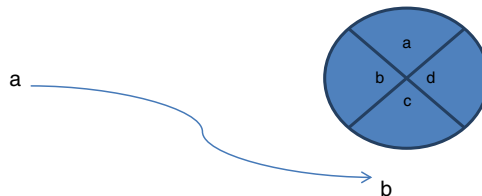
Figure 2.
Outline of the method

second and third question focused on participants' perceptions of strengths and problems in the company. This exercise encouraged participants to surface otherwise subconscious or ineffable understanding of corporate issues. The timeframe for all tasks was kept deliberately short in order to encourage participants to visualize their intuitive understanding of the organization (without too much cognitive rationalization taking place at the initial stage). The process is accounted for by *mimesis* (Ricoeur, 1984): the creative, dialogical evolution of both similarity and differences of meaning or the evolution of the paradox of meaning. Just as with using a "yo-yo", the methodological sequence involves iterative practice involving release, extension and retraction. The idea is to improve the outcome with each successive process through skills development and acquisition of the paradoxical wisdom in finding poetic "truths within fictions" through experience. The data (involving language, pictures and observational notes) was, therefore, continuously interpreted in situ and within the sequence by the researchers in collaborative feedback with the participants.

Findings
Participants used a variety of metaphors to represent their image of the company. These metaphors were predominantly favourable and included journey metaphors such as an airplane which gets them to their destination, an international career, several fixed, architectural metaphors like a house surrounded by blue and grey sky: this grey sky represents troubles people experience at work; another was a fortress: "running a company is like being in a war, fighting, situation changes constantly, there are many battles to win, a factory - everybody has to work hard and finish the work on time"; and a bridge (technology serves as a bridge to connect people), the ocean (the company provides a connection between all continents).

When asked to identify perceived strengths of the company, the tropes included mostly spatial metaphors such as a map (the company provides opportunities for employees to travel around the world); a labyrinth (see Plate 1) representing the work processes where employees sometimes feel stuck and need help from different departments to find their way out (also referring to communication difficulties). Other metaphors were more anthropocentric – human figures represented "the strength of the company [...] its hardworking employees". Also animal figures were constructed,

Plate 1.
Labyrinth

like a giraffe – symbolic for reaching higher up, being ambitious and a tiger – a symbol for power, hunting for new talent.

The metaphors representing "problem areas" in the company included a car with trailer (representing different departments of the company): different departments sometimes drove in different directions and because of that the momentum is lost. Other metaphors included a computer representing the "stupid IT platform" which does not meet the requirements of its users.

In the narration stage of the facilitated exploration (during "cooking"/sense-making), participants were asked to share narrative interpretations of the physical metaphors they had built. The common theme among the participants seemed to be the concept of "pressure". Pressure in the company was perceived to be coming from very strict HQ regulations with no leeway for local adaption, and from the Chinese dominance at the managerial level. In the course of the reflective conversation (based on individual participants' narration and probing questions from the moderator), our pilot study participants linked the perceived pressure to Chinese – Thai cultural differences. They perceived the Chinese culture as more ambitious, more competitive, more willing to work under pressure, systematic and punctual. Wasting of time was perceived as a waste of money by the company. On the other hand the Thais narrated themselves as more easy-going, flexible, tolerant and fun loving, and less willing to work under (too much) pressure. Even though "Zhuóyuè" in general was perceived to have a good image and represented an attractive employer in Thailand, Thai employees felt dissatisfied with the intense work pace and the Chinese dominance at the top management levels. This was interpreted as mistrust for other cultures and lack of confidence in local employees' abilities.

Our participants mentioned several examples of critical incidents in the workplace to support these claims. One issue related to holiday regulations. Even though the company claims to allow 24 days of annual holidays, in reality employees often were not allowed to take holidays because their presence was required due to the pressure in business. Another example was the use of complicated IT systems required by "Zhuóyuè" HQ, which were perceived as not user-friendly and led to duplication of work and frustration among local employees in Thailand who were not allowed to suggest changes to the system due to HQ dominance. Participants also mentioned that they perceived the Chinese managers to lack cultural empathy and they resented the imposition of Chinese rules on the Thai subsidiary of "Zhuóyuè". The "pressure" element became obvious in several of the metaphors used: the "leaves on the tree turning yellow and brown and dying under pressure", the strict and inflexible Chinese rules, regulations and way of thinking portrayed as a "yellow wall" and the "Chinese flag" as a metaphor for Chinese thinking which symbolically dominates the company. During the main study, most aspects of the pilot study reflection were confirmed among both Thai and Chinese participants, particularly the pressure from headquarters, the inflexible and complicated IT system and the problems due to cultural differences and miscommunication. However, from the group discussions among the Thais in Thai language, we gathered that the Thais were quite impressed with the Chinese sense of pride in the company and subsequently avoided openly discussing any conflictual issues and tropes in an attempt to maintain group harmony and avoid issues of loss of face between Thais and Chinese.

In the third stage of the investigation, our participants used their consolidated understanding of the situation to develop possible solutions. Based on the previous discussions, a number of suggestions for improvement were developed. In our Thai

pilot study participants felt that "Zhuóyuè" should introduce "cultural empathy" as one of the selection criteria for Chinese expat managers and provide them with cross-cultural training for their host country assignment. Additionally, local Thai managers should also be given an opportunity to be promoted to top management within local subsidiaries in order to improve motivation and career prospects and to reduce staff turnover. Moreover our Thai participants felt that the Chinese top management should be more receptive to local employees' suggestions and show more flexibility in adapting to host country needs and requirements. This would include a careful consideration of HQ rules and regulations and their local applicability in Thailand. In metaphorical terms, our participants spoke about "slowly breaking down the yellow wall or making it more flexible".

Finally, participants discussed a vision of the future: "We would like our company to be like […]". One of the metaphors derived from this exercise was a racing car with a heart as its engine (see Plate 2). In the discussion of this vision, participants explained that they see the employees as the heart, the engine of the company.

This model confirmed what our pilot study participants had expressed more openly, i.e. the company should recognize the value of its employees and carefully respond to their emotional needs.

Discussion

It was intriguing to observe that the Lego method proved to be equally stimulating to "Imagineering" in both the pilot study and the main study. One of the differences we noticed between Thai and Chinese "Zhuóyuè" employees was that the Thais seemed to be more inclined towards anthropomorphic, communal, organismic and relational metaphors (such as school, home, tiger, giraffe) and the Chinese engineers used more mechanistic metaphors (car, airplane, train). During the discussions in the process of building the future company model (how they would like the company to be), we also confirmed the Chinese tendency towards mechanistic metaphors (the racing car) and the Thai tendency towards embodied metaphors (a heart as engine). Thai culture being a more embodied culture also inspired a greater use of embodied metaphors (this was also noticeable when Thai participants spoke in Thai to each other, e.g. the Thai expression "pood kwam nai jai" literally means "speak from your heart" = express what you really feel).

Another difference we observed between the pilot study and the main study was in the use of criticism. In the pilot study where participants were Thais only, the group
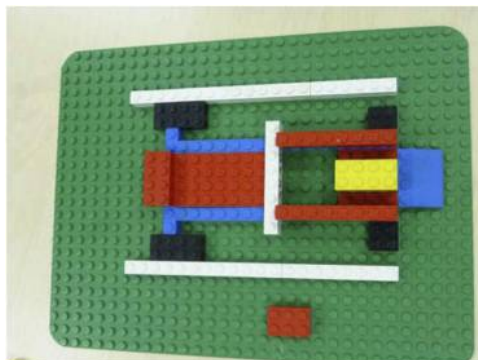
Plate 2.
Racing car with heart
as an engine

expressed open criticism towards the Chinese company through metaphors such as a yellow fortress (see Plate 3). The participant's narration elaborated on the rigid walls, which represent the Chinese top management's way of thinking. Even though the company claims to be international, they only promote Chinese nationals for top management positions and Thai employees feel they are trapped inside the Chinese wall (Chinese thinking and advancement).

Another Thai participant built a model of the Chinese flag, to represent the Chinese domination of the company top management and corporate rules. In her narration, the Chinese flag symbolized China as a big country with a huge population where people compete against each other to survive. As a consequence, she narrated that the company does not care much about individual employees and they do not seem to mind a high staff turnover rate. In the main study with two Chinese managers in the group, the Thai frustration with the company was expressed as well, but in a more indirect way. One Thai employee built a labyrinth or maze to express her confusion with corporate rules and regulations: "It helps to show some **hidden** problems and solutions which cannot be **seen** by using normal way like normal meeting and discussion" (Participant 2).

Another Thai employee built a gun with an unaligned sight and explained that Chinese top management aims the gun to hit the target (i.e. gives orders to reach the goal), but said that they do not understand the local situation in Thailand and therefore do not aim in the right direction. In their interpretations participants embodied their perceptions of the organization and its problems through the use of physical and embodied metaphors: "Lego created metaphors for real business issues which helped us to **visualize** certain situations" (Participant 3). Another participant commented: "I was actually surprised by how many different thoughts, ideas, emotions and feelings **came to my mind** when **constructing**" (Participant 4).

Furthermore our study showed how participants linguistically explored the metaphors via stories and incidents and reached a cognitive understanding through collective narratives in an iterative process (blending of the three spheres of preparation, flavouring and cooking):

When you have something as an item in your **hand** which is not only a sentence or a short paragraph, it helps to be able to explain **deeper** and more complex thoughts when you describe what you did to the others (Participant 5).
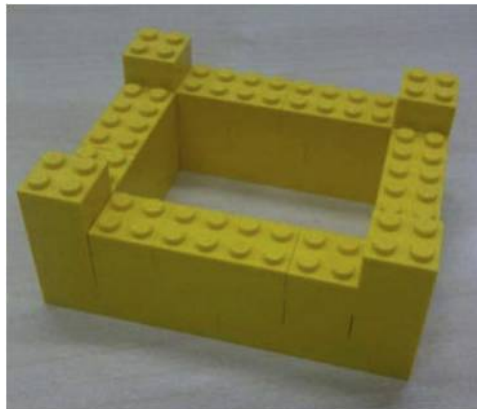
Plate 3.
Yellow fortress

All of these comments use the communicative flavouring of metaphors of space/travel (came to my mind, root causes, hidden, deeper, shake out, go along) and embodied metaphors (visualize, hand, see, speak out) connecting the preparation of perception with the "cooking up" (constructing) of attempted rationalizations:

> The workshop has helped our team to further understand the problems and the original cause of the problems inside the organization. In addition, the workshop also helped us to **shake out team members' understanding** and provide them more opportunity to **speak out the way they see** the problem and provide recommendations to solve the problem as we **go along** (Participant 6).

Within discourse, the analogical reasoning enabled through the many tropes used (particularly the embodied metaphors) is the key flavouring of the sauce of meaning making. The tropes all appear to bridge the gap between body and mind. In the main study, female Thai employees were more inclined to use more relational and organic metaphors; the male Thai employee used mainly military metaphors and the Chinese male employees (both with an engineering background) used predominantly mechanistic metaphors. From this we propose that the curry mix in any meaning process may have gender, occupational, identity and cultural flavours in the blend. Thai "cooks" make something hot and tasty out of raw food, just as our participants have made something regarded as sensible out of raw experience:

> It's a creative way not only to help us open our minds to see the problem from a different perspective but also enable us to **see and listen** to others' ideas more carefully as it comes with their detailed explanation and rationale. Thus it created an opportunity for further discussion that finally led to a **deeper** understanding of the complicated situation and a better analysis of the problem, **the root causes**, and the most appropriate solution (Participant 7).

The lived experience of employees of the Chinese MNC in Bangkok was characterized by the interaction between their ineffable embodied perceptions, their cultural cognitive schemas and the flavouring effect of language and discourse. Language from this perspective has complex functions but a central role is the mediating (sauce) in the cooking of rationalizations from raw experience. For example, the metaphor of a labyrinth generated through Lego modelling represented, from our interpretation, an attempt to provide a coherent description of embodied confusion within a foreign company. The labyrinth therefore appeared as an attempt to articulate ineffable feelings or an ontic representation of embodied ontological realities, which defy fully coherent reasoning or cogent narrative: "labyrinths form an indelible part of our experience and our culture, a way of understanding ambiguity, complexity, detours and delays as well as deep-felt wisdom and the thrill of serendipitous discovery" (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2014, p. 13).

Conclusions and implications

We proposed that embodied cognition/embodied realism greatly enhance our understanding of how language affects international business and MNC activities. Our view of language and discourse is that it is like a thick liquid medium that flavours experience in the blended and improvizational processes of meaning making. Embodied approaches emphasize the role of language as a mediator between corporeal and cognitive engagement. In this view, language is a kind of catalyst for meaning that translates both embodied sensing and sense-making cognitions as a framing device enabling "sense-talking" or "talking sense". The process is always imperfect, ongoing and unfinished because ineffable embodied experience can never be fully "translated"

into reason. As the researcher is present, she is a part (in some way, intimately or more at a distance) of this complex, subjective process and if she thinks she can observe it objectively and from the outside, she is fooling herself.

Application of any paradigmatic position is a preferred application of one particular meaning system reflecting a particular subjective worldview. We support the argument that much of the language and encoded knowledge used in MNC discourse is characterized by disembodied, de-contextualized and technocratic emphasis upon rational cognition and is largely taken for granted despite its role in shaping strategic decisions within MNC's (Brannen and Doz, 2012). The "corporate speak" of MNC decision making derives from a western heritage of Cartesian-inspired episteme of scientific rationalism that privileges "mind over body" and reason over sensibilities. This power/knowledge episteme is not globally relevant or impartial because it derives from particular western cultures, histories, philosophies and ideologies. Embodied views offer a potential counterbalance to any "lack of critical discourse on the implications of IB activity for those stakeholders who might be considered as marginalised or excluded" (Cairns and Roberts, 2011, p. 290), and a response to the critique that international management research has involved "a continuous disavowal of epistemic reflexivity and a critical trajectory for theory development" (Jack *et al.*, 2008, p. 870).

In terms of practical applications of our research, embodied metaphors seem to have had beneficial effects for addressing issues of consequence to participants as well as enabling "politically contentious issues to arise and be decoded and debated, foster creative thinking, and facilitate organizational change by being occasions for collective sense-making where important issues can be surfaced and debated" (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2006, p. 208). Our approach encouraged the "ontic" elaboration of narrative and discursive "flavouring" and the cooking up of cognitive abstractions and rationalizations, as participants were advised to build embodied models and tell a story about them. Such approaches therefore offer the potential to "give voice" to the sentiments of more embodied cultures throughout the world. Hermeneutic phenomenology, communicology and embodied realism offer a prospect of emancipation for more indigenously relevant non-Cartesian methods (Tsui, 2004; Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2011) and, therefore, the prospect of a more geocentric or "ambicultural" (Chen and Miller, 2010) approach that attempts to avoid any western ethnocentrism carried by dominant, rationalized disembodied discourses.

Note

1. Recipes', of course, do not guarantee successful dishes because good cooking requires practice and the acquisition and application of skills. Our recipe – which employs contemporary approaches like Embodied Realism or Embodied Cognition (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999) – is only a start in a longer process of our advocacy of "hermeneutic phenomenology" in IB research (sometimes termed "communicology"; Lanigan, 1988, 1992).

References

Barry, D. (1994), "Making the invisible visible: using analogically-based methods to surface unconscious organizational processes", *Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 12 No. 4, pp. 37-47.

Birkinshaw, J., Brannen, M.-J. and Tung, R.L. (2011), "From a distance and generalizable to up close and grounded: reclaiming a place for qualitative methods in international business research", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 5, pp. 573-581.

Boje, D. (2001), *Narrative Methods for Organizational and Communication Research*, Sage, London.

Boje, D.M. (1995), "Stories of the storytelling organization: a postmodern analysis of disney as 'Tamara-land' ", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 38 No. 4, pp. 997-1035.

Boje, D.M. (2008), *Storytelling Organizations*, Sage, London.

Boyacigiller, N.A. and Adler, N.J. (1991), "The parochial dinosaur: organizational science in a global context", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 262-290.

Brannen, M.-Y. (2004), "When mickey loses face: recontextualization, semantic fit, and the semiotics of foreignness", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 29 No. 4, pp. 593-616.

Brannen, M.Y. and Doz, Y.L. (2010), "From a distance and detached to up close and personal: bridging strategic and cross-cultural perspectives in international management research and practice", *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 236-247.

Brannen, M.Y. and Doz, Y. (2012), "The languages of strategic agility: trapped in your jargon or lost in translation?", *California Management Review*, Vol. 54 No. 3, pp. 77-97.

Brannen, M.Y. and Salk, J.E. (2000), "Partnering across borders: negotiating organizational culture in a German-Japanese joint venture", *Human Relations*, Vol. 53 No. 4, pp. 451-487.

Buergi, P., Jacobs, C.D. and Roos, J. (2005), "From metaphor to practice: in the crafting of strategy", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 78-94.

Burrell, G. and Morgan, G. (1979), *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis*, Heineman, London.

Cairns, G. and Roberts, J. (2011), "Reflections on seven years of critical perspectives on international business: an extended editorial", *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp. 289-296.

Chen, M.-J. and Miller, M. (2010), "West meets East: towards an ambicultural approach to management", *Academy of Management Perspectives*, November, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 17-24.

Corley, K.G. and Gioia, D.A. (2011), "Building theory about theory building: what constitutes a theoretical contribution?", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 12-32.

Cunliffe, A. and Coupland, C. (2012), "From hero to villain to hero: making experience sensible through embodied narrative sensemaking", *Human Relations*, Vol. 65 No. 1, pp. 63-88.

Czarniawska, B. (1997), *Narrating the Organization: Dramas of Institutional Identity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL and London.

Czarniawska, B. (2002), "Narrative, interviews, and organizations", in Gubrium, J.F. and James, A. (Eds), *Handbook of Interview Research*, Sage Publications, Holstein, pp. 733-749.

Czarniawska, B. (2004), "On time, space, and action nets", *Organization*, Vol. 11 No. 6, pp. 773-791.

Czarniawska, B. (2006), "A golden braid: allport, goffman, weick", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 27 No. 11, pp. 1661-1674.

Gabriel, Y. (2002), "On paragrammatic uses of organization theory: a provocation", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 133-151.

Gabriel, Y. (2004), "Narratives, stories and texts", in Grant, D., Hardy, C., Oswick, C. and Putnam, L. (Eds), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*, Sage, London, pp. 61-77.

Gabriel, Y., Geiger, D. and Letiche, H. (2011), "The marriage of story and metaphor", *Culture and Organization*, Vol. 17 No. 5, pp. 367-371.

Geertz, C. (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, NY.

Gersten, M.C. and Søderberg, A.-M. (2011), "Intercultural collaboration stories: on narrative inquiry and analysis as tools for research in international business", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vols 4/6 No. 30.8, pp. 787-805.

Gioia, G.A.C. and Chittipeddi, K. (1995), "Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation", *Strategic Management Journal*, November/December,Vol. 12, pp. 443-448.

Griffin, E.A. (2006), *A First Look at Communication Theory*, McGraw-Hill, Boston, MA.

Heidegger, M. (1927/1996), *Being and Time*, (Trans by J. Stambaugh), SCM Press, New York, NY.

Hofstede, G. (1980), *Culture's Consequences* (unabridged), Sage, London.

Hofstede, G. (2001), *Culture's Consequences*, Sage, London.

Jack, G.A., Calás, M.B., Nkomo, S.M. and Peltonen, T. (2008), "Critique and international management: an uneasy relationship", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 33 No. 4, pp. 870-884.

Jacobs, C.D. and Heracleous, L.T. (2006), "Constructing shared understanding. The role of embodied metaphors in organizational development", *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 207-226.

Janssens, M., Lambert, J. and Steyaert, C. (2004), "Developing language strategies for international companies: the contribution of translation studies", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 39 No. 4, pp. 414-430.

Kluckhohn, F.R. and Strodtbeck, F.L. (1961), *Variations in Value Orientations*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT.

Kociatkiewicz, J. and Kostera, M. (2014), "Into the labyrinth: tales of organizational nomadism", *Organization Studies*, 15 September, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 55-71.

Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1999), *Philosophy in the Flesh; The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Philosophy*, Basic Books, New York City, NY.

Lamb, P., Sandberg, J. and Liesch, P.W. (2011), "Small firm internationalization unveiled through phenomenography", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 5, pp. 672-693.

Lanigan, R.L. (1988), *Phenomenology of Communication: Merleau-Ponty's Thematics in Semiology and Communicology*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, PA.

Lanigan, R.L. (1992), *The Human Science of Communicology: The Phenomenology of Discourse in Foucault and Merleau-Ponty*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, PA.

Lowe, S., Carr, A. and Moore, F. (2007), "Paradigmapping studies of culture and organization", *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 237-250.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962), *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London.

Osland, J.S. and Bird, A. (2000), "Beyond sophisticated stereotyping: cultural sensemaking in context", *Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 65-79.

Ricoeur, P. (1984), *Time and narrative*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Vol. 1.

Sackmann, S.A. and Phillips, M.E. (2004), "Contextual influences on culture research: shifting assumptions for new workplace realities", *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 370-390.

Sandberg, J. and Pinnington, A.H. (2009), "Professional competence as ways of being: an existential ontological perspective", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 46 No. 7, pp. 1138-1170.

Schwartz, S.H. (1992), "Universals in the content and structure of values: theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 25 No. 25, pp. 1-65.

Stake, R.E. (1995), *The Art of Case Study Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Strauss, C. and Quinn, N. (1997), *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.

Styhre, A. (2004), "The (re)embodied organization: four perspectives on the body in organizations", *Human Resource Development International*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 101-116.

Trompenaars, F. (1988), *Riding the Waves of Culture*, The Economist Books, London.

Tsui, A.S. (2004), "Contributing to global management knowledge: a case for high quality indigenous research", *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, Vol. 21 No. 4, pp. 491-513.

Welch, C., Piekkari, R., Plakoyannaki, E. and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, E. (2011), "Theorising from case studies: towards a pluralistic future for international business research", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 5, pp. 740-762.

Westwood, R.L. (2001), "Appropriating the 'other' in the discourses of comparative management", in Westwood, R.L. and Linstead, S. (Eds), *The Language of Organization*, Sage, London, pp. 241-282.

Further reading

Westwood, R.L. and Linstead, S. (2001), "Language/organization: introduction", in Westwood, R.L. and Linstead, S. (Eds), *The Language of Organization*, Sage, London, pp. 1-19.

About the authors

Dr Sid Lowe is an Associate Professor at the University of Wollongong in Dubai. He is researching and publishing in areas of B2B networks, culture and language, identity and image. His work has been published in marketing and management journals, including *Organization Studies*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Marketing Theory*, *International Small Business Journal* and *Scandinavian Journal of Management*. Dr Sid Lowe is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: drsidlowe@yahoo.co.uk

Astrid Kainzbauer is an Assistant Dean of International Relations at the College of Management, Mahidol University in Bangkok, Thailand. She teaches in the areas of cross-cultural management, organizational behaviour and international business management. Her research focuses on cross-cultural aspects of teaching, training and learning, trust in manager-subordinate relationships, and various aspects of Asian management research.

Slawomir J. Magala is a Professor of Cross-Cultural Management at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University. He has been involved in global consulting and training experiences in post-communist and pre-capitalist countries. He has published extensively, including "Cross cultural competence" (Routledge, 2005; Polish translation, 2011), "Social life of values. Cross-cultural construction of realities" (in Barry, D. and Hansen, H. (Eds), Sage *Handbook of New and Emerging Theories in Management and Organization*, 2008), "The management of meaning in organizations" (Palgrave, 2009), "Ethical control and cultural change. In cultural dreams begin organizational responsibilities" (*Journal of Public Affairs*, Vol. 10 No. 3, 2010). His early political sociology book – *Class Struggle in Classless Poland* (South End Press, Boston 1982) had been recently translated and published in Polish by the European Center of Solidarity (Gdansk, 2012). His paper from a Barcelona conference on rhetoric and narrative methods in management, "The rhetoric of manageable democracies" had been selected for the US based *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*.

Dr Maria Daskalaki is an Associate Professor at the Kingston Management School, Kingston University. She graduated with a BA in Psychology and an MA from the Lancaster University in Organizational Analysis and Behaviour. She then completed her PhD in Organization Studies at the Royal Holloway, University of London. She is currently involved in interdisciplinary research on a wide range of themes and subject areas including solidarity economy, alternative forms of organizing as well as autobiographical narratives, discourse and identity. She has published in various peer-reviewed journals including *Organization Studies*, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, and *Culture and Organisation*.