How is belonging to an international virtual team co-created interactionally?

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In a globalized world where teams collaborate across borders, time zones and cultures, the issue of “belonging” becomes central. In international organizations project teams are increasingly used to handle temporary, complicated tasks. Due to the demands for specific skills and low cost, these teams can have complex collaborative structures; often they are constituted by internal local and remote team members as well as third party vendor teams. They navigate in complex social settings where the borders of the global team are fluid and where the work and context changes continuously. These teams are highly impacted by temporality, by multilingualism, and by time/space divisions.

Previous research within organizational studies into temporary organizations (Packendorff, 1994, 1995) and virtual/remote teams (Bell and Kozlowski, 2002) have shown that temporality and globalization are highly impacting the way work is planned and performed and how multinational team members collaborate. From another perspective the notion of transient multilingual communities has recently been examined by Mortensen (Mortensen, 2013, 2014) who shows that institutional language choices are constructed by practice. Ethnomethodological studies have shown how practitioners through categorization work position others as belonging to specific groups (Sacks 1972a, 1972b) and discourse analytic and conversational analytical studies have examined how different group and organizational identities are performed.

Studies related to the topic of belonging have shown how leaders position themselves as belonging to a team or situation and how leadership is enacted on the micro-level of institutional interactions such as meetings and performance appraisal interviews (Nielsen 2009; Van de Mieroop and Schnurr 2014). Graf has studied how coaches create, negotiate and establish their professional identity by means on local social actions (2011). And Schnurr and Zayts have shown how a newly promoted team leader accomplishes becoming a leader of a team through interacting with the members, and how being a leader is interactionally co-constructed (2011). Despite the gabs between fields, the practice and discursive turns (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Schatzki, Knorr, and von Savigny 2001) within organizational studies have made it pressingly relevant for linguistic and organizational scholars to draw on each other’s findings.

In this paper we investigate how teams who are impacted by conditions such as temporality, globalization and multilingualism orient towards “belonging to the team”, how they interactionally constitute their belongingness and how they construct teams as identifiable entities. Specifically, we will explore the interactions between project team members and examine their micro-discursive behaviour in daily project meetings. We show that the team members orient towards and categorize people as belonging or not belonging to the team, but also as peripherally belonging. It is not a binary relation.
We show that teams through routine activities repeatedly constitute the boundaries of the team and continuously (re-)confirm membership. By means of active category work and knowledge display, as well as orientation towards tasks and collaboration, the team members show “belonging” to the project and position themselves as “team members”. Finally, we will discuss the complexities of belonging in multilingual, global teams.

The data for this study is part of a large collection of ethnographic data and video recordings of authentic institutional interaction in a range of organizational settings, collected in 2013-2015. The data was inductively examined, transcribed in accordance to the notation system developed by Gail Jefferson and finally analysed using Conversation Analysis.