Primary or Complex?

Towards a Theory of Metaphorical Strategy Communication in MNCs

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Abstract

We introduce contemporary metaphor theory – and, especially, the linguistic concept of metaphor complexity – as a new lens to understand the role of language in multinational corporations (MNCs). Specifically, we propose that the complexity of metaphorical communication might substantially influence the effectiveness of strategy communication in MNCs, and that this influence differs as a function of the MNC's needs for global integration and local responsiveness. We outline a research agenda for a multidimensional theory of strategy communication in MNCs—one that views the MNC not only as a multilingual community but also as a multi-conceptual one.

Keywords: *multinational corporation (MNC), multinational enterprise (MNE), language (language design), multilingual system*, *strategy communication, metaphorical communication*, *metaphor complexity*

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INTRODUCTION

A crucial task of senior executives is to align their organizations' ends with their means through the effective communication of strategy (Kaplan & Norton, 2005; Mintzberg, 1973). A strategy can only succeed if it is conveyed in an easily intelligible and emotionally gripping manner that allows corporate leaders to bridge functional, divisional, and hierarchical gaps between and within organizational units (Gavetti & Rivkin, 2005; Yang et al., 2011).

As highlighted by a growing stream of research in international business, effectively communicating strategy is particularly challenging for executives of multinational corporations (MNCs) (Brannen et al., 2014). Today, the MNC is understood as a "multilingual community" (Luo & Shenkar, 2006) composed of speakers from many different cultural backgrounds with a variety of mother tongues. Language differences can have severe adverse consequences on internal MNC communication (Brannen, 2004; Neeley et al., 2012; Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012), including information asymmetries, increased mistrust, power contests, and dysfunctional conflict (Harzing & Feely, 2008). These language-induced challenges unfold across many strategic domains, including internationalization (Welch et al., 2001), knowledge transfer among units (Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2005, Makela et al., 2007; Welch & Welch, 2008), and HQ-subsidiary and inter-subsidiary relations (Harzing et al., 2011; Harzing & Pudelko, 2014; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999). Ultimately, to the extent that they have an influence on language practices in organizations, managers in MNCs are called to develop a "global language design" that not only is in line with the organization's strategy and organizational structure (Luo & Shenkar, 2006), but also improves the odds of effective strategy communication (Goshal et al., 1994).

While the research on the ramifications of language and language design in MNCs has generated a wealth of insights, scholars in international business are only beginning to extend their focus beyond *natural* language towards other facets of language, such as rhetoric, narratives, and symbolism (Alvi, 2012; Cornelissen et al., 2015; Flory & Iglesias, 2010; Vaara & Tienari, 2011). One of these largely neglected facets of language seems especially vital for strategy communication in the context of the MNC: metaphorical communication. Metaphorical communication refers to figurative verbal expressions that convey thoughts and feelings by describing one domain, A, through another domain, B. For instance, Willy Shih, former CEO of Kodak, used metaphorical communication to explain his discovery-driven approach to strategy in the late 1990s:

> The vision is we're going to California, and we're going to drive. That means pack for five days, and bring credit cards, but don't ask me where we're going to have lunch on Tuesday, because I can't tell you (Shih, 2007, p. 2).

Although CEOs and other executives frequently resort to metaphorical communication when discussing strategy (Fehn et al., 2013; König et al., 2013), and although the effects of metaphorical communication on human thought and behavior have gained attention in management science (Antonakis et al., 2012; Cornelissen et al.; 2012; Inns, 2002; Weick, 1998; for overviews, see Landau et al., 2010, and Landau & Keefer, 2014), there is little research on metaphorical strategy communication in MNCs. This void is noteworthy because MNCs exhibit a heightened degree of complexity, cultural heterogeneity, and inherent tension (Roth & Kostova, 2003), which are precisely the characteristics that might elicit intricate, paradoxical outcomes from metaphorical communication:

On the one hand, metaphorical communication appears to be well-suited for communicating strategy in MNCs, as it can reduce complexity (Charteris-Black & Ennis 2001; Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Ortony, 1975). Moreover, it may be unique in its ability to provide a meta-lingual, cross-contextual grounding that fosters mutual understanding (Blechman et al., 2000; Cornelissen, 2006; Goldberg, 2009). Willy Shih's "going to California" metaphor, for example, simplifies and visually transmits the notion of uncertainty and the need for stamina. It also frames Kodak's future as a journey—a concept that is widely shared across contexts. Thus, given Luo and Shenkar's view of "language design as a deliberate choice" (2006, p. 321), one might view metaphorical communication as a vital element of language design in MNCs. In particular, metaphorical communication could help leaders convey strategic messages in a way that bridges the wide contextual divides in MNCs (Brannen & Doz, 2012; Harzing et al., 2011; Welch et al., 2005).

On the other hand, MNC managers who use metaphorical communication face major challenges. In particular, managers are torn between the relevance of highly contextualized and context-independent metaphorical communication. Cognitive linguistics suggests that metaphorical communication becomes more effective when it is closer to the receiver's context in terms of his or her conceptual systems, value systems, and knowledge systems (Boers, 2003, p. 233). For example, Willy Shih's "going to California' metaphor" should be particularly instrumental when communicating with organizational members from the United States. At the same time, however, comparative linguistics suggests that the more contextualized the metaphorical communication, the more likely it is that members of the MNC's multilingual community may profoundly misunderstand the message, even if they have perfect command of the respective natural language (Liu, 2002). For instance, Willy Shih's metaphor assumes a certain socially constructed concept of a road trip to California and it makes several assumptions, such as "credit cards are the primary means of payment." Thus, while a receiver from the US might easily grasp the message behind Shih's metaphor, a non-US receiver may misunderstand it, even though he or she speaks English. In other words, highly contextualized metaphorical communication might hamper the understanding of strategic messages across MNC units. In addition, identifying and developing suitable metaphors for each of the various contexts present in an MNC is time and resource consuming and, thus, costly. Overall, in light of the various facets of metaphorical communication, its specific trade-offs in MNCs, and our limited knowledge of those tradeoffs, it is reasonable to ask: *When executives use metaphors to communicate strategy in MNCs, how does the design of the metaphorical communication determine the effectiveness of that communication?*

In this paper, we provide a first conceptual basis for addressing this question by combining linguistic theory with established international business research. In particular, we build on linguistics to develop the concept of *metaphorical communication complexity*, which denotes a continuum ranging from primary metaphorical communication (PMC) to complex metaphorical communication (CMC). PMC refers to basic, generally shared concepts, knowledge, and value systems, while CMC addresses context-specific and idiosyncratic concepts, knowledge, and value systems (Boers, 2003; Kövecses, 2005). We discuss the respective advantages and disadvantages of PMC and CMC for MNCs, which in turn enables us to deduce nomological propositions about the fit between the level of metaphor complexity of a given MNC's strategy communication and that firm's respective global strategy. Our basic idea builds on the classical view on MNCs (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989; Prahalad & Doz, 1987) and proposes that MNCs striving for local responsiveness can be expected to create most value by adapting strategy metaphors to specific contexts, as local units are much more dependent on being strategically adjusted to local contexts. However, such approaches are likely to be the least adequate for globally integrated MNCs seeking an efficient, uniform, and easily transferrable understanding of strategy among globally dispersed decision makers (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988).

Our conceptualization of metaphorical strategy communication and our nomological hypotheses make at least two major contributions. First, we add a new perspective to the growing stream of publications exploring the intricate role of language in the management of MNCs (Brannen & Doz, 2012; Lauring & Klitmøller, 2015; Luo & Shenkar, 2006; Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012; Tietze, 2008; Welch et al., 2005; Zander et al., 2011). In particular, we advocate metaphorical communication as another, highly common and influential dimension of language design beyond natural language. Moreover, by introducing the notion of metaphor complexity to the international business literature, we provide a more nuanced portrayal of the MNC as not only a multi-lingual community but also a multi-conceptual community. As such, our research adds to the emerging conversation that emphasizes the need for a complex, contextualized, and multidimensional view of language and language design in MNCs, and for a generally more fine-grained understanding of MNCs (Holden & Michailova, 2014; Chidlow et al., 2014).

Second, and more specifically, we provide a more balanced portrayal of metaphorical communication in strategy communication. Thus far, the leadership and strategy literature has almost exclusively highlighted the positive aspects of metaphorical communication (e.g., Antonakis et al., 2012; Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997; Miller, 2012). Scholars have only recently begun to develop a more contextualized view of metaphorical communication that highlights the dilemmas that emerge when using this rhetorical device (König et al., 2013). We add to this literature by theorizing about the multi-faceted, sometimes paradoxical implications of metaphorical communication, which arise as a result of the interaction of metaphor complexity with focal dimensions of the MNC's strategic mode, much in the tradition of Luo and Shenkar (2006). In addition, our theorizing has specific practical implications.

STRATEGY COMMUNICATION IN MNCs

Although scholars have presented a myriad of definitions of "strategy," there is broad consensus that "strategy is a combination of the ends (goals) for which the firm is striving and the means (policies) by which it is seeking to get there" (Porter, 1980, p. xvi). A strategy includes normative and purposive elements, such as a vision, a mission, and objectives, as well as an overall plan for how to detect, orchestrate, and deploy resources to achieve these goals under constantly changing conditions (Hambrick & Frederickson, 2005). In this respect, strategy gives meaning and identity to an organization, and serves as an important element of leadership, as it establishes the fundamental criteria that managers in an organization must apply when making day-to-day decisions.

Given that a strategy can only create value if it is shared and implemented by organizational decision makers, its effective communication is paramount to organizational performance (Dess & Priem, 1995; Rapert et al., 2002). In our theorizing, we define "strategy communication effectiveness" as the degree to which strategy communication aligns the intentions and actions of organizational decision makers with the communicated strategy by: (1) creating awareness and comprehension of the strategy, and facilitating the memorization of organizational values and heuristics; and (2) creating conviction and an overall positive attitude towards the strategy. This definition builds on psychologists' concept of the "trilogy of mind," which envisages the dimensions of cognition, affection, and conation as the fundaments of human behavior (Hilgard, 1980; Mayer et al., 1997).

Our theorizing is based on three important assumptions regarding the value created by certain types of strategy communication in MNCs. First, as outlined in the introduction, we assume that strategy communication—regardless of whether it employs metaphorical communication—offers great benefits, but also inherently involves the risk of misunderstanding (Luo & Shenkar, 2006).

Second, we assume that any assessment of the value created by strategy communication must also take the associated costs into account. Deciding how to communicate strategy and crafting such communications are resource-intensive processes, as they take time, often involve top managers, and require a certain level of knowledge about the targeted audience(s) (Minto, 2002). Accordingly, we conceptualize strategy communication as an activity that can create or destroy value depending on the benefits and costs of that communication. We label instances in which the net value created by the strategy communication is equal to or less than zero as "ineffective" strategy communication.

Third, for the sake of simplicity at this early stage of theorizing, we adhere to Luo and Shenkar's view of language design in MNCs in that we envision strategy communication as being, at least partly, a "product of deliberate choice" (2006, p. 321). We acknowledge that MNCs are loosely coupled systems (Birkinshaw et al., 2000; Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008a; Ferner, 2000) and politically "contested terrain" (Boussebaa, 2015, p. 697), and that strategic language develops interactively in all vertical and horizontal directions. However, we focus on the effects, instead of the emergence, of that part of communication that is purposely developed at the apex of the organization with the intent of creating strategic understanding, meaning, attachment, and alignment among organizational decision makers (Kaplan & Norton, 2005; Luo & Shenkar, 2006; Mintzberg, 1973). In so doing, we stipulate that executives are boundedly rational while designing communication (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). As such, many aspects of their communications are likely to be unintended reflections of their social situations (Cho & Hambrick, 2006).

Another premise of our work is that strategy communication in MNCs is particularly challenging because it must connect multiple natural language systems and it must be understood across a large number of cultures (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Gudykunst et al., 1988). In this regard, a growing stream of international business literature views MNCs as "multilingual communities" (Luo & Shenkar, 2006) and focuses on "language barriers" in these organizations (Harzing & Feely, 2008), which create production and/or comprehension difficulties (e.g., Rogerson-Revell, 2007). Only recently has research on language in MNCs begun to adopt a broader perspective, noting that MNCs are "not only […] multilingual [communities]" (Holden & Michailova, 2014, p. 915) but also entities that encompass multiple social contexts (Brannen, 2004). According to this view, translation is needed not only at the interface between the source language and the target language, but also between the source culture and the target culture (Holden & Michailova, 2014). In other words, communication in MNCs is more intricate than previously portrayed.

The intricacy of strategy communication in MNCs further increases as a result of the idiosyncratic strategic pressures that these organizations face. MNCs are global enterprises that are active in multiple global regions, with the objective of overall corporate success rather than the maximization of each individual unit's performance (Ghoshal, 1987). To achieve this goal, MNCs need to adapt to pressures for global integration and local responsiveness, which vary across industries (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988; Devinney et al., 2000; Doz et al., 1981; Greenwood et al., 2010; Kostova et al., 2016; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Integration pressures arise from such factors as the existence of multinational customers, the presence of multinational competitors, and the need to access a variety of production inputs. The greater the pressure for global integration, the more an MNC must actively manage interdependencies across its subsidiary units (Kim & Hwang, 1992; Kostova & Roth, 2003). Local responsiveness pressures include context-specific differences in customer needs and distribution channels, the availability of substitutes, and local government demands (Prahalad & Doz, 1987). The greater the local responsiveness pressures, the more an MNC must take the idiosyncratic contexts of each subsidiary into account (Luo, 2001).

Strategy communication specifically needs to consider possible differences in the MNC's strategy (Luo & Shenkar, 2006). In highly responsive MNCs, elements of strategy (e.g., product strategies or management systems; Egelhoff, 1982; White & Poynter, 1984) differ from context to context. In contrast, in less responsive MNCs, strategy is similar for all subsidiaries. Moreover, in highly integrated MNCs, the activities of the different subsidiaries need to be coordinated (Hoskisson et al., 1993; Kostova et al., 2016; Kostova & Roth, 2003), which exacerbates the potential for and relevance of misunderstandings not only vertically between headquarters and subsidiaries but also horizontally among units. Conversely, in less integrated MNCs, subsidiaries' strategies are less interdependent and formulated more independently. In order to address these two challenges, which stem from contextual heterogeneity and strategic idiosyncrasies, MNCs need a particularly unifying and boundary-spanning approach to strategy communication, which must simultaneously be highly adaptive to the unique characteristics of the firm's strategic environment.

METAPHORICAL STRATEGY COMMUNICATION

Metaphorical Communication in the Context of Strategy Communication

We adopt a broad definition of "metaphorical communication" as the group of figurative, verbal expressions that convey thoughts and feelings by describing one domain, A, through another domain,

B. As such, our definition of metaphorical communication encompasses all tropes that compare "something unfamiliar … with something familiar" (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 95), including analogies, metonymies, and similes (Black, 1962; Ortony, 1975). For instance, we would refer to "argument is war" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and "each employee is like a flower" (Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric; cited by Hymowitz & Murray, 1999, p. B1) as examples of metaphorical communication.

Metaphorical communication constitutes a focal topic in contemporary linguistics and cognition research (Ibáñez & Hernández, 2011; Landau et al., 2010). This interest is rooted in Black's (1962) observation that metaphors do not merely act as substitutes for literal statements or express existing similarities, as was assumed in classical rhetoric (Aristotle, *Rhetoric)*. Instead, each metaphor establishes an *interaction* between its "A" component and its "B" component in which "B" is *framed* through the social construction of "A" (Landau & Keefer, 2014). A metaphor (such as "this company is like an old tree") "selects, emphasizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the ["A" component ("company" in this example)] by implying statements about it that normally apply to the ["B" component ("tree" in the example)]" (Black, 1962, p. 44). Interest in metaphors soared after Lakoff and Johnson (1980) observed that human thought and language are largely structured in "conceptual metaphors." For instance, such expressions as "spend time" or "save time" can be attributed to the conceptual metaphor TIME IS MONEY,[1] which represents the general understanding that time has some valuable, intrinsic characteristics that are close to the characteristics people assign to money (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In this regard, conceptual metaphor theory implies that all metaphors combine two knowledge domains: a typically abstract *target domain* (TIME in the above example), and a typically tangible and familiar *source domain* (MONEY in the above example) (Kövecses, 2003).

Both research- and practice-oriented authors encourage executives to systematically employ the rhetorical "power" (Klein, 1998) of metaphors, especially when communicating with internal

[1] We follow the convention introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in which conceptual metaphors are written in small capital letters to distinguish them from linguistic expressions.

stakeholders (Antonakis et al., 2012; Denning, 2007; Heath & Heath, 2007). Kotter (1996, p. 92), for instance, suggests that executives can metaphorically convey the message:

> We need to retain the advantages of economies of great scale and yet become much less bureaucratic and slow in decision making […]

as:

> We need to become less like an elephant and more like a customer-friendly Tyrannosaurus Rex.

All of these publications share the notion that metaphorical communication might enable organizational leaders to communicate more effectively than they could by merely using abstract language (Sackmann, 1989) for two reasons. First, on a cognitive level, metaphorical communication can be conducive to comprehension, as it introduces something new by referring to something already known and as it often triggers visual imagination in the receiver's mind (Ortony, 1975). Furthermore, metaphorical communication can simplify new or complex issues, especially because it focuses attention on a smaller and less complex set of the target domain's attributes (Foster-Pedley et al., 2005). Simplification, visualization, and references to familiar schemata achieved through metaphorical communication may make it easier for organizational decision makers to memorize a strategy (Ortony, 1975). In addition, by linking unknown facts with familiar ones (Foster-Pedley et al., 2005), metaphors provide frames, which can reduce perceptions of uncertainty (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1992). As perceptions of uncertainty are often a source of inertia, metaphors can act as catalysts for organizational change and encourage stakeholder support by legitimizing strategies (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Cornelissen et al., 2012).

Second, on an affective level, metaphorical communication may "bridge the gap between logical and emotional ... forms of persuasion" (Mio, 1997, p. 121), and thereby encourage commitment to the subject being introduced (Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997). Because it serves to simplify, metaphorical communication can give an audience a feeling of relief and enlightenment (Mio, 1997). Moreover, metaphors can activate the receiver's senses and emotions by referring to concrete source domains that receivers have actually experienced (Ortony, 1975). Thus, a metaphor can provide a tangible, sensual, and collectively shared frame for an abstract thought, such as a strategy, and can be used by communicators to make receivers see that abstract thought through the filter of the metaphorical expression (Black, 1962, p. 41). This sense-giving process (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) may enable executives to emphasize some characteristics of a strategy while suppressing others (Black, 1962; Weick, 1995), thereby allowing them to change and align the perspectives, thoughts, values, and feelings of organizational decision makers, and even the way they interpret reality (Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997; Sackmann, 1989). In this vein, scholars find metaphors particularly powerful for creating a sense of community, a shared identity, and joint commitment in a collective by referring to shared knowledge or beliefs (Cohen, 1979; Gerrig & Gibbs, 1988).

All of the potential advantages of metaphorical communication motivate managers to frequently employ it in various aspects of strategy communication (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Cornelissen et al., 2012). For instance, SAP's board member Vishal Sikka once explained a pricing strategy for a new, key product by arguing that "you can't buy camels for the price of sheep" (ASUG News, 2011). T-Mobile US's CEO John Legere described the competitive landscape in his industry as populated by "fat cats that can't move" (The Verge, 2014). Alibaba's CEO Jack Ma asked his company to "be in love with the government but never marry it" (Financial Times, 2012), while InterMune's CEO Daniel Welch elaborated on a strategic partnership by explaining that "[both parties are] in the front seat of the car. In Phase I, we are in the driver's seat; in the Phase II, they take over the driver's seat. But each is navigating with the other" (Thomson StreetEvents, 2007).

More importantly, metaphorical communication seems to be particularly applicable to the challenges of MNCs. References to familiar domains and reductions in complexity are particularly relevant for MNCs, as they can be expected to reduce the risk of misunderstandings across different languages. Clarity and emotional attachment are also important in MNCs because these organizations are, by definition, highly heterogeneous and divided and, therefore, often hampered by cross-cultural mistrust (Harzing & Feely, 2008).

Primary and Complex Metaphorical Communication

Generally, authors who study strategy communication (e.g., Gavetti & Rifkin, 2005; Heath & Heath, 2007) assume that the metaphors used by senders are understood and shared by receivers (see Cornelissen et al., 2011, for a notable exception). However, a core tenet of contemporary metaphor theory is that the degree to which metaphors are universally applicable varies (Charteris-Black & Ennis, 2001). As with any sign (Brannen, 2004), the understanding and interpretation of metaphors are shaped by institutional and sociocultural contexts (Kövecses, 2005), and metaphors originating in one context are often unintelligible to people from another context (Charteris-Black, 2002; Liu, 2002; Ou, 2016). Furthermore, while some metaphors are used and interpreted similarly across contexts, others are used and interpreted similarly only within a relatively narrow context (Boers, 2003; Deignan et al., 1997; Kövecses, 2005). In linguistics, metaphors that build on universal human experiences (Grady, 2005; Kövecses, 2005) are termed "primary metaphors," while metaphors that build on context-specific experiences (Boers, 2003; Charteris-Black, 2002; Charteris-Black & Ennis, 2001) are referred to as "complex metaphors."[2]

In our theorizing, we borrow linguistics terminology to propose that all metaphorical communication can be arrayed along a continuous scale of *metaphor complexity*, which ranges from primary metaphorical communication (PMC) to complex metaphorical communication (CMC). Building on the extensive literature on metaphors in heterogeneous contexts (e.g., Deignan, 2003; Littlemore, 2003; Liu, 2002; Yu, 1995), we define *metaphor complexity* as a construct that is formed by three distinct indicators: *specificity of the conceptual basis*, *specificity of required knowledge*, and *idiosyncrasy of the underlying value system*.

Specificity of the conceptual basis. This indicator denotes the degree to which a metaphor refers to a relatively uncommon conceptual basis. PMC relies on a conceptual basis that is shared across the contexts of the sender and all receivers (Kövecses, 2005). LOVE IS WARMTH, POWER IS UP, and ANGER IS PRESSURE IN A CONTAINER are examples of conceptual bases that are likely to be shared by people from all contexts (Kövecses, 2005). Studies have shown that metaphors referring to similar conceptual bases can be understood even in highly heterogeneous linguistic forms (Charteris-Black, 2002; Deignan et al., 1997). Accordingly, a Chinese person can be expected to understand an angry Englishwoman who draws on ANGER IS PRESSURE IN A CONTAINER when saying "I am near the boiling

[2] This terminology is related—but not identical—to that of Cornelissen and Kafouros (2008), who argue that complex metaphors are composed of smaller primary metaphors.

point," even though a literal equivalent to "near the boiling point" does not exist in Chinese. Instead, the Chinese idiom includes expressions such as *ta qi-huhu de*—"he is puffing and blowing with gas" (Yu, 1995, p. 65).

At the opposite end of the complexity scale, CMC is characterized by idiosyncratic conceptual bases. Studies have shown that a complex metaphor often cannot be grasped by recipients even if a linguistically equivalent translation exists in the receivers' language or the receivers speak the language in which the metaphor is formulated (Charteris-Black, 2002). This is because the understanding of a metaphor requires familiarity with the underlying concept (Deignan et al., 1997). For example, a member of the East-Asian Hmong people would probably find it difficult to interpret expressions that build on the Indo-Germanic and Chinese concept of LIFE IS A JOURNEY, which is evident in such expressions as "walk with someone on the winding road of life." This is because, for the Hmong, LIFE IS A STRING (Kövecses, 2005).

Specificity of required knowledge. This indicator describes the extent to which the understanding and interpretation of a metaphor depend on knowledge that is shared by potential receivers. In its most ideal form, PMC refers to knowledge shared by the sender and all potential receivers, which enables all receivers of the communication to grasp the meaning of a metaphor. For instance, Jack Welch's "flower" metaphor lies near the primary end of the complexity-continuum, as it refers to relatively unspecific knowledge and is therefore likely to be understood by members of most contexts:

> Each employee is like a flower. You have to go along with a can of fertilizer in one hand and water in the other and constantly throw both on the flowers. [...] If they grow, you have a beautiful garden. If they don't, you cut them out. That's what management is all about (Jack Welch, cited by Hymowitz & Murray, 1999, p. BI).

In the case of CMC, specific knowledge is required because complex metaphors stem from context-specific source domains (Deignan, 2003). For instance, food, family, and opera are the essential sources of metaphorical expressions in Chinese, whereas people in the United States derive most of their metaphors from sports, business, and politics (Liu, 2002). Few westerners would guess that "managing the family and becoming the master" is a Chinese metaphorical expression for "being a business leader” (Liu, 2002, p. 62). Similarly, few Chinese would grasp that the US idiom “He’s a Monday morning quarterback” refers to “someone who says how an event or problem should have been dealt with by others after it has already been dealt with” (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2016).

Idiosyncrasy of the underlying value system. This indicator refers to the number of normative contexts to which a metaphorical communication corresponds. PMC corresponds with the overarching value systems of all target contexts, which is important because receivers are more likely to understand a metaphorically transmitted message if it supports their value system (Boers, 2003). This is particularly likely if the metaphorical communication refers to common human values or behaviors that are understood across various contexts (Grisham, 2006; Kövecses, 2005). For example, Heath and Heath (2007) examine Aesop’s fable about the fox and the grapes, and find that the moral of this story, which is that one easily scorns things that are hard to reach, appears in a similar form across a wide range of contexts, such as in the Anglo-American countries, Hungary, China, and Sweden.

In contrast, CMC draws from more idiosyncratic value systems than PMC. This lowers the odds that such metaphors can be universally understood and shared, as recipients might not be able to grasp a message that contradicts their own value systems (Boers, 2003). Along these lines, Littlemore (2003) studies the metaphor “it does not matter whether the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice.” This scholar observes that students from cultural contexts characterized by high levels of uncertainty avoidance do not understand that this metaphor acknowledges that compromise is sometimes necessary and that uncertainty might not necessarily be a bad thing.

Challenges in Choosing between PMC and CMC in Heterogeneous Contexts

A pivotal conclusion from our reading of contemporary metaphor theory is that effective inter-contextual metaphorical communication requires the sender to be aware of the differences between various levels of metaphor complexity and to remain sensitive to local variations.

Overall, one might gain the impression that PMC is a priori preferable to CMC when used in a multinational organization. PMC, which is less bound to context-specific connotations, integrates differentiated discourses and reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings, which are more likely in heterogeneous contexts (Charteris-Black, 2002). Moreover, as PMC addresses shared primary experiences (Kövecses, 2005), it seems particularly suitable for supporting social unity and comprehension (Drews et al., 1985), which are difficult to achieve in an MNC. In fact, the creation of unity might be a particularly relevant advantage of PMC in comparison to headquarters-centric CMC because the latter might unintendedly trigger the emergence of "neo-colonial," elite social networks within the MNC, which can substantially harm information flows in MNCs (Vaara et al., 2005).

Another important comparative advantage of PMC emerges from the relatively high costs of identifying and crafting CMC for each of the multiple contexts found in a contextually diverse social system. It is time-consuming, tedious, and resource-intensive to devise "several slightly different expressions to reflect the cultural values and beliefs of [each context]" (Liu, 2002, p. 116). CMC can be particularly costly if the source domain of a metaphor does not exist in the target language or if the metaphor conflicts with metaphors that already exist in the target context (Jansen, 2002). For instance, "parent company" is metaphorical not only in English but also in Farsi. However, in Farsi, it refers to a company "that supplies raw materials to a company that uses them in manufacturing" (Deignan, 2003, p. 257).

Nevertheless, the impression that PMC is a panacea is misleading. CMC has decisive advantages relative to PMC when: (a) metaphors build on source domains shared by the sender and all receivers; (b) all receivers have the specific knowledge needed to interpret the metaphors in accordance with the sender's interpretation; and (c) metaphors do not contradict the receivers' fundamental value systems. If these conditions are fulfilled, CMC enables the sender to include a greater amount of information (Ortony, 1975; Sackmann, 1989) and "richer imagery" (Boers, 2003, p. 233) in the message, which would be lost in the generalizations inherent in PMC. Recall, for instance, the "going to California" metaphor used by Willy Shih. This metaphor embodies a number of specific characteristics of a discovery-driven strategy, such as the pursuit of a bright future (represented by California), phases of boredom (driving through endless fields and dunes in Iowa and Nebraska), and obstacles that need to be overcome (such as the Rocky Mountains). In contrast, a more primary metaphor (e.g., a comparison of discovery-driven planning with a journey towards a beautiful country that passes through unknown territories) is less specific. These characteristics of CMC are particularly important in cases in which certain local concepts or values are fundamental to the conveyed message, and PMC for those concepts or values does not exist. Moreover, and most crucially, CMC enables the sender of a message to allude to locally shared, specialized knowledge and values, which creates a feeling of community and joint commitment (Cohen, 1979; Gerrig & Gibbs, 1988).

In summary, both PMC and CMC have benefits and costs. As we outline in the following section, this is pivotal for strategy communication in MNCs because it implies that such companies need to adapt their metaphorical strategy communication to their respective global strategies.

A FRAMEWORK FOR METAPHORICAL STRATEGY COMMUNICATION IN MNCs

Table 1 shows the practical meaning of metaphor complexity in the context of MNCs. It contains an assortment of eclectically chosen but archetypal strategic messages, which are presented in three categories: the abstract strategic message; a PMC of that message; and a CMC of that message. For instance, Coal India Limited (2012) formulates its principal strategic objective in a relatively abstract way:

> [Our goal is] to emerge from the position of domestic leader to [become a] leading global player in the energy sector […].

Coal India could also express this message using a relatively primary metaphor, such as:

> Our goal is to grow from a small and remote kingdom into an empire in the world of energy.

This metaphor is primary, as it: (a) refers to a relatively common conceptual basis, (b) refers to knowledge shared by a high number of potential receivers, and (c) corresponds with value systems from a broad array of cultural contexts. Thus, this PMC is likely to be conceived similarly by a large number of receivers. However, the implications of this PMC are also unspecific and leave a high amount of interpretive leeway. To address this issue, Coal India's executives could use the following, more complex metaphor when, for instance, communicating in a European context:

> Our goal is to rise from our position as a Maroboduus of the energy sector to become the Augustus of the energy sector.

Notably, this CMC requires the highly specific knowledge that Maroboduus was the king of the relatively small Germanic tribe of the Marcomanni from about 9 BC to 19 AD, which was the time during which the Roman emperor Augustus ruled nearly the entirety of the known western hemisphere (27 BC to 14 AD). If sender and receivers share this knowledge, and also share specifically rich and tangible associations with the concepts of Maroboduus (e.g., a noble and successful king of a rather small and unimportant tribe) and Augustus (e.g., nobility, a long-lasting and peaceful reign, and the establishment of an empire), then this CMC can carry much more content than a PMC that alludes to the primary concept of "empire." As a consequence of the CMC's concreteness (Heath & Heath, 2007) and tangibility, receivers may be more likely to implement the strategy according to the idea that is envisioned in the concept of "Augustus" because they hermeneutically understand and remember the message and feel emotionally connected to it.

--- Table 1 goes about here ---

Overall, we presume that the respective benefits and costs of primary and complex metaphorical strategy communication in an MNC are likely to depend on the MNC's organizational model. On the one hand, the stronger the pressure for global integration, the greater the potential benefits of PMC relative to the potential benefits of CMC. In such cases, strategy is largely undifferentiated and not specific to subsidiaries' idiosyncratic contextual needs, but similar across most of the organization (Ghoshal, 1987; Hoskisson et al., 1993). This calls for strategy communication that uses primary metaphors because they are intelligible to receivers from all addressed host countries and can thus help unify the organizational members' understanding of a strategy. PMC is also likely to be more beneficial than CMC in these cases because high levels of integration along the value chain require high levels of interaction between contextually heterogeneous units (Kostova & Roth, 2003; Porter, 1986; Roth & Morrison, 1992; Roth et al., 1991). For example, in an MNC in which R&D occurs in Europe, most production is aggregated in Asia, and most sales take place in the US, effective coordination between the elements of the value chain is crucial for the firm's success. Thus, in this case, the company could forego substantial benefits or even be harmed if the headquarters uses highly contextualized, difficult-to-interpret metaphorical communication that hinders effective collaboration among the organizational units. Moreover, the company will likely benefit if the headquarters invests in deliberately crafting decontextualized PMC.

On the other hand, the greater the pressure for local responsiveness, the greater the relative benefits of strategy communication that uses the complex metaphors of the various host countries. Under such circumstances, CMC helps managers fulfill their task of (re)contextualizing global strategy to fit local environments. More importantly, if pressures for responsiveness are high, a large share of strategy should be adjusted locally (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988; Herbert, 1984). Therefore, the greater the pressure for local responsiveness, the more an MNC will profit from the fact that CMC contextualizes strategic meaning beyond the mere idiomatic (lingual) level, creates closeness and familiarity (Cohen, 1979; Gerrig & Gibbs, 1988), and thereby adds to the effectiveness of strategy communication. Correspondingly, we assume that the benefits provided in this fashion are likely to outweigh the costs of developing individual CMC for each context represented in a given MNC.

In the following, we integrate and extend these premises to syllogize four formal propositions about the association between the complexity of metaphorical strategy communication and the value created by that communication. To do so, we utilize the four stylized, repeatedly validated (e.g., Harzing, 2000; Roth & Morrison, 1992), and frequently used (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2010; Kostova et al., 2016) ideal types of MNC strategy that stem from combinations of high or low pressures for global integration and local responsiveness (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988; Prahalad & Doz, 1987): international, global, multinational, and transnational. The resulting model is depicted in Figure 1. For each strategy type, we first describe the strategy type and the associated strategy communication needs. We then discuss the expected benefits of different metaphorical communication approaches and assess their costs. We close with a formal proposition regarding which approach creates the most value.

--- Figure 1 goes about here ---

International MNC: CMC

International MNCs, which usually rely on exports as their internationalization strategy, operate in an environment in which the pressures for both integration and responsiveness are low (Perlmutter, 1969). In such MNCs, foreign units usually function “adjunct to domestic business or as a source of quick profit” (Magaziner & Reich, 1985, p. 8) and “export responsibility and foreign market development reside at corporate headquarters” (Herbert, 1984, p. 262). Headquarters in these organizations frequently rely on expatriates (Harzing, 2001) or “compradors”—local elites familiar with the headquarters’ context (Boussebaa, Sinha, & Gabriel, 2014)—to operate local subsidiaries. Consequently, strategy is developed and communicated almost exclusively in the specific context of the headquarters (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988). In addition, much of the value added is generated in the home country, making *strategic* communication to local decision makers abroad less relevant. In turn, local contextualization, interdependencies between units, and efficiency play less important roles.

In light of these characteristics, it is relatively straightforward to determine the type of metaphorical strategy communication that is likely to be most beneficial for international MNCs. As we argue above, we assume that: (a) CMC is less likely to lead to misunderstandings if strategy communication takes place in a single, homogeneous context and that (b) adequately comprehended CMC is more effective than PMC. Therefore, CMC that is rooted in the context of the corporate headquarters can be expected to provide the greatest benefits for international MNCs compared to other types of metaphorical communication.

Headquarters-centric CMC is also likely to be less costly than other forms of metaphorical strategy communication in an international MNC because executives do not have to decontextualize metaphors in order to formulate PMC. In particular, as international MNCs are, by definition, only loosely embedded in the local contexts of their subsidiaries’ host countries, their corporate headquarters are likely to possess only limited knowledge about local contexts. They are, for example, less likely to have “inpatriates” (Harvey, 1997) who can assist in the creation of localized strategy communication, making attempts to do so comparatively costly.

In addition, as international MNCs tend to be in the early stages of internationalization (Jarillo & Martíanez, 1990), they may wish to economize by reusing extant CMC from the headquarters context that describes the company’s strategy independent of internationalization efforts. Alternatively, executives can easily build metaphors from their personal experiences, as they largely share their context with the headquarters-associated recipients of their strategy communication. For example, if Willy Shih had been the CEO of an international MNC, he could have made use of all of the local connotations that the complex "going to California" metaphor carries without having to consider the metaphor's transferability to other contexts. Stated formally:

> Proposition 1: Ceteris paribus, in international MNCs, CMC stemming from the context of the organization's headquarters creates more value than other forms of metaphorical strategy communication.

Global MNC: PMC

Global MNCs operate in environments in which pressures for integration and efficiency are high, while pressures for local responsiveness are low. Such MNCs follow a global strategy and a global organizational logic. Therefore, they constantly seek "to standardize [their] offering everywhere" (Levitt, 1983, p. 94). Competition in such industries is largely based on firms' abilities to link or integrate subsidiary activities across geographical locations (Roth et al., 1991). Correspondingly, a few single units (either headquarters or subsidiaries with global strategic mandates; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989, p. 61; Birkinshaw & Morrison, 1995; Roth & Morrison, 1992) control and coordinate strategy execution in global MNCs with the intent to reap synergies between units (Hoskisson et al., 1993; Mudambi, 2011). The main goals of strategy communication in such firms are to convey strategy from headquarters to subsidiaries in a unified and widely comprehensible way, and to allow for collaboration among units, especially along the value chain. These goals are likely to be reflected in MNCs' natural language policies, as argued by Luo and Shenkar (2006). Accordingly, we assume that MNCs facing high integration pressures will use one uniform functional language across the globe.

We argue that PMC, as the primary policy of metaphorical strategy communication, provides greater benefits than CMC in global MNCs. In fact, headquarters-centric CMC is likely to be highly ineffective in such organizations. Consider again the relatively complex "going to California" metaphor used by Kodak's CEO Willy Shih. Organizational members from other contexts will struggle to understand and remember this "ethnocentric" (Perlmutter, 1969) CMC, and will thus feel uninspired to implement the discovery-based strategy approach as intended by the CEO. In contrast, the use of PMC greatly improves the odds that organizational members from most contexts will grasp the message, feel emotionally engaged, and change their behavior to match the message. In addition, using a single PMC enables units from different contexts to align based on shared terminology and, ultimately, based on a shared understanding of the strategy. For example, using PMC, Willy Shih could have referred to a “beautiful country” instead of “California” and to a “journey” instead of “driving.” In so doing, he would have avoided the context-specific concepts, values, and knowledge associated with a road trip to California.

Moreover, in a global MNC, developing PMC is likely to be advantageous from a cost perspective. Generally, when a single functional language is used in the MNC (Luo & Shenkar, 2006), developing PMC is less time-consuming and costly than devising different CMCs for all of the individual contexts. Relatedly, while a tailored CMC approach may have some benefits in terms of comprehension and motivation within the individual units, those benefits are likely to be outweighed by other costs associated with this approach—tailored CMC fragments the strategy communication and may consequently hamper global integration across and alignment between subsidiaries. This would directly contradict global MNCs’ primary objectives of efficiency and standardization.

In summary, in global MNCs, a PMC policy for strategy communication optimizes the fit between the firm’s strategy and the expected benefits and costs of metaphorical strategy communication. In formal terms:

> Proposition 2: Ceteris paribus, in global MNCs, PMC that is similar for the entire organization creates more value than other forms of metaphorical strategy communication.

Multinational MNC: CMC Tailored to Multiple Units’ Contexts

Multinational MNCs operate in environments in which pressures for local responsiveness are high and pressures for integration are low. In contrast to a global MNC, a multinational MNC treats foreign investments as a portfolio of independent entities (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988; Hill et al., 1992). Multinational MNCs develop large parts of their strategies autonomously within the subsidiaries (Harzing, 2000; Nell & Andersson, 2012). Consequently, the primary objective of strategy communication in this type of MNC is to be as proximate as possible to each context (Luo, 2001). At the same time, there is relatively little need to communicate in a way that facilitates correspondence and strategic alignment among units (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988; Harzing, 2000; Herbert, 1984). If interunit communication occurs, its content is rather stable and easily codifiable (Kostova & Roth, 2003; Kostova et al., 2016) with limited strategic relevance. This corresponds with Luo and Shenkar's (2006) suggestion that multinational MNCs will use multiple functional languages.

Accordingly, we expect PMC to be less beneficial for multinational MNCs than for global MNCs. As we argue above, PMC is generally less effective than CMC in strategy communication. This holds particularly true for cases like multinational MNCs in which strategy is not merely locally executed but actually refined and further developed in the international subsidiaries. Furthermore, even when translated into the local language as a consequence of the language policy of the MNC, PMC involves de-contextualization and, therefore, does not allow executives to "highlight and preserve sensitivities to local variations" (Luo & Shenkar, 2006, p. 323). In contrast, CMC endemically includes contextual idiosyncrasies. This is evident, for instance, in the following fictional complex strategy metaphor (see Table 1), which is situated in a Japanese context:

> Our goal is to have the strength of Akashi Shiganosuke combined with the leanness and agility of Toshiyuki Igarashi.

In the 1980s, executives from General Electric (GE) could have used this CMC to convey their firm's strategic goal to their Japanese subsidiaries. In abstract terms, that goal was to:

> [...] revolutionize this company to have the strength of a big company combined with the leanness and agility of a small company (Thompson, 2001).

The above CMC of GE's strategy is particularly rich, as it not only names the explicit characteristics of strength and agility, but also evokes specific images of Akashi Shiganosuke and Toshiyuki Igarashi. Shiganosuke was a legendary sumo wrestler who was active during the first half of the seventeenth century and weighed approximately 180 kilograms. Igarashi is a Japanese flyweight boxer (weighing around 50 kilograms) who became world champion in 2012. In the minds of receivers from a Japanese context, this CMC may raise a host of concepts and values that the Japanese associate with sumo wrestling and, to a lesser extent, boxing. In contrast, a PMC of the same message would inherently be more general:

> Our goal is to have the strength of a blue whale combined with the leanness and agility of a young dolphin.

Executives in multinational MNCs must tailor CMC to each context represented in their organizations, as CMC cannot be transferred from one context to another. For instance, the sumo/boxing metaphor is unlikely to be adequately comprehended by most internal stakeholders from European or American contexts. Thus, we expect CMC to be beneficial in multinational MNCs only if it is adapted to each context. One might wonder whether such adapted CMC implies reduced effectiveness and benefit compared to a single PMC. This question arises because, in the case of adapted CMC, strategy communication becomes fragmented, with each international unit receiving its own communication. This makes alignment between subsidiaries challenging. However, we suggest that this is likely to be a minor concern, as pressures for global integration are comparably low in multinational MNCs and the international subsidiaries consequently have limited need for inter-unit communication and alignment.

Notably, local adaptation of CMC is likely to be more costly than the development of a single unified PMC because, for example, it might require difficult translations (Holden & Michailova, 2014). However, we suggest that the benefit-to-cost ratio of tailored CMC is favorable in multinational MNCs given the importance of contextualization under the high pressures for responsiveness and the relatively low pressure for integration under which such MNCs operate. Formally, we propose:

> Proposition 3: Ceteris paribus, in multinational MNCs, strategy communication using CMC that is tailored to each context represented in the organization creates more value than other forms of metaphorical strategy communication.

Transnational MNC: A Mix of PMC and CMC Tailored to Multiple Units' Contexts

Transnational MNCs are active in environments in which pressures for both integration *and* responsiveness are high. These MNCs need to balance global uniformity and coordination with the heterogeneous but interdependent requirements of their subsidiaries (Greenwood et al., 2010; Prahalad & Doz, 1987). Such transnational strategies are usually reflected in matrix organizations, which foster knowledge and resource sharing, and strategy processes and formulations that account for the shared and the independent goals of the subsidiaries (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988).

Consequently, this type of MNC faces a particularly difficult trade-off that neither PMC nor CMC alone can resolve. A transnational MNC needs to strive for integration and efficiency, while simultaneously adapting to each of the contexts in which it operates. Therefore, strategy communication in transnational MNCs is likely to be more beneficial the more it mirrors this trade-off by not only exerting a unifying effect across subsidiaries but by also enabling heterogeneous local refinement of strategy. MNCs following this strategy often operate with multiple functional languages in order to provide headquarters and subsidiaries with the flexibility they need to balance integration and responsiveness (Luo & Shenkar, 2006). The approach for metaphorical strategy communication should be similar. On one hand, if executives of such a firm exclusively use CMC tailored to each context, they will jeopardize their company's efforts to globalize and interconnect strategy because complex metaphors rooted in one context are incompatible with other contexts. On the other hand, if executives reduce all metaphorical communication to PMC, they will lower the ability of their companies to respond to local idiosyncrasies.

Therefore, we expect transnational MNCs that rely on metaphorical strategy communication to reap the greatest benefits from using an approach that integrates PMC with tailored CMC. PMC, such as the "blue whale/dolphin" metaphor in Table 1, achieves the unification needed to respond to the pressures for integration. As such, it is well-suited for communicating the globally integrated elements of the respective transnational strategy across the corporation in a globally understood functional language. Tailored CMC is more effective for communicating locally adjusted subsidiary-level strategy in local or regional languages, which play an important role in transnational MNCs (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988). For instance, in a Japanese context, executives could use the domain of sumo wrestling (e.g., specific tactics and rules, historic fights, winners and losers) to conceptualize individual aspects of their strategies. Such CMC includes rich and contextually grounded cognitive and emotional cues, which can be expected to increase the effectiveness of strategy communication at the subsidiary level.

We acknowledge that the development of an integrative communication strategy using both PMC and CMC is likely to be more costly than the alternatives. However, we propose that in an environment as challenging as that of a transnational MNC, the cost of developing strategy communication is likely to be minuscule compared to the risk of foregoing benefits or even harming the firm through failed strategy communication.

Overall, we posit that this proposed integrative communication strategy creates most value for transnational MNCs when compared to the conceivable alternatives of pure PMC or pure CMC. In formal terms:

> Proposition 4: Ceteris paribus, in transnational MNCs, strategy communication using a combination of (a) PMC for the globally integrated part of strategy that is similar for the entire organization and (b) CMC for the locally adjusted part of strategy that is tailored to each context creates more value than other forms of metaphorical strategy communication.

DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH AGENDA

Contribution

In this paper, we examine the topic of strategy communication in MNCs through the lens of metaphor theory and international business studies. The leitmotif of our theorizing is that although metaphorical communication can create great value for MNCs, executives can only reap this value if they align the complexity of their metaphorical strategy communication with their respective MNCs' strategies. While PMC should be the preferable metaphorical communication policy in global MNCs, CMC is advantageous for international and multinational MNCs. We expect transnational MNCs to create the most value through metaphorical strategy communication if they adopt a mix of PMC and CMC.

Perhaps the most important contribution of our paper lies in the fact that it provides a new perspective to the growing stream of publications exploring the intricate role of language in MNC management (Brannen, 2004; Luo & Shenkar, 2006; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999). This literature has primarily focused on the implications of natural language in MNCs (Brannen & Doz, 2012; Lauring & Klitmøller, 2015; Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012; Tietze, 2008; Welch et al., 2005; Welch & Welch, 2008; Zander et al., 2011), while the role of metaphorical communication has been largely neglected in all but a few studies (e.g., Cacciaguidi-Fahy & Cunningham, 2007; Vaara & Tienari, 2011). In our theorizing, we illuminate the importance of filling this gap given the unique and powerful effects of metaphorical language in framing and determining human thought and behavior (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011; Gubler et al., 2015). These effects make metaphorical communication not only particularly attractive for communication in MNCs, but also particularly challenging to use. More generally, our focus on metaphorical communication, and on research into its social and cultural implications allows us to provide rich background for a complex, contextualized, and multidimensional view of language and language design in MNCs (Chidlow et al., 2014).

By combining metaphor theory—especially the comparative linguistics view of metaphor (Kövecses, 2003; Liu, 2002)—with literature on strategy processes and communication in MNCs (Luo & Shenkar, 2006), we add to recent research highlighting the implications of the socio-cognitive underpinnings of linguistic, translational processes in MNCs (Brannen et al., 2014). In particular, Holden and Michailova (2014) show that difficulties related to translation and language barriers occur not only because a term or expression in one language might lack a literal equivalent in another language, but also because translation is shaped by cultural interference and ambiguity resolution. Even when a linguistic equivalent exists, a term or an expression in one language may have fundamentally different connotations in another language and its socio-historical context. In other words, translation is *enacted* in a socio-cognitive context (Brannen, 2004).

Our theory showcases metaphorical communication as an extreme case of the challenges described by Holden and Michailova (2014). Even when the sender and receiver speak the same language or when literal equivalents exist in the receiver's language, metaphorical communication is bound by the socio-cognitive contexts of the sender and the receiver. More specifically, the interpretation of metaphorical communication is bound to the receiver's schemas and to his or her knowledge of the source domain. In addition, metaphorical communication involves substantial ambiguity (Beyer, 1992; Hill & Levenhagen, 1995) because it is typically not explicit about which features of the source domain should be mapped onto which features of the target domain. Thus, metaphorical communication allows for many "potential meanings" (Ramsay, 2004: 146)—although it provides a frame (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1992; Landau & Keefer, 2014), the frame's appearance in the eye of the receiver might differ from what the sender envisioned. Our conceptualization of metaphor complexity helps improve our understanding of these intricate interpretive processes in the context of MNCs.

We also contribute to the international business literature by developing a nomological framework of the interactive effects of different levels of metaphor complexity and generic types of MNC strategy on the effectiveness of strategy communication. In so doing, we follow the tradition of Luo and Shenkar (2006), who address language in the strategic context of MNCs and recommend that firms align language systems with organizational strategy. In particular, we highlight the fact that MNCs inherently operate under a constant tension between the global and the local, a tension that craves alleviation through the unification and clarification of messages (Brannen & Doz, 2012; Harzing et al., 2011; Welch et al., 2005). Furthermore, MNCs are characterized by contextual heterogeneity (Prahalad & Doz, 1987), and leaders of MNCs are, to some extent, required to cognitively melt their companies' innate diversity into a cohesive, shared understanding of the most fundamental ends and means on a global scale (Ghoshal, 1987). This need is intensified given "the trend in internationalization […] toward transferring whole, complex organizational systems that are even more dependent on soft, socially embedded processes and technologies" (Brannen, 2004, p. 613). Our paper is the first to systematically show why metaphorical communication might be uniquely suited for transferring "soft" processes and technologies in a condensed, yet rich and tangible, manner and give strategic meaning across contextual boundaries (Brannen & Doz, 2012). It is also the first to systematically address the various challenges that managers of MNCs face when they use metaphorical communication. Therefore, our theorizing, including the systematic definition of metaphor complexity, could have great relevance for a wide range of inquiries into international business, well beyond the arena of strategy communication.

Finally, by studying the implications of figurative language in different contexts, our research adds to the growing stream of literature on the role of rhetoric in leadership communication (e.g., Antonakis et al., 2012; Carton, et al., 2014; Cornelissen et al., 2010; Gao, Yu, & Cannella, 2015; Den Hartog & Verburg 1997; König et al., 2013). Early rhetoric theory consistently advises speakers to adjust their "lexis," or style of speech, to the audience and its respective idiosyncrasies, including such characteristics as limited attention spans or specific emotional dispositions (Aristotle, Rhetoric; Corbett & Connors, 1998). Contemporary research supports such advice by, for example, demonstrating that the effectiveness of communication depends on the presence of some "common ground" (Clark and Schaefer, 1989: 260) between the communicator and the audience (Fussell & Krauss, 1989). However, the literature on leaders' rhetoric in different contexts does not specifically focus on metaphorical communication. Moreover, the leadership literature that does focus on metaphors in business settings neglects contextual differences and centers almost exclusively on the beneficial consequences of metaphorical communication (e.g., Antonakis et al., 2012; Den Hartog & Verburg 1997; Miller, 2012). As Heath and Heath (2007) suggest, metaphors are "sticky"—they stick in the minds and hearts of receivers and may, therefore, be a particularly useful instrument of leadership in times of strategic change (Cornelissen et al., 2011). Only recently have scholars begun to develop a more contextualized view of metaphorical communication that highlights the predicaments that emerge when using this rhetorical device (König et al., 2013). We contribute to this emerging stream of research by theorizing about the dilemmas that arise from the interaction of metaphor complexity with focal dimensions of the MNC's strategic mode, and by providing a more balanced portrayal of metaphorical communication and its ramifications in the conveyance of strategic messages inside organizations (Gavetti & Rivkin, 2005; Grisham, 2006). As many other types of speech are likely to have markedly different consequences in different contexts, our paper may also provide a general impetus for a comparatist view of strategy communication in larger organizations.

Managerial Relevance

Our research has important implications for managerial practice. Numerous theory-focused articles and various best-selling, practitioner-oriented publications highlight the potential benefits of metaphorical communication for management (Denning, 2007; Gavetti & Rivkin, 2005; Heath & Heath, 2007). In contrast to these prior studies, this paper emphasizes that MNC executives who wish to employ metaphorical language to communicate global strategy need to be keenly aware of cross-contextual differences among the organizational members they address. In particular, our model provides detailed recommendations for the types of metaphorical strategy communication that best fits certain types of MNCs. We advise executives in MNCs to not only follow these recommendations but also to build on the overall theory presented here to improve their understanding of the contextualized implications of symbols overall. In the end, the use of appropriate metaphors and an awareness of metaphor complexity are likely to help managers "understand"—in a truly hermeneutical sense—the various contexts found in their organizations. In circumstances where such an understanding provides a competitive advantage, the theory we develop may also be conductive to performance beyond the communicative facet of metaphorical language: the more understanding a sender of communication gains about the historical and normative bases of a context through the process of developing (complex) metaphors, the more she or he gains in local responsiveness in that context at large.

Future Research and Conclusion

As with any theory, our propositions build on various premises that not only constitute important boundary conditions but also provide avenues for future research. Most importantly, we assume that a strategy metaphor used by an executive adequately represents the sender's intentions, regardless of whether that metaphor is formulated as PMC or CMC. However, this need not always be the case. Consider, for instance, a metaphor Nokia's CEO Stephen Elop used in 2011 to highlight the competitive pressure Nokia was facing, and to motivate employees to embrace radical and risky strategic shifts. In an internal memo, he told a story about a man who dared to jump into the sea in order to be rescued from a burning oil platform. Elop then wrote:

> We [...] too are standing on a "burning platform," and we must decide how we are going to change our behavior. […] And we have more than one explosion—we have multiple points of scorching heat that are fueling a blazing fire around us. (Elop, cited in Engadget, 2011)

The "burning platform" metaphor is an archetypal example of powerful PMC. It refers to primary concepts (the experience of catastrophic fire; Clarke & Harris, 1985), unspecific knowledge (e.g., fire, the sea), and universal values (survival as one of the most valuable goals). Moreover, it creates a feeling of threat much more immediate than abstract explanations about the company's competitive environment. However, whether the "burning platform" metaphor precisely conveyed what Elop had in mind is questionable. With the help of the metaphor, Elop made jumping look more inviting than staying on the platform. Thus, some employees may have associated "jumping from the platform to be rescued" with "leaving the company to find a safer job in another company." To the extent that this was the case, the metaphorical communication was highly ineffective. Future research could investigate this problem and study the dysfunctional consequences of logically non-equivalent (Schwenk, 1984) metaphorical strategy communication. This research could be particularly interesting given recent experimental findings on the effects of different metaphorical frames (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011; Gubler et al., 2015).

Relatedly, the precise conditions under which metaphors are more effective than literal language are not well understood. The entire audience's interpretation may diverge from that which is intended or the audience may develop unintended sub-ideas when presented with metaphors (Gaddefors, 2007). Moreover, communication recipients may be very heterogeneous in their processing of metaphors (Cornelissen, 2006a). For instance, prior research suggests that a person's prior beliefs about the subject matter of the message may have a bearing on the metaphor's effectiveness (Cornelissen et al., 2011; Gentner & Bowdle 2008). We therefore call for more empirical research, like that found in Sopory and Dillard (2002), aimed at studying the effectiveness of metaphors under clearly delineated conditions. In particular, we believe controlled experiments would provide useful results.

Another important boundary condition found in our assumptions is that each metaphor the headquarters uses has a linguistic equivalent in the target language. Relaxing this assumption opens up opportunities for an even deeper integration of our theorizing with extant research on natural language diversity (Brannen et al., 2014). For instance, building on Holden and Michailova (2014), it would be interesting to investigate the specific challenges associated with translating metaphorical strategy communication. This research could benefit from the broad stream of translation studies that specifically deals with metaphors (e.g., Schäffner, 2004). Relatedly, future research may attempt to study the endogeneity of metaphorical communication in MNCs along the lines of Luo and Shenkar (2006), who focus on how language design evolves as a reflection of strategy, cognition, and situation. For instance, if an MNC has selected English as the functional language for the entire organization, is it more likely to rely on PMC or CMC? These thoughts would be particularly important in an empirical investigation of metaphorical strategy communication.

From an MNC strategy perspective, one limitation of our study is our focus on the classical integration/responsiveness framework and the resulting strategies (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989; Prahalad & Doz, 1987). While we believe that the number and quality of studies validating the dimensions (e.g., Harzing, 2000), which represent the “face validity” of the model, and the intense application of the framework in contemporary international business research and teaching (Devinney et al., 2000; Kostova et al., 2016) provide sufficient support for our approach, we are fully aware of its limitations (see, e.g., Devinney et al., 2000 or Haugland, 2010, for critical reviews). For instance, we assume that structure and power in the MNC are consequences of (boundledly) rational centralized decision making. Furthermore, we assume that at least a part of the strategy is deliberately crafted by headquarters. Future studies may seek to relax these assumptions and, for example, integrate metaphorical strategy communication with extended versions of the integration-responsiveness typology (proposed by Devinney et al., 2000) or fundamentally different conceptualizations of MNC strategy (e.g., transaction-cost models, agency-based models, or regional perspectives; Hennart, 2000; Kostova et al., 2016; Rugman & Verbeke, 2004). In particular, adopting a socio-political perspective and a view of the MNC as a loosely coupled political system (Birkinshaw et al., 2000; Boussebaa, 2015; Ferner, 2000) raises interesting questions. For instance, can headquarters deliberately use certain kinds of metaphorical communication to regulate the degree of coupling between units (i.e., use PMC to increase and localized CMC to decrease coupling)?

Relatedly, there is a promising opportunity to integrate our theory into research on the attention headquarters pay to subsidiaries. For instance, metaphorical communication could improve a subsidiary’s ability to “gain attention from corporate headquarters” (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008, p. 577), which is viewed as a scarce and valuable resource in MNCs. Moreover, given our emphasis on the role of strategy communication among all units in an MNC, our theory could help widen the attention-based conversation from a vertical (headquarter/subsidiary) perspective to a multi-dimensional perspective that includes horizontal subsidiary-to-subsidiary communication. In particular, an extended perspective could generate insights into the patterns of strategy emergence in

MNCs (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2011). Alternatively, it would be highly interesting to analyze the implications of metaphorical communication in the context of strategic change and transformation, especially "framing contests" (Kaplan, 2008a) between members of different units who might use metaphorical communication to politically influence collective interpretations of new strategic issues.

Scholars might find another rich avenue for future research in the study of the relation between the usage of tropes, such as metaphors, in an MNC and the development and exercise of power in the organization (Clegg, 1987, 1989). Prior studies, many of which are based on critical, postcolonial theory, demonstrate that language designs that are imposed by headquarters can have (possibly unintended) adverse political consequences (Prasad, 2012; Said, 1979). For instance, scholars have revealed how language-design decision, such as decisions to implement one language as the corporate language, can trigger the creation of relationships characterized by superior and inferior positions. Such new hierarchies can have a vital impact on organizational members' regulation and reconstruction of organizational identity (Boussebaa & Brown, 2016; Boussebaa et al., 2014; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Vaara et al., 2005). The use of headquarters-specific CMC might lead to similar consequences when, for instance, subsidiary employees feel incompetent or disregarded because they are unable to make sense of the communication. Such feelings may even extend to the point that employees feel imperialistically (Phillipson, 1992) dominated by the cultural context that is imposed upon them (Vaara et al., 2005).

We see several dimensions along which future research may explore the degree to which our theory may be generalizable to other settings. First, we focused on MNCs because they represent an extreme case in terms of intra-company contextual differences, cultural heterogeneity, and tensions (Roth & Kostova, 2003). As large firms in most sectors are internationally active today (Dunning & Lundan, 2008) and as even smaller, largely national-focused firms are becoming increasingly multi-contextual in their workforces (Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999), we believe our research can be widely generalized across company populations. In addition, differences in shared conceptual repertoires, knowledge, and values are likely to exist in *any* firm that exceeds a certain size, suggesting that our main idea should be valid in many non-MNC settings. Nevertheless, researchers may wish to explicitly test and extend our theory by asking to which degree and under which circumstances our findings apply to large non-MNCs and comparatively small organizations.

Second, we concentrated on the discourse among MNC units in different nations. We have thus implicitly focused on contextual idiosyncrasies on a country level. Subsequent research could expand this view by exploring metaphorical communication between “smaller” or “bigger” contexts, such as business units, departments, or divisions, on the one hand, or multi-country regions on the other hand, which can develop unique forms of discourse as they evolve. Such research could be particularly interesting because variations in the discourse of sub-contexts may deviate from preconceived contextual stereotypes, such as cultural contexts (Drews et al., 1985). Studies taking a regional perspective (Verbeke & Asmussen, 2016; Mudambi & Puck, 2016) could also help define the implications of our model for MNCs in the light of proposed semi-globalization (Rugman & Verbeke, 2004).

Third, our study focused on the communication of strategy to company-internal audiences. However, we can easily envision other valuable projects centering on the metaphorical communication from MNCs’ representatives to *external* constituents who may or may not share a conceptual basis, knowledge, and values with the senders of the communication. For instance, König et al. (2013) find that metaphorical strategy communication with stakeholders in capital markets might not always be advantageous given its inherent ambiguity. The incorporation of metaphor complexity as a moderator could enhance our understanding of such phenomena. Future studies may also examine the consequences of metaphorical communication in a company’s interaction with diverse external audiences (Lamin & Zaheer, 2012), such as journalists or consumer advocates, who hold different values than, for instance, securities analysts.

Fourth, while metaphors are a particularly rich example of a trope that can have different effects on different audiences, they are not the only rhetorical device with this property. In fact, we could envision almost all elements of “charismatic” rhetoric (Fanelli et al., 2009; Antonakis et al., 2012), such as hyperbole, rhetorical questions, and the use of stories, as being received and understood differently depending, for instance, on the socially situated perceptions of exaggeration, hierarchy, and narration. This applies to audiences from different countries and to audiences with different professional backgrounds within a country. For instance, imagine the possible different reactions to hyperbole from a US audience and a Scandinavian audience, or the different reactions to hyperbole from a sales representative and an engineer.

The most logical first step for subsequent empirical research consists of testing our propositions and studying the precise performance effects of metaphorical strategy communication. Effective strategy communication is widely viewed as a prerequisite for organizational performance (Gavetti & Rivkin, 2005). However, to our knowledge, large-scale empirical studies of the precise consequences of internal strategy communication, not to speak of metaphorical strategy communication and strategy communication in MNCs, do not exist. More specifically, future investigations should focus on the *mechanisms* that explain how and why metaphorical strategy communication influences performance-related variables, such as M&A performance, crisis management, and organizational adaptation to discontinuous change.

Regardless of the focus of subsequent research, qualitative-inductive and quantitative-deductive research is needed. Inductive research is particularly advisable for describing metaphor use in managerial contexts in more detail. A rich base of qualitative evidence could, for instance, be helpful in providing managers with more specific, systematic guidelines concerning such aspects as conceptual bases and value systems shared across contexts. Thus far, linguists have described the complexity of numerous metaphors by comparing metaphor use in a wide array of cultural contexts, including the European, North American, Asian (especially the Chinese), and African contexts. Similarly, research on intercultural differences (Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2004) has provided insights into culturally determined value systems. Nevertheless, a systematic synthesis of this research, including an empirically grounded overview of metaphors and their levels of complexity, is still lacking.

Statistical-deductive studies could be fruitful for uncovering broader associations. For instance, we recommend that researchers test our model in a large-scale, cross-industry study using publically available data and survey data. Discursive vehicles used in previous research (e.g., Kaplan, 2008), such as letters to shareholders (Amernic et al., 2007) or publically available interviews with top managers (Guo, 2011), could serve as a sufficient basis for measuring whether a given MNC's headquarters tends to describe its global strategy in a more complex or more primary manner. Survey data gathered from multiple MNC employees from a range of contexts could help researchers estimate the effectiveness of communication.

When testing, grounding, and extending our model, researchers can build on the increasingly firm basis of research methodologies that are available for operationalizing the variables included in our theory. Most prominently, metaphor analysis (Pragglejaz Group, 2007; Schmitt, 2005) has been developed to such an extent that it can be applied by scholars from disciplines outside linguistics (Alvi, 2012), and it might also be helpful in developing a scale for metaphor complexity. As in most MNC studies, controls should include such factors as the level of global strategic posturing among industries and companies (Carpenter & Fredrickson, 2001). Additional controls should comprise general drivers of communication effectiveness, such as communication structure (Minto, 2002), non-verbal expressiveness (Friedman et al., 1980), and other rhetorical elements (Bonet & Sauquet, 2010).

In contrast to the extant research on metaphors in the context of strategy communication, our theorizing emphasizes the notion that decision makers who wish to use metaphors need to "become aware of and respect both the differences in [… receivers'] backgrounds and when these differences are important" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 231). This point is particularly salient for executives in MNCs, who are required to effectively communicate their global strategies across highly diverse contextual landscapes. We therefore hope that this paper serves as a resonant call for an enlightening debate not only on the use of metaphorical communication in MNCs and the development of a complex, contextualized, and multidimensional view of language and language design in MNCs, but also on strategy communication in MNCs in general.

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FIGURE 1: Framework of the Types of Metaphorical Strategy Communication with Highest Value for Generic Types of MNC Strategies

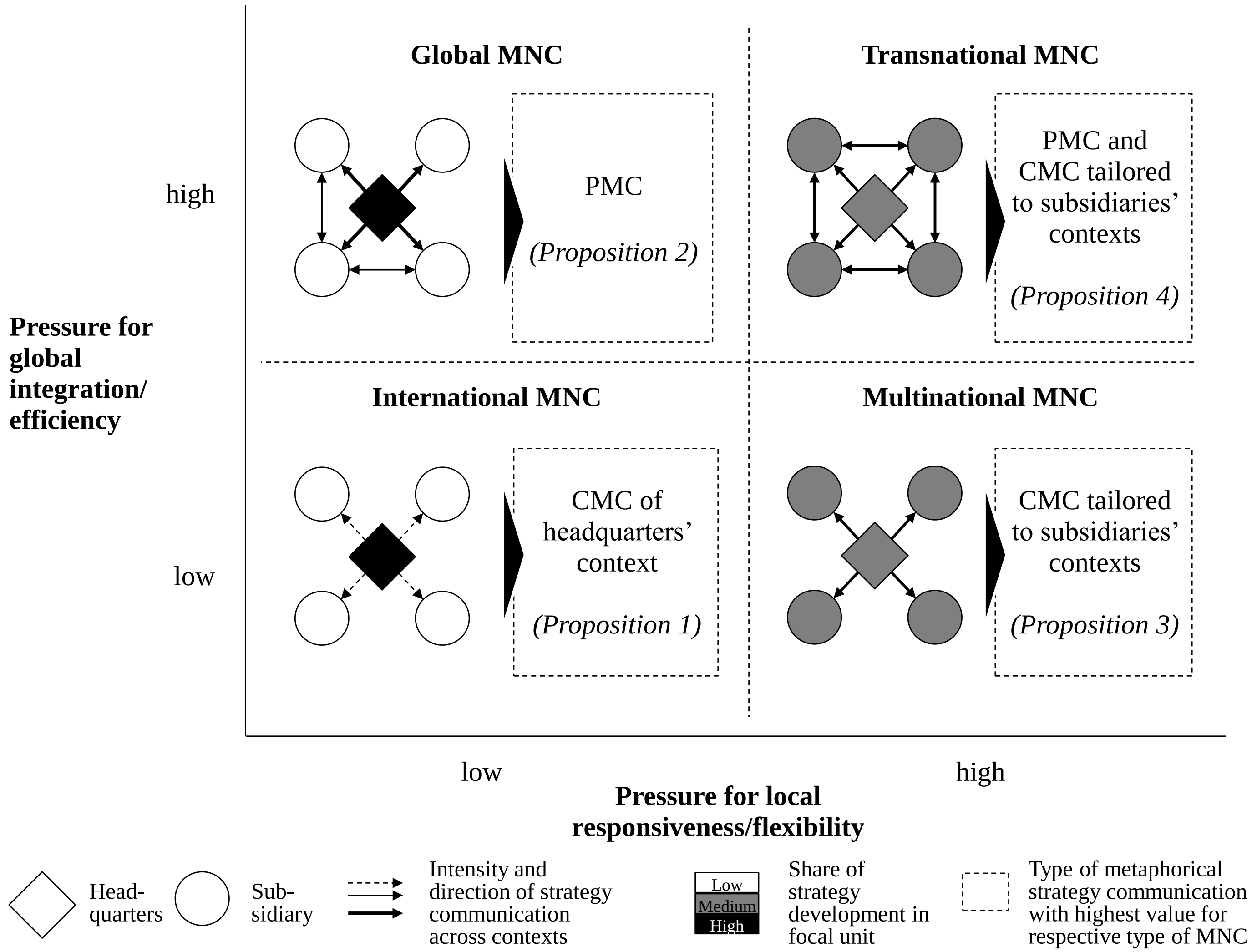

TABLE 1: Examples of Strategic Messages in Abstract and Metaphorical Language

Abstract (non-figurative) strategic message	**Metaphorical communication of the abstract strategic message**	
	Relatively primary (PMC) • Reference to a relatively common conceptual basis • Reference to knowledge shared by the sender and a high number of receivers • Correspondence with value systems in a broad array of cultural contexts	**Relatively complex (CMC)** • Reference to a relatively specific conceptual basis • Reference to knowledge shared by the sender and a small number of receivers • Correspondence with value systems in a narrow array of cultural contexts
"[Our goal is to] emerge from the position of domestic leader to leading global player in the energy sector." (Coal India Limited, 2012)	"Our goal is to grow from a small and remote kingdom into an empire in the world of energy." (fictional)	"Our goal is to rise from our position as a Maroboduus of the energy sector to become the Augustus of the energy sector." (fictional) *Maroboduus was the king of a small Germanic tribe from 9 BC to 19 AD. Augustus, the Roman emperor, ruled nearly the entirety of the known western hemisphere from 27 BC to 14 AD.*
"[Our goal is to] revolutionize this company to have the strength of a big company combined with the leanness and agility of a small company." (GE in the 1980s, cited in Thompson, 2001)	"Our goal is to have the strength of a blue whale combined with the leanness and agility of a young dolphin." (fictional)	"Our goal is to have the strength of Akashi Shiganosuke combined with the leanness and agility of Toshiyuki Igarashi." (fictional) *Akashi Shiganosuke (approximately 180 kg) was a legendary sumo wrestler active in seventeenth-century Japan. Toshiyuki Igarashi is a Japanese flyweight boxer (approximately 48 kg) who became world champion in 2012.*
"We [are] going to use a discovery-based planning method [...] to [find] our way in this new market." (Kodak CEO Willy Shih in 1997, as told in Shih, 2007, pp. 2-3)	"The vision is this … we are on our journey to a beautiful country. However, on that journey, we have to pass through territories none of us has ever been to and of which there are no maps. That means we know that we need to be trained and that we have to pack food for several days. However, do not ask me which way we will exactly take or what we will eat each day. I do not know the answers. We just have to discover our way." (fictional)	"The vision is we're going to California, and we're going to drive. That means pack for five days, and bring credit cards, but don't ask me where we're going to have lunch on Tuesday, because I can't tell you." (Shih, 2007, p. 2)

"Take market share from Caterpillar!" (fictional) *In the 1980s, Komatsu pursued an aggressive growth strategy, striving to increase its US market share from 3% to 15% in the near-term and to 20-25% in the long term (Scherer, 1992).*	"Occupy Caterpillar's territory!" (fictional)	"Maru-C" (Scherer, 1992, p. 105) *This literally translates from Japanese into "encircle Caterpillar," with C signifying Caterpillar and "encircling" referring to the board game "Go" in which each player attempts to capture the opponent's stones by encircling them.*
"We will abandon desktop software in a way that allows no reversing the decision." (fictional) *In 2013, Adobe Systems decided to switch from producing traditional software to offering software as a service.*	"We will lock desktop software up and throw away the key." (fictional)	"We're going to burn the boats with regards to desktop software." (Adobe Systems CEO Shantanu Narayen, cited in Financial Times, 2015) *"Burning the boats" refers to accounts of Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés burning boats upon landing on Mexican shores to force his crew to fight to the death.*[3]
"We don't wait for external pressures. We are internally driven to improve." (Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, 2013; Amazon, 2014)	"We fortify our position without the enemy threatening to attack." (fictional)	"We heat up the cauldron before the Duke of Savoy even thinks about sending his troops." (fictional) *In 1602, a group of the Duke of Savoy's commandos entered the city of Geneva to open the city gates and conquer the city. Legend has it that Catherine Cheynel, who lived just above the La Monnaie town gate, dropped a cauldron of boiling soup onto a Savoyard attacker and killed him. The ensuing commotion helped wake up the townsfolk, who successfully defended the city.*
Tesla aims to become the "world's only vertically integrated energy company." (Tesla Motors CEO Elon Musk, cited in New York Times, 2016)	Tesla aims to "be the only energy firm to have everything under one roof, from start to finish." (fictional)	Tesla aims to "build the Apple of clean energy." (Daniel M. Kammen, Director of the Renewable and Appropriate Energy Laboratory at UC Berkeley, cited in New York Times, 2016)
"We do not serve the low end of the market." (fictional) *In 2013, even the cheapest model of Apple's iPhone still cost USD 549.*	"We're not in the junk business." (Apple CEO Tim Cook, cited in Bloomberg, 2013)	"We do not want Apple to be for consumer electronics what Popov is for vodka." (fictional) *Popov is a low-cost vodka, the taste of which Internet reviewers describe as "equal parts nail polish and shame."*

[3] For the sake of historical accuracy, it shall be noted that Cortés did not actually burn his ships but had them scuttled (Reynolds, 1959).