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# Implementing the equality, diversity, and inclusion agenda in multinational companies: A framework for the management of (linguistic) diversity

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## Abstract

Advancing, both conceptually and practically, the equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) agenda, which is notoriously difficult to implement, this paper addresses the under-researched area of global diversity management (GDM) in multinational companies (MNCs). Drawing on Harrison and Klein's (2007) conceptualisations of diversity (separation, variety, and disparity) and two core concepts (fluidity and reciprocity) that reflect recent developments in the EDI literature, we propose a two-step framework for implementing the EDI agenda through GDM. We argue that to achieve inclusion, we first need to *think* differently about diversity and differences (i.e., view diversity in a positive light and recognise and appreciate differences as *fluid*), in order to *act* differently (i.e., promote *reciprocal* effort to leverage diversity). We illustrate our framework with the specific case of linguistic diversity, a diversity dimension that is particularly salient, but also often neglected in MNCs, and discuss the implications of the proposed framework for EDI theory as well as human resource management policies and practice.

**Abbreviations:** BELF, English as business lingua franca; CCM, cross-cultural management; CEFR, common European framework of reference for languages; EDI, equality, diversity and inclusion; GDM, global diversity agenda; HR, human resources; HRM, human resource management; IB, international business; MNC, multinational company.

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**KEYWORDS**
disparity, equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) agenda, fluidity, global diversity management, language, language-based discrimination, linguistic diversity, linguistic inclusion, MNCs, reciprocity, separation, variety

### Practitioner notes

**What is currently known?**

- Organisational inclusion promotes positive outcomes of diversity for individuals and organisations.
- Multinational companies (MNCs) recognise the importance of the equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) agenda but often struggle to implement it and leverage its strategic potential.
- More guidance is needed to help MNCs foster inclusion through global diversity management (GDM).
- EDI debates tend to focus on a small range of diversity dimensions which do not include language, even though language-based stereotyping and discrimination can have significant work and career outcomes for individuals and groups.

**What this paper adds?**

- We propose a two-step framework for implementing the EDI agenda and fostering inclusion through GDM.
- To illustrate how our framework can be applied to the management of different aspects of diversity, we focus on the specific case of linguistic diversity.
- We discuss linguistic diversity as a process and an outcome, and frame it as a key dimension of EDI.
- We discuss the EDI-related impacts of linguistic diversity in MNCs.
- We offer practical recommendations for the management of linguistic diversity.

**The implications for practitioners**

- Avoid thinking about categories of difference in binary terms and promote a positive view of differences.
- Work with the assumption that achieving (linguistic) inclusion is only possible through reciprocal efforts of all staff—both majority and minority group members.
- Raise awareness of the fact that successful implementation of the EDI agenda requires systematic, strategic, and prolonged efforts.
- Include language in organisational EDI efforts within HR policy and practice, especially in multinational settings.
- Turn attention to fostering linguistically inclusive workspaces through on-going individual-, group- and organisational level actions.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Across the world, businesses declare their commitment to the equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) agenda, understood as the creation of equitable and inclusive workplaces in which no one is discriminated against, and all employees—regardless of their background and demographic characteristics—can fulfil their potential. It is recognised that 'much is gained by way of organisational outcomes when inclusion is fostered in organisations' (Mor-Barak et al., 2016, p. 308), as 'good work and inclusion go hand in hand' (CIPD, 2021a, p. 3). Advancing the EDI agenda also helps achieve important societal outcomes, such as '(re)building an economy of belonging at a global level (Newburry et al., 2022, p. 1)'. Implementation of the EDI agenda through dedicated policies and practices is a key responsibility of

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human resource management (HRM) and a crucial aspect of diversity management efforts (e.g., CIPD, 2019; Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Parry et al., 2021). The CIPD's (2020) 'People Profession in 2030' report points to diversity, inclusion and shifting demographics as key trends impacting future workplaces.

However, a recent Harvard Business Review Analytic Services research report (2021) on EDI revealed that whilst many organisations are trying to advance their EDI agendas, few have managed to make satisfactory inroads. Organisations struggle to leverage the strategic potential of EDI (Ely & Thomas, 2020; Newburry et al., 2022), which can only be achieved if EDI is holistically and deeply embedded into organisational cultures (Cassell et al., 2022; Śliwa et al., 2022) and aligned with shared values (Umeh et al., 2022) rather than solely linked to non-discriminatory policies. EDI-related initiatives and diversity management are particularly challenging to implement in multinational companies (MNCs), not least because of problems with legitimacy, in particular among non-HR managers (Davis et al., 2016; Kirton & Greene, 2019). Additionally, EDI approaches originate in the Global North and often do not account for contextual differences (e.g., Umeh et al., 2022), further exacerbating problems with their relevance in different local cultural contexts (e.g., Bader et al., 2022; Hennekam et al., 2017; Sippola & Smale, 2007). These implementation challenges are not helped by the fact that global diversity management (GDM) still remains an under-researched area (Cooke et al., 2019). To advance the EDI agenda, new conceptual and practical approaches to inclusion are needed, especially as economic downturns threaten investment in diversity and inclusion (CIPD, 2020).

Drawing on a range of disciplines which, in different ways, have engaged with equality, diversity and inclusion, we therefore put forward a *conceptual* and *practical* framework to aid HRM professionals responsible for GDM in the implementation of the EDI agenda in MNCs. We do so by integrating three key ideas. First, we adopt Harrison and Klein's (2007) view that diversity can be conceptualised in three distinct ways, which vary in substance, operationalisation, and consequences: separation (differences in standpoints and opinions reflecting disagreement or opposition), variety (differences in kind or category, primarily of information, knowledge, or experience), and disparity (differences in concentration of assets or resources, such as pay or status). Second, we draw on the understanding of categories of difference as fluid—as discussed, for example, in relation to gender (e.g., Butler, 2004; Hines & Taylor, 2018) and race (e.g., Davenport, 2020; Saperstein & Penner, 2012). Third, we incorporate the view of reciprocity as necessary for inclusion (e.g., Memoli & Sannella, 2017; Pless & Maak, 2004; Shore et al., 2011). We suggest two steps that are needed for successful implementation of the EDI agenda in MNCs and for ensuring inclusion of all employees: (1) *thinking* differently; (2) *acting* differently. Step one involves a shift in thinking about difference and diversity—viewing diversity in a positive light and recognising and appreciating *fluidity*. Step two is concerned with promoting *reciprocity* in leveraging diversity. This conceptual integration contributes to the understanding of how to start moving towards a positive view of diversity both conceptually and practically and thus how to work towards a deeper embedding of a positive approach to diversity and inclusion.

To illustrate how our generic framework can be applied to the management of different aspects of diversity, we focus on the case of linguistic diversity: a diversity dimension that is particularly salient in MNCs. Most MNCs are inherently multilingual and linguistically diverse teams have long been on the rise (CIPD, 2021b), thus increasing the risk of language being used as an exclusionary mechanism (Piller, 2021). Even so, calls to consider language as a core aspect of diversity (e.g., Cocchiara et al., 2016; Groutsis et al., 2018; Piekkari et al., 2015) are yet to be systematically addressed by diversity management research and HRM practice. Despite evidence (e.g., Gaibrois & Nentwich, 2020; Iheduru-Anderson, 2020; Ozturk & Berber, 2022) which shows that language diversity intersects with other dimensions of diversity and can act as their proxy (Piller, 2021), dominant debates—especially in the Global North—focus on a limited set of diversity categories, most notably those of gender and race. The inclusion of linguistic diversity in diversity research and policies is essential if we are to 'address the neglect of culturally and linguistically diverse talent' (Groutsis et al., 2018, p. 2236). It is also crucial in efforts to combat language-based discrimination (Formanowicz & Suitner, 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Woo & Giles, 2017) and foster linguistic inclusion. We conceptualise linguistic inclusion as both a *process* and an *outcome*. As a process, and consistent with the view of diversity as variety, linguistic inclusion encompasses actions aimed at developing positive perceptions, attitudes, and actions towards linguistic diversity. As an outcome, linguistic inclusion denotes a situation where there is a lack of

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separation and disparity, manifested in an absence of language-based divisions, discrimination, and privileges among language users.

By putting forward our framework, we provide a generic model of how to implement EDI in MNCs that could be tailored to different diversity dimensions, and different home/host country, industry, and organisational contexts. Our framework makes three contributions to EDI theory building. First, it suggests a shift in the *conceptualisation* of (language) differences towards a focus on the positive aspects of diversity, that is, diversity as *variety*, in order to accomplish inclusion. The second contribution lies in the framework's emphasis on fluidity. This involves the recognition of a high degree of *variety* within categories of difference—in relation to both language and other categories, such as gender and ethnicity—which, we theorise, will result in the reduction of difference-based barriers and divisions, that is, *separation* and *disparity among staff*. Third, through introducing the concept of reciprocity—which highlights the importance of mutual adjustments by all staff, regardless of their backgrounds, leading to a further reduction in *separation* and *disparity*—our framework contributes to the understanding of how to effectively *implement* the EDI agenda in MNCs. Our framework also has a range of implications for HRM practice both generally and across the different HRM functions, such as recruitment and selection, and training and development.

## 2 | A GENERIC FRAMEWORK FOR IMPLEMENTING THE EDI AGENDA THROUGH GLOBAL DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

### 2.1 | Defining equality, diversity, and inclusion

The overarching goal of equality/equity, diversity, and inclusion research and practice has been to overcome discrimination and inequality in organisations (Gagnon et al., 2022). We understand equality as concerned with 'the way in which an individual (or group) displaying specific manifestations (of any dimension of diversity) is related to that individual's (or group's) (un)equal achievements, status, or access to resources' (Köllen et al., 2018, p. 439). Complementing this, equity refers to 'the absence of systematic disparities… between groups with different levels of underlying social advantage/disadvantage—that is, wealth, power, or prestige' (Chin & Chien, 2006, p. 79). By contrast, diversity refers to 'the numerous categories, often referred to as dimensions of diversity, that can be used to describe humans, and that humans can utilise to describe themselves' (Köllen et al., 2018, p. 439). In organisational contexts, diversity can be described as 'the distribution of differences among the members of a unit with respect to a common attribute' (Harrison & Klein, 2007, p. 1200). Conversely, inclusion focuses on experiences and 'the degree to which individuals feel a part of critical organisational processes such as access to information and resources, involvement in work groups, and ability to influence the decision-making process' (Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998, p. 48).

Harrison and Klein (2007) provide important insights into different framings and understandings of diversity in organisations. To them, 'diversity is not one thing but three things' (Harrison & Klein, 2007, p. 1200). They argue it can be indicative of (1) 'separation: differences in position among unit members [that] reflect disagreement or opposition; (2) variety: differences in kind or category, primarily of information, knowledge, or experience; or (3) disparity: differences in concentration of valued social assets or resources such as pay or status' (Harrison & Klein, 2007, p. 1200). In their view, demographic characteristics can be 'meaningfully conceptualised as separation or as variety or as disparity' (Harrison & Klein, 2007, p. 1208). They contend that when diversity is thought about as separation, this leads to reduced cohesiveness, more interpersonal conflict, distrust, and decreased team performance within a unit. By contrast, viewing diversity in terms of variety results in greater creativity, higher decision quality, more task conflict and increased unit flexibility. Finally, disparity-type of diversity is associated with more within-unit competition, resentful deviance, reduced member input, and withdrawal.

As Lumineau et al. (2021) observe, International Business (IB) research has focussed predominantly on separation (the negatives of diversity), with tentative ventures into variety (the positives of diversity), and has all but ignored disparity (the discriminatory consequences of diversity). Such view of diversity creates an obstacle to implementing

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the EDI agenda which aims at leveraging and celebrating diversity, and achieving inclusion. In MNCs, implementation of the EDI agenda is integral to GDM, which operates at the intersection of cross-cultural management (CCM) and diversity management (Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Romani & Holgersson, 2020). MNCs operate across national, cultural, ethnic, geographic, and linguistic boundaries. In the CCM and IB field, the management of these boundaries and their associated differences has typically been interpreted as the management of distance and has usually adopted 'a negative view on foreignness, distance, and differences of all kinds (…), with an emphasis on liabilities and adverse outcomes associated with such differences' (Stahl et al., 2016, p. 621). Such a deficiency-focussed way of thinking about differences has limited the scope to offer constructive guidance for GDM in MNCs.

As an affirmative and practical way forward, we propose a two-step generic framework (see Figure 1) for implementing the EDI agenda in MNCs. It is worth noting that EDI scholarship has been conducted from within different paradigms, adopting a range of approaches: from functionalist ones, that have focussed predominantly on 'diversity management', to those taking a radical humanistic stance, concerned with the achievement of social justice (Romani & Holgersson, 2020). Following scholars who have argued in favour of paradigm commensurability (Donaldson, 1998; Romme, 2003), and more recently paradigm interplay in EDI studies (Gagnon et al., 2022), our framework is underpinned by elements of two paradigms. It draws on radical humanist ideas concerning the fluidity of categories, such as gender and race, and the re-negotiation of hegemonistic positions through the expectation of reciprocity, whilst also aiming to provide practical guidance for managers, typically associated with the functionalist paradigm. In general terms, the two steps of our proposed framework follow the well-established and empirically tested cognitive model (Beck, 1964), widely used in both psychotherapeutic (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) and organisational (coaching) contexts. According to this model: (1) our actions in response to situations are the result of our thoughts, that is, perceptions and interpretations, in relation to these situations; (2) to change how we act in specific situations, we therefore need to change the way we think about them.

## 2.2 | Step one: Changing how we *think about* diversity and differences in multinational companies

As the first step of a generic framework for GDM consistent with the EDI agenda, we propose changing the way we *think about* diversity and differences: from viewing them primarily in negative terms (separation) to embracing their positives (variety). Connected to this is the necessity to move away from thinking about categories of difference in *binary* terms, as exemplified by notions of 'distance' and 'foreignness', towards a conceptualisation embracing *fluidity*.

Traditionally, the EDI literature has distinguished between visible/surface-level and invisible/deep-level differences (Kandola & Fullerton, 1994), and between primary/unchangeable and secondary/changeable differences (Holvino & Kamp, 2009). Such categorisations, however, have been challenged. One key element of this critique

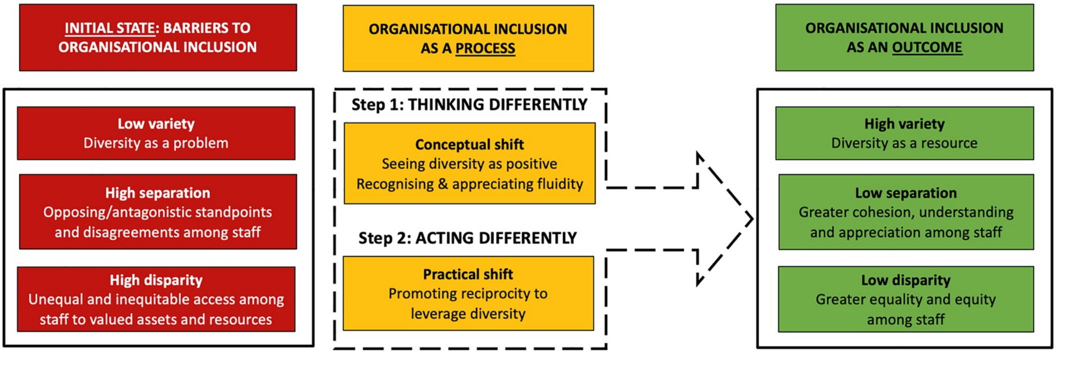


FIGURE 1 Implementing the equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) agenda in multinational companies (MNCs).

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concerns classifying differences as subject to binary distinctions, instead of acknowledging that they are fluid (Clair et al., 2019; Linstead & Brewis, 2004). For instance, the literature addressing race in organisations goes beyond binary categorisations of people as 'white' and 'non-white' (e.g., Liu, 2017). Likewise, the binary classification of individuals as either men or women is being replaced by a more fluid understanding, encompassing transgender individuals and those who do not identify their gender in binary terms (e.g., Gagnon et al., 2022; Ozturk & Tatli, 2016).

### 2.3 | Step two: Changing how we *act* in relation to diversity in MNCs

The above changes in how we think about diversity and differences in MNCs are needed for the creation of inclusive organisational climates (Nishii, 2013) in which the EDI agenda can be successfully implemented within GDM practices. Traditional diversity management practices have been criticised for assimilation or essentialisation of difference, thereby inadvertently advancing the interests of the dominant group only (Holck & Muhr, 2017; Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011). By contrast, the EDI agenda is concerned with the needs of both dominant and non-dominant groups. To be meaningful, inclusion must rely on relations of reciprocity (Memoli & Sannella, 2017).

An EDI-oriented approach therefore considers achieving organisational inclusion, across all dimensions of diversity, as a *collective*, *reciprocal* effort, rather than the responsibility of individuals who belong to non-dominant groups. Pless and Maak (2004) introduced reciprocal understanding as a founding principle in their framework of inclusion based on a moral theory of recognition. GDM practices aimed at promoting reciprocal efforts of both majority and minority group members and a shared responsibility of all within the MNC for implementing the EDI agenda are central to the practical application of our framework. The actual form of these efforts will differ depending on the dimension of diversity in question. Below, we turn to linguistic diversity as a core dimension of diversity and discuss in detail the changes in thinking and acting that the application of our generic framework involves in relation to it.

## 3 | IMPLEMENTING THE EDI AGENDA: THE ILLUSTRATIVE CASE OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

The implementation of the EDI agenda within the management of linguistic diversity aims to combat language-based discrimination (Formanowicz & Suitner, 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Woo & Giles, 2017)—'the unfair treatment of an individual or group of individuals on account of their language or speech features such as accent' (Ng, 2007, p. 106)—and foster linguistic inclusion. We define linguistic diversity as both a variety *within* a single language and as the variety *of* languages used within an MNC. A variety within a single language is manifested in differentiated language profiles of staff, different language norms in communication and a range of nonstandard accents, for example, when speaking in the corporate language. A variety of languages refers to the use of multiple natural languages in an MNC, such as German, French or English, as well as a range of occupational languages, for example, used among IT professionals, project managers or engineers, and corporate idiolects, linked to an MNC's specific products and processes.

### 3.1 | Linguistic diversity and its outcomes

Although language has not been systematically considered as a core dimension of diversity, work from across a range of disciplines—such as IB, linguistics, psychology, and organisation studies—has provided evidence of the profound implications of linguistic diversity. As Kim and Angouri (2022) observe, languages are markedly socially unequal, enjoying different status and influence (Ristolainen et al., 2021; Wilmot & Tietze, 2020). Language hierarchies exist between and within languages, with only a small minority of language users able to use the most valued linguistic forms (Piller, 2021). It is estimated that around 98% of the 6000 languages used are clustered at the bottom

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of the language pyramid, with only a dozen acting as 'super-central languages' (De Swaan, 2001 in Piller, 2021). English, which appears to be 'all conquering in the arena of common corporate languages' (Wilmot, 2017, p. 91), functions as a 'hyper-central' language, with the standard varieties of English at the apex of the pyramid (Piller, 2021). Language use is heavily influenced by language ideologies which naturalise hierarchical relationships among speakers (Boussebaa et al., 2014; Kim & Angouri, 2022) and which, together with language proficiency, 'mediate social inclusion in linguistically diverse societies' (Piller & Takahashi, 2011, p. 371).

As a signifier of difference (Kim et al., 2019; Woo & Giles, 2017), language constitutes a salient marker of identity. Vocal clues, such as non-standard accented speech and grammar, speech disfluency and the use of different linguistic norms signal minority group membership and, by extension, a speaker's status (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Hideg et al., 2022). Non-standard accent refers to variations in accent based on geographic location (e.g., Appalachian English found in the Eastern United States), ethnicity (e.g., Indian Tamil English or African American Vernacular English), or acquisition (non-native; Montgomery & Acheme, 2022). Even proficient foreign language users can be subject to language-based discrimination (Russo et al., 2017), with subtle linguistic clues manifested in divergent conversational styles (e.g., turn taking, interruption conventions or pragmatic norms such as the acceptable ways of saying 'no') being able to serve as the basis for social differentiation (Tenzer et al., 2021) and discrimination. By contrast, others, especially those who speak the corporate lingua franca, the language of the headquarters or powerful subsidiaries, as their first language, tend to see their organisational status enhanced (e.g., Neeley & Dumas, 2016; Ristolainen et al., 2021). As Kim and Angouri (2022, p. 15) observe, language-based differentiation 'is one of the prime sites through which employees reframe the organisational relationship, negotiating zones of authorities and reifying or challenging status quo in multinational context'. In MNCs, English-language proficiency and standard speech tend to create 'a hierarchy of privilege' (Gaibrois & Nentwich, 2020, p. 479).

By triggering categorisations and (self-)stereotyping, language impacts perceptions and evaluations of self and others (Formanowicz & Suitner, 2020). Despite their global prevalence, non-standard accents activate cultural, class and ethnic stereotypes (Huang et al., 2013; Kang & Yaw, 2021; Kulkarni & Sommer, 2015; Śliwa & Johansson, 2014) which subsequently generate (predominantly negative) evaluations of the speakers' non-linguistic competence, intelligence, and trustworthiness (Dragojevic et al., 2021; Hideg et al., 2022; Tenzer et al., 2014). In many contexts, including MNCs, there are normative pressures against discriminatory behaviours towards speakers with non-standard accents and/or with a perceived lower level of language proficiency. Modern prejudice, however, normalises such discriminatory practices when they can be rationalised (Roessel et al., 2020)—presented as likely to affect future work performance, for example, by undermining a candidate's credibility among their staff or clients. Normalisation of discriminatory practices can lead to their routinisation whereby discriminatory scripts become taken-for-granted (Ng, 2007). In contexts where legislation prohibits discrimination based on protected characteristics, such as race, religion, or country of origin, but where prejudices remain, language-based discrimination can act as their proxy and serve as a gatekeeping mechanism (Piller, 2021), both in recruitment (Cocchiara et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2013) and promotion (Iheduru-Anderson, 2020). For example, an investigation carried out by *The Guardian* newspaper has revealed a pattern of bullying and harassment over regional, working-class accents at leading UK universities, prompting some students to leave higher education (Parveen, 2020).

Foreign and other non-standard language users are often aware of language stigmatisation, which can lead to diminished self-esteem and language anxiety (e.g., Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Li et al., 2020). Employees speaking in a foreign language may thus seek to reduce the perceived stereotype threat through linguistic side-lining, that is, limiting their involvement in communication (Tenzer et al., 2021) and code-switching—typically reverting to their first language (CIPD, 2021b; Hinds et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2019; Lauring & Klitmøller, 2015). Such behaviours, however, are likely to impede the achievement of equality/equity and inclusion in the organisation, in particular when code-switching results in linguistic ostracism (Fiset & Bhave, 2021; Kulkarni, 2015), and prevents other interlocutors from taking part in the communication. First, the career outcomes of individuals who revert to their first language, excluding others, can be negatively affected as code-switching can reinforce perceptions of poor

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performance and limit development opportunities (Russo et al., 2017). Second, code-switching, when experienced by others as a micro-aggression (Kulkarni, 2015), can lead to resentment (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015).

In sum, language-based discrimination is pervasive and can manifest itself in both overt and subtle ways (Roessel et al., 2020). It can significantly undermine job access and career progression (Cocchiara et al., 2016; Shore et al., 2018), leading to negative EDI outcomes for individuals, teams and the organisation. As such, we see the management of linguistic diversity as a crucial concern for HRM practitioners and EDI scholars alike, and an essential element of both GDM and the implementation of EDI values in MNCs.

## 3.2 | A framework for managing linguistic diversity

We now discuss how our generic framework for implementing the EDI agenda through GDM can be applied to managing linguistic diversity in MNCs (see Figure 2). As previously explained, our framework draws on Harrison and Klein's (2007) distinction between three views of diversity: separation, variety and disparity, as well as two core concepts that can be found in the humanistic tradition of the EDI literature—fluidity and reciprocity. As with the generic framework, we propose two steps for managing linguistic diversity: (1) changing how we *think* about linguistic diversity and language differences; and (2) changing how we *act* in relation to linguistic diversity. Specifically, applied to linguistic diversity, step one of our framework involves moving away from the deficiency-based conceptualisation of language differences as binary and static, with a focus on generic proficiency levels and the assumed superiority of standard language norms. It entails seeing language differences as a resource and recognising and appreciating *fluidity*. Here, fluidity involves challenging the binary distinction between native and non-native speakers, acknowledging the context-dependent nature of language differences (i.e., the fact that they vary depending on the type of communicative activity, where and how it is taking place, the interlocutors and the relationships between them) and reflect each language user's complex language profile (i.e., differentiated ability to perform communicative activities and strategies) in use and in interaction. It also entails valuing pluri-lingual competence and challenging the implicit assumption of linguistic superiority of standard language users. Step two suggests a move away from expecting members of non-dominant groups (foreign/non-standard language users) to adjust to the dominant group (standard language users) and the 'dominant norm', towards promoting *reciprocity* to leverage diversity. This involves

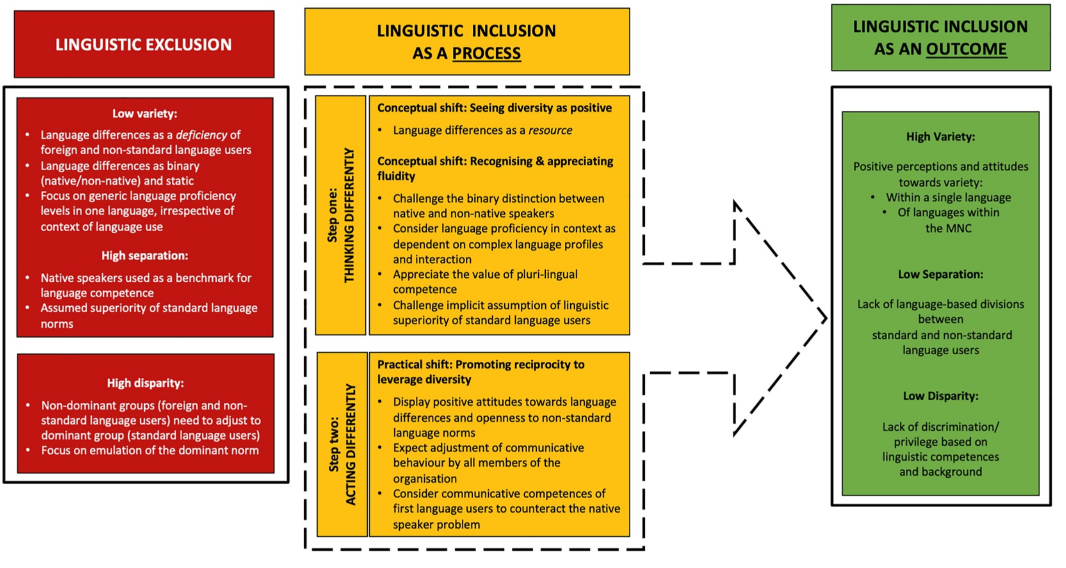


FIGURE 2 A framework for the management of linguistic diversity.

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displaying positive attitudes towards language differences and openness to non-standard language norms, adjustment of communicative behaviour by all members of the organisation, and due consideration of the communicative competence of first language users. Below, we discuss the two steps of our framework in greater detail.

### 3.2.1 | Changing how we think about linguistic diversity and language differences: From separation to variety to fluidity

In the context of linguistic diversity in MNCs, separation refers to the negative consequences of linguistic diversity, such as challenges with information transfer, as well as the potential of language to cause tension and division among staff based on their native languages and associated identities. Variety refers to seeing linguistic diversity as a *resource* in that the variety of languages used in the MNC as well as users with different language profiles and pluri-lingual competence can create value for the organisation. Disparity refers to the potentially discriminatory consequences of linguistic diversity, where (the perception of) differential skills in the dominant language and the usage of nonstandard language norms and accents impact on organisational power and career progression. The first step in implementing the EDI agenda through linguistic diversity management requires a move away from a deficiency-based view of linguistic diversity and language differences, which can perpetuate linguistic exclusion and reify difference, towards seeing language differences as a resource and thus a greater appreciation of language *variety*.

This shift can be achieved if language differences are conceptualised as fluid. We acknowledge developments going beyond the domain of linguistics which has a long tradition of viewing language as 'emergent from contexts and interactions' (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010, p. 240). For example, scholars undertaking language-sensitive research in IB and CCM have started to move towards approaches which conceptualise language as a social practice (Karhunen et al., 2018; Tietze & Piekkari, 2020). As Piller (2021, p. 1) observes, '[l]inguistic diversity is a fundamental fact of language: no two people use language in exactly the same way', nor does one person use the same language all the time. A more nuanced approach to language therefore acknowledges its 'fluidity' (Karhunen et al., 2018, p. 999; see also Angouri & Piekkari, 2018; Cohen & Kassis-Henderson, 2017; Janssens & Steyaert, 2014; Steyaert et al., 2011).

Our proposed general re-conceptualisation of language differences encompasses a four-pronged change in how we think about language diversity. First, it challenges the binary distinction between native and non-native speakers. Apart from linguistics (e.g., Kramsch, 2014; Seidlhofer, 2004) and recent work in language-sensitive IB and CCM research (e.g., Cohen & Kassis-Henderson, 2017; Karhunen et al., 2018; Tietze & Piekkari, 2020), this value-laden distinction still shapes much of language diversity scholarship and everyday thinking about language competence. The native versus non-native speaker dichotomy, with the associated 'standard language ideology' (Montgomery & Acheme, 2022, p. 2), is problematic not least because it is underpinned by a monolingual bias (Dewaele, 2017), even though monolingualism is not the norm in societies (Crowther & De Costa, 2017; Piller, 2021), and especially in MNCs (Steyaert et al., 2011). As we explain below, this binary distinction also 'fails to account for the complexity of any given person's language competence' (Cohen & Kassis-Henderson, 2017, p. 13).

Second, the proposed shift builds on a more complex understanding of language proficiency as dependent on context and reflecting people's complex language profiles in use in a given interactional situation. Language profiles feature prominently in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), a highly influential language policy instrument issued by the Council of Europe (2018). Language profiles highlight the typically differentiated ability of language users to perform communicative activities (such as managing interactions or writing reports) and strategies (e.g., adapting language or breaking down complicated information) in different contexts. Language proficiency refers to 'the ability to perform communicative language activities... whilst drawing upon both general and communicative competencies' (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 32). Importantly, the latter comprise not only linguistic competencies (such as the vocabulary and grammatical structures) but also sociolinguistic and pragmatic competencies (the ability to effectively interpret linguistic cues and use language in a way which is seen as appropriate in a given social context). As such, language proficiency is highly context dependent.

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Third, embracing fluidity entails recognising the benefits of the pluri-lingual competence (Council of Europe, 2018) which denotes an ability to 'mobilise multiple linguistic resources simultaneously' (Karhunen et al., 2018, p. 999), often relying on 'partial language repertoires' (Cohen & Kassis-Henderson, 2017, p. 11) to facilitate communication. Here, proficiency does not equate with 'perfect grammar, an authentic accent, or extensive vocabulary' (Nurmi & Koroma, 2020, p. 8). In MNCs, pluri-lingual competence often manifests itself in practices such as code-switching, that is, 'shifting between languages during interaction' (Ahmad & Barner-Rasmussen, 2019, p. 2); 'translanguaging' (García & Wei, 2014; Langinier & Ehrhart, 2020), that is, using a mixture of languages (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014), and hybrid language use, such as parallel use of various national languages or company/professional jargon (Gaibrois, 2018). In some contexts, such as multinational teams of IT engineers, shared pluri-lingual competence and familiarity with technical and organisational jargon, can lead to the creation of 'new languages' by the given work group, thus helping staff feel more at ease in interactions and increasing their participation and voice (Gaibrois, 2019, p. 99).

Finally, thinking differently about linguistic diversity entails challenging the implicit misleading assumption in much language diversity research and HRM policies and practice, namely of linguistic superiority of standard language users. When communicative effectiveness is given priority, privileged position of standard language users (e.g., Gaibrois & Nentwich, 2020; Wilmot, 2017) becomes subject to questioning and re-negotiation. Research in applied linguistics, CCM and IB demonstrates that language proficiency is not in itself sufficient to ensure effective communication in professional contexts (e.g., Council of Europe, 2018; Karhunen et al., 2018; Nickerson, 2005). As Martin (2015, p. 7) observes, one 'can be both communicatively competent and incompetent', depending on the context of interaction, and other interlocutors. Professional communication often requires specialist knowledge and familiarity with occupational languages and corporate idiolects (Gaibrois, 2018; Tietze et al., 2016), and the ability to appropriately interpret, negotiate and adjust to the social context of the interaction, and its pragmatic and professional norms (see e.g., Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013; Karhunen et al., 2018; Kassis-Henderson, 2005). The presumed superior *language* proficiency of standard language users is thus not a reliable predictor of successful *communicative* performance. As research on English as Business Lingua Franca (BELF) interactions has demonstrated (e.g., Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Kaur & Birlik, 2021), in some contexts, non-standard ways of using a language may be highly effective and conducive to creating a shared understanding.

The proposed change in thinking about language differences can offer a new theoretical perspective on the nature and consequences of language differences, and—by extension—the nature and consequences of other types of differences. This perspective can be applied to advance the EDI agenda in practice. It reframes language users' differentiated language profiles as well as pluri-lingualism as a *resource* that can create value for the organisation (diversity as variety), thus reducing the negative consequences of linguistic diversity (diversity as separation) and the potentially discriminatory consequences of language differences (diversity as disparity).

### 3.2.2 | Changing how we act in relation to linguistic diversity: From privileging the dominant group to promoting collective, reciprocal efforts

Reciprocity in the context of linguistic diversity refers to the conceptual framing and practical enactment of responsibility for effective communication as a collective, reciprocal effort of all speakers, regardless of their fluency in the corporate or shared language, or the variety of language that they have at their disposal (standard or non-standard). The importance of a relational orientation has been consistently highlighted in applied linguistics, in particular BELF (e.g., Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Kaur & Birlik, 2021). It has also been recognised in the intercultural communication literature (e.g., Martin, 2015). For example, Szkudlarek et al. (2020) have called for a shift from individual-level conceptualisations of intercultural communicative competence to a relational perspective. Our focus on reciprocity represents an important departure from the traditional conceptual and practical focus on perceived deficiencies of foreign language users. This shift mirrors the gradually occurring shift in theory and practice in relation to the achievement of gender inclusion, manifested in critiques of 'fix the women' solutions (Burkinshaw & White, 2017).

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The focus on reciprocity has three key elements. First, effective communication is strongly influenced by individuals' *attitudes* towards language differences (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Nurmi & Koroma, 2020). Therefore, displaying positive attitudes towards language differences and being open to non-standard language norms is crucial for achieving a practical shift towards linguistic inclusion. Studies have illustrated that language attitudes, understood as 'evaluative reactions to language' (Dragojevic et al., 2021, p. 61) and related language ideologies, affect not only the first language users' evaluation of accented speech (Kang & Yaw, 2021), and by extension the language users and their general and linguistic competence, but also their ability to understand others (Lindemann & Subtirelu, 2013). This means that these subjective understandings and perceptions of language fluency and comprehensibility may be more consequential for interactions than objective understandings (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). As such, they need to be carefully considered in HRM policies and practice if linguistic inclusion is to be achieved.

Second, reciprocity is based on accommodation which is an interactive 'two-way process' (Rogerson-Revell, 2010, p. 453). It can be accomplished through a wide range of pre-emptive, spontaneous, and responsive linguistic (Jenkins, 2022) and procedural strategies (Lockwood & Song, 2016), as well as technology (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2016). These comprise common convergence strategies such as overlooking language mistakes and adopting a low context language (Nurmi & Koroma, 2020; Rogerson-Revell, 2010), providing explanation following implicit requests (Kaur & Birlik, 2021), as well as building in redundancy in speech (Harzing et al., 2011). Procedural solutions such as the inclusion of safe talk (Planken, 2005) or the provision of minutes or post-meeting summaries (Lockwood & Song, 2016) can also serve as useful accommodation strategies. Similarly, redundant media use (whereby multiple media are deployed to convey the same message, Leonardi et al., 2012), visual communication (Sanden, 2020) as well as the application of new technologies, such as integrated web-based communication (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2016), have been found to aid communication in multilingual settings. Reciprocity can further be enacted through other linguistically inclusive practices, such as collective negotiations of a common language, parallel language use, and making linguistic limitations explicit (Rogerson-Revell, 2010). Finally, multilingual resources can also play an important role in accommodation (Jenkins, 2022) which can be accomplished through translanguaging (Gaibrois, 2018; García & Wei, 2014; Langinier & Ehrhart, 2020) and code-switching (Ahmad & Barner-Rasmussen, 2019). While not all staff can engage in reciprocity by drawing on multilingual resources, they can be trained in the other accommodation strategies discussed in this article. The effectiveness and suitability of accommodation strategies will depend on the interlocutors and the context of interaction, which, as Szkudlarek et al. (2020, p. 3) observe, is 'crucial for making sense of communicative processes'.

Third, the concept of reciprocity also draws the attention of HRM practitioners to the communicative profiles and skills of those who communicate in their first language. Successful interaction between language users with different levels of fluency in the language of interaction does not solely depend on the skills of foreign language users (Subtirelu & Lindemann, 2014). Research has highlighted that the presence of first language users can increase feelings of a diminished language competence in others and change their behaviour (Neeley, 2013; Nurmi & Koroma, 2020). There is also evidence that those interacting in their first language might be less proficient in *lingua franca* interactions (e.g., Jenkins, 2011; Kassis-Henderson, 2005), at times causing 'miscommunication and misunderstanding' (Sweeney & Hua, 2010, p. 480). Some first language users' tendency to use idiomatic, high context, high-paced speech, and their perceived inability or unwillingness to adapt to their interlocutors (Gaibrois & Nentwich, 2020) has been termed the 'native speaker problem' (Nickerson, 2005). First language users often do not recognise the extent of this problem, or lack the competence (Nurmi & Koroma, 2020) or will to prevent it when the onus for effective communication is framed as lying exclusively with foreign language users who are expected to adjust to local language norms (Kim & Angouri, 2022).

Introducing a focus on reciprocity in the *practical* implementation of linguistic diversity management is thus a crucial complement to our *conceptual* reframing of language differences as fluid rather than binary. Making it the responsibility of members of both dominant and non-dominant groups in the organisation to adapt to each other will further reduce the negative consequences of linguistic diversity (diversity as separation) and the potentially discriminatory consequences of language differences (diversity as disparity).

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Our proposed framework has considerable practical implications for HRM. As an example, Table 1 provides a possible set of recommendations for linguistic diversity management that would flow directly from the above application of our framework to linguistics diversity, as summarised in Figure 1. An emphasis on fluidity and reciprocity is relevant to all HR functions, but we see recruitment and selection, and training and development as having the biggest role to play in fostering linguistic inclusion. We refrain from discussing these recommendations in any detail as they are not intended as a normative checklist, but instead are an *illustration* of how our framework can be applied in practice in MNCs. Other aspects of diversity will have their own HRM and managerial practices, and will involve specific legal, strategic, and cost considerations, as well as decisions on the most relevant loci of action.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

Bringing together different strands of literature, we addressed the under-researched area of GDM, focussing on advancing, both conceptually and in practice, the EDI agenda in MNCs. We argued that to successfully implement the EDI agenda in MNCs and other organisations, we first need to *think* differently about diversity and differences (i.e., to view diversity in a positive light and to recognise and appreciate differences as fluid), in order to *act* differently (i.e., promote reciprocity to leverage diversity). To illustrate how our framework can be applied in practice, we presented the case of linguistic diversity as a particularly relevant aspect of diversity within MNCs. Future research could offer elaboration of the framework in relation to other dimensions of diversity, such as gender, ethnicity, race, age, disability, and neurodiversity. In this regard, our application of the concepts of fluidity and reciprocity to language diversity can be seen as a 'backdoor' way to incorporate these valuable ideas within discussions of more contentious topics such as gender and race. Below we discuss the contributions of our paper.

### 4.1 | Contributions to theory building

We offer a detailed theoretical explanation of how the various elements in Harrison and Klein's (2007) model are related to each other, and how their integration can help us move towards a positive view of diversity both conceptually and practically. Moreover, in putting forward our framework, we provide a generic model of how to implement EDI in MNCs that could be tailored to different diversity dimensions, and different home/host country, industry, and organisational contexts, while using the key principles of fluidity and reciprocity to increase variety and reduce separation and disparity. In addition, our framework makes three distinct contributions to theory building in the area of equality, diversity and inclusion: (1) a shift in the conceptualisation of differences towards emphasising the positive aspects of differences and diversity; (2) theorisation of differences as fluid as underpinning diversity management; (3) consideration of reciprocity as necessary for effective implementation of the EDI agenda.

First, the proposed shift in the conceptualisation of differences, in line with what Harrison and Klein (2007) refer to as the 'variety' conceptualisation of diversity, focuses on the positive aspects of diversity. We see such a conceptual shift as a precondition for advancing the EDI agenda in MNCs and other organisations. Whilst emphasising the 'variety' conceptualisation of diversity, our framework does not overlook the 'separation' (i.e., negative) and 'disparity' (i.e., discriminatory) conceptualisations of diversity (Harrison & Klein, 2007). Nevertheless, through proposing the 'variety' perspective as a starting point, it highlights the importance of organisational efforts to increase variety as a prerequisite for achieving inclusion. Research has criticised organisational inclusion practices that produce a tokenistic representation of members of minority groups (Adamson et al., 2021) by focussing merely on increasing the number of representatives of minority groups in an organisation without acknowledging the value that a *variety* of backgrounds and perspectives bring to the organisation. A recent large-scale review of the consequences of tokenism shows that 'being a token is for the most part, a negative experience that carries with it a host of adverse consequences' (Watkins et al., 2019, p. 360). A variety-driven conceptualisation of diversity in (global) diversity

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**TABLE 1** Practitioner recommendations for the management of linguistic diversity

| HRM function | Recommendation |
|---|---|
| General | Foreground the positive aspects of diversity, including linguistic diversity |
| | Clearly and consistently communicate the intentions behind inclusion efforts |
| | Make a commitment, including the allocation of budget, towards systematic, strategic, and prolonged efforts to combat language discrimination and foster linguistic inclusion |
| | Ensure that your approach to linguistic diversity is consistent with the legal framework(s) in the location(s) where the company operates |
| | Ensure that linguistic diversity is addressed in company strategy and diversity policies, and is consistently reflected in HRM practices |
| | Be mindful of the inherent variety in all dimensions of diversity, including linguistic diversity |
| | Avoid binary distinctions among staff—challenge categorisations into native versus non-native speakers—and associating standard language users with linguistic superiority |
| | Foster a psychologically safe environment for staff from all linguistic backgrounds by promoting openness to a pragmatic, nonstandard language use |
| | Endorse and signal the value of plurilingual language competence, even if it is partial |
| Recruitment and selection | Look for a fit between language profiles and job requirements |
| | Check language proficiency in context based on simulations of future job tasks |
| | Support recruitment panels in tackling language prejudices and raise awareness of rationalisations of language-based discrimination in recruitment |
| | Probe for language attitudes of first language users and check linguistic accommodation skills |
| | Communicate the importance of linguistic inclusion to prospective candidates in recruitment campaigns and in job interviews and later during new employees' orientation training |
| Training and development | Seek to ensure nonstandard and foreign language users enjoy the same development and promotion opportunities as standard/first language users |
| | Raise top managers' awareness and undertake action to mitigate the risk of overlooking nonstandard language users' leadership potential |
| | Work towards securing a good representation of nonstandard language users in top leadership positions |
| | Do not use 'native speakers' as a benchmark for language competence in training courses |
| | Make visible and create opportunities for leveraging varied language profiles of staff |
| | Raise awareness of challenges of communicating in a foreign language |
| | Organise communication training for all staff, including those who speak in their first language |
| | Devote part of leadership development programmes to the management of linguistic diversity, inclusive language use and language attitudes |
| | Offer, where practical and financially viable, language courses adjusted to staff's differentiated language profiles and focussed on specific proficiency needs for a given role |
| | Support the proactive development of staff's language proficiency for career progression and the associated changing language requirements |
| | Dedicate part of staff development budget to language attitudes training and the development of language accommodation skills and strategies (linguistic and procedural) to facilitate communication and foster linguistic inclusion |
| | Raise awareness of unconscious language biases, and their consequences for individuals and groups |

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management has the potential to provide an antidote to tokenism, which is associated with the 'separation' and 'disparity' (Harrison & Klein, 2007) conceptualisations of diversity.

Second, using linguistic diversity as an illustrative example, we have drawn attention to the complexity of language and communicative profiles that goes far beyond simplistic evaluations of linguistic proficiency as 'high' and 'low', irrespective of the context of interaction, and that calls for consideration of language differences as fluid. We highlight the need for adopting an understanding of all differences as fluid, and for recognising the high degree of variety *within* categories of difference. The literature on gender in organisations has articulated the view of gender as fluid (e.g., Borgerson & Rehn, 2004; Fotaki & Harding, 2017). Similarly, variety within the category 'autism' has long been established, not least as reflected in the label Autism Spectrum Disorder (e.g., Hull et al., 2017; Skuse, 2020). Adopting the conceptualisation of all categories of difference as fluid will contribute to the reduction of difference-based barriers and divisions. Consequently, it will reduce separation and disparity and generate more equal, equitable and non-discriminatory outcomes across the organisation.

Third, through including the concept of reciprocity, our framework makes an important contribution to understanding how to effectively *implement* the EDI agenda in MNCs. The concept of reciprocity highlights the significance of relationships among staff, regardless of their backgrounds, that are characterised by mutual adjustment efforts. The idea that adjustment on the part of the dominant majority is required is not new (e.g., Burkinshaw & White, 2017). However, our framework contributes to theory building with an argument for fostering organisational cultures in which reciprocity is embraced as a shared responsibility of all employees and a vehicle for implementing the EDI agenda into all spheres of the MNC's activity. A reciprocal way of relating leads to unsettling the extant distribution of privileges and disadvantages, the re-negotiation of previously hegemonistic positions, and, in consequence, to reducing the gap between the opportunities and accomplishments of staff from different backgrounds. As such, it results in reduced separation and disparity between majority and minority group members, both key to creating equitable and inclusive organisations.

### 4.2 | Limitations and suggestions for future research

We drew on specific insights from different strands of literature; it was not our intention to provide a comprehensive overview of these bodies of scholarship. Rather, we focussed on *the integration of* key contributions that held the strongest potential to shift our thinking and practice of diversity management. Further, our concern with implementing the EDI agenda and fostering inclusion made us foreground the positive aspects of diversity, as represented in the variety-oriented conceptualisation of diversity (Harrison & Klein, 2007). However, we do acknowledge that the divisive effects of diversity—including linguistic diversity—can be profound. We also recognise that whilst we have tried to make our illustrative case of linguistic diversity management as detailed as possible, we have not had the space to discuss all of the important nuances of linguistic diversity, such as those associated with gender-based differences in language use.

In addition, we acknowledge that the literature which we reviewed and integrated to develop our conceptual framework and recommendations for practice has been generated in the Global North. Likewise, the views on diversity and its management, as presented in this article, are constrained by the bounded rationality of our own positions as scholars trained and located in Global North higher education contexts. Whilst we recognise the need for reflecting on and adapting the recommendations of our research to the conditions of specific organisational and geographical contexts, we believe that the generic cognitive model which we have followed, that is, that we need to change how we think in order to change how act, has a general applicability.

Since EDI-related initiatives and diversity management are particularly challenging to implement in MNCs, we have focussed explicitly on intra-organisational relationships in (large) MNCs. We recognise that diversity—including linguistic diversity—also comes into play in inter-firm relationships (Wilmot, 2017), which may in some cases promote, but in others can pose additional challenges to, the management of (linguistic) diversity that is consistent with the

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EDI agenda. Moreover, small and medium size enterprises can also be highly diverse—can operate as highly varied 'linguascapes' (Steyaert et al., 2011)—and are not immune to language-based (Wilmot, 2017), and other types of, discrimination. Our framework and practical recommendations provide general guidance for the implementation of their EDI agendas. However, future research might address the unique challenges faced in intra-organisational relationships and assess the impact of firm size and even industry. There is also scope for future research to consider how different internal stakeholders—for example, top management, subsidiary management, team leaders and corporate HR department—contribute to, and (inadvertently) undermine, the EDI agenda implementation.

Another important boundary condition of our framework in the MNC context is the firm's home country as well as the host countries in which it is operating.[1] Home and host country context will impact both on GDM in general and on linguistic diversity management. As to the latter, Harzing and Pudelko (2013) showed that MNCs from different home/language regions (Anglophone, Asian, Continental European, and Nordic) had very different approaches to language use between different managerial groups as well as different policies with regard to the choice of the corporate language. Regarding host country context, we suggest it might be easier to implement inclusive language policies in countries such as India, Malaysia, or Switzerland where multilingualism is commonplace, than in monolingual countries with close links between the national language and the national culture, such as France. Future research could address how—within our general framework—the management of various aspects of diversity might need to be adjusted to various home and host country contexts.

Finally, we are aware that, as Leslie (2019) has argued, organisational inclusion programs can backfire and create the impression of false progress. It can be considered a limitation of our framework that it does not incorporate the challenges and possible resistance and power struggles associated with implementing more inclusive (linguistic) practices. Majority group members might resent losing their traditional advantages or even seeing them explicitly exposed as advantages that might have helped them in their careers. We therefore suggest the productive incorporation of majority group members in implementation of EDI agenda as an important area for future research. Linguistic diversity might serve as a useful test case in this respect, as the recognition of linguistic advantage might be easier to accept for majority group members than, for instance, advantages related to gender and race.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

This paper developed a generic framework for implementing the EDI agenda through GDM. Motivated by persisting difficulties with advancing the EDI agenda, we responded to calls for conceptually nuanced and practically oriented approaches to EDI. We proposed that to *act* differently, we first need to *think* differently. We illustrated our argument with a focus on linguistic diversity, often overlooked in the EDI literature, as a core dimension of diversity in MNCs. Drawing on a range of disciplines, we put forward a detailed framework for implementing the EDI agenda through the management of linguistic diversity. Beyond linguistic diversity, our generic framework can be conceptually extended and applied in practice to other diversity dimensions.

Step one of our framework involves shifting from the conceptualisation of (linguistic) diversity and (language) differences as deficiency-focussed, binary and static towards *variety* and *fluidity*. Step two is concerned with moving away from expecting members of non-dominant groups to adjust to the dominant group and with promoting collective, *reciprocal efforts* and shared responsibility of all staff for the implementation of the EDI agenda. We hope that the framework will assist HR practitioners to manage linguistic and other types of diversity, thereby helping MNCs and domestic organisations alike to become increasingly inclusive workplaces.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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## ENDNOTE

[1] We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer suggesting this very relevant point.

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