

Language as a Resource in Project Management: A Case Study and a Conceptual Framework

Nuno A. Gil

Abstract—This study sheds light on how project managers can use language as a resource for communicating with local communities and stakeholders alike, and protect the legitimacy of their decisions and actions. The verbal accounts produced by a senior project management team are examined in-depth. The accounts address the claims raised by residents affected by the expansion of the Heathrow airport. The context for the talk-in-interaction is one of conflicting interests: the promoter undertakes actions to mitigate the impacts of the construction works, but some residents feel frustrated that the business can grow at the expenses of their welfare. The findings reveal that managers tend to acknowledge all claims even when perceiving they lack legitimacy. The analysis of the words and phrasing in the conversational turns that form the accounts reveals three tones—caring, assertive, and apologetic—that managers use intentionally to frame linguistically the acknowledgements. The study discusses how the tones fit with the extent to which, first, managers consider that the claims are factually correct, fair, and precise as opposed to unfair, exaggerated, or opportunistic; and second, managers find technical or institutional references available for constructing the accounts. It also discusses the effects of congruence—or the lack of it—between what managers mean to say about what the project team will do, what managers actually say, how listeners interpret what was said, and what the project team actually gets done.

Index Terms—Communication, language, legitimacy, local communities, project stakeholder.

I. INTRODUCTION

PROJECTS are sociotechnical enterprises, and technical know-how alone is insufficient to bring a project to successful completion. This premise makes communication skills central to project management, as well as a behavioral competence that professional associations require for certified project managers [36], [52]. Communication has also long deserved attention in the project management literature. Gaddis' [27] seminal article exhorts project managers to invest in learning to communicate adequately. It also notes that frankness and integrity are key features of communication when discussing the future. Subsequent literature on the so-called soft side of project management—that embodies Lechler's [39] dictum “when it comes to project management, it's the people that matter”—has since then sought to flesh out seminal ideas (e.g., [12], [13], and [51]).

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The author is with the Manchester Business School, The University of Manchester, Manchester M15 6PB, U.K. (e-mail: nuno.gil@mbs.ac.uk).

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One subset of this literature has focused on the communication skills necessary to effectively manage stakeholders external to projects. This literature has focused on managing local communities, media, and other constituencies (e.g., environmentalists and preservationists) affected by large-scale infrastructure projects [58], [66]. The theory is underdeveloped, but the issues are well understood. At the onset, project managers need to develop a public relations plan about how to deal with the public and media, and to divide the communication workload among the team members [66]. To be effective, project managers need to build coalitions and communication channels with the affected groups, manage their expectations, listen to their concerns, keep them up-to-date on project progress, attend public meetings, and participate in community affairs [3], [12]. They also need to foresee and forestall emergent issues, prepare detailed responses, and respond quickly to misleading information that circulates about the project [51], [66].

Collectively, these actions help project managers to make the affected groups gain confidence and trust in the project team [58]. These actions may also bring on the affected groups to see the project as an opportunity to improve their welfare rather than a threat to vested interests [58]. In doing so, managers protect institutional legitimacy, i.e., the public perception that the actions are proper and appropriate, rather than negligent and irresponsible [61]. But these are challenging tasks because the public that stands to gain from the project is not necessarily the same that the project affects most [66]. How project managers can use language to communicate effectively with external stakeholders affected by the project so as to protect legitimacy is the question at the heart of this study.

As a proxy for researching this question, this empirical study examines in-depth verbal accounts produced throughout the interaction between a senior project management team and representatives of the local communities affected by the construction works for a new airport terminal. The setting is the £4.2 billion (2006 prices) Terminal 5 (T5) project at Heathrow, a private airport owned by British Airports Authority (BAA). The analysis departs from Elsbach's [22] work on how firms use accounts (which encompass explanations, justifications, proclamations of innocence, use of enhancements, and entitlements) so as to protect institutional legitimacy. Elsbach identifies two linguistic forms to frame the accounts: acknowledgements and denials, and two types of content to construct the accounts: references to institutional and technical practices.

Somewhat surprisingly, the findings reveal that “denials” [22] and “silence” [32] when residents make claims are hardly an option for the project management team. Rather, the acknowledgement of the issues at the core of the claims emerges as an

almost necessary condition to talk people into believing that the project team is committed to mitigate the detrimental impacts of the project. Managers appear to intentionally acknowledge the issues even if they perceive that the claims have low legitimacy in the sense that they may be factually incorrect, opportunistic, or exaggerated. In light of this constraint, the findings suggest that the tone of the acknowledgements, i.e., the attitude conveyed through the choice of words and phrasing, becomes critical to fit the acknowledgments to the perceived legitimacy of the claims and to the content available for constructing the managers' accounts. Grounded on the analysis of the empirical findings from this case study, this study proposes a conceptual framework about the strategic use of language as a resource to manage local communities and external stakeholders alike.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, the work in communication for protecting legitimacy is discussed in Section II. Then the research methods and setting are described in Section III. Section IV analyses the verbal accounts, and Section V discusses the findings. Finally, Section VI presents the implications to practice and theory, and Section VII discusses the limitations and opportunities for future research.

II. COMMUNICATION AND LEGITIMACY: IN FIRMS AND PROJECTS

Organizations are eager to communicate to protect institutional legitimacy, and maintain a positive reputation in the public eye and in the eyes of the actors that can influence their fate [59]. This is especially so for large firms, which are more likely to be the target of institutional actors [18]. These actors, such as media and interest groups, create coercive and normative pressures for conformity to public expectations, as well as an arena in which firms can build legitimacy [22]. Firms that fail to meet expectations undermine their institutional legitimacy, and compromise prospects of growth and existence due to lawsuits, regulatory changes, and boycotts [25], [32].

Various studies have uncovered structures that firms create to communicate and protect institutional legitimacy, namely work in impression management (e.g., [22]), issues management (e.g., [10], [18], and [34]), public affairs (e.g., [32] and [53]), and more recently, corporate communication [14]. The "boundary spanning" role [45] of these structures is twofold. On the one hand, they build bridges to help managers understand the outside world, and learn how the firm can adapt so as to meet or exceed regulatory requirements and conform to expectations [45]. On the other hand, they work as a buffer that managers use to insulate the firm from external interference, or to engage in advocacy and advertising for influencing policy, regulation, and sociopolitical expectations [45].

One stream of this literature focuses on the verbal accounts that these structures produce to protect institutional legitimacy. Elsbach's [22] study of the accounts produced by the California Cattle Industry reveals two broad linguistic framings and two types of contents. Accounts can be framed as acknowledgements or denials. A denial ("it did not happen") attempts to separate the firm from the controversial event, whereas the acknowledgement ("we recognize the negative event, but") rec-

ognizes it, but tries to attenuate negative perceptions. The acknowledgements can be more effective to induce positive reactions because they seem less defensive and more concerned with the public needs than the denials [41]. The content may include references to technical or institutional practices. The technical references stress efficiency and effectiveness in organizational performance, conveying rationality and validity [22]. The institutional references to normative, and socially endorsed practices and goals improve the credibility and believability of the accounts. The institutional references can be more effective than the technical ones because they provide evidence that the firm is acting in a responsible, legitimate manner. Conversely, the technical references can induce perceptions of self-serving or uncaring feelings [22].

More recent studies have started to explore how the performance of the firm is affected by the links between the verbal accounts and its actions *ex post*. Scholars exhort firms to establish routines, make resources available, and commit to embed (in the firm) shared cognitive and linguistic maps of the relevant stakeholders [9], [55]. This approach can lead the firm to move beyond "skilful public relations exercise and rhetoric framing" [44] into engagement with the stakeholders in the ways that are strategically desirable [4]. In particular, Erhard's *et al.* [23] model defines integrity as "the state or condition of being whole and complete." In oversimplified terms, integrity for an individual or organization is about "honoring one's word." This involves, first, doing what you said you would do and by the time you said you would do it; and second, as soon as you know that you will not do it, saying that you will not do to those who were counting on your word, and "clean up any mess" caused by not keeping the word [23]. Erhard *et al.* [23] argue that integrity is a factor of production that provides access to increased performance and value creation. But, insightfully, they also demonstrate that the application of cost-benefit analysis to one's integrity can cause out-of-integrity and untrustworthy behavior. Bosse *et al.* [5] frame similar issues in terms of fairness: people behave reciprocally by rewarding others whose actions they deem fair, and by willingly incurring costs to punish those they deem unfair.

A. Communication and Project Management

Communication is a behavioral competence for project management practice. Building on the experience of practitioners, the Project Management Institute's (PMI's) Code of Professional Conduct acknowledges that communication styles vary according to the personality of the project manager. Still, it highlights a set of principles for effective communication: listen to the concerns of stakeholders, maintain professional integrity, adhere to ethical standards, balance stakeholder interests, and be aware of the emotional barriers (e.g., preconceived opinions and beliefs, prejudices, biases, egos, and politics). Likewise, Gadeken's [26] experience-based reflection on behavioral competences required for successful project managers spells out key attributes relevant for effective communication:

- 1) Assertiveness: stating one's own position forcefully in the face of opposition from influential others.

- 2) Strategic influence: building coalitions with influential others to overcome obstacles and obtain support.
- 3) Relationship development: spending time and energy getting to know program sponsors, contractors, and other influential people.
- 4) Political awareness: understand who the influential players are, what they want, and how to work with them.

Along the same lines, Pinto [50] encourages managers to develop political acumen and persuasive skills so as to account for the ubiquitous presence of politics and power imbalances in projects. Communication is also part of the critical factors for determining project success, namely, the abilities: to communicate what the issues are with affected constituencies, to deal with the issues, and to sell the project output [51].

The literature on managing architecture–engineering–construction projects has also long established that effective communication is central to high project performance [49], [62]. Extant studies are mostly descriptive, and focus on internal communication between design and construction teams, and between the project suppliers and the client. Building predominantly upon anecdotal evidence and exploratory surveys, these studies reveal that on-site construction project managers may spend up to nearly 80% of their workdays communicating verbally [38]; and that interpersonal communication is critical to crisis management [40] as well as to develop proper design briefs [6].

Not surprisingly, communication skills also play an essential role in developing relationships with local communities affected by new infrastructure projects. In these settings, antagonistic vocal minorities can create difficulties, while the silent majority may sit on the sidelines [66]. Using vignettes on projects to illustrate the issues, but not as an empirical basis, Wideman [66] exhorts managers to attend public meetings, produce community information bulletins, and support talks with visual aids and scale models. El-Diraby and Wang [21] develop a semantic model to communicate to local communities (via an e-portal) the environmental impacts of highway construction and mitigation measures. More strategically, Baker [3] discusses how project managers may need to shift the communication pattern occasionally, for example, from coalition building and listening to counterattack and delaying tactics, but he does not elaborate on the topic. Such shifts should not compromise, however, on the principles of honesty, fairness, and integrity that should underpin project relations [63], [67].

Clearly, the infrastructure project managers face the challenge of developing a positive relationship with the local people. The next section discusses how the T5 managers took on this challenge.

III. METHODS AND RESEARCH BASE

The research method is a single-setting case study with multiple embedded units of analysis [69]. Case study research suits well to examine “underexplored” topics [20]. This is exactly the case of investigating how project management teams can use language for protecting legitimacy. This method is also appropriate because studies of how organizations deploy language in the management of self–other relations must consider

the socio-organizational contingencies to generate meaningful insights [56], [57]. The units of analysis are the pairs of residents’ claims and corresponding accounts produced by the T5 managers in the interaction with the residents. This approach borrows from studies of talk-in-interaction, which consider language a resource to coordinate social action [56], [57]. But the focus here is on the tones that project managers’ words and phrasing convey.

The empirical setting—the T5 project at Heathrow airport—is relevant to studies on managing external stakeholders and local communities in particular. As a monopolistic owner of the three major London airports, BAA operated under the eye of the public and regulator. Many people were frustrated that the government had approved T5 on the basis that the economic benefits outweighed the environmental impacts. “T5 was not for the benefit of the residents as illustrated by BAA”, a resident claimed. If the T5 managers neglected the well being of the residents or the environment during the construction works, they would offer an argument to the oppositionists lobbying the regulator to call for the government to break up the monopoly. Further, 90% of the residents had opposed in a ballot against the government plans (backed by BAA) to add a third runway to increase Heathrow capacity. But while the local authorities had threatened to take court action if these plans went forward, a government report had concluded that there was a case for adding a third runway if the environmental impacts could be reduced.

Notwithstanding this, as any public listed company, BAA needed to balance the investments in social responsibility and the environment with institutional pressure for economic efficiency and profit generation. For the T5 senior managers, this meant that they needed to balance the need to respond effectively to the concerns of local residents with pressure to deliver T5 on time, on budget, and efficiently. Next, the method to investigate these issues is discussed.

A. Data Collection and Analysis

The fieldwork lasted from mid-2004 until mid-2007 as part of a broader research program on managerial practices in large infrastructure projects. At the heart of the empirical database for this study are the minutes of 12 Local Focus meetings held between 2003 and 2005, and 27 meetings of the Heathrow Airport Consultative Committee (HACC). The Local Focus meetings were attended by the T5 senior managers and representatives of the resident associations. The HACC meetings were attended by the T5 senior managers, senior BAA corporate staff, and many stakeholder groups, including local councils, resident associations, London assembly, and environmental groups. The HACC minutes remain available online on a Web site run by the HACC. The Local Focus minutes were available online on a Web site run by BAA/T5 until 2008.

The author systematically read through the minutes to identify the accounts that the managers reactively produced in response to the claims raised by the residents, as well as the accounts that the managers produced proactively in anticipation of foreseeable claims. Thirty-two distinct claims are identified, each one demanding that the project team would take actions to mitigate

TABLE I
INITIATIVES TO GAIN COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND MEET THE LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

Aim	Initiative	Objectives	Exemplar
Improve external communication	Open site annual event; weekly guided tours of T5	Progress update; be agreeable	OpenSite is a great opportunity for us to explain how T5 is being constructed and for people to see for themselves the work (T5 community liaison manager 05)
	Itinerant T5 Exhibition	Show how T5 will look; share archaeological findings	We hope the new exhibition will encourage local people to come and learn more about T5 development (T5 design and development director 03)
	Local Focus Forum	Listen to people; address people's concerns; respond to complaints	We don't always get what we want, but BAA does listen (...) I always report back to my members, and it helps them understand why certain things happen (Chair of resident association 05)
	Newsletter with 10,000 copies, distributed four times a year	Keep local communities informed	One of the T5 inquiry commitments was to keep local residents informed about the development as it progresses. This is part of that commitment (T5 inform, issue 1, Summer 02)
	Monitor environment program (e.g., dust deposition stations, noise levels)	Collect data to ensure environmental impacts are acceptable	We're carrying out noise, dust, air and water quality monitoring to provide us with an early warning system should things not go to plan (T5 environment manager 02)
Nurture long-term relationship	Adult training scheme, network of vocational training centres	Provide local people training and education opportunities	We aim to utilise T5 as a vehicle to develop a variety of training and education schemes in construction-related trades (T5 project director 06)
	Teacher Resource Pack to assist with vocational learning	Help schools benefit from the T5 learning potential	For us, T5 is a local project and therefore of real interest to our pupils, which makes this pack all the more useful and relevant (Local head teacher 05)
Good will	T5 registered charity; fundraising events	Support local organizations	We feel that T5 has a responsibility to the local community and by helping in this way we're proud to be making a contribution (Chair of T5 charity 05)

a different impact of the construction works, e.g., noise, traffic congestion, and air pollution. The predictability of the claims given the large scale of T5 fits with Heugens *et al.*'s [35] description of issues, i.e., gaps between the stakeholder's expectation of the firm's behavior and the stakeholder's perception of the actual behavior. The localized nature of the issues was unlikely to have major impacts to the reputation of BAA. But if the managers left the issues unattended, they could find it difficult to work cooperatively with residents, and consequently, with the local authorities.¹

Fifty-nine BAA accounts are also identified, each consisting of a sequence of conversational turns. In general, BAA managed to produce one account that closed off the discussion around the claim in the first meeting after the meeting when the claim surfaced. Five claims, however, generated up to ten accounts each as the issues remained unresolved from one meeting to the next. For these, time series were built in tabular form that traced the sequence of the conversational turns.

As characteristic of qualitative studies [46], the coding effort progressed iteratively after an exploratory exercise at the onset. This exercise was informed by a set of high-level codes: 1) whether the BAA accounts were acknowledgements or denials; and 2) whether the BAA accounts included technical and/or institutional references. For each claim, the author copied sections of the accounts from the minutes, pasted the sections into separate tables, and compared the data with the codes. Although a lack of denials in the BAA accounts was uncovered, differences in the linguistic framing of the acknowledgements was sensed. The data suggested that the T5 managers used systematically

different words and phrasing to convey different attitudes when acknowledging the issues. This led the author to pursue a fine-grained analysis.

Specifically, the linguistic construction of the conversational turns—the primary constituents of interaction [57]—that formed the acknowledgements was looked at. The turns for words and phrases that the T5 managers used to convey a specific verbal tone or attitude were examined. The matrices were populated with the words and phrases to make sense of data, and the turns that fit with each potential tone were counted [37]. The process was stopped when a saturation process set in the sense the three broad tones that emerged—assertive, apologetic, and caring—satisfactorily exhausted the data. The insights were summarised in a conceptual framework on the use of language to strategically communicate with local residents.

The issues of internal validity were handled by triangulating the conceptual output against face-to-face interviews and archival documents. Specifically, the insights were played against: 1) the transcripts of interviews with the T5 senior managers “focused” [43] on how they handled the residents' claims; 2) relevant excerpts of the conversations that the author conducted with over 70 T5 participants as part of the broader research program; and (3) archival data, such as media interviews with representatives of the local communities and BAA, clips in the T5 press (*The Site*) and local press, and the content of the Web sites of the local councils.

The scope of this study was refined through presentations with practitioners and scholars. The reliability of the coding was tested by, first, engaging a graduate-standing student in coding the same material [60], and second, submitting drafts to peer-reviewed conferences. The exemplars in Tables I–V, picked from the final matrices, illustrate the discussion that follows.

¹A project community relations manager puts it “if residents are unhappy, councils are unhappy” [47].

TABLE II
SAMPLE OF CLAIMS AND ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENT AND FRAMING OF THE MANAGERS' ACCOUNTS

Issues at the core of the claims	Content of the acknowledgements produced by the T5 senior management team	
	Technical turns	Institutional turns
Lack of community policemen	BAA has employed 78 internal security officers to look after the T5 site and hostel [ASSERTIVE]	We will facilitate discussion with police [CARING]
Floodlights from T5 site are a nuisance	Floodlighting after dark is necessary to work safely. With the progression of summer, need will diminish [ASSERTIVE]	
Noisy generator	We'll replace it. On behalf of BAA, we pass on apologies to the local residents who experienced the disturbance [APOLOGETIC]	
Increasing demand on medical services	There's an Occupational Health Unit to service workforce on site [ASSERTIVE]	BAA expects to use the services of the local hospitals in case of a major accident as it's normal [ASSERTIVE]
Mud on local roads	There's a constant road sweeper in action to alleviate the problem [ASSERTIVE]	We cannot guarantee 2004 won't be without difficulties [ASSERTIVE]
Works on M25 highway		We can arrange a visit of someone from the Highways Agency to talk [CARING]

TABLE III
TONE OF BAA ACCOUNTS AS A FUNCTION OF CONTENT AND PERCEIVED LEGITIMACY OF THE CLAIM

Tone of the turns*	Key linguistic indicators	Content of the account	Perceived legitimacy of claim	Intent of project management team	Exemplars of the linguistic framing in pairs of local residents' claims – project managers' turns
Turns conveying emotional status of caring (#35~28%)	<i>we'll help out; we care; we respect your frustrations; what do you feel if we; we take this seriously; we strive to be good neighbours; we listen to your concerns</i>	Institutional	Moderate	Help overcome people institutional barriers (#13~10%)	[local] Could BAA use your influence on new coach operators and the routes they take? This matter has still not improved (...). [T5] I've taken the issue up with the coach operator concerned [T5] This remains a problem. We will further follow up.
		Technical	High	Recognise claim legitimacy (#11~9%)	[local] Since issuing fly-parking warnings to relevant construction workers, has any re-offended? [T5] Some have re-offended. The T5 managing director receives a weekly dossier of offenders and has taken this very seriously.
		Technical and institutional	High	Express concern proactively (#11~9%)	[T5] Works will start at the end of July to develop the road system (...) We hope that a visible improvement will be evident in the landscaping and the surrounding area
Assertive turns (#81~66%)	<i>we'll do/act; we're exceeding best practice; negotiations are ongoing; we didn't accept; no guarantee can be given; we are not involved</i>	Technical and institutional	High	Express commitment to resolve issues (#65~53%)	[local] Could BAA produce a policy that would deter people setting up illegal caravan sites? [T5] We've submitted a planning application for a 600 bed Hostel and temporary caravan park (...) There's a greater requirement for caravans than originally envisaged
		Technical and institutional	Low	Express sense that claim has low legitimacy (#12~10%)	[local] The roads in the area of Stanwell Moor are dusty when dry and muddy when wet due to the tippers from the T5 site [T5] There are three full time sweepers in action on the road surrounding the project. Permission will be sought from the Highways agency to clean the A3044 and A3113. We're happy to come and sweep if informed
		Technical	Low	Develop realistic expectations (#4~3%)	[T5] Regrettably there have been occasions when issues of this nature [a T5 worker used a pneumatic drill at 4am] occurred. But no guarantee can be given that this sort of thing will never happen again.
Apologetic turns (#7~6%)	<i>we apologize for; we pass on our apologies</i>	Technical	High	Express regret	[local] Due to the crane works at the A3044 on the weekend, six hours of continuous overhead flights were experienced (...) the residents haven't been informed with a Notification of Works [T5] Although a generic notice was issued covering a 5-6 week period, the specifics weren't realised at that time. BAA apologizes for this"

* Number of conversation turns framed in the tone; percentage relative to the total number of turns (123).

IV. ANALYSIS

A. T5 Project Context

In February 1993, BAA submitted the planning application for T5, encompassing the construction of three concourses, a 4000-space car park, 13.5 km of tunnels, taxiways, and the diversion of two rivers. At the peak of construction, BAA expected over 5000 workers to turn up daily on site. The government approved the planning application in 2001, noting "it was right to rely on the assurances given by BAA to control the widespread impacts of construction works to the environment."

It also imposed 690 planning conditions, including restrictions on working hours, no-go routes, parking provisions, control of emissions, and noise barriers [33]. The construction of T5 started in 2002 with a target to open in 2008. Table I summarizes the initiatives that BAA launched to gain community support and meet the planning conditions.

One group of initiatives focused on improving external communication. They aimed to keep the local residents informed about the construction works, and to allow them to express concerns about the T5 activities, i.e., they aimed at short-term cooperation [17]. This passed by writing progress updates in the

TABLE IV
EXCERPTS OF THE LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS OF A MONOTONIC CONVERSATIONAL SEQUENCE

Claim by the local residents	Turns from the T5 senior project management team	
	Technical content	Institutional content
Could BAA support the "Slough Anti Incinerator Network" and try to stop this horrendous proposal? (Jun04)		<i>We're aware of it, but not involved (...)</i> we'll ensure our planning department will be made aware of it (Jun04) [ASSERTIVE]
Has BAA determined the accuracy of the [incinerator] proposal? (Jul04)	The planning department <i>didn't judge it close enough or in the right location</i> to be an insurmountable obstruction (Jul04) [ASSERTIVE]	<i>BAA does not feel we could tell another company</i> that they couldn't proceed with an application that they had gone through a democratic process to achieve (Jul04) [ASSERTIVE]
Isn't BAA concerned that it [the incinerator] will add to the already high levels of pollution in the vicinity of the airport? (Jul04)		We acknowledge your strong sentiments, <i>but you should try to focus</i> on airport responsibilities (Jul04) [ASSERTIVE]

Italic words and phrasing convey linguistic tone

TABLE V
EXCERPT OF THE LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS OF A MULTITONIC CONVERSATIONAL SEQUENCE

Claim by the local residents	Turns from the T5 senior project management team	
	Technical content	Institutional content
On certain days, there're long queues of traffic ...BAA needs to ensure that we don't end up totally grid-locked (Jul 02)	<i>It's the intention</i> of the T5 Project Team to report to the Transport Manager whose role will be full-time <i>to manage the flow of traffic</i> (Jul 02) [ASSERTIVE]	A Transport Policy for the workers <i>is being compiled</i> (July 02) [ASSERTIVE]
	A temporary bridge has been installed. <i>This will minimise</i> the impact of construction related traffic (Nov 02) [ASSERTIVE]	
This matter [traffic issues] has not improved (Jul 03)	<i>We've erected</i> directional signage showing 'No Through Route to T5 Traffic (Jul 03) [ASSERTIVE]	
Directional signage was invisible to the traffic due to the trees and shrubs (Jul 03)	The signage is now visible to passing traffic. <i>We'll monitor the situation</i> (Sep 03) [ASSERTIVE]	We apologize for failing to notify the specifics of a road closure (Sep 03) [APOLOGETIC]
... local communities haven't been treated with respect ... the liaison team is informed, but perhaps T5 doesn't listen to them (Jan 04)		We're aware that <i>whilst striving to be good neighbours</i> , on occasions, we didn't meet our own aspirations (...) <i>I respect residents' frustrations...these are taken very seriously and every attempt is made to listen to the concerns</i> (Jan 04) [CARING]

Italic words and phrasing convey linguistic tone

newsletter and using a double-decker bus to show around displays about T5. As put by the T5 community liaison manager (2005), "Keeping people informed about what's happening is more than *half the battle in keeping them reasonably content*" (emphasis added). These initiatives also helped the project team to develop "moral imagination" [65] in the sense they could anticipate better the residents' concerns and potential claims that could be raised. The T5 community liaison manager explained the following:

Initially, we had people complaining of dust in their windows, in their washing, there was common anger that tends to escalate. In those cases, we'd be out there meeting them very quickly. That has a huge effect to diffuse anger, avoid they call the local newspaper and then we'd get an angry mob.

A second group of initiatives focused on the long-term relationship between BAA and the local communities, i.e., they aimed at long-term collaboration [17]. Specifically, they aimed to reinforce the relationship between BAA Heathrow and the local communities in terms of employment. BAA expected the T5 project to generate over 16 000 person-years of employment. The BAA local labor strategy recognized that around Heathrow, there were areas of deprivation, as well as a shortage of construction workers [2]. A BAA economic development manager ("typically a public sector job" in his own words) was responsible for implementing the strategy. BAA committed to invest £150 000 per annum from 2002 until 2012 to help the local residents access employment opportunities at the T5 project. But the economic development manager acknowledged that the

overhead from implementing the labor strategy was modest relative to the reputation benefits it generated, particularly, in the public sector. As he put it, “they’re all looking to T5, to the things we tried, and try to extract lessons from that.”

The third initiative involved donations from the T5 charity, an activity built exclusively upon employee voluntarism and fundraising. Charities are a way to improve visibility, demonstrate social responsibility, and develop social influence [7]. While the amounts were small (maximum donation of £2500), the impacts in terms of generating positive emotions could be high as typical of donations above and beyond required activities [7].

B. Content and Form of the T5 Senior Managers’ Accounts

Interestingly, apart rare exceptions, the T5 managers acknowledged invariably the issues brought out in the residents’ claims. This indicates a difference relative to studies where firms employ both acknowledgments and denials to maintain legitimacy [22]. Table II illustrates the residents’ claims and the content of the managers’ acknowledgements. The phrasing in italic indicate how the tone in brackets can be conveyed, a topic that is discussed later in this section.

On the one hand, the findings suggest that most claims were grounded in occurrences linked plainly to T5. It would not make sense, for instance, the T5 managers denying that the construction works caused dust or that T5-related traffic had circulated through restricted residential areas. If they did so, they would go against the logical expectations of the claimants [41]. This would deteriorate the relationship with the residents. The exception was a claim that the 24 h hotline was not working properly. T5 managers deemed it incorrect and unfair. Here, a manager argued that she believed “the level of service provided was good,” and explained that the system diverted calls to the answer phone when the line was busy or staff was out of the office.

On the other hand, the T5 management team was interested in asking the local councils to relax occasionally the application of a planning condition. T5 managers could undermine the legitimacy of their requests if they denied claims so as to decouple the project from activities perceived as illegitimate [22]. Hence, the managers would acknowledge the claims even when they, first, doubted as to whether the claim was correct and precise (“people try their luck,” one manager noted sharply); and second, they felt the claim was legitimate, but the project team was not accountable for it due to institutional boundaries, “This isn’t a part of the T5 project, but a stand-alone Highways Agency scheme,” remarked a manager in one account.

But if the institutional context constrained the T5 managers to acknowledge the claims, they also did not want to signal that “willingness to compensate local people is an open checkbook,” as put by the T5 communities liaison manager. Accordingly, the managers were careful in producing the acknowledgements. The T5 environment manager illustrated this tension with the two following situations:

You need to be careful about how far you want to go; neighbors talk ‘BAA helped me to get £200’, and then the next person says ‘I need £500 because my car is filthy due to your project,’ but T5 may have nothing to do with it.

A lady who runs a nursery for plants 250 m away said it was costing her a lot more to clean the glasses. We didn’t have baseline data on her place, but data on the vicinity didn’t show even a marginal increase. We thought the way she was going was that she wanted a lot of money to pay for cleaning the green houses. So we talked with her, showed the data, and said “we understand your concerns, but we don’t believe we’re having an impact as far as dust is concerned.”

The next section probes into the content of the acknowledgements.

C. Content of the Acknowledgements

The T5 managers employed only technical references in the construction of nearly 50% of the accounts, used both technical and institutional references in the construction of around 20% of the accounts, and only institutional references in the construction of around 30% of the accounts. Many of the technical references aimed at providing a “credible, rational, and adequate explanation” [22] for actions that the managers knew could disturb the residents’ welfare, but they were interested to pursue nonetheless for the sake of the project performance; for example, “we need to extend the height of the stockpile because the rate of backfilling isn’t happening at the same pace of extraction,” or “we need to safeguard additional hours to bring back soil for backfill in times of weather delays.” Other technical references aimed to demonstrate that the project team was mitigating the impacts, for instance, “we increased the presence of water bowsers, road brushers, and spraying of stockpiled soils.” If managers had hard technical data at hand, they would not hesitate using it to stress that the words agreed with the deeds. “The data shows that there were no exceedences in 2004 across the 20 dust stations,” a manager observed in one occasion.

The T5 managers seem to have found the use of institutional references suitable whenever they wanted to explain that, although they felt with the residents’ concerns, the project team did not have authority to resolve the issues. “We acknowledge the ditch is drying up, but we don’t have liability to feed it,” a manager explained in one case. In doing so, the T5 managers recognized that the issues could be associated to the project, but they attempted to justify in a “believable way” [22] that it was unfair to blame the project team for their occurrence.

D. Framing Linguistically the Acknowledgements

The analysis of the language used in the 123 conversational turns forming the 59 verbal accounts produced by the T5 senior management team reveals three broad tones: caring, assertive, and apologetic. Table III illustrates how the managers used systematically selected words and phrases to frame linguistically the acknowledgements in order to communicate a specific intent.

1) *Acknowledging in a Caring Tone:* The T5 managers appeared to use purposely a caring tone to convey senses of concern and feeling interested in the residents’ wellbeing, or put differently, to convey an emotional status that they *cared* with residents (rows one to three in Table III). They used this tone when the accounts involved both technical and/or institutional references, albeit difficulties to sound caring when presenting

only rational and technical arguments [22]. Three key situations were uncovered for which managers used caring turns.

First, the managers sounded caring when they judged that the institutional boundaries did not make the project team accountable for the claim, but they felt that the claim was legitimate. The caring turns tried perhaps to meet the residents' expectations that the T5 managers had a moral obligation to help people overcome institutional barriers. Second, the managers employed caring turns for framing an acknowledgment that recognized the project team had not resolved yet a legitimate issue. The managers were interested in talking people into not inferring from the delay that the project team neglected their wellbeing and behaved out of integrity. Thus, they, caringly, recognized a gap between the deeds and the reasonable expectations of the residents. But managers also resorted to institutional references, and eloquence to explain and justify the gap, "I wouldn't try in any way to offset this incident [noise during silent period] by putting into context that T5 is the largest construction programme in Europe," said the T5 director.

And third, the T5 managers employed caring turns when acknowledging proactively a foreseeable legitimate claim. This happened whenever they planned to request local authorities to relax the application of a planning condition:

The project requested us 24 hour working to hit a milestone. Before going to the local authorities, we assessed the impacts and asked the residents: 'what do you feel about this if we put mitigation measures in?' Their main concerns were the headlights of the trucks and the noise of the reverse beepers. We proposed to work in a circular way and deposit the material away from their homes. (T5 environmental manager 07) (emphasis added).

The T5 managers knew that the residents could perceive their requests as evidence that the project team put commercial interests ahead of people's welfare. In an effort to preempt a claim, the managers proactively raised the issues, and queried caringly the residents for ways through which the project team could mitigate the negative impacts.

2) *Acknowledging in an Assertive Tone:* The T5 managers appeared to use an assertive tone as a means to express determination in their opinions, promises, and sense of responsibility. The assertions were associated to choices of phrasing in the active voice (see rows four to six in Table III)—a commonly regarded technique to reduce ambiguity and establish objectivity [15]. This tone was used to frame about two-thirds of the conversational turns. Three main situations were identified in which the managers would be systematically assertive.

First, the T5 managers used assertions to try to persuade the residents that the project team was committed to mitigate the construction impacts. "We're not sweeping the T5 impacts under the carpet," the T5 director stated bluntly. Second, the managers were assertive when responding to a claim that they perceived was opportunistic, unfair, or exaggerated the issue. This was the case of assertive turns responding to claims that asked the project team to help the residents block planning applications of third parties. Another example involved claims suggesting that the project team was not meeting the legal obligations. In both situations, the managers acknowledged the issues. But they sought, assertively, to close off the discussion as they deemed

the claim lacked legitimacy. Few instances of this situation were found, though, perhaps because the managers felt that this tactical positioning risked inducing negative perceptions.

And third, the T5 managers used assertions when they deemed that the claims were unreasonable, given the scale of the project. "We'll look into this matter, but cannot give guarantees," they remarked occasionally. These assertions aimed to avoid residents from developing unrealistic expectations, which managers knew would be difficult to meet. They also sought to preempt people from perceiving that the project team were not behaving in integrity. But managers seldom used this type of assertions, concerned perhaps they would backfire and residents could perceive them as insensitive.

3) *Acknowledging in an Apologetic Tone:* Apologies show the realization of and regret for a fault or wrongdoing. The T5 senior managers occasionally run into situations where the residents perceived the managers had failed to keep their word. This is unsurprising given, first, the institutional and operational complexity of the T5 programme, and second, the misunderstandings that stem sporadically from the structural ambiguity inherent to verbal interaction [31]. The findings suggest the T5 managers apologized whenever they perceived that the residents' claims were correct and precise (see last row in Table III). Perhaps, the managers aimed to communicate their awareness of both the rights and obligations of BAA relative to the residents. Apologies were perhaps also a managers' attempt to honor their word and earn the trust of people. Notwithstanding this, the apologies were coupled tightly to precise technical references since they were an admission of fault. The number of apologetic turns was a very small fraction of the total number of turns.

4) *Shifting Tone Over Time:* The majority of the accounts were formed by conversational turns all in the same tone, i.e., they were fairly "monotonic." The T5 senior managers appeared to stick to one tone whenever they sensed that the choice of that linguistic framing for the content available was effective to neutralize, or at least attenuate, the negativity in the claim (see Table IV).

But occasionally, the T5 managers shifted from one tone to a different one. For example, they followed up the assertive turns with caring turns in a conversational sequence. They did so if the initial choice for framing linguistically the content available had not rested people assured that the project team was working hard to mitigate the impacts. Table V illustrates a common situation that was observed.

This "multitonic" situation was noticeable in the way the T5 senior managers responded to the claims about fly parking, traffic congestion, and illegal caravan parking—issues that dogged the project from the onset. The managers acknowledged that these claims were legitimate. The need to mitigate these impacts was a legal obligation, and recommendations were spelled out in the induction booklet distributed to all workers, "whether you drive your own car or car share with others, please be mindful that you are entering a highly residential area. Ensure you use only those dedicated areas made available for parking." Still, the managers were cognizant that the strategies to mitigate these issues were difficult to implement effectively as they involved many actors. Hence, the managers often followed up assertive

TABLE VI
USING LANGUAGE TO MANAGE LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND PROJECT STAKEHOLDERS ALIKE

		Verbal acknowledgements of the claims			Verbal denials
		Caring tone	Assertive tone	Apologetic tone	
Perceived legitimacy of the claim	Low		Suitable with technical and institutional references to: i) express sense that claim has low legitimacy ii) help people develop realistic expectations		Use in exceptional situations (no/extremely low legitimacy)
	High	Suitable with institutional references to: i) express willingness to help people overcome institutional barriers ii) recognise legitimacy of people's claim iii) proactively express concern with people's well-being	Suitable with technical and institutional references to: i) express commitment to resolve issues raised by people ii) express commitment to mitigate detrimental impacts	Suitable with technical references to: i) express regret ii) try to honour the word, after failing to keep the word	

turns about the traffic issues (which used technical references) with caring turns (which used institutional references).

V. DISCUSSION

The moral" legitimacy of the people living in the vicinity of Heathrow airport for clean air, quietness, and maintenance of their welfare made them a "normative" stakeholder relative to the T5 project, i.e., one "to whom the firm [the T5 team] has a moral obligation, an obligation of stakeholder fairness, over and above that due other social actors simply by virtue of their being human" [48, p. 124]. But residents were also an "instrumental" stakeholder [16] in the sense that they had power to affect project performance. If the managers jeopardized the relationship, hostile residents could request the local councils to cooperate less with their requests for relaxing the application of planning conditions, and in extreme, to stop construction works.

The empirical findings suggest that the T5 senior managers were well aware of the dual stakeholder status of the local communities. They also reveal that managers faced a balancing act. They needed to be both responsive to people's concerns and to avoid making unreasonable concessions that could damage the bottom line. Since legitimacy is relative to people [30], the management of this tension was far from trivial. The analysis suggests the managers intentionally used language as a resource to manage this tension. First, they shied away from using denials when communicating with claimants even when they perceived the claims lacked legitimacy. And second, they varied the linguistic framing of the acknowledgements as a function of the content available for constructing the accounts and of whether they perceived the claim to be legitimate or not.

Interestingly, these findings resonate with Erhard *et al.*'s [23] studies on the long-term value of integrity for individuals and organizations pursuing high performance. About two-thirds of the T5 managers' conversations turns were assertive, suggesting that the managers were committed to preempt residents from developing unrealistic expectations about whether and when the

issues would be resolved. The managers unequivocally asserted what they knew the project team could (not) do, and when the team could do it. In about another third of the accounts, the managers seem to have pursued a similar logic for managing the normative-instrumental tension. But they resorted to the politically adept caring turns. These turns conveyed an emotional status that the managers were not just giving lip service to the residents' well being and environment. And the apologies can be interpreted as a managers' attempt to "honor" their word when they considered that the project team had unarguably failed to "walk-the-talk."

Table VI summarizes this rudimentary conceptual understanding of how project managers can strategically use language to protect the legitimacy of their decisions and actions relative to claims raised by the local communities and external stakeholders alike.

Admittedly, misunderstandings between the T5 managers and local people surfaced occasionally despite the strategically constructed assertions, caring turns, and apologies. Talk is in a sense a working agreement between what people say (which may not be exactly what they meant) and what listeners interpret (and they may be a little off) [31]. These discrepancies in interpretation were particularly conspicuous in analyzing the issues around the third runway, which beset the relationship between the T5 managers and some residents from the project onset. Some people indignantly saw BAA's backing for a third runway as the firm performing a U-turn since they understood BAA had promised an end to the expansion of Heathrow during the public inquiry; one resident remarked "BAA purely looks to get more money for its shareholders. Is this not greed?" BAA insisted, however, that it had merely stated that T5 did not require a third runway to operate, and this was still true. Our findings do not rule out the possibility of BAA intentionally planting ambiguity in the early accounts about the third runway. But if this was true, BAA paid dearly for it. It incurred—and continues to incur—people's wrath from the moment it backed the third runway. And the T5 managers had to put a lot of effort into clarifying the discrepancies in communication so as to avoid

the third-runway issues undermining their efforts to sustain a positive relationship with the local residents.

Noteworthy, our qualitative data does not lend itself to untangle the extent to which the strategic intent behind the framing of the accounts was truly effective. Surely, the managers succeeded to close off the discussions about the issues with one account in 85% of the situations. This alone is a remarkable result, and corroborates with Elsbach's [22] findings about the effectiveness of acknowledgements. But, a claimant may give up pursuing an issue without necessarily becoming convinced that managers took proper care of it. It is plausible that a claimant was motivated to file a claim to make a symbolic point without intending to spend additional effort to be compensated. An alternative explanation may be that claimants chose to give up some fights given the show of strength put on by the project team to manage public relations.²

The success of the T5 managers in closing off the majority of the discussions could also result more from the expost deeds and less from the accounts themselves. Pragmatically, the T5 senior management team chose to give claimants the benefit of the doubt for the claims that they deemed reasonably credible and involved only a marginal compensation. This was invariably the case when residents complained that their car had got a chip on the screen, or that the car had skidded because the roads were muddy. Of course, the story was different if the compensation was not cheap. For example, a claimant alleged that the construction works were making it hard to sell the house at the price that otherwise would be its market value. But the T5 management team refused to buy the house to avoid creating a precedent that could be costly to BAA. Caringly, though, a T5 manager took a landscape architect to the resident's home, arguing that knowledge of the plans for tree screening would help the resident find a buyer. Arguably, this strategic stance helped the T5 managers to quickly close off most claims during the project.

Further, the minutes were almost invariably mute about the residents' emotions accompanying the claims. This was in stark contrast with the skillful accounts produced by the T5 managers. Occasionally, people would praise the project team for a specific deed. For example, one resident said "on behalf of Stanwell Moor Village, we thank the support of BAA with regard to the 'Low Flow Scheme'." And people would also acknowledge the positive relationship that they developed with some T5 team members:

Julie [T5 community liaison manager] has always gone to the trouble to look into the problems that have been put before her, even if the response hasn't always been positive . . . she has become a great friend. (resident on Julie's departure June 2005)

But anecdotal evidence reveals that some residents were utterly frustrated with the "inacceptable" lack of resolution of selected matters over time:

The villages have suffered immensely during the construction period in 2003 relating to noise, dust, intrusive lighting, and inadequate advance notice on some forthcoming works. Despite assurances that

the matters would be investigated, no improvement was evident to rectify the problems. (Chair of the Residents Association 2004)

All in all, it remains indeterminate whether this frustration was legitimate, or rather, it echoed a bias against T5 that interfered with impartial judgment. Stated differently, did the managers ever behave out of integrity, not "walking-the-talk" as some residents suggested? Putting aside misunderstandings inherent to talk-in-interaction, the planning conditions did not prescribe precise levels of performance for the mitigation measures. Hence, residents could, legitimately, argue that the project team did the least required by law and social expectation, i.e., they acted defensively [11]. Conversely, the managers could, also legitimately, argue that the project team went beyond compliance with legal requirements, i.e., they acted altruistically [42].

This conundrum is telling of the difficulty in assessing the effectiveness of communication with constituencies affected by projects, and more so, in assessing the extent to which project teams keep their word. It could be argued, for example, that the T5 project team could have invested more to mitigate the impacts and gain "the other half of the battle in keeping people reasonably content," to appropriate their own metaphor. They could have built more temporary roads to circulate trucks moving soil (and free local roads), used only vibration methods when driving piles (and reduce noise), and used only ultralow sulfur diesel in the machinery (and reduce emissions). Indeed, the T5 environment manager confided that staff could be reluctant to make these investments:

In the early stages, we had to work really hard to convince the projects of the benefits of working with the community since in a lot of projects, you go in, you build and you leave (. . .) we had to justify the costs on everything, but we did it because this was an opportunity to demonstrate we can build a terminal with minimal impact on the communities.³

Understandably, the T5 managers needed to draw a line in the sand to balance social and environmental responsibility with performance. But this balancing act was inexorably difficult to manage and, in turn, difficult to communicate. This does not necessarily mean that the project team behaved out of integrity. It could be that the "other half of the battle" was lost from the onset—at least with residents who opposed inalterably to the project. But had T5 managers failed to use language strategically and unequivocally in interacting with residents, the tension would have been much more difficult to handle.

VI. IMPLICATIONS TO PRACTICE AND THEORY

This study contributes conceptual understanding of how project managers can strategically use language to manage local communities and stakeholders alike. These insights are relevant to project management practice, in particular, in the context of large-scale infrastructure projects. J. Lemley, former Chief Executive of Transmarche Link once stated "managing the public

³The management of this internal tension is outside the scope of this paper, but it also matters. In the emphatic words of the community relations manager for the St. Pancras project (London), "if residents are being upset and it's within the contractors' power to do something, I'll snap at their heels till it's done. To do this job effectively, from time to time you need to be a Rottweiler" [47].

²We thank an anonymous reviewer for this valuable point.

image of major civil engineering projects is at least as important as managing their physical creation" [58]. This "do-no-harm" paradigm [1, p. 230] increasingly wraps new infrastructure projects regardless of whether the promoter is a public agency or a private enterprise [29]. This paradigm is also at the basis of Good Neighbor policies that frequently accompany project implementation and operations. Nestle Waters North America, for example, operates a Good Neighbor policy for all its sites, whereas Shell operates a sustainable development management framework that encompasses the same concerns [64], and Wilcox [68] reports on the use of a similar policy in the expansion of a wastewater treatment plant by a public agency in Seattle. Communication with external stakeholders is central to implementing Good Neighbor policies. And managers need to know how to use language to communicate effectively.

Of course, the skilful use of language will not preempt all situations where people can perceive project managers failing to "keep their word." Major projects are complex undertakings, and language itself is an ambiguous media. These factors make the management of major projects amenable to misunderstandings with affected constituencies. But if integrity provides actionable access to the opportunity for superior performance and competitive advantage, as Erhard *et al.* [23] argue, managers want to master the use of language beyond mere rhetoric framing. This will help managers to generate fewer misunderstandings, as well as "honor their word" when apologies are due.

This study has also important implications to theory. It constitutes a first attempt to connect action, communication, and language in studies of stakeholder management applied to projects. The insights add depth to previous studies that apply stakeholder theory to project management [28], and to literature on the role of communication in managing project stakeholders. More broadly, the insights add depth to extant studies that recommend firms to fit responses to reputational threats with public expectations, stakeholder status, and claim legitimacy [8]. This study also reveals how managers may be tempted, for the sake of pragmatism, to relax moral congruence and compensate claims that they perceive lack legitimacy but are cheap to meet. This contributes a more nuanced view to studies arguing firms should achieve "moral congruence" between cognitive and linguistic models with internal routines, work practices, and available resources [55].

VII. LIMITATIONS AND OUTLOOK

The uniqueness of the T5 program underpins the rationale for conducting a single-setting research study. Atypical or extreme cases often "reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied" [24, p. 78]. Single-setting research can also lead to a "deep understanding" of a situation, which helps scholars "see new theoretical relationships and question old ones" [19]. Still, the difficulties to generalize insights from a single setting [69] constitute a key limitation of this study. As the private owner of a controversial monopoly, BAA needed to work cooperatively with the residents during the T5 project. This was critical to protect its

intuitional legitimacy, or in the words of a senior manager, "its licence to operate and grow the business." But, admittedly, this relationship can be less conspicuous and threatening to institutional legitimacy in other contexts. And accordingly, managers may choose other ways to frame linguistically the accounts.

It also merits further research on how project managers can use language for responding to the claims raised by other interest groups such as the media and activists. Media, for instance, play an important role in exposing gaps between business practices and public expectations [53], and in confirming and eroding the legitimacy of the firm [34]. These are "derivate" stakeholders whose legitimacy does not derive from a moral stake [48]. Hence, these groups are not entitled to greater moral consideration in managerial decision-making or to a special obligation to attend to their well being. But, managers need to consider the actions and claims of these groups due to their potential effects upon the other normative stakeholders and the firm [48].

Other important aspects of using language as a managerial resource also merit investigation, namely: 1) how managers can use linguistic precision when interacting with people so as to neutralize exaggerated claims without backing away from their core; 2) how the framing of the claim can constrain the manager's own framing of the account, in the same way that the grammatical construction of a turn can constrain the construction of the next turn [54]; and 3) how the speaker's job role and personality should affect the content and framing of the accounts. Furthermore, minutes are nothing but a proxy of how the talk-in-interaction exactly unfolds. And while the verbatim minutes posted online were reportedly agreed by both parties, they cannot capture the "elements of theatrically" [31] incorporated into talk, including nonverbal vocalizations (utterances), pauses, smiles, chuckles, headshakes, and tone of voice. Individuals use these features to display and communicate irony, sarcasm, playfulness, and other meanings. We should research how project managers can tap this resource.

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Nuno A. Gil received the Licenciado degree in civil engineering from the Instituto Superior Técnico, Lisboa, Portugal, in 1992 and the Ph.D. degree in civil and environmental engineering from the University of California, Berkeley, in 2001.

He is a Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in the Manchester Business School (MBS), The University of Manchester, Manchester, U.K., where he is also the Deputy Director of the MBS Centre for Research in the Management of Projects. From 2008 to 2009, he was on sabbatical leave and received a Global Research Award funded by the Royal Academy of Engineering. His current research interests include development of theory, conceptual framing, and methods on new infrastructure design and development, investigating the program- and project-based processes, design architectures, and organizational structures associated to the delivery of new infrastructure such as airports, utilities, and schools.

Dr. Gil is a corporate member of the British Institution of Civil Engineers.