

13th GEM&L International Conference on Management and Language

Call for Papers

Sheffield, 4-5th June 2019

Exploring Multiple Perspectives on Translation in International Business and Management

Although translation is a fundamental part of business activity, the role of the translator has largely been an invisible one (Venuti, 2008) and it is only quite recently that explicit consideration has been given to those individuals who engage in translation processes in organisational contexts (e.g. Logemann and Piekkari, 2015), thus breaking the silence on translation issues in international business (Chidlow et al, 2014; Zhong and Chin, 2015). In this spirit, we have chosen translation to be the theme of the 13th GEM&L International Conference on Management and Language.

One of the major challenges facing language and translation-sensitive scholars located in the management and business fields of inquiry is that translation is a broadly defined concept, with multiple and different aspects being investigated across various disciplines. As a result, “to apply a ‘translation perspective’ or rely on ‘translation theory’ is not the exclusive prerogative of any single group or academic community” (Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016, p. 236).

There are many definitions of translation in the literature. In general, it involves a “process of moving communication in any form (verbal or written) from one language to another” (Piekkari et al. (2013). More broadly speaking, many scholars have moved away from the classical positivist view of language as a code based on the sender-receiver model of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) to a social constructivist approach which sees translation as a social practice (Girin, 1990; Chidlow et al. 2014; Xian 2008). The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2006) reflects this perspective when he speaks of “language hospitality” to signify the acceptance of ‘otherness’ (p. 10). In the same vein, Ciuk and James (2015) point out that translation can also be considered as a “situated practice” through which individuals interact in order to jointly construct and negotiate shared meaning. Furthermore, in organisation studies, there is a tradition of using translation as a metaphor in order to consider how ideas and organisational practices move and change across different contexts, thus raising the ontological question of how actors relate to each other (Kearney, 2006; for a literature review, see van Grinsven, Heusinkveld and Cornelissen, 2016).

Despite different perspectives across disciplines, however, there are common themes which emerge when considering the concept of translation as it occurs in a business domain. There is a general understanding that translation requires change, insofar as that “to set something in a new place is to construct it anew” (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005 p. 8). However, in both international management and organisation studies, by thinking of translation more broadly as movement, or transporting, as per the Latin etymology of the term (Munday, 2016) the concept can be used to investigate the travel of words, practices and ideas across different organisational settings, including not only business but also academia. This raises many questions about the efficacies of the various ways in which this can be done, including (but not limited to) some of the areas of inquiry of interest to our community which are identified below.

In order to understand translation in an organisational setting, it is important to consider micro-level practices as relatively little is yet understood about the daily activities of individual boundary spanners (Barner-Rasmussen et al, 2014) or paraprofessional translators (Tyulenev, 2014). Such individuals engage in acts of linguistic and organisational translation on a regular basis at work, despite it frequently not being a part of their formal job role. When investigating how organisations manage multilingualism (Maclean, 2006) it is vital to incorporate bottom-up explorations of how linguistic diversity is actually managed in organisations (e.g. Sanden and Lønsmann, 2018), in contrast to a mechanistic view of language (Janssens, Lambert and Steyaert, 2004), in which corporate language policies are seen as a rationally planned part of corporate strategy (Luo and Shenkar, 2006).

An important area of inquiry is therefore the concept of translational agency – who is translating what, and how, for whom? Studies (e.g. Holden and Michailova, 2014; Tietze, Tansley and Helienek, 2017) have documented the existence of a discursive void between different natural languages, and thus the agency of translators becomes still more important when they also act as cultural mediators (Ribeiro, 2007), dealing with words which are culturally salient (e.g. Blenkinsopp and Shademan Pajouh, 2010). This therefore leads explicitly into questions of power. Welch & Welch (2008) posit that language acts as a “powerful reconfiguration agent”. Brannen et al. (2014) point out the transformative power of translation as an act of recontextualisation. Piekkari et al. (2013) propose a multilevel theoretical model of the translation process and show how an organisation’s translation ability affects its language absorptive capacity. This approach raises questions such as how messages are translated and how transparent and open the relationship is between the commissioner of the translation and the translator themselves, as translation is an inherently political act (Spivak, 2012). This is particularly relevant in scenarios involving paraprofessional translators (e.g. Logemann and Piekkari, 2015) who do not subscribe to a formal code of ethics as is often the case with translation professionals, and who may therefore use translation activities in order to consolidate their own power and act as organisational gatekeepers (Holmes, 2007). At the same time, the activities of paraprofessional translators can be interpreted as instances of using employees’ language skills as non-remunerated commodity (e.g. Heller 2010).

Linked to this is a consideration of how boundary spanners/paraprofessional translators manage their careers. Given that language skills can link to all three of the career competences of “knowing why, knowing how and knowing who” identified by De Filippi and Arthur (1996), further exploration of how such individuals manage their abilities in the age of “boundaryless careers” (Itani, Järlestrom and Piekkari, 2015) is needed. Is it the case that they actively seek out roles in which they will be able to use their language abilities? Or is it a more emergent process in which organisations gradually come to recognise and rely on their skills in these areas?

A key aspect is to understand how technology is changing the world of multilingual work. Many employees now use tools such as Google Translate (Sanden and Lønsmann, 2018) in order to achieve a translation which is often far from perfect, in scenarios where speed and convenience, rather than accuracy, are used to assess the quality of a translation (e.g. Reiss and Vermeer, 2014). This is in addition, or in contrast to, professional translation and terminology management tools, of which organisations typically have limited awareness (Albuquerque, Costa and Esperança, 2015).

However, aside from technological solutions, organisations engage in a range of approaches to manage translation and language diversity (e.g. Feely and Harzing, 2003). Therefore, researchers have also considered how organisations can incorporate language management into their business strategy (Luo and Shenkar, 2006) through the use of corporate language policies and language-sensitive recruitment practices (Van den Born and Peltokorpi, 2010), and thus we welcome papers which consider how translation can be managed at the strategic level, which frequently evokes a different

conceptualisation of language use than at the micro level (Kankaanranta, Karhunen and Louhiala-Salminen, 2018).

Alongside these questions of who is engaging in translation, and how, there is also a fundamental issue regarding what is being translated. Most business translation falls in the domain of “pragmatic translation” (Froeliger, 2013) in the sense that its primary function is informative, rather than aesthetic, although there are exceptions - whilst external marketing communications may require aesthetic qualities, this may not be an expectation in the translation of company reports. Thus attention must be given to the type of document which is translated (e.g. Yli-Yokapii, 2006; Jeanjean et al, 2015; Tréguer-Felten, 2017).

The silence on translation in international management is particularly surprising given the role of translation in business activities, with the noticeable exception of the study of the different recontextualisations of common corporate values of a US MNC in its French and German subsidiaries through translation (Barmeyer and Davoine, 2011). Our ability as researchers to investigate and report on interactions which occur in multiple languages (e.g. Xian, 2008) should be developed. To this end Steyaert and Janssens (2013) call for more reflexivity on research carried out in a multilingual way, rather than reducing translation in international research to a merely technical process of back-translation (Brislin, 1970), despite the profound impact that it has on both questionnaire responses (e.g. Harzing, Reiche and Pudielko, 2013) and the interview process (e.g. Marschan-Piekkari and Reis, 2004; Welch and Piekkari, 2006). We therefore invite papers which reflect on these methodological issues.

Two final points concern the impact of translation on both pedagogical issues and on policies and practices of business and government. Firstly, at a time when the teaching of languages to business students is under threat (Lønsmann and Klinge, 2018) it is necessary to consider how both specific language skills, and a broader sensitivity to linguistic issues (Gaibrois and Piekkari, 2018) are incorporated into the curriculum, thus preparing students to act in polyphonic and multilingual work environments. It is worth noting that translation as a pedagogical tool and as a theoretical issue has completely disappeared from business schools’ curricula, because of the widespread use of English in business education in non-English speaking countries (Tietze, 2004) and the belief that translation as an exercise in foreign language learning impedes the acquisition of linguistic proficiency in oral production. The question to be raised is: how can we “transfer” the outcomes of academic research on translation into BS curricula and particularly into language teaching and developing awareness of language issues’?

Secondly, and in line with this reasoning, in a recent report from the Academy of Management’s Practice Theme Committee on measuring and achieving scholarly impact in the real world (Haley et al., 2017), some respondents to the committee’s study have argued for the AOM to invest in “more innovative and institutionalised ways of translating research” (p. 19) to increase the dissemination of research findings. In other words, translation could provide a means for making scholarly research more accessible to business and government, thereby contributing to putting scholarly knowledge into meaningful action for business and society.

Given the broad ranging nature of these issues, we therefore warmly welcome multidisciplinary contributions on this topic in order to shed light on this emerging area of inquiry in management. Additionally, we recognise that translation activities occur in many different types of organisational settings, not just the multinational corporation (Angouri and Piekkari, 2018), and thus we encourage papers which explore settings which are underrepresented in the language-sensitive management literature, including SMEs (e.g. Chiochetti, 2018), but also NGOs, local authorities and other public bodies which also deal with language work in order to carry out their daily activities. We also invite

contributions which critically analyse the work of paraprofessional translators from various perspectives, both with regards to the powerful position their translation activities put them in, and with regards to how organisations use employees' language skills as a non-remunerated commodity (e.g. Heller 2010). Papers which reflect on methodological issues of translation in international management work are welcome, as are pedagogical papers, as today's students are tomorrow's managers, so papers which explore translation as a pedagogical tool in both specific language teaching and in developing language general competencies (Mughan, 2015) more broadly are welcome.

Therefore, papers could include, but are not limited to, the questions listed below:

Who acts as boundary spanners and paraprofessional translators?

What role do paraprofessional translators play in multilingual organisations? How does this affect the use of professional translation and interpreting services?

Can translation studies act as a bridge between international business and organisation studies, given the comparatively little dialogue between the two areas?

What processes and practices do organisations use in order to translate?

How can translation be understood as an act of power when translating words and concepts across different settings?

Can the ad-hoc use of employees' language skills for translation purposes be critically interpreted as a non-remunerated commodity, and what are the implications of this practice for organisations?

How does the adoption of a common corporate language or lingua franca influence translation processes?

How is technology changing the way in which individuals interact in multilingual environments?

How can we be more transparent about the methodological implications of translation when conducting multilingual research?

How can inter- and multidisciplinary approaches help us to better understand the role and impact of translation in organisations?

What are the pedagogical implications and challenges of using translation perspectives to develop language specific and language sensitive skills for managers?

To what extent can a translation perspective help business schools decision makers reconceptualise language and language teaching from a non-mechanistic perspective?

How can the translation of research facilitate bringing the work of researchers to life so as to make an impact on real world practice and policy?

How do translation practices differ depending on the type of document which is being translated?

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- Steyaert, C., Ostendorp, A., & Gaibrois, C. (2011). Multilingual organizations as 'linguascapes': Negotiating the position of English through discursive practices, *Journal of World Business*, 46(3): 270-278.

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