

## 12<sup>th</sup> GEM&L International Workshop on Management & Language

Paris, 22-23 May 2018

### CALL FOR PAPERS

#### **The impact of language on knowledge creating and sharing**

Knowledge acquisition and transfer are vital to companies' strategic development but they require an ability to collaborate successfully across professional, cultural and linguistic boundaries (Kogut & Zander, 1992; Hedlund, 1999; Buckley et al., 2005). Given its role in facilitating the flow of meaning, language has been called "the lubricant of the transfer of knowledge, values and experience from one source of common knowledge to others" (Holden, 2002). However, as Welch and Welch (2008) observe, language issues occupy a relatively small place in knowledge management (KM) research, perhaps due to the lack of attention to the impact of international contexts on KM in general. Ten years later, it can be argued that the link between language and cross-boundary knowledge transfer needs to be further articulated and explored. For this reason, the impact of language on knowledge creating, transferring and sharing has been chosen as the theme of the 12th GEM&L conference. We suggest below some of the areas of inquiry which could be shared by the KM and language-oriented research communities, although they are by no means the only ones.

The interconnection between knowledge and language in fields such as organizational and international business studies (OS/IB) can be seen in the paradigmatic shift from a mechanical vision of meaning-making to one that sees meaning as co-produced in interaction with others and embedded in the context (Bakhtin, 1981; Hislop, 2013). An example of this trend is the growing body of research on the emergence of negotiated language practices which have been shown to enhance productive knowledge-sharing in ways that lingua franca practices cannot (Janssens et al, 2004; Steyaert et al., 2011 and Logemann and Piekkari, 2015). This work is consistent with knowledge management (KM) research which refers to knowledge as "knowing" to emphasize its dynamic, evolutive nature (Paraponaris and Sigal, 2015; Tsoukas, 2009). Cross-pollination between findings on negotiated language practices and those on knowing as a dynamic process (Renzl, 2005) offers interesting prospects for the advancement of research on cross-boundary collaboration.

Both KM and language-sensitive researchers are seeking to better understand how tacit or socially-embedded knowledge can be communicated between heterogeneous groups (Collins, 2007; Nonaka, 1994; Polanyi, 1983; Hislop, 2013; Buckley et al., 2005). The notion of codified or explicit communication vs. socially-embedded tacit communication has been applied by researchers in both communities to categorize phenomenon such as companies' language policies (Janssens, Lambert and Steyaert, 2004) and types of knowledge boundaries (Carlile, 2004). Their conclusions suggest that

explicit and tacit communication are interwoven to varying degrees, and that the greater the sensitivity and adaptability to local conditions, the greater the ability to share tacit understanding.

Knowledge sharing is dependent on dialogical relations (Bakhtin, 1981; Tsoukas, 2009), but dialogical exchanges are threatened when people do not speak the same language. To address this issue, researchers have explored the “transformative power” (Brannen et al., 2014, p. 501) of translators and boundary-spanners in the knowledge-sharing process (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2010; 2014; Tietze et al., 2017; Holden, 2002; Piekkari et al. 2014). Translation is a creative activity through which the original message is reinterpreted in the context of a new reality (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005; Tietze et al., 2017), making it a vital part of cross-boundary knowledge transfer in monolingual, multilingual and professional communities. Even knowledge domains that we take to be expressible let’s say in English in an unproblematic way are indeed not, as exemplified by the findings of Evans (2004), Evans et al. (2015) and Baskerville et al. (2011) on the use of terms in international accounting.

The role of language as a tool in the mediating of meaning has been explored in OS literature (Engeström and Sannino, 2010; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Peirce, 1931; Lorino, 2014). Studies on boundary objects, for example, have yielded important insights into the way semi-universal, semi-localized objects such as maps, visual aids and symbols can help heterogeneous groups understand each other (Star and Griesemer, 1989; Carlile, 2002). Linking natural languages to knowledge through linguistic representations, terminology and languages for special purposes also offers interesting perspectives for collaboration between language-oriented scholars (Wüster, 1991; Picht, 2014; Sager, 1981; Felber, 1987; Lerat, 1995; Rey, 1979).

Next, language-sensitive researchers can contribute to a deeper understanding of the link between knowledge sharing, social identity and trust (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2007; 2011). Research has shown that people share ideas more willingly with members of their own social, cultural or professional group (Reiche et al., 2015; Gumperz, 1982; Kassis Henderson, 2010), but we also know that knowledge is increasingly shared between groups, reconfiguring old boundaries. What impact does the increasing fluidity of boundaries have on identity and therefore on knowledge sharing? Luring (2008) has found for example that although language is indeed a shaper of identity, its impact on identity can depend more on the context of language use than on national origin. The plasticity of boundaries is also evident in the concepts of intersectionality (Zander et al., 2010) and multiple cultures (Soderberg and Holden, 2002), raising questions about the impact of double-identity holders on knowledge sharing. Scholars are also reexamining the direction of the flow of knowledge across boundaries, as demonstrated by Peltokorpi and Yamao’s (2017) study on reverse knowledge transfer between local subunits and company headquarters.

We also need to better understand the social processes at play in the formation of language clusters (Tange and Luring, 2009), language communities (Girin, 1990), knowledge clusters (Wannenmacher, 2014; Ahmad and Widèn, 2015), knowledge boundaries (Paraponaris and Sigal, 2015; Peltokorpi, 2017) and communities of practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991). In addition, as knowledge communities also reside in business and practice, we must learn more about the expectations of businesses concerning what language(s) should do, in order to address their needs. Ultimately, this raises the question of whom the knowledge is created for and why.

Finally, the dynamic approach to language and knowledge creation viewed as a social process of co-construction of meaning has important consequences for methodology. Methods such as participatory action research (PAR) and ethnographic research which call for the involvement of the researcher in ongoing organizational processes and direct observation of discursive interactions during knowledge

sharing in the workplace may provide promising results (Bradbury-Huang, H., Reason, P., 2013; McIntyre, 2007). Participative Action Research is all the more appropriate for the advancement of scholarship on language and knowledge as it brings together the vision of researchers and practitioners as cross-boundary collaboration unfolds.

We welcome empirical, methodological and conceptual papers which aim at breaking new ground, and in particular, papers which examine the way language impacts knowledge sharing and creation, knowledge boundaries, communities of practice, boundary-spanning, cross-boundary communication, translation and mediation. Authors are encouraged to explore approaches to language issues within organizations, and to closely scrutinize business practices and activities. The areas of enquiry which may be explored include, but are not limited to, the questions listed below:

How is knowledge shared and created in the workplace?

What is the articulation between language, sharing and a generation of knowledge?

What is the impact of language clustering on knowledge sharing and creation?

To what extent is multilingual capacity a challenge or an opportunity for knowledge creation in multinational companies?

What is the role of language and knowledge in the production of sense-making (Weick, 1995) across boundaries?

How does language impact the intertwining of tacit and explicit knowledge?

Does the adoption of a lingua franca optimise the process of knowing?

How to better overcome language and knowledge boundaries in collaborative contexts?

What is the role of translation, mediating tools and other boundary objects in knowledge sharing and creation?

How can social identity and trust-building impact knowledge sharing in multilingual contexts?

How can studies on intersectionality and multiple identities advance our understanding of social interactions during knowledge sharing in multicultural/multilingual workplaces?

What are the challenges of academic knowledge production?

What about innovative research methods regarding knowledge sharing and production?

How can language-sensitive research contribute to knowledge management research?

Are the ethnological approach and the participatory action research adapted to qualitative research methods in knowledge and language-sensitive academic research?

To what extent can interdisciplinary research help produce new theory and practical applications in language and knowledge research?

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