

THE GIFT OF TONGUES: TRANSLATION AS INSTITUTIONAL WORK

Abstract

An implicit assumption in the literature is that that institutional work is conducted in and through one language, English, only. We challenge this view by arguing that translation is a form of invisible and unacknowledged institutional work which spreads institutional practices and patterns across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries. We theorize about translation as a process through which different natural languages and their meaning systems meet. In particular, we explore the role and agency of bi-and multilingual translators in these processes. We combine three streams of research – translation studies, international management and institutional research – to propose a concept of what we label ‘institutional translation work’. It represents a first attempt to examine translation in a multilingual context, with the objective of understanding how translation happens. We develop a typology of three approaches to translation that lead to three different types of institutional work. In doing so, we locate the agency of the translator in spaces of 'slippage' which are inevitable in translation processes. We suggest that the concept of institutional translation work changes the way institutional work is commonly understood in international settings.

Somewhere *in-between* products, systems, plans, visions, strategies, budgets and contracts - or at least certain aspects of them - are translated. Which aspects are picked out for translation, by whom, how faithfully the translations are conducted, at what cost, and to which standards of quality, we do not know (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio, 2011: 293, our italics).

Institutional theory is perhaps the most enduring approach to understanding organizations (Greenwood, Oliver, Shalin & Suddaby, 2008). Since the publication of foundational papers in the 1970s and 1980s (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1977; Meyer & Rowan, 1983; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tobert & Zucker, 1983; Meyer & Scott, 1983) institutional scholars have continued to develop new perspectives on organisations as normative systems that give meaning to social exchange and thus enable self-reproducing social order. Challenges relating to the process of how institutional organisations change has provoked a stronger focus on agency and the exercise of influence, i.e., how organisational actors work on their institutional context to promote collective and individual interests – a question that according to Greenwood et al. (2008) is yet to be fully answered. Our opening quotation by Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio (2011) raises this very question from the viewpoint of translation.

To an extent, institutional scholars have risen to the challenge by recognising the central role of communication in the process of institutionalisation (Lammers, 2011; Suddaby, 2001). Recently, they have focused attention on micro-processes of institutional work, understood as the “purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 215). Central to this thinking is the role of agency in the lifecycle of institutions which are framed as a “complex mélange of forms of agency - successful or not, simultaneously radical and conservative, strategic and emotional, full of compromise, and rife with unintended consequences”

(Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011: 52-53). The emphasis on the mundane microfoundations of institutions (Powell & Colyvas, 2008) has inspired a series of studies on the on-going construction of institutions which affect the behavior and beliefs of individuals and collective actors by providing templates for cognition, emotion and behaviour in social life. Supported by constructivist, more process-oriented epistemologies (Colyvas, 2007) institutional scholars have concerned themselves with questions of ‘why’ and ‘how’, rather than with ‘what’, ‘how much’ and ‘when’ (see, e.g., Dacin, Munir & Tracey, 2010; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Zilber, 2006).

Concomitant with orientations towards micro-settings and constructivist epistemologies the generative and performative power of language in the creation, maintenance and disruption of institutions has been acknowledged. Institutional research has thus been ‘linguistically turned’ as researchers draw on discursive, rhetorical, and sense-making approaches (Brown, Ainsworth & Grant; 2012; Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Maguire & Hardy, 2010; Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004; Sillince & Barker, 2012) to advance knowledge about how and why institutional patterns are maintained or changed and spread across fields and boundaries, including national and linguistic ones.

There is a particular strand of literature in institutional research which has developed a language-sensitive approach to translation. A group of mainly Scandinavian scholars (Brunsson, 1989; Brunsson & Olsen, 1993; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005) concerns itself with ‘the travel of ideas’ in global business and management contexts. This corpus of work focuses on how ideas become global practice and how they are received, amended and changed in the process of being transferred at the local level. These studies provide strong evidence that signs and systems of signification and related practices have to be recontextualised in order to be successfully grounded in different contexts. They clearly allow for agentic action as organizational actors make sense of

institutional patterns and enact them. However, this group of researchers adopts translation as a metaphor rather than asks how ideas which are expressed in different natural languages travel.

We believe that in times of globalization and multilateral communications (Lambert, 1989; Pym, 1998; Parker, 1997) this by-passing of language multiplicity (Temple & Young, 2005) appears odd and unjustified. Despite English having been established as the dominant global *lingua franca* of science, business, international relations, culture and the arts (Montgomery, 2013; Tietze, 2008), the reality of all international collaborations remains multilingual in character (Steyaert, Ostendorp & Gailbrois, 2011; Tietze, 2010). Therefore, when words, ideas and meanings begin to travel across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries they meet with other words, ideas and meanings and hence two linguistic signification systems have to be aligned in order to produce meaningful communication and purposive action. And that's when translation happens. Our opening quotation suggests that this process takes place in hidden spaces of "in-between" and has to be initiated and executed by someone: we argue that this 'someone' are translators who possess the gift of tongues. Alongside professionally trained interpreters and translators, employees and managers, situated in international organisations, translate between different languages as part of their everyday work. In their collective totality translators constitute the microfoundations of institutional patterns and institutions themselves which are 'translated into being'.

In this paper we aim to change the way institutional work is commonly understood in three fundamental ways. First, we contest the monolingual view of institutional work by arguing that such work is undertaken in international contexts, requiring the crossing of national language boundaries and calling for translation. We establish translation as a key form of institutional work in the lifecycle of institutions. In order to unpack the process of

translation we engage in conceptual blending (Cornelissen & Durand, 2012) between translation studies, research on institutional work and institutional management.

Second, we challenge the view that translators would only be passive instruments of communication and transmitters of equivalent information across contexts. We point to their agency as cultural mediators and politically-motivated actors who influence the way ‘foreign’ ideas are received and even rejected. As the opening quotation suggests, translators make decisions about which aspects of the text are translated or not and to what extent they can and want to be faithful to the source text (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio, 2011). While linguists argue that spaces of slippage are inevitable in any translation process (Jacobson, 1959), we adopt the position that they provide translators with a window of opportunity to innovate, influence and recreate meaning. Understood in this way, translation and translators raise questions about conflict of interests in institutional work.

Third, we develop a novel construct of institutional translation work as a cross-linguistic, inter- and intra-organizational microprocess which occurs on a regular, yet unacknowledged basis in international organisations. It is the purposive actions of bilingual or multilingual individuals who through their translation work contribute to the creation, maintenance and disruption of institutions in multilingual organization. Our research proposes a typology of three approaches to translation which are coupled with three different forms of institutional work: finding sameness, establishing local intelligibility, and creating mutual intelligibility through articulation of voice.

The remainder of the paper unfolds in the following way. In the next section we briefly review translation studies and introduce the process of translation from this disciplinary perspective. Translation studies provide us with a meaningful vocabulary for theorizing about translation as institutional work. Thereafter, we turn to a particular stream of

institutional research which deals with translation as a metaphor. We then present selected ideas from a language-sensitive stream of research in international management. Our purpose is to establish a link between translation across natural language boundaries and institutional work – a link which to the best of our knowledge has not been established previously. Viewed separately, translation studies and international management provide an incomplete understanding of translation as institutional work, but when combined, they form a solid and generative foundation for theorizing about this important form of institutional work. We propose a typology of three approaches to translation leading to three different forms of institutional work. We conclude by summarizing our main contributions, outlining the implications of our analysis, and suggesting directions for future research.

TRANSLATION IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

Translation studies as a bounded field of study and practice was established as late as in the 1970s (Holmes, 1972). The development of this discipline can be summarized in three phases. The early approaches focused on the original source text and concerned themselves with the difficulty of translating correctly into another language. The endeavour of translation scholars was to be faithful to the source text by establishing rules to find equivalence in another language (Baker & Saldhana, 2011).

Later models of translation focused on the purpose and consequences of the translated text in the target culture and viewed it as a process of reconceptualisation of signs and meanings in different target contexts. This target model of translation was concerned with different normative systems in the target culture and acknowledged the lack of achieving absolute equivalence. Translators at that time generally questioned the existence of a ‘correct language’ and therefore the possibility of ‘correct translation’.

In the last phase of the development, translation theorists started to pose questions about whether language and translation can ever be neutral, and developed a strong vocabulary that borrowed from postcolonial studies. They framed the translation process as expressive of dominant Western languages which imposed their meaning systems upon colonial states.

Since the establishment of translation studies in the 1970s, the discipline is still growing with “meteoric speed” (Baker & Saldanha, 2011: xi) and its ideas and approaches are increasingly being drawn upon by scholars from other disciplines in order to understand globalisation and its consequences as a multifaceted phenomena (Dodson, 2005; van Leeuwen, 2006). Even in the English-dominated field of international management and organization studies, scholars are turning their attention to the inevitability of translation as a concomitant phenomenon of multilingual realities. Recent contributions problematize the unreflective use of English (Janssens & Steyaert, 2013; Tietze & Dick, 2013), proffer translation studies as a means to develop language strategies for international companies (Janssens, Lambert & Steyaert, 2004), conceptualise international managers as translators (Tietze, 2010) and empirically investigate mundane translation behaviours (Piekkari et al., 2013). In this regard there are some early signs that the management academy is starting to take translation seriously. This growth and spread of the application of translation studies in itself provides some substantiation to our argument that, through globalisation, natural languages are increasingly meeting and brought to bear on each other. The existence of a shared *lingua franca*, i.e. the English language, has not eradicated or rendered superfluous issues resulting from language diversity. Rather the contrary the need to translate has become increasingly pressing.

The Process of Translation

Our starting point is the very process of translation in order to understand its communicative microfoundation and be able to locate precisely the agency of the translator in the process. Eco provides a definition of translation as the transfer of meaning from Language A to Language B. There is no direct outcome of translation as it is a “process that takes place between two natural languages” (2003: 25-26). While it is inherently difficult to capture and pin down a process, semiotics as the study of how languages systems convey meaning provides a descriptive vocabulary to understand this transfer of meaning. Based on the foundational work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) in particular, language is seen as a structured system where ‘signifiers’ (which we understand here in the widest sense as words, scripts, texts but also as objects or practices) are tied to ‘signifieds’, the concept or meaning behind the signifier. Saussure (1916) was concerned with the structural aspects of language as a system of signs and less concerned with pragmatic aspects of language-as-used in contexts. Nevertheless this basic model provides some explanation as to why the dual nature of the sign renders the translation process problematic.

Figure 1 illustrates the dual nature of a sign which forms a holistic entity used in the communication process. *Semiosis* refers to the over-arching process of producing and reproducing, receiving and circulating meaning in all forms. Brannen (2004) explains it as the dynamics of communication and translation in terms of backward and forward flows of meaning, including the possibility of not only of mediating meaning at the recipient location, but also of rejecting meaning or sending messages back to the source location. This is visualized in Figure 1 with arrows going in two directions between language A and B. *Recontextualization* in turn refers to the different meanings that signs (words) take on within the target culture context. We therefore use one-way arrow that goes from language A to language B. During translation *slippage* (Jakobson, 1959) happens at the less visible level of

the sign, i.e. the signified (meaning, concept). This *slippage* is the central space of translation and of the production, reproduction and circulation of meaning.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Figure 1 also illustrates the challenges associated with translation. As the signifier of language A (source language) is transformed into the signifier of language B (target language), the signified (i.e. the meaning itself) is not necessarily equally transformed and the translation process remains superficial. What happens is that words are translated but the attached meaning is not. Translation is therefore reduced to the transfer of the signifier without the signified, resulting in a disrupted and only partial communication process (see, also Brannen, 2004).

Let us provide a simple example to make the point. The English word ‘table’ is a sign, consisting of a particular combination of written (or spoken) letters (the signifier) and what it means or stands for, i.e. an object or a concept of a particular practice (the signified). In translating the sign ‘table’ into German (Tisch), one could argue that complete equivalence may exist. However, in translating the sign ‘table’ into the language of an Amazonian rainforest tribe where tables do not exist as such, the translation process becomes more difficult because there is no direct equivalent to this sign. Also, how to translate or explain particular practices (i.e. the signified) related to tables such as different usages of tables or indeed different seating orders or norms (e.g. table manners) would incur considerable difficulty. Any transfer of practice, let’s say to introduce - or impose - table manners into a different cultural contexts where ‘tables’ do not exist and are not used would meet complications and potentially evoke the use of symbolic or material power to introduce table manners. All too often it is assumed that the translation process only entails the discovery of

equivalence, thus ignoring the dual nature of the sign as existing of both a signifier and a signified and assuming that translating the signifier only suffices to generate meaningful exchange.

Yet, even within the field of translation studies the role of translators as agents is largely neglected and marginalised. Skopos theory (Vermeer, 1987) and its development (Vermeer & Reiss, 1991) offer the nearest construct to include human agency as an intrinsic part of the translation process. Human action and its subcategory translation is determined by its purpose (in Greek *skopos*). Holz-Mänttari (1984) views translation as a professional acting, a process of intercultural communication with the desired result being the usability of translated information in specific situations and context-of-use. While translation studies provide a useful vocabulary to explain and illuminate what happens when words and texts, cultures and norms, ideologies and values meet the focus is on the trained, professional translator who largely decides what role the source text is to play in the translation action. As our interest lies in institutional translation work in and around international organizations, we now turn to institutional research.

TRANSLATION AS AN INSTITUTIONAL PROCESS

Institutional scholars mainly from Scandinavia have adopted translation as a metaphor to illuminate how ideas travel across boundaries (Brunsson, 1989; Brunsson & Olsen, 1993; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005). Ideas are translated at local level in an editing process (Sahling-Andersson, 1996) which includes both the selection and the rejection of aspects of a new concept, thus resulting in new, local meanings of ‘foreign practice’. Translation in the Scandinavian institutionalist literatures means “the modification that a practice or an idea undergoes when it is implemented in a new organizational context”

(Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009: 190). It refers to a sensemaking and negotiation process where the foreign and the local, the new and the old are blended (Saka, 2004). A translator then is a mediator who frames foreign words, concepts, and practices in order to make them meaningful and relevant for the local context and circumstances (Boxenbaum, 2006; Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón, 1996; 2005; Saka, 2004). Whether considered an individual or a collective process (Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón, 1996), the act of translation often lays bare the taken-for-granted assumptions and norms of the local context (Ferner et al. 2012).

Czarniawska and her colleagues explicitly draw on translation studies (e.g., Latour, 2002) and distinguish between source-oriented ‘foreignization’ (Venuti, 1998; 1995), and target-oriented ‘domestication’ (Nida, 2001). In foreignization, the translation retains a degree of foreignness and therefore breaks with the conventions of the target language and culture (Shuttleworth and Cowie. 1997). In domestication, translation is regarded as communication (Nida, 2001) which is rendered as familiar as possible in order to prevent misunderstanding on the part of receivers.

Following this research stream, researchers have investigated the adoption of diversity management practices, which originate from the US, in Denmark – a society whose norms and values conflict with the original diversity management practices (Boxenbaum, 2006; Boxenbaum & Battilana, 2005; Risberg & Sørderberg, 2008). In this conflictual context, particular groups of organizational actors successfully translated the American practice of diversity management into Denmark, evoking their own personal value system, strategic reframing processes as well as local grounding processes for the successful adaptation. Through this process aspects of the practice were changed. Building on the Scandinavian tradition, Saka-Helmhout’s (2012) study of how Japanese work systems were diffused to the

UK shows that translation occurred within the boundaries of particular situations and institutional constraints.

While the Scandinavian School established that ideas travel and in doing so they change at the locus of reception where they become grounded, it does not offer explanatory insights into the minutiae of the translation process proper: what happens when ideas travel across boundaries of natural languages? How is the translation process initiated, facilitated or blocked? We argue that there is a need to go beyond the metaphoric level coined by this sophisticated literature to the level where translation work is actually done. We therefore now turn to studies in international management.

TRANSLATION IN A MULTILINGUAL CORPORATE ENVIRONMENT

The field of international management has begun to focus on the role of languages, including the role of English since the late 1990s (Marschan, Welch & Welch, 1997). Janssens, Steyaert & Lambert (2004) have made a significant contribution to international management from a translation perspective. In their essay on the development of language strategies for international companies they differentiate between mechanical, cultural and political metaphors for translation. Generally speaking, their threefold model mirrors the developments in translation studies discussed above.

Three Perspectives on Translation

Janssens' et al. (2004) mechanical perspective on translation follows the source-based model of translation. The authors do not theorize about the translator as an agent per se but indicate that senior managers, who are important commissioners of translation, often adopt a mechanical perspective to translation because they commonly assume "that with some care in

translation and training, they will be able to transfer organizational resources relatively intact” (Brannen, 2004: 606). In this way, the translation can be ‘accurate’ and convey identical meanings between the source and the target text. Brannen (2004) attributes this to senior managers’ over-simplistic ideas about the translation process. She argues that they often confuse the sign with the signifier and signified and transfer the signifier without the signified (Brannen, 2004).

Inscribed in the mechanical approach is the assumption that equivalence of meaning exists and that translation therefore is a technical exercise for the purpose of precise and objective transfer of meaning. Within this model of translation, the translator is a “walking dictionary” (Hermans & Lambert, 1998), whose sole role is to ensure the equivalence of the text by mechanically switching between the source and target texts while being ‘faithful’ to the given fixed meaning of the source text. Within international management, both as a field of practice and as an academic community, the source language is assumed to be English (Crystal, 2003; Tietze & Dick 2013). Its status as an easily available and unproblematic *lingua franca* is based on assumptions that underlie the mechanistic perspective, i.e., that it is possible and desirable to achieve ‘sameness’ in the pursuit of knowledge and in managing the multinational corporation.

The second perspective on translation introduced by Janssens et al. (2004) is the cultural perspective which aligns broadly with the target-culture model. Within this approach, the translator becomes the agent who mediates between two different cultural and linguistic worlds and who assures recontextualisation of meaning in the target culture or text. In other words, the target language rather than the source language matters in the translation process and the transferred meaning becomes localised and is (re)created through embedding it in the local culture. Here the translator is a cultural mediator who is at home in at least two languages and cultures and who travels between the two. The purpose of mediation is to

create intelligibility, mainly for the recipients of the original text, so that it can be rendered accessible and understandable within their respective contexts. The achievement of intelligibility is therefore an enabling process which has to be facilitated by ‘someone’. This agency is bestowed onto the translator who is described as a bridge, node or mediator in this process with the ultimate purpose to generate intelligibility at the point of reception of a new sign, practice or asset (Brannen, 2004).

The final, political perspective on translation by Janssens et al. (2004) resonates with translation approaches which concern themselves with domination of one language and meaning systems over others. It is similar to the cultural perspective in that it views translation process as creating intelligibility. Yet, scholars within this tradition are sceptical about the mutuality of intelligibility and question whether the dominant language (usually the source language) imposes its meaning systems, values and practices on the target language and audience. Power relations are part and parcel of this perspective on translation as dominant meaning systems travel ‘disguised’ in language. International management scholars have been inspired by Phillipson (1992) who views language and language strategies and policies as part of a political decision making process. He sees the English language as a globally dominant hegemonic force. Tietze (2004) concurs and provides an account how the English language carries and expresses global management discourses that hide ideologically-loaded assumptions about the economic and societal order in an increasingly interconnected world.

Janssens et al. (2004) draw on Venuti’s early (1998) and later work (2004) in order to argue that translation performance entails a degree of manipulation and influencing as “the translator always deforms the original text” (Venuti, 1998: 11). Translation is at the heart of the colonial encounter between unequal cultures, languages and power relations. Venuti (1998: 11) recognises the asymmetrical relations in any translation project: “[t]ranslating can

never simply be communication between equals because it is fundamentally ethnocentric”. Therefore, translators inscribe foreign texts with domestic (or target culture) intelligibilities and interest.

Translators in this political model are active agents providing voice to the domestic culture. They are authors in their own right who work with source texts not only in order to make them meaningful to the domestic audience, but to reserve for themselves the right to reject certain aspects of imported meaning systems. In international organizations, they may be external commissioned experts (Janssens et al., 2004) or expatriates (Harzing et al., 2011) which emphasises their interlinking and negotiating role. As organizational actors, they bring together the different languages through translation and mediate between the heterogeneous value systems and discourses underpinning the act of translation.

Mainstream international management research has not concerned itself with translation processes. As with translation studies, the role of the translator as a culturally and politically aware agent who mediates, questions, makes daily choices and even rejects aspects and nuances of meaning and practices, remains underexplored and un-theorised. Therefore, in the following we focus on a selective number of studies, where the work undertaken by bi- or multilingual language nodes is directly mentioned or palpable in how language encounters are described and conceptualised. While we mainly focus on empirical studies that articulate the translation work undertaken by managers and employees we also include two empirical studies which investigate the role of professional translators. We do so because they are located within the realm of international management and demonstrate the agency of translators in a powerful way.

Managers and Employees as Translators

A fleet of empirical studies emerged from Scandinavia from the late 1990s onwards, which focused on language aspects of managing the multinational corporation. Themes such as human resource practices (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch, 1999a), coordination and control of foreign subsidiaries (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch, 1999b), post-merger integration (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta, 2005; Piekkari, Vaara, Tienari & Sääntti, 2005; Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari & Sääntti, 2005), and the interplay between language policies and practices (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012) were approached from a language lens.

References to communication in general and communication problems in particular are abound. International scholars pointed to the inequities produced by language in terms of how performance is measured and assessed in different languages (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a); how career progression may be hampered and even damaged due to insufficient language competence (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012); and how particular employees who lacked language skills were silenced (Piekkari et al., 2005). Cross-border mergers provided a fruitful research setting to uncover the (re)construction of post-colonial identities of superiority and inferiority when different languages meet (Vaara et al., 2005).

There were also early articulations of the existence and work of ‘language nodes’ (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a) or ‘language bridges’ (Feely & Harzing, 2003) – bi- or multilingual personnel, who ‘happened’ to be involved in the internationalisation of company and whose language skills provided them with an informal source of expert power in the organization. Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999a) acknowledge the critical role of expatriates in acting like “interpreters between subsidiaries and headquarter”. They indicate that communication problems relate to problems of translation – to the recontextualisation of meaning and the framing of practices in the local context. Throughout these case study based accounts, higher language skills and competencies are linked to the creation of effective channels of communications, network buildings, knowledge transfer as well as to propelling

careers forward or holding them back. Yet, the early contributions are not particularly reflective about the role of translation in managing the multinational corporation. Their main contribution lies in amassing empirical evidence about the effects of language policy decisions and language choices in situ and providing an initial research trajectory for further inquiries.

In a host of later empirical studies the answer to the question of ‘who translates’ is articulated more clearly. Steyaert, Ostendorp and Gailrois (2011), Harzing, Koster and Magner (2011), Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio (2011) and Heikkilä & Smale (2011) develop stronger conceptual insights about everyday language acts in international organizations as part of a special issue on language in international management research and practice (Piekari & Tietze, 2011). Steyaert et al. differentiate between six discursive practices located in everyday negotiations in two multilingual multinationals in Switzerland. They demonstrate that language choice is an on-going negotiation process, and frequently a battle between English and local languages. While the term translation is not used to illuminate the discursive practices, it is palpable as an concomitant activity - as for example in the discursive practice of using several languages in conversations simultaneously. They cannot occur unless there were translation acts involved.

Other studies in this collection begin to articulate the question of agency when they provide answers to ‘who translates’. Findings across these studies suggest that translators are more likely to be normal employees who are either functional managers (e.g. HRM, marketing), general managers, engineers or technical staff who work at the multilingual niches and interstices of international organizations. Frequently, they work as nodes or translators for groups of staff with less developed language skills but often in higher organizational positions (SanAntonio, 1986). They may be blue collar staff (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio, 2001) or operative employees (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999b) whose

status gets elevated through translation. Senior staff often rely on the services of these translators as integrating and interpreting agents, who select and deselect what to translate (Heikkilä & Smale, 2011), interpret and explain the selected texts to the subsidiary audience, and struggle with the translation of technical and also legal aspects as they occur in, for example, the adoption of e-HRM systems in a new context (Heikkilä & Smale, 2011). Harzing et al (2011) build on an earlier contribution by Feely & Harzing (2003) and provide empirical evidence of the solutions that may exist to the language barrier. These solutions include machine-based translation, the use of external professional translators and interpreters, but also informal day-to-day translations conducted ad-hoc by language bridges in order to facilitate communication: “someone will automatically translate” (Harzing et al., 2011: 282). The authors differentiate between different groups of language bridges such as ex- or impatriates or locally hired non-native managers.

In their study of foreign-owned subsidiaries in Japan, Peltokorpi and Vaara (2012) adopt a recontextualization perspective and emphasize the role of subsidiary presidents as key actors in recontextualization processes. Their findings show that “when subsidiary presidents as boundary spanners make sense of MNC-level language policies and practices, the process is both enabled and constrained by pre-existing systems of signification, including their host-country language proficiency and identification” (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012: 827). Many of the subsidiary presidents were expatriates whose fluency in Japanese as the local subsidiary language varied. While the authors do not elaborate on this finding, they firmly place high-status organizational actors as translators on the map.

Piekkari, Welch, Welch, Peltonen & Vesa's (2013) recent contribution investigates translation behaviour of managers and employees in an international service multinational. They argue that translation behaviours are both mundane because they comprise a spectrum of invisible activities in particular self-translation, and important because they have direct

effects on service delivery, organisational functioning and performance. The practising managers and employees were not trained as professional translators and self-translation as well as the use of social networks, including friends and family, were means to enable translation, in particular if it had to be provided in a timely manner.

Tietze, Tansley and Helienek's study (2013) provides some recent insights into the role of the translator in the transfer of the talent management discourse into a Slovak manufacturing setting. Talent management is a concept and practice originating from the US consultancy industry and in this study it was met with a *mélange* of historical, political, cultural and industrial perspectives as well as languages (English, Slovak, but also Danish and Swedish). The translator was a bilingual business expert, not a professionally trained translator or interpreter, who had cultural know-how and a close working relationship with the CEO. He played a crucial role in this knowledge transfer not only as a mediator but also as the 'agent provocateur' who, through his translating work, shaped, influenced and steered the process. He strived for equivalence in vocabulary, where possible; provided explanation, examples and reinterpretation of particular technical vocabulary associated with the talent management discourse and used persuasion to convince the participants involved that talent management as a foreign practice was part of the progressive agenda and necessary for the transformation of the company. In short, he was central in the process of *semiosis* (see Figure 1).

Alongside managers and employees, a bulk of translation work is done by professional translators which we now turn to.

Professional Translators

Ribeiro studied (2007) interpreters in a Brazilian-Japanese knowledge transfer project. He found that these interpreters strove to find equivalence of meaning, but that they understood their main contribution to the successful transfer of engineering knowledge to be facilitators between different worlds. Their task was to ensure that the “knowledge conversations” did not break down. This was attributed not so much to the technical-mechanistic side of their interpreting work, but to them enacting roles of cultural buffers, who would actively manage the encounters. These interpreters had been socialised in Japanese cultures, but all of them had worked for several decades in the Brazilian steel industry. This background, cultural and linguistic, afforded them to “conduct their main task” of “buffering business and interpersonal relationships between the employees of the two companies during the technical meetings” (pp. 566-567). The success of their translation work was based on the assimilation, explanation and embedding of the situated conversation. In doing so they created mutual intelligibility. Of the available literatures this is the ‘purest’ example of *semiosis*. The translating process does not flow from language system A to B or is recontextualised within B, but it entails a backward and forward flow of signs, meanings and knowledge through which mutual intelligibility is created (see Figure 1). These interpreters are not the ‘walking dictionaries’ of Herman and Lambert's study (1998), but are at the centre of webs of signification and as such key agents in the creation of knowledge.

Blenkinsopp and Shademan Pajouh (2010) provide examples of professional translators and interpreters who translate in international business encounters in Iran. Their study is about the ‘untranslatable’ Farsi word *tarouf* (meaning politeness, associated with elaborate practices and protocols). Since there no equivalence for this term in other languages interpreters’ translation work is characterised by a strong mediating role as cultural guides in order to make up for the usually Western perspective on how to conduct business. They are aware that their work is situated in the context of difficult relations between Iran and many

Western countries. Their role is to see their own culture as foreigners see it in order to avoid misunderstandings. Thus, the translation process is not about creating mutual intelligibly, but about rendering ‘strange’ one’s own cultural habits.

DISCUSSION

Our reading of the extant literature has shown that translation is always situated in contexts. Translation is done by concretely situated actors who make choices about what to translate and what not, which aspects to highlight and which to play down, whether and how to adopt a practice or leave it ‘untranslated’ when possible. Agency is performed through these translation acts of editing information, omitting sections, changing meaning, deliberately or not, adding on information and explanation and inventing examples and elaborations during the translation process. In this way, the microfoundations of international organizations are created and maintained.

Table 1 aligns the three perspectives on translation with three forms of institutional work. Building on the categories offered by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) we establish a link between different practices associated with institutional translation work and institutional life cycles. As Table 1 shows, a culturally and politically aware translator may engage in creating institutions when defining meaning, expressing advocacy, constructing identities and changing norms and assumptions. S/he may also perform disruptive institutional translation work that undermines assumptions and belief systems. A more mechanically oriented translator in turn is likely to maintain institutions in the search for sameness and equivalence. Such an approach is closely related to the enabling and embedding acts performed through translation as Table 1 illustrates.

Insert Table 1 about here

We argue that slippage is the invisible space of instability and change where the agency of the translator unfolds. In making choices, translators take purposive actions aimed at creating (intelligibility), maintaining (equivalence) and disrupting institutions (co-authorship) as Table 1 illustrates. In doing so, they spread institutional patterns and practices. We have shown that the exercise of translation is much more than a mechanical act of finding equivalence – indeed neither empirically nor conceptually have we found evidence that complete ‘sameness’ would exist. We have shown that translation is a process of *semiosis* creating at best mutual understanding and that through the process of *recontextualisation* signs, texts, practices and assets change their meaning because slippage of meaning is inevitable (Jakobson, 1959). Furthermore, under certain circumstances translating agents can challenge and disrupt the transfer process by articulating the local voice or by acting as a purposeful persuader and deliberate change agent (see Table 1).

Translators are key institutional workers who use the ‘gift of tongues’ to exercise agency in locations of momentary slippage and instability where meaning is produced and reproduced. *Skopos* theory (Vermeer, 1987) sees translation as a specific form of human action determined by its purpose. According to Vermeer the purpose is always driven by the target language or culture - in this regard recontextualisation processes explain the *skopos* of the translator. However, ‘real’ international settings require different *institutional translation work* as compared to literary translation. The realities of international organisations and their translators is captured more appropriately through institutional translation work as it expresses a multilateral flow of meaning as exercised by agents such as expatriates, employees as well as professional translators.

However, agency is always constrained and the work by translators is purposive to an extent only as it is conducted in the contexts and requirements of specific situations. Translators, too, are institutionally embedded (Battilana, Leca, Boxenbaum, 2009; Battilana, 2006) and the agency they can exercise is therefore constrained by field and organisational characteristics and their own social position (Dobbin, 1994; Scott, 1987; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Battilana et al., 2009). The reviewed literature is not very explicit about the social position or organisational details the language nodes or mediators work in. The studies by Ribeiro (2007) and Tietze et al. (2013) show that translators who have deep technical and language knowledge, longitudinal involvement in projects and also possess the trust and respect of their commissioning agents exercise strong agency along the three mechanical, cultural and political dimensions of translation. In Tietze et al.'s study, the translator was a close ally of the most senior power holder as well a business expert in his own right. Together these factors afforded him with the opportunity to translate a particular institutional practice by purposefully explaining, challenging perceived notions about how to manage staff and thereby 'selling' the idea of talent management to his audience. In Marschan-Piekkari et al.'s (1999a; 1999b) studies the translators are often expatriates, lower level employees or subsidiary presidents whose language skills further enhance their status in the hierarchy of the multinational corporation.

The overarching contextual factor emerging from the reviewed literature is that the early stages of an international venture, whether a merger and acquisition, a joint venture or strategic alliance is always accompanied by equivocal and fluid processes, increasing the potentiality for intervention and *slippage* in which new meanings and innovations can emerge. Also, in these earlier stages of international ventures language, culture and political struggles are more likely to be visible and erupt, with translating agents playing an important integrating role. During periods of relative stability, institutional translation work continues

as an everyday, invisible activity - little is known about what kind of content and information are translated, why and to what effect, other than the constraining factors which relate to immediate situational contingencies (Piekkari et al., 2013). Yet, even in relatively stable periods, multilingual communities and institutions are always present and serve as the location of multiple languages, perspectives, worldviews and practices. In this regard, institutions are always heterogeneous to a degree, giving rise to incompatibilities and contradictions, which may trigger actors' reflective capacity, enabling them to take some critical distance from existing arrangements and enabling chance (Battilana et al, 2009: 75).

Likewise, the institutional life cycle (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010) consists of periods of relative stability, and re-stabilization after periods of innovation and conflict. This cycle is likely to make a difference to the relative strength of agency exercised by translating agents. In periods of change during which new initiatives or practices are introduced, translators are likely to exercise their agency more strongly. As discussed previously, the language-sensitive international management literature is mainly silent about the translator-as-agent. Whether and to what extent translators could act, potentially, as situated institutional entrepreneurs (Mutch, Delbridge, & Ventresca, 2006) who mobilise their language resources to instigate purposeful strategic change or to challenge the dominant logic of a multilingual field or group (Battilana et al, 2009; Weick, 2011) remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have argued that translators have a central role to play in the transfer of ideas, meanings and practices. We have explained why this is the case by drawing attention to the dual nature of the sign, where meaning slips and becomes instable on the level of the signified. This affords translators with the possibility to interfere as cultural and political agents – instead of mediators they turn into co-authors of meaning. We have aligned our

translation-aspired approach to institutional thinking and propose that in times of globalization, the field needs a theoretical trajectory to start to capture the interstices where global webs of significations (Geertz, 1973) are constructed. Here, understanding institutions as more than relatively enduring material practices and structures, but understanding them as systems of signs and symbols (Li & Nohria, 2009) locates translators and their “semiotic ability to design, analyze and transform symbols in social settings” (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996: 5) at the centre of international webs of significance. It also renders them powerful because monolingual commissioners of translation are not in an immediate position to control which aspects of texts or practices are mediated, which disappear or get (re)invented in institutional work of translators.

The framing of international organizations as multilingual communities (Luo and Shenkar, 2006), together with theoretical borrowing from translation studies has opened avenues to explore the embedded discursive practices and strategies of translators who have been shown to be important agents in the on-going construction of international institutional patterns and organisations. The systematic and extensive exploration, both empirical and also conceptual, of *institutional translation work* is yet to be done. The interplay between translators’ language and technical expertise, their location in organisational hierarchies, and their utilisation of social capital in the execution of institutional translation work offers considerable potential for future research.

Methodologically, research concerning itself with the interplay of multiple languages and their use requires multilingual approaches and skills within the research team. In practice, this may play out as a collective, collaborative approach to fieldwork. Accordingly, methodologies and protocols how to select and present foreign language data and how to make visible the translation process throughout the research process and also in the construction of research accounts, will require the academy to reflect upon its current and

established language practices, which are decidedly monolingual in character (Steyaert & Janssens, 2013; Tietze & Dick, 2013). This is not to say that there is no need for an integrative language ‘instrument’ such as English as the global lingua franca. Yet its unreflexive use has impacted, in our view, negatively the scope of research topics and approaches in a time where languages and cultures meet and form knowledge networks. This process is not exclusively a monolingual one.

In this paper we have articulated the existence of translating agents and rendered their invisible status problematic. By developing a broadened definition of institutional work to include aspects of translation, we offer an avenue to deepen the academy’s understanding of how institutional patterns travel across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This travel we conceptualise as *semiosis*, played out in the different forms of institutional translation work such as equivalence, (mutual and local) intelligibility and co-authorship or voice. We propose that the integration of this conceptual apparatus with the vocabularies and approaches of institutional thinking and in particular with the institutional work approach will generate genuinely novel insights into the multilingual construction of institutional patterns. Likewise, it will necessitate a willingness on behalf of the academy to reflect upon its monolingual practice.

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Figure 1. The process of translation

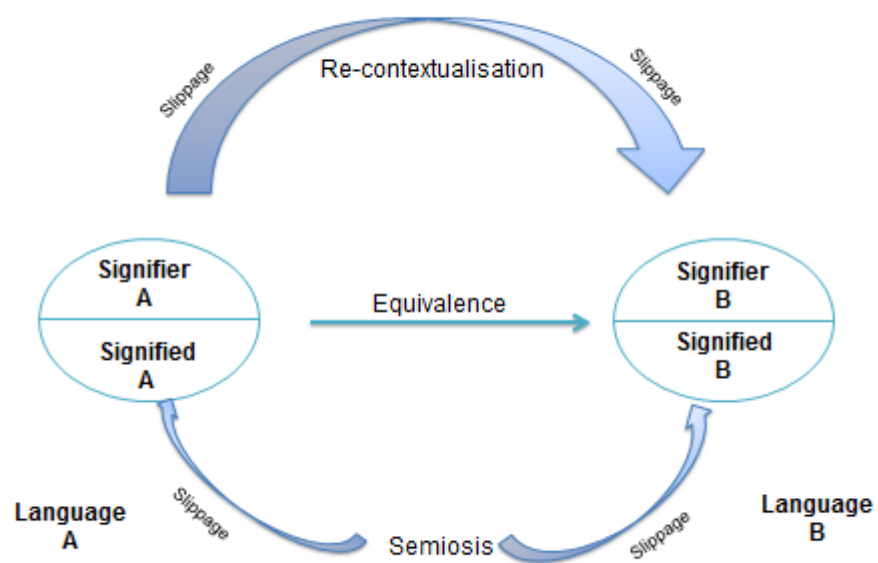


Table 1. Three forms of institutional translation work

<i>Perspective on translation</i>	<i>Institutional life cycle</i>	<i>Institutional translation work</i>
mechanical	maintaining institutions	finding of sameness
cultural	creating and/or disrupting institutions	establishing local intelligibility
political	creating and/or disrupting institutions	creating mutual intelligibility by articulating voice