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The Translation of Management Knowledge: Challenges, Contributions and New Directions

Knowledge both changes and retains its characteristics when translated. Even relatively fixed forms of knowledge, such as those associated with matters of faith, are changed according to context and over time. Yet we can also still recognise continuities. In the context of management, where knowledge is relatively ambiguous, research frequently used to treat ideas or innovations as quite fixed, even if their implementation was often contested. In parallel, over the course of the last twenty years, scholarly attention has become increasingly focused on the ways in which management knowledge have been created, developed, disseminated and applied (Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón 1996, 2005). In particular, both in management and other disciplines, it has become widely accepted that knowledge in the form of ‘new’ ideas, practices, scientific developments and technologies does not typically remain stable. Rather, when it ‘diffuses’, ‘flows’ or ‘moves’, knowledge is translated to ‘fit’ the specific context (Ansari, Fiss and Zajac 2010; Røvik 2011). While, obviously, there remain many challenges involved with studying primarily ideational phenomena (Benders and van Veen 2001) we are beginning to better understand how various forms of knowledge are blended, modified, adapted or re-invented, and how these processes may ultimately shape a large variety of different outcomes such as those related to learning and innovation. In this sense, translation theory has reoriented the emphasis of learning and innovation on both the actors who engage with the translation process and the diverse contexts in which they do so.

Challenges

There are a number of challenges facing the study of translation, of which two have formed the main motivation for this special issue. While perhaps not exhaustive, these are central issues that have been considered the starting point for a number of contributions.

First, various theoretical perspectives are evident in the literature on management knowledge and learning. These might all include a consideration of how knowledge changes. For example, in the field of technological innovation, translation resonates with the idea of *re-invention* (Rogers 1995) while political approaches might consider knowledge as the product of conflict and compromise and therefore subject to change (Sturdy 2004). But translational research draws primarily from actor–network theory and the sociology of translation **in which translation is theorised as a multifaceted activity of negotiation and transformation during which meanings, claims, and interests are subject to on going change** (e.g. Callon 1986; Latour 1986, 1987; Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón 1996; Sahlin-Andersson 1996). Translation research also makes connections to fields such as computational linguistics, discourse analysis, cultural capital and resource-based views of the firm (Wittgenstein 1958; Bourdieu 1986; Nonaka 1994). This diversity of perspectives can create confusion and ambiguity, which may easily constitute a fertile ground for theoretical drift. At the same time, the variety of different theoretical bases also provides richness and suggests a wide recognition of the analytical value of translation theory across different fields, but also privileges specific questions, such as: If ideas are subject to translation, who is translating what and for what purposes and with what consequences? What roles do different types of actors play in translating ideas? What approaches to translation are more effective and for whom? How, if at all, can varying theoretical traditions in translation theory be combined?

Second, despite its merits translation research has developed over recent years without much critique, for instance, on its underlying assumptions, or at least without much pausing for reflection (Spicer and Perkmann 2008). This could be a manifestation of limited dialogue

between theorists emanating from different schools of thought (McKinley, Mone and Moon 1999). Whatever the case, in order to enhance insight and open up avenues for further research it is necessary to critically and constructively assess current debates in the field, particularly those that locate translation in the context of contemporary organisations and/or organising.

As such, the aim of this special issue is to address these points and advance understanding about this emerging, but significant, field in the scholarly community. This special issue has assembled a diverse set of papers, which review developments in translation theory. These papers share concerns about the challenges facing the study of translation, and seek to encourage new thinking and frameworks and open up new directions in management and organisation studies more generally. The six papers show how rich and diverse the translation field in management can be when it comes to understanding how ideas move within and across organisations. The papers also reveal new framings and point to exciting new research opportunities that can be found in fruitfully comparing, elaborating, expanding, contrasting and blending extant perspectives (e.g. Cornelissen and Durand 2012). We will elaborate on their contributions in the next section.

Contributions

In this section we outline how the contributions to this special issue have sought to address the key challenges in different ways. The first contribution in this special issue ‘Translation theory “translated”: three perspectives on translation in organizational research’ is a systematic review by Wæraas and Nielsen (2016), which attempts to bring together the hitherto fragmented field of translation studies in the organisation and management discipline. Wæraas and Nielsen provide an over-arching synthesis of the different theoretical perspectives through a three-fold grouping of actor–network theory, knowledge-based theory and Scandinavian institutional theory. The authors note a lack of common language and an

absence of cross-referencing in translation studies. Seeking to redress this, Wæraas and Nielsen identify similarities and differences across the three perspectives upon translation. Following this, they suggest that each perspective focuses on different aspects of the translation process rather than, as some believe, representing incompatible traditions. Identifying the different strengths and weaknesses of each perspective leads Wæraas and Nielsen (2016) to conclude that one can compensate for the weaknesses of the other. While providing illustrations of how perspectives might be usefully combined, they do not advocate the development of a single theoretical perspective but highlight the value of a plurality of distinctive insights.

In ‘Translating management concepts: towards a typology of alternative approaches’ by van Grinsven, Heusinkveld and Cornelissen (2016), we find an extensive list of 40 terms used in the literature, often interchangeably, to refer to management concepts, from ‘management ideas’ to ‘innovations’ (but excluding ‘organisational innovation’). As in the first paper, the review sets out the assumptions, advantages and limitations of current approaches, and the scope for integration between positions. It also reveals the diversity of translation research and of the theoretical perspectives from which this literature derives. The main contribution is the typology of four distinct but related approaches to translation research. This comprises two dimensions – the source and the object of variations, or what changes and how? This gives rise to ideas being symbolically repackaged through embeddedness (e.g. regulation), or through actors’ agency/instrumentality or to ideas changing structurally/materially through the same mechanisms. Each of the four approaches is linked to varying broader theoretical perspectives in the management ideas literature (institutional, rational, dramaturgical and political; c.f. Sturdy 2004) so that, for example, the structural variation in ideas achieved through individual action is associated with political perspectives. However, some studies from the 150 reviewed, are shown to include multiple dimensions of translation and thus hold

the promise of integration, albeit sometimes at the risk of conflating incommensurable assumptions.

The third paper ‘Knowledge transfer as translation: review and elements to an instrumental theory’ authored by Røvik (2016) proposes to expand the scope of translation theory by outlining an instrumental perspective on translation and developing the construct of translation competence; that is, the ability of translators to translate ideas and practices between context to achieve desired ends. Based on a review of the translation approach in organisational theory it is argued that prior conceptualisations of translation are limited in two main ways. First, extant literature has primarily focused on translation of general ideas to recipient units and has paid scant attention to the perspective of the source units, such as actors who attempt to translate knowledge to another organisation. Second, and relatedly, it is stressed that, because of a primarily descriptive orientation, translation theory significantly limits its potential to guide deliberate interventions in knowledge transfer processes. In order to address these limitations, the article draws on theories of knowledge transfer and the neighbouring discipline of translation studies to argue that translation of knowledge should be seen as a rule-based activity, and the way translators apply these translation rules shapes the outcomes of the transfer process. Based on these assumptions, the author contributes to the literature by developing a typology of three translation modes (i.e. styles of translation performance) and by identifying four key translation rules to be used in particular contexts. In so doing, the author identifies fruitful possibilities for conceptual integration of translation theory and theories of knowledge transfer.

Radaelli and Sitton-Kent (2016) in ‘Middle managers and the translation of new ideas in organizations: a review of micro-practices and contingencies’, argue that translation research has fixated primarily on the strategic apex of the organisation. Other organisational actors, who are responsible for operational execution, have received little systematic analysis of their

role despite the fact they have a similar impact on the translation of ideas. Drawing upon this premise the authors review the growing, but dispersed, literature on middle managers through the lens of translation theory. The analysis follows middle managers throughout the translation process and identifies the micro-practices pursued by middle managers to affect the travel of new ideas within the organisation, as well as the contingencies that frame middle managers' engagement in specific translation stages. In doing so, the paper highlights that middle managers' linking-pin position, organisational embeddedness and limited hierarchical/professional power affect the translation of new ideas on the ground. Following this, the authors not only emphasise organisational risks and problems that can determine the translation of new ideas but also flag up conditions that shape dominant translational 'rules' at multiple organisational levels. The paper concludes with a discussion of the main implications for middle managers and offers future directions for research.

O'Mahoney's (2016) paper 'Archetypes of translation: recommendations for engagement', finds that in the growing literature on translation in management there is little recognition of the variety of possible alternative conceptualisations of what translation is and what it does. Drawing on a systematic review of the current work on translation, the author found four different perspectives that were underpinned by distinct theoretical archetypes (scientism, actualism, social constructivism and symbolic interactionism) each comprising a specific set of ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. These archetypes are considered of particular importance, not only because they allow more insight into the variety of different interpretations of translation, but also because they shed more light on the difficulties in each perspective engaging with others. Indeed, the author found that inter-archetype dialogue or cross-citation between these concurrent streams remained absent. To address these issues the paper draws on a critical realist perspective. Based on this, it reveals possibilities for drawing upon the strengths of the four translation archetypes and addressing

their five main weaknesses. The analysis culminates in an overview of fruitful research questions for the different archetypes. The paper advances prior literature on translation by not only showing the variety of alternative conceptualisations and their underlying archetypal assumptions, but also by contributing to a more constructive dialogue between distinct research traditions.

Finally, in 'Pedagogy as translation: extending the horizons of translation theory', Lamb, Ortenblad and Hsu (2016) do not seek to review the whole field of translation research in management, but focus on deliberate or 'rationally calculated' translation by actors. Furthermore, they examine this in the specific context of management education and the translation of Western management ideas in non-Western contexts, such as MBA programmes in China. In other words, the paper combines translation research with the field of management learning, rather than that of management innovation or ideas. It does so in an explicitly prescriptive way to engage critically with the neo-imperialist nature of management education by applying a cross-cultural sensitive pedagogy, 'pedagogy as translation' (PaT). They describe PaT as a five-stage process for teachers to facilitate and enhance students' translation of management ideas. This comprises instructor reflexivity in preparing teaching materials and processes; putting context back into otherwise de-contextualised and seemingly universal management knowledge; privileging the student by getting them 'to gauge points of symmetry and asymmetry' between themselves and specific management ideas; re-contextualisation whereby students are asked to justify their particular translations or selectivity; and, finally, exploring and evaluating the possible effects of different translations. In setting out such an approach, not only does the article offer a rare prescriptive and critical take on translation, but it also outlines wider implications for understanding the deliberate translation of ideas and for cross-cultural education more generally, within and beyond the context of management.

New directions in translation research

This paper offers not only a reflection of the current state of research in the translation field but, based on the six papers collected in this special issue, we suggest a number of potentially fruitful avenues for further research.

No single or dominant conceptual framework seemed to have emerged to guide translation research. Contributions in this special issue find and draw on a multitude of perspectives from actor–network theory, knowledge-based theory, Scandinavian institutionalism and knowledge transfer, to critical realist perspectives and broader theoretical perspectives in the management ideas literature (institutional, rational, dramaturgical and political). Reflecting upon the different perspectives there may be potential for different ways of conceptual integration (Cornelissen and Durand 2012) but we also underscore that different perspectives encompass distinctive strengths and so suggest that separation should remain. Given the diverse landscape of the translational field, we suspect researchers in this field will continue to draw from different theoretical perspectives to offer insights in translation theory. However, the contributions to this special issue do prompt the question about whether integration is at all possible.

Furthermore, the six papers in this special issue each trigger a number of important implications for translation theory. For example, in discussing the ways in which actor–network theory, knowledge-based theory and Scandinavian institutionalism may be combined to pursue a better understanding of translation, Wæraas and Nielsen (2016) maintain that these perspectives represent three ‘translations’ of translation theory and urge us to think about how different perspectives of translation have emerged. Meanwhile, van Grinsven et al. (2016), in developing their typology of four alternative approaches to translation, urge us to consider carefully the plethora of terms and related constructs associated with the scholarly discourse on the flow of management concepts and its implication for translation theory. In

addition, they also show that there are indeed possibilities for integration, while at the same time explaining what specific challenges such integrative views on translation may face. In his attempt to advance a set of theoretical ideas that have not been empirically investigated, Røvik (2016) offers a fruitful avenue for future research by encouraging the research community to empirically explore the connection between knowledge transfer and translation, and thereby opens up possibilities for further exploring more instrumental views. For research that focuses on the role of translating actors, Radaelli and Sitton-Kent (2016) attempt to synthesise the growing, but dispersed, literature on middle managers through the lens of translation theory, and suggest there is a dearth of studies that investigate translation as a role that managers in general perform over time and for multiple new ideas. The authors encourage further inquiry into when and how managers engage with the translation of new ideas and when and how organisations cultivate circumstances for these managers' regular engagement with translation. O'Mahoney (2016) shows how dialogue between exponents of different ontological archetypes can be encouraged by categorising the main weaknesses of these archetypes and explains how a critical realist view may provoke asking questions that seemed 'unthinkable'. Based on this, he stresses not only the need for each tradition to be more open-ended in terms of possible outcome, but also encourages using a greater variety of different methods, alternative views for the same dataset and involving multiple archetypes in the process of analysis. Lamb et al. (2016), in trying to apply translation theory to cross-cultural management learning, problematise re-contextualisation as deliberate translation and encourage further research to investigate the deliberate translation of ideas, more generally, across different managerial ideas and different contexts.

We hope the contributions to this special issue evidence the richness and vitality of the translation field, but also inspire future contributions in translation theory.

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