Languages and Cross-Cultural Management

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INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural management is an established sub-field of international business research (Brannen & Mughan, 2017), and the study of languages and language diversity has often been associated with this particular sub-field. For a considerable period of time, languages were subsumed under the umbrella of cultural differences (Piekkari et al., 2014). Such a treatment of language and culture can be traced back to the strong influence of Edward T. Hall (1959) on the field. His work on culture suggests that those without a working knowledge of a local language can communicate effectively if they only understand the basic cultural assumptions and nonverbal cues that accompany spoken communication. Not surprisingly, the notion of 'the silent language' was well received by monolingual English-speakers, both practitioners and academics, in the 1960s and 1970s (Piekkari & Westney, 2017).

Initially, language-sensitive research emerged from the field of international business and much emphasis was placed on decoupling culture from language and focus on language in its own right (Brannen et al., 2014), although some counter arguments have also been presented recently (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Neeley, 2017). In the past twenty years, this body of research has established itself as a distinct field of inquiry (Brannen et al., 2014). This chapter provides an overview over the historical emergence of this domain, its key themes, debates, and conceptual vocabulary before articulating its contribution to contemporary understanding of language diversity in organizations and beyond. In concluding, some future research directions and challenges are articulated.

This chapter is located in the part of the book about ‘contingencies’ of cross-cultural management. This suggests that language is viewed as a contingent variable which informs cross-cultural management encounters and practices. Unlike cross-cultural management, which entails a strong comparative dimension (Søderberg & Holden, 2002), the stream of language-sensitive research is more concerned with relationships between languages. We regard culture and language as rather similar constructs in that both permeate international business activities and cannot be removed from these activities. In this regard we argue that language is more than a contingency and therein, we believe, lies its attraction and importance. For example, language-sensitive scholars have articulated something new and different is their questioning of the role of English and its unreflective use. In doing so, the field has also introduced English and its relationship with other language and meaning systems as an important contribution to cross-cultural management.

DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGES AS A FIELD

In this section we will track the development of the field of inquiry over time. Our historical overview consists of three junctures: the beginnings (from 1987 to 2010), gaining momentum (from 2011 to 2014) and a look into the future (from 2015 onwards). We have decided to carve out a time period spanning approximately 30 years, because it enables us to track certain changes and turning points in the emergence of the language field and approach it more holistically. Some individual contributions about languages remained unconnected and did not leave a particular impact on the thinking and approaches of the field at the time. However, in retrospect, we can appreciate that these early writings were ahead of their time and paved the way for later developments.

We adopt Mills' (2010) term 'juncture' for studying change; it is a heuristic that 'refers to a concurrence of events in time in which a series of images, impressions and experiences come together, giving the appearance of a coherent whole' (Mills, 2010: 509).The term is useful because it underlines changes in the way the community has treated and thought about language(s) over time. This section is not a comprehensive literature review, but rather a selective compilation of contributions that express particular positions and perspectives in order to illustrate the developments in the field.

Juncture 1 From the Late 1980s to 2010: Language as the Sideshow

In recent years, there have been several publications taking stock of language research in international business studies (Brannen et al., 2014; Brannen & Mughan, 2017; Karhunen et al., 2018; Tenzer et al., 2017). Brannen and Mughan (2017) reviewed all articles published in the *Journal of International Business Studies* since the 1970s that have treated language as a critical factor in the environment of the internationalizing firm. While Tenzer et al. (2017) use Holden's (1987) work as a baseline, Karhunen et al. (2018) take stock of the field since the publication by Marschan et al., (1997). At that time, language became the focus for research in its own right.

What unites these contributions is an understanding that language was the sideshow to cross- cultural approaches as well as to discursively oriented organisation studies, and it took time for the international business community to pick it up as research theme. Piekkari and Westney (2017: 199) argue that the 'mounting salience of language as a research topic grew out of major changes in the strategies and organizational design architectures of the MNC that began in the late 1980s, but whose implications took nearly a decade to become apparent'. At that time, the network model of the MNC was well accepted in the field and cross-border interactions between units were seen to intensify.

The network model was also the base for a case study of the Finnish MNC: Kone. Marschan et al. (1997) highlighted the strategic role of language for communication, control and coordination in the multinational. In doing so, they problematized language standardization in terms of mandating a common corporate language, mostly English, which brought relationships with other languages into the limelight (see also Fredriksson et al., 2006; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a for power and control; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999b for consequences for human resource management).

Later contributions across the Atlantic in the US made similar arguments about the strategic importance of language. Luo and Shenkar (2006) approached language as a resource that needs to be aligned with MNC strategy, structure and the degree of internationalization. They asserted that 'unlike national culture, language is a strategic choice' which has implications for management processes such as control, knowledge transfer, and coordination as well as for organization-level financial performance (Luo & Shenkar, 2006: 331). Brannen (2004) studied Walt Disney Company's experiences of internationalization into Japan and France. Drawing on semiotics her notion of semantic fit explains how Disney's assets took on new meanings in these cultural contexts. Brannen (2004: 597) argues that while 'Disney experienced semantic fit in transferring each of its products and processes to Japan, these same firm assets experienced a significant lack of semantic fit in France'. Brannen's focus was on meaning rather than the interplay between languages as such; nevertheless, it has revealed how invisible meanings make a significant difference in the (un)successful transfer of practices and concepts.

Other studies focused on the common corporate language policies and its consequences for power and influence (Vaara et al., 2005) as well as for people management (Piekkari et al., 2005) in the context of Nordea, a cross-border merger. This case is important because for a certain period of time Swedish, not English, served as the common corporate language of this Nordic financial institution. Vaara et al. (2005) analyse the case in its historical and political context, embedding it in the relationships between Sweden and Finland as well as in the position of bilingualism in Finland. Importantly, the English language is seen as a modern addition to the prevalent languages, Finnish and Swedish, ultimately playing an integrative role in tensions caused by the merger of two banks.

Books and book chapters in handbooks and companions played an important role for the field to develop new ideas beyond the almost formulaïc writing style of journal articles, to consolidate the current state of knowledge and to reach out to other research communities. In two handbooks, Piekkari (2006, 2009) introduced the language perspective to researchers in international human resource management and to scholars of business discourse respectively. Marschan-Piekkari and Reis (2004) discussed the role of language in cross-cultural interviewing in a *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for International Business*. These publications herald an emergent focus on questions of methodology about how to research language diversity

In sum, in this period, scholars were unearthing the importance of language diversity in many international business situations. The insistence that languages had been marginalised for too long explains, to an extent, why it was considered necessary to decouple languages from culture. Cultural approaches to understanding differences in values and behaviour were seen as so dominant that some intellectual distance was necessary to establish language-based approaches in their own right. Furthermore, language diversity requires choice, i.e. which language to use and when (one does not really choose a culture, certainly not a national one). The dominant concept at the time was the common corporate language, the choices that led to selecting this shared communicative tool and its consequences for organizational constellations.

Juncture 2 From 2011 to 2014: Gaining Momentum

This short juncture is placed between the publication of two special issues in international business journals in 2011 (*Journal of World Business* edited by Piekkari and Tietze) and 2014 (*Journal of International Business Studies* edited by Brannen et al.). The two special issues intensified publications in the language field as these special issues were the first of their kind to draw language-sensitive research together. They provided a point of departure as well as a source of legitimisation for the perspectives and debates prevalent in this field.

The 2011 special issue included six papers, some of which were firmly embedded in traditional international business themes such as overcoming the language barrier in headquarters-subsidiary relationships (e.g., Harzing et al., 2011). Other contributions offered intellectual space for different views to be articulated. For example, Steyaert et al., (2011) introduced the notion of *linguascapes*, where language use is seen as a negotiated, grounded activity. Their approach differed from that of Harzing et al., (2011), who saw the existence of *language diversity* as expressive of language *barriers* and offered *solutions* to the barrier. The special issue included quantitative studies (e.g., Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio, 2011; Zander et al., 2011), qualitative studies (Heikkilä & Smale, 2011; Steyaert et al., 2011) as well as a reflexive methodological essay about the possibility to use language as a resource in quantitative management research to assess cross-cultural equivalence (Usunier, 2011). In the editorial, we state that the papers collectively ‘challenge current thinking about language in the field of international and management’ (Piekkari & Tietze, 2011: 268) and many of the papers became influential in the field’s emergent understanding of the policy-practice debate. The special issue also anticipated later developments in terms of the importance of translation for the field. At the time, we made a call ‘to introduce the vocabulary and concepts from translation studies in order to develop stronger concepts and frameworks for future research’ (Piekkari & Tietze, 2011: 268).

Despite the relative niche-character of the languages field, the special issue for the *Journal of International Business Studies* attracted almost 80 submissions and led to the publications of an editorial and a series of 12 papers, six of which were included in the special issue and others in later editions of this journal. The special issue continued to develop themes of international business, such as the impact of language barriers on trust in multinational teams (Tenzer et al., 2014) and on subgroup dynamics in such teams (Hinds et al., 2014), as well as knowledge transfer in language-sensitive recruitment (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2014). These contributions signify a more nuanced approach to phenomena, which had already been established previously, but were now examined in more detail. Some of the contributions also turned to the issue of translation as a critical methodological concern (Chidlow et al., 2014), combined sense-making with language issues (Kuznetsov & Kuznetsova, 2014), and offered novel ideas by conceiving language as social practice and introducing the notion of multilingual franca (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014).

Thematically, studies continued to consolidate research into the role of languages in group formation, learning, and identity constructions, while also broadening inquiry to include the role of English in the creation of management knowledge (Tietze & Dick, 2013), and its role in micropolitical behaviour in MNCs (Piekkari & Tietze, 2014). Language inquiry was also taken up by other disciplinary fields (e.g., economics, see Tietze et al., 2016, and accounting see Evans et al., 2015).

These years also saw the establishment of an initially French, now internationally oriented, Research Group on Management & Language, GEM&L (Group d'Études Management & Langage). It hosts an annual conference and several workshops throughout the year. GEM&L aims to support research on languages in organizations and encourage collaboration between management researchers, language teachers and professionals. To date it provides the most lasting networking forum for language-sensitive researchers across multiple disciplines.

The final development during this juncture is an intensification of the role of languages, particularly English, in academic knowledge production, i.e. at a meta-theoretical, philosophical level. It became important to recognize the potentially detrimental effect of English if used as the dominant axiomatic language of knowledge. For example, Harzing and Metz (Harzing & Metz, 2013; Metz & Harzing, 2012) queried the composition of editorial boards, including members' geographical location, gender and language mix to show that the composition of editorial boards does not reflect the diversity of the community of management scholars, including their language diversity. Building on the contributions by Meriläinen et al., (2008) and Thomas et al., (2009) in the previous juncture, Tietze and Dick (2013) provide further evidence about the impact of English on the creation of management knowledge. They argue that its use 'forces out' words, concepts and meanings from other languages. While these papers remain few in number, they follow-up on some of the critical questions which were already raised in the earlier period. Steyaert and Janssens (2013) highlight the paradox between multilingual scholarship and the invisibility of translation and language issues in published articles of management and organization studies.

In sum, during the first juncture the community began to discuss with more insistence its own blind spots and take a more self-reflective approach vis-a-vis its own practices. This juncture also saw an intensification of publications on language beyond international business journals such as accounting, human resource management, and so forth. Likewise, some contributions continued to explore the relationships between English and other languages in the context of international research collaborations and also in terms of the (hegemonic) publication practices prevalent in the management academy.

Juncture 3 From 2015 onwards: Into the future

The contemporary period is characterised by increasing institutionalisation of networks as well as by the beginnings of interdisciplinary work between international business, institutional scholarship, organisational studies, and translation studies.

Since 2015, the field of language-sensitive research has yet been drawn together through further special issues in peer-reviewed journals: *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management* edited by Beeler, Cohen, de Vecchi, Kassis-Henderson and Lecomte in 2017, and the *European Journal of International Management* edited by Lecomte, Tenzer and Zhang in 2018. These special issues derive largely from GEM&L conferences and symbolise ongoing developments in the field. They carry forward established themes such as cross-cultural team dynamics and intergroup processes (Cohen & Kassis-Henderson, 2017; Vigier & Spencer-Oatey, 2017; Woo & Giles, 2017); language policy and use (Beeler & Lecomte, 2017; Cordeiro, 2017; Gaibrois & Steyaert, 2017; Lønsmann, 2017; Wilmot, 2017); translation in terms of transferability of concepts (Tréguer-Felten, 2017) and translator agency (Tietze et al., 2017). These special issues broadened and deepened the streams of inquiry of the field. In particular, conceptual and positional papers (Angouri & Piekkari, 2018; Komori-Glatz, 2018; Tietze, 2018) and the contributions of a younger generation of researchers (e.g., Sanden & Lønsmann, 2018; Wilmot, 2017) provide evidence of the vibrancy of the field. In sum, this development is adeptly described by Terry Mughan (2015: 77) as '[m]oving [languages] from the periphery to the core'.

KEY CONCEPTS AND DEBATES

Previous research has already established that '[t]he production of international business theory is dominated by English-speaking scholars in general and authors affiliated with US institutions in particular' (Ellis & Zhan, 2011: 108). This dominance of the English language is further accentuated by the preference of quantitative methods. As mathematical language in the form of statistical methods and terms partially substitutes for verbal argumentations, ‘it is not surprising that non-native speakers of the English language have concentrated on getting quantitative empirical papers published’ (Oesterle & Wolf, 2011: 738–739).

We argue that the language-sensitive community of scholars is the only community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) within the management and business disciplines, which investigates the English language and its performative role in the creation of management knowledge. Therefore the English language is the first key concept we will introduce. From thereon, we show an intellectual movement of the field from a focus on a single language, English, as a lingua franca and common corporate language to an emphasis on language diversity, including linguascaping, hegemonic use of language, language-based positions such as language agents, structures, and translation. Whenever appropriate, we make reference to how the study of languages aligns to or differs from approaches in cross-cultural management.

Focus on a Single Language

Today, the English language has gained an undisputable status in the world as a global language for conducting international business as well as for academic work (Nickerson, 2005). English is the official national language in more than 80 countries (Simons & Charles, 2018) and no other lingua franca amongst the many that exist has achieved the same depth and spread as English as a global lingua franca (Ostler, 2005). A lingua franca is available for anybody to use. Although it is defined as ‘an idiom that non-native speakers use with other non-native speakers, rendering it a foreign language for all parties concerned’ (Vandermeeren, 1999: 276), it is also used in communications between native and non-native speakers, creating a different set of communicative dynamics (Tietze, 2008).

In the organizational context, the notion of lingua franca is often replaced with a common corporate language referring to the introduction and use of one particular language – mainly English – as a shared means of communication. The most common organizational context is the MNC, which is both multilingual and multinational in character (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Luo & Shenkar, 2006; Piekkari & Westney, 2017). As mentioned earlier, mandating a corporate language is a way to standardize language use (Marschan et al., 1997) and it represents a common instrument for top management to deal with language diversity (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013). It is also an inherent element of language strategies that MNCs develop as they expand globally (Welch & Welch, 2018).

However, a common corporate language, even if formally introduced, is not evenly or consistently used throughout the MNC (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a). Fredriksson et al., (2006) show that both English and German were used as the main languages in Siemens, with management remaining ambiguous whether there actually existed a language strategy. Likewise the uptake of English was higher among younger employees, but German continued to dominate conversations about any technical matters. In other study, Hinds et al., (2014) show how cultural practices and professional values continue to influence behaviour and language choice. They offer the example of German engineers who, despite being able to use English, preferred to talk in German as its use enabled them to express their professional knowledge with greater ease and sophistication. These findings suggest that national traditions and areas of expertise mix with language behaviour and influence language choice. In other words, MNCs do not become monolingual through the introduction of a corporate language.

Empirical research also shows that a corporate language can have disintegrating effects in terms of social cohesion and people management (Piekkari et al., 2005). For example, not having command of the mandated language does not only socially disadvantage certain language groups, but also renders them less able to express and generate professional knowledge. Furthermore, employees' reaction to the imposition of a corporate language policy may vary from embracing to resisting its use (Lønsmann, 2017) as it may be perceived as a threat to employees' linguistic identity (Bordia & Bordia, 2015). Thus, introducing a corporate language is not necessarily a panacea for advancing shared understanding, because organizational members, while speaking a common language, still think in different languages (Kassis-Henderson, 2005).

Recently, researchers have started to criticize the way the concept of a common language and language more broadly, is employed in the field. The critics argue that current approaches do not capture the fluidity of language use nor the co-existence of many different languages as communicative resources. Therefore, Janssens and Steyaert (2014: 629) proposed the notion of a multilingual franca and argued that 'language users manipulate the multilingual resources they have available to them'. This concept focuses on language use as social practice originating 'from the ground' rather than the top of the MNC. The authors draw attention to how language users negotiate local practices and combine multiple linguistic resources through bricolage. Within this approach, different languages do not merely co-exist, but mingle with each other, resulting in hybrid forms of language use: 'One "language" does not straightforwardly index one subject position; rather, speakers use linguistic resources in complex ways to perform a range of subject positions, sometimes simultaneously' (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014: 630).

Drawing on Janssens and Steyaert's (2014) conceptual article Karhunen et al., (2018) problematize the assumptions underlying the core concept of language used in the field of language-sensitive research in international management. They reviewed 92 articles on the topic of language(s) in MNCs published between 1997–2015 and grouped them into three complementary categories depending on whether the articles took a structural, functional or social practice view of language. In line with Janssens and Steyaert (2014), they consider the social practice view the most promising one, and propose a future research agenda for advancing it. The social practice approach can also be used to understand culture as practice and provides a possible arena, where cross-cultural management and language researchers can meet.

Despite the contemporary interest in negotiated language use, the debate about the usefulness of a common corporate language as a means to manage language diversity continues. Sanden (2018: 16) proposes to abandon the term and to focus instead on language management as a 'group of activities targeted at the needs of a linguistically diverse workforce'. Such activities include e.g., use of English, local languages, translation services, focused recruitment and selection. Recent contributions suggest more emancipatory language policies that would better accommodate different standards of English and promote 'plain language initiatives' for reasons of inclusion (Kankaanranta et al., 2018). The notion of hybrid language use is particularly relevant here, as it refers to 'all forms of language use which are not based upon the frequent and unexpressed norm of monolingual conversations between (native) speakers of national languages' and assumes that 'imperfect' language skills are not problematic (Gaibrois, 2018: 86).

Furthermore, the exploration of ELF and BELF continues to this date (e.g., Komori-Glatz, 2018). While the notion of English as a lingua franca (ELF) is well established in sociolinguistics (Jenkins et al., 2018), the term English as Business Lingua Franca (BELF for short, Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005) deepens our understanding of it. BELF scholars argue that when speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds use 'English' at work, the interactions are inevitably diverse and co-constitutive and intertwined with business knowledge (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018). Addressing the allegedly hegemonic role of 'English' in today's global business, BELF researchers have explicitly distinguished between two notions of 'English' in MNCs: BELF as a multilingual resource emerging in everyday interactions as opposed to English as an *a priori* linguistic system typically put to use in official one-way communication (Kankaanranta et al., 2018). Whereas BELF represents a situated, inherently multilingual social practice highlighting the legitimacy of non-native speakers as competent professionals, English as a linguistic system view enjoys a privileged position in relation to other languages. It can be seen to provide an advantage for organizational members or global elites who can access and use it to advance their own interests. In BELF research, 'English' is but one of many resources including other languages, gestures, drawings, and physical environment (e.g., Virkkula-Räisänen, 2010), whereas the latter conceptualization – strictly speaking – only focuses on the specific skill in the English language. These two conceptualizations of 'English' provide a more realistic image of its role in professional settings and address some of the criticism by Phillipson (1992) and Tietze (2004), who consider English an instrument of inequality and social inclusion/exclusion.

In sum, the bulk of language-sensitive research first raised the use of English as an issue worthy of exploration because it reveals underlying hierarchies, positions and structures in social behaviour. Second, the field also debunked the myth that organizations, however forcefully managed, will ever be monolingual. On the contrary, through the articulation and exploration of the role of English, language diversity emerged as a lasting and complex phenomena calling for detailed investigative effort.

Focus on Language Diversity

In this sub-section we will discuss the notion of linguascapes, the hegemonic use of language and language-based positions and structures in MNCs, and topic of translation.

Linguascapes

The concept of *linguascaping* expresses a similar approach to language as the social practice view discussed above. Drawing on Apparudai, Steyaert et al. (2011: 277) introduced it as the ‘ongoing negotiation among accounts of how to “choose” between languages’ when several are available. Linguascaping is then a user-driven process of everyday negotiations, grounded in multilingual realities of employees rather than commissioned from the top by senior management. Accordingly, language users are not seen as passive recipients of language policies ‘handed down’ by senior management; instead, they live in ‘multi-optional contexts, combing English with other language options’ (Steyaert et al., 2011: 277).

As a concept, linguascaping offers an alternative way to understand multilingual workplaces as it sheds light on how individual agents and small groups develop discursive practices in line with their existing abilities and the expediencies of the situation they find themselves in. Steyaert et al., (2011: 274) provide examples of improvisation, code switching and compromise solutions about which language or languages to use in any given situations. Recent contributions demonstrate that language diversity also shapes the communicative structures, knowledge exchanges and relational positions between employees.

Hegemonic Use of Language, Language-Based Positions and Structures

Previous research on power and hegemony in language use focuses on individuals and small groups but no particular framework dominates this stream of research. Early contributions such as Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999a) established that the choice of one language over another leads to privileging a particular language (such as the common corporate language) or national group over others. Empirical research documents how organizational groups were either bestowed with voice or silenced after the imposition of a new corporate language (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999b). Vaara et al. (2005) demonstrated the effect of historical legacies between countries on corporate language policies and practices in the context of a cross-border merger. While the early studies viewed the introduction of English as a common corporate language in a constructive way, later studies were more critical of this top management decision.

The critical takes on language use fall within the legacy of linguistic imperialism by Phillipson (1992), who frames the use of English as a locus of power rather than a neutral code. Phillipson (1992: 77) argues that the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and the way it continuously reconstitutes structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. Recent work posits that once the use of English is seen as 'normal' and pre-given, it is employed in a hegemonial sense. In such situations, the meaning system of English tends to overshadow meanings and interpretations expressed in local languages (Beeler & Lecomte, 2017; Wilmot, 2017). The English language hegemony re-creates post-colonial power structures (Boussebaa et al., 2014) with far reaching effects for the creation of management knowledge (Meriläinen et al., 2008; Thomas et al., 2009) and the well-being of management academics (Horn, 2017).

The interest in micro-negotiations of language use has triggered work on language agents, i.e. the individuals who do the linguascaping and who are involved in actively shaping the communicative processes across boundaries and groups. Researchers have labelled these language agents in different ways. Marschan et al. (1997: 593) refer to them as 'language nodes' who often have better-than-average access to information. Expatriates, who tend to be fluent in the common corporate language, can take on the role of such language intermediaries between headquarters and foreign subsidiaries. Harzing et al., (2011: 282) call them 'bridge individuals', as they possess specific language skills and 'act as bridges between employees without the necessary language skills'. Barner-Rasmussen et al., (2014: 887) prefer the notion of boundary spanners who are perceived by members of both their own in-group and relevant out-groups as contributors to and facilitators of significant interactions between the groups. In the same context, Brannen and Thomas (2010) talk about biculturals. While the early work emphasized individuals' language skills, later work has made the conceptual distinction between language skills and cultural skills (Barner-Rasmussen, 2015; Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Brannen & Thomas, 2010). Thus, an individual may have cultural skills but not the requisite language skills, and vice versa.

Since the early contributions, the interest in the agency and power of language-skilled employees is still increasing They are now recognised as strategic agents, located at the cross-roads of cultural, national, organization and language boundaries. These agents accumulate considerable informal power, have better access to knowledge and other resources, and assume gatekeeper roles (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014: 900). Evidence shows that individuals who possess both cultural and language skills perform more boundary spanning functions such as facilitating interaction, exchanging information, and linking previously disconnected individuals with each other than those who are not equipped with this dual set of skills (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014). Boundary spanners also take on more demanding and more diverse tasks, because cultural and language skills reinforce each other. However, the most effective boundary spanners are few in number and rarely occupy top management or expatriate positions but rather are scattered across organizational levels and job roles (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014: 899).

In sum, there is no shared position in how language-sensitive research treats issues of power. Researchers are concerned with linguistic imperialism and hegemony and the consequences of the unreflexive use of English. They are uncomfortable with the assumption that the use of English alone can describe and capture 'all thinkable business situations' and reflect 'all existing bodies of knowledge'. The field has become sensitised to the existence of differences in meanings across languages, which can be glossed over by dominant publication practices in English-only (Tietze, 2018).

Translation

An important intellectual shift lies in the increasing focus on translation (and interpreting) as a necessary form of language work in multilingual contexts. Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio (2011: 293) state that '[s]omewhere in between, products, systems, plans, visions, strategies, budgets and contracts – or at least some aspects of them –are translated. Which aspects are picked out for translation, by whom, how faithfully the translations are conducted and at what cost, and to which standards of quality, we do not know'. Since then, some answers have begun to emerge about the role of translation and translator agency. Translation within language-sensitive research means interlingual translation, that is, the process of translating a text from one language (source language) to another language (target language). Contemporary studies have shown that tracking and analysing the interlingual translation process unearths cultural as well as historical-political contexts which continue to influence how texts gets translated and received. In this regard, like the taken for granted use of English, once unravelled, can be used to parse organization relationships, so can interlingual translation be used to unravel the hidden aspects of international and cross-cultural relationships either between individuals or small groups or between MNC headquarters and subsidiaries. An example of a headquarters (US) and subsidiary (Polish) relationship is given by Ciuk et al., (2019). They track the interlingual translation process of an incoming English language text into Polish and demonstrate how (purposeful) shifts in meanings are achieved through translation decisions of reframing, domesticating and inscribing. They also show how these translator acts are not neutral or mechanistic, but reflect and express micro-political relationships in the MNC.

An early piece that contributed to the field's understanding of translation as much more than a mechanistic skill was published in 2004 in the *Journal of World Business* by Janssens, Lambert and Steyaert. While this conceptual paper was concerned with the ways in which international companies approach language diversity, it made an explicit 'interdisciplinary move to translation studies' (Janssens et al., 2004: 415). The authors distinguish between a mechanistic, cultural and political language strategy which represent alternative metaphors on how to organize language diversity. This study has increased awareness of translation studies and enabled researchers to integrate concepts from this field into their theoretical repertoire.

A growing number of studies have followed suit, shedding light on translation behaviour (Piekkari et al., 2013), translation in cross-cultural management (Holden & Von Kortzfleisch, 2004; Steyaert & Janssens, 2015) and individual translators (Tietze et al., 2017) as political actors (Logemann & Piekkari, 2015) and as vehicles in the transfer of knowledge and values (Ciuk & James, 2015; Tréguer-Felten, 2017). Instead of language nodes or boundary spanners, translation scholars use the term 'paraprofessional translators' (Tyulenev, 2014). They are employees, who translate alongside their regular work tasks but are not trained as professional translators. They have been shown to be influential, in particular, in contexts characterised by organizational change and ambiguity (Ciuk & James, 2015; Logemann & Piekkari, 2015; Tenzer et al., 2017) or when global concepts spread into countries where another language is spoken (Meyer & Höllerer, 2010). Meyer and Höllerer (2010) investigate the reception of the Anglo-American concept of shareholder value in Austria and, amongst other, also comment on the struggle over meaning associated with it.

Methodological and Meta-Theoretical Considerations

The early development of the field was dominated by qualitative case studies due its phenomenon-based orientation. This has left a legacy, as Tenzer et al. (2017) report. While the majority of studies continue to be qualitative (47.9%), there is a growing number of work using quantitative methods (42.6%) with a small minority using mixed methods (4.2%) or adopt a purely theoretical/conceptual approach (Tenzer et al., 2017). Experimental research designs still remain an exception in this field (Fan & Harzing, 2020, forthcoming). The community of language-sensitive researchers is only beginning to seriously consider language as a methodological question in terms of how to go about studying the use of languages in context. To provide some practical examples: boundary spanners, which have been identified as key actors in enabling cross-cultural and cross language encounters, are hard to identify from outside because they are dispersed across the organization and job roles (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014). Furthermore, observing a meeting conducted in several languages or using interpreters or conducting interviews across different languages or translating collected data from source to target language (i.e. mainly English) are complex endeavours and dependent on the individual or collective language and translation competencies of the researcher or the research team.

Xian (2008: 234) studied 'how successful women managed and developed their careers in the Chinese information technology' industry. The translation of these women's narratives posed immense translation problems for her. She therefore consulted a second native speaker of Chinese to discuss her own translation of Chinese data into English, which revealed differences in interpretation. Xian argues that, due to the lack of equivalence between languages in terms of meanings or even lack of comparable vocabulary, the translation process itself is not a mechanistic act but a cultural act, akin to data analysis.

There is considerable potential for the field to make an important meta-theoretical contribution to wider cross-cultural management research by problematizing the underlying assumption that all languages carry equal meanings and that translation between languages is merely a mechanistic process (see Halai, 2007; Holden & Michailova, 2014; Marschan-

Piekkari & Reis, 2004; Temple & Young, 2004, for a discussion). Chidlow et al. (2014) reviewed the equivalence paradigm in international business research and demonstrated an on-going shift towards a less technicist and more contextual understanding of translation processes in international business research. The implications of their study are far reaching as translation would then be seen as a sense-making, decision process which shapes research designs, relationships between researchers and research participants as well as the production of management knowledge.

Xian (2008) and Usunier (2011), who both problematized the myth of equivalence of meaning, were early contributors to this stream of research. While Xian (2008) focused on language-related challenges in qualitative interview data (see also Piekkari & Tietze, 2016), Usunier (2011) discussed them in the context of quantitative cross-cultural management research. He argues that too much cross-cultural research is 'language-free' and uses translation, if at all, in a mechanical way, often in the form of back-translation. Usunier (2011: 315) offers a more nuanced understanding of different forms of equivalence, where experiential equivalence is the hardest one for the translator to achieve, i.e. 'to reconstruct source-based experiential meaning in the target language.' At the stage of publication in peer-reviewed journals, universalistic assumptions 'that equivalent meanings can be found in all languages' tend to dominate –'an assumption that partly denies the obvious capacity for language to create unique meanings' (Usunier, 2011: 315). Thus, the language-sensitive field has begun to problematize the role of English and equivalence of meaning in the design, execution and publication practices prevalent throughout business and management research.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Table 1 summarizes the development of the languages as a field over time and its key concepts and debates. The table shows that the boundaries between the focus on a single language (primarily English) versus the focus on language diversity are becoming increasingly blurred. This is because notions such as multilingual franca (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014) and BELF (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005) are gaining ground. They are based on the view of language as social practice suggesting that language is a product of social interaction among employees, is embedded in various layers of context, including the organizational and cultural, and forms only part of the individual's communicative competence (Karhunen et al., 2018).

LANGUAGES AS A MEETING GROUND WITH CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT RESEARCHERS

The field of cross-cultural management is concerned with understanding meanings of lived experiences in context. In this chapter, we have problematized the unreflective use of English and argued that it is not conducive to making sense of emic aspects of culture in multilingual contexts. To date, however, these deep-seated aspects for cross-cultural and cross language research have largely remained invisible and almost gone unnoticed. We believe that they offer a rich and fruitful ground collaborations between language-sensitive and cross-cultural scholars.

The emergence of language-sensitive research within international business studies was contingent on an awareness – albeit not always made explicit in written accounts – that different languages construct the world in different ways and that there is no absolute equivalence of meaning between languages. Consequently, it is not possible to capture or control all existing knowledge, or knowledge-to-be, through one language, i.e., English. The decoupling of language from culture is a key characteristic of this field and we have argued that this was necessary in order to establish language-based enquiry as legitimate in its own right. Importantly, as language use in multilingual contexts requires a degree of choice, issues of agency form part of the investigative repertoires offered by the field. Also, the enabling and constraining effects of English as the dominant lingua franca in the production of management knowledge and as the most frequently adopted common corporate language have been investigated. This has enabled the field to investigate English in relation to other languages (or local languages as they are called now) and opened the door for posing critical questions about the privileged role of English.

Brannen and Mughan’s (2017) collection of published papers points to the role of languages in effective external communications with markets, customers and external professional bodies. This is an avenue that is less well explored in contemporary (European) language-sensitive scholarship due to its internal focus. Yet, language is central for the performance of international partnerships since partners provide and receive capital, expertise and other resources through acts of communication (Boussebaa et al., 2014; Brannen & Salk, 2000; Cuypers et al., 2015; Golesorkhi et al., forthcoming; Joshi & Lahiri, 2015), thus offering potential for future research. Much of the research to date has been restricted to language use in headquarters-subsidiary relationships of MNCs (Brannen et al., 2014) rather than other organizational contexts (Angouri & Piekkari, 2018) such as multilingual domestic firms (Piekkari & Westney, 2017), or small- and medium-sized enterprises (see Blenkinsop et al., 2019; Wilmot, 2017 for exceptions). Researchers have also favoured manufacturing companies at the expense of service firms and given precedence to white-collar rather than blue-collar workplaces. They have also privileged private for profit rather than non-profit or public organisations (Angouri & Piekkari, 2018), which could offer rich settings for language research.

Stretching the external remit even further, insights gained from how to manage language diversity could be brought to bear on big societal challenges caused by migration and political upheaval. Workplaces have an important role to play in the socio-cultural integration of migrants in the receiving countries. Fluency in the local language is part of migrants' set of competences and an effective means for adjustment and for bridging differences between migrants and local communities. In a study of Finnish self-initiated and organizational expatriates' acquisition and usage of the local language in China, Zhang and Lauring (2019) found that language skills had a fundamental effect on the creation of power imbalance and feelings of superiority and inferiority among employees with varying levels of language proficiency and different mother tongues, producing deep divides between expatriates and local employees.

The findings from language research can also be used to shed light on immigrants' entrepreneurial activities. Research on immigrant entrepreneurs shows that their language skills and cultural knowledge significantly affect the internationalization strategy of immigrant-owned small- and medium-sized enterprises (Sui et al., 2015). '[I]mmigrant business owners tend to gravitate toward foreign markets with which they are linguistically matched', because in these markets they can more easily establish relationships with local firms, governmental officials and other potentially important stakeholders (Sui et al., 2015: 811). In addition to language skills, migrants may draw on their skills in non-verbal communications and cultural knowledge of visible artefacts and symbolic behaviour, which have been less explored in the field of languages, but provide another meeting ground with cross-cultural management scholars.

In terms of its origin, language sensitive research emerged from within the discipline of international business studies, but is currently broadening its zone of influence to organizational theory, human resource management, accounting and economics; an expansion which invites the combined insights from cross-cultural and language sensitive researchers to understand the situated practices and their diverse underpinnings. Collaborations between cross-cultural management scholars and language-sensitive researchers will be able to draw together insights from each perspective to inform the management of cultural and language diversity beyond an understanding based exclusively on (national) cultural differences.

In terms of methodology, the main social science techniques are used to explore multilingual workplaces, with interviews and surveys being the most frequently used techniques (see Tenzer et al., 2017). The notion of equivalence (or lack thereof) between languages and also cultures and the consequences for research projects are a fruitful avenue for inquiry as they enable researchers to address the very core of research projects – what is it we actually know and how do we know about it, in particular when we shift and change meaning when translating data or core concepts. These are avenues of thoughts the whole field of business and management is yet to incorporate more fully into its intellectual project. The two main language mechanisms of global communication, i.e. English as a lingua franca and translation, and understanding how they come into play within different cultural contexts, remains a challenge for contemporary research.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The intellectual project described in this chapter was triggered by what has been termed the linguistic turn of social sciences (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). It left deep marks on the development of many management disciplines, most prominently perhaps on the field of organisation studies, in which discursive approaches have become part of the established research approaches. In international business, cross-cultural approaches played an important role in advancing of the field. In this chapter, we outlined a related, but so far mainly separate development, the emergence and rise of ‘languages’ as an important movement, which was also informed by the linguistic turn and which can be seen to complete the turn (Angouri & Piekkari, 2018).

The extensive reviews undertaken by Tenzer et al. (2017) and Karhunen et al. (2018) signal that this particular field has a future as expressed in a large volume of published works. and continuation in terms of its outputs, contributions, practices and approaches as well as the potential to ‘reach out’ to other business disciplines. Similarly, the existence of a second generation of researchers testifies to the continuation of this field of inquiry.

Its main challenge lies in finding a balance between establishing itself institutionally on firmer ground, for example through founding a journal or by establishing a standing conference stream or special interest group within existing international conferences, and enabling younger researchers to ‘fly their ideas’ and exercise their imagination, uncowed by a hyper competitive research environment that often leads to pragmatic and safe career choices and low-risk decisions about research topics and publication outlets. Of course, all communities face these challenges, but for language-sensitive scholars closer collaboration with cross-cultural management research communities could provide impetus and creative drive to energize both communities.

A continued challenge for researchers dealing with ‘languages’ is how to make their findings and thoughts more available and relevant for various audiences. While the early research was conducted in the Nordic countries, which are characterized by close ties between academia and the business world, more efforts could be targeted at pooling the findings of this field into a coherent message for practitioners or policy-makers. For example, the recent book by Neeley (2017) consolidates her longitudinal research on the Japanese company Rakuten. In our view the impact agenda provides an opportunity for ‘languages’ to demonstrate their relevance for business and policy makers on regional, national or supranational levels (Hogan-Brun, 2017; Hogan-Brun, 2018; Kelly, 2018; Mughan, 1990) in an effort to build more inclusive societies and fairer economies (Holmes, 2018; Phipps, 2018).

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Table 1. Summary of the development of the field and its key concepts and debates

Dimensions	***Key concepts and debates***	
Temporal juncture	*Focus on a single language*	*Focus on language diversity*
Juncture 1 from late 1980s to 2010: Languages as a sideshow	English as a lingua franca and common corporate language, BELF (English as Business Lingua Franca)	Linguistic imperialism, language hierarchies, language-based positions (i.e., language agents) and structures
Juncture 2 from 2011 to 2014: Graining momentum	Critique of the notion of a common corporate language, multilingual franca	Linguascaping
Juncture 3 from 2015 onwards: Into the future	Language as social practice	Translation Methodological and meta-theoretical considerations (i.e., hegemonic use of language)