

Exploring 'Bundles' of Employment Practices: Culture, Language and Translation Perspectives

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<cn>9.<en><ct>Exploring ‘Bundles’ of Employment Practices: Culture, Language and Translation Perspectives

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The purpose of this edited book is to provide deep explanations and analysis of international comparative employee relations as they have been subject to enormous changes in a global epoch. While there is ‘increased integration between countries’ (see Chapter 1 in this volume) which is driven primarily by the liberalization of international trade, there are also cross-country variations of employee relations, which continue to exist. The existence of such different forces for either integration or for continued variation and difference makes for a dynamic and multifaceted field of inquiry. Brewster in Chapter 2 predicts a radically changed world of employment relations; a world which contemporary academics would find difficult to explore, capture, describe and analyse as it lacks the terminology to investigate crucial issues of work, for example in global value chains which fall outside the traditional (conceptual) territory of employment relations research. Likewise work gets ‘moved around the world, and as it get done by “the machines”, employee relations will become a restrictive terminology’ (Chapter 2: xxx). Such considerations raise the question of what the future may bring in terms of useful approaches and ways of thinking about such radical and deep-reaching changes and how to understand and research them.

Comparative approaches to understanding ER are mainly based on national differences and develop awareness about how different systems of ER operate; however, they may not provide the depth of insights required to understand the intricacies of how and why employee relations change at micro levels of practice, nor are they able to capture the nuances of interactions that result at localities where such changes become enacted.

<a>CULTURAL APPROACHES

In the past comparative cultural approaches, that is, etic approaches, looked at variances and co-variances of variables between (national) cultures, enabling some ‘law-like’ principles governing large numbers of people. Its main assumption is that there is something to compare as there must be similarities between (national) cultures and these are expressed as ‘cultural dimensions’. Once these are established they provide a measurement tool to compare the relative importance of national cultural traits and their respective constellations. The most famous example is perhaps the school of thought initiated by Geert Hofstede (1980), where cultural dimensions are used to explain similarities and differences between different national systems. In this way of thinking, employee relations are part of national systems and subject to the same cultural difference and similarities as other institutional systems. In Chapters 7 and 8 it is shown how strong individualist (US) and strong collectivist (Nigeria) societal cultures both impact and reflect the constitution, laws and processes of employee relations and employee participation in them. Opute in Chapter 8 shows that employees in Nigeria

have a strong collectivist orientation, which means that they are not always searching for freedom of association, but for recognition of their role not just as employees, but as having minds and hearts – one could say a quite ‘holistic orientation’ to how they wish to be viewed and treated. Yet, in Chapter 4 located in China and its different traditions of understanding and framing employee relations, employee relations and general workplace relations demonstrate that applying a label such as ‘collectivist orientation’ does not reach all possible interpretations and practices that can be associated with a collectivist mindset. Indeed, Chapter 4 serves as a good example where the semantic distance between meanings deriving from other localities and traditions is far removed from Chinese meanings, traditions and practices. Thus many Chinese words are left visible (i.e. untranslated) as there is simply not ‘sufficiently good’ equivalent expression in English to express the particular origin and meanings of the Chinese words and practices. In sum, the application of the cultural dimensions individualist and collectivist orientation are useful, but only if discussed in contexts rather than treated as ‘absolute measurements’. Thus, what having a collectivist orientation means is contingent on a host of other influences, history and socio-political contexts being some of them. It could be argued that the dynamics and influences that shape enacted relationships situated in specific contexts would be better understood by embracing an emic approach. This means an approach focusing on the unique constellations at specific micro-settings, which shape ER workplace practices.

The comparative approach is a useful starting point, though it could be argued that it does not capture the dynamic nature of how contexts, agents, ideas and systems interact in multifaceted ways. In order to understand such dynamics, it is possible to turn to language and translation as phenomena as well as concepts to parse in particular the micro processes through which change unfolds. While the influence of national culture is by now an established and accepted aspect of international comparative research, there are two further approaches which could usefully be incorporated into a research agenda for the future. These are ‘languages’ and ‘translation’. I provide now a brief overview about their reception by different academic communities, which are engaging with international research in a global world.

<a>LANGUAGES AND TRANSLATION

Languages (as in the English language, the Italian language etc.) have been discovered as an interesting phenomenon within international business and management research, where situations and developments in ‘typical’ international business contexts such as cross-border mergers and acquisitions were investigated from a languages perspective. Conceptually, these researchers in this field decoupled language from culture (Brannen et al., 2014) and focused on the use of language in situated contexts. Here, it was shown, for example, that language diversity and how it is managed impacts strongly not only on the flow of communications and the sharing of knowledge, but equally on the exercise of control and coordination in particular in multinational corporations (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999), on the enactment of HRM functions (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999), on the group coherence and trust relationships in dispersed global teams (Hinds et al., 2014; Tenzer et al., 2014) and on contemporary identity constructions in different sections of the MNC (Vaara et al., 2005), which included the evocation of past political–historical relationships. For this school of

inquiry, a focus on language and language diversity also included a critical engagement with the role of English as a lingua franca of management knowledge (Steyaert and Janssens, 2013; Tietze, 2018) and its limitations to express knowledge and meaning that is coded in different language systems. In this regard, this group of scholars has made the English language itself subject to its enquiry. As quoted in the introductory chapter: ‘... linguistic standardisation due to the universal use of English is not always matched by a similarity of structure and functions’ (Tiraboschi, 2003: 192). Chapter 4 is a prime example of this statement as cultural heritage, communist ideologies and the influx of ideas and practices from market economies contribute to a multifaceted understanding and practice of industrial relations. To understand such a multitude of different labels and practices is described by Xi as a ‘quite complicated thing’. A complication which led him to choose a strategy of foreignization, that is, leaving visible ‘difference’ in the form of Chinese words as a means to document the existence of difference in employee and industrial relations concepts and regimes.

The term ‘translation’ became more widely spread within organizational research in the 1990s with a significant contribution being made by Scandinavian institutional scholars (Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009; Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996, 2005; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). The notion of translation which has been adopted captures processes of change and transformation. Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen (2009: 190–1) state that translation refers to the ‘modification that a practice or an idea undergoes when it is implemented in a new organizational context’. Thus, a translation lens could be used to understand how and why ideas and practices change when they are adopted in a local context. This adoption is done by local actors, who remain embedded in the local context, its systems, traditions and values, and frequently these agents are assumed to be managers, though they could equally be trade union officials, workplace representatives or members of the local workforce. Yet, the role of these actors, that is, trade unionists or trade union members, is less well explored or understood (Cassell and Lee, 2016) in how they relate to new and incoming ideas and make them happen through translation. Cassell and Lee (2016) provide a longitudinal narrative analysis of the travel of a trade union idea (here: learning representative initiative) and how it required distinctive trade union translation work. Questions that this kind of approach – in contrast to a more comparative approach – can answer are: ‘How do the relationships between different stakeholder groups and translators influence how the idea is edited? How do different translators negotiate the meaning and purpose of the idea? And how does the nature of these idea change through translation?’ (Cassell and Lee, 2016: 3). In other words, adopting this metaphorical approach to translation unearths the nature of a dynamic process that is relational and changes the very idea (or practice) itself.

It is interesting to note that Whittall and Trinczek, in leaning on Streeck and Thelen (2005) in Chapter 6 describe the German work council as a ‘regime’, which is governed by rules that are locally enacted as the history of a plant creates ‘an internal understanding of what is acceptable behavior ... and interaction norms’. The notion of the work councils as regime is built, amongst other, on the existence of conflict, as members of institutions fill such bodies with life. This take on work councils as regimes of organically evolving local practices is as much an outcome of historical factors as of local enactments. Thus, a conceptual take on comparative employee relations based on regimes of ‘practice’ is advocated as a means to un-lock the complexities of work council's operations and to move

beyond mere description. As an intriguing point Whittall and Trinczek state that the leading works using and developing this particular conceptual take have been published in German and have not been translated into English. A clear case, where translation is needed in order to share knowledge more effectively.

There are two take-aways from this chapter and these observations: in order to research bundles of practices, it is necessary to focus investigative effort on the micro processes at organizational and institutional levels. Once particular practices have been identified and vocabulary to describe them has been coined, it becomes possible to ‘compare’ then with either comparative elements of the same study or with available other sources and their findings.

The approach used in by Cassell and Lee is quite similar to the approach advocated by Scandinavian Institutional scholars, as they are too concerned with exploring what happens when a ‘practice’ (or a regime of practices) begins to travel around the globe, rather than adopting a comparative approach. It is reasonable to assume, that such travel of ideas and practices needs to entail considerations of interlingual translation – as if it does not happen, knowledge is not shared. The employed definition of translation as a descriptor for change does not engage with the linguistic character of translation from a source text/context to a target text/context; that is, it uses translation in a metaphorical sense, rather than an interlingual one. It has been argued and shown that interlingual translation is, in particular in contexts of incoming change, a useful focus for research projects as acceptance, resistance and adoption of the incoming new idea/practice can be traced through focusing on the interlingual translation work undertaken by local agents. For example, a recent study by Ciuk, James and Sliwa (2018) focuses on the interlingual translation work of a group of managers in the context of an incoming idea/practice (from US Headquarters) to a Polish subsidiary, where the new change programme needs to be literally and metaphorically translated. They show that struggles, exchanges, meaning-making and discussion over how to translate particular words and texts from US English into Polish is a situated, political–historical micro practice, through which cultural adoption and domestication is achieved. Thus, they take interlingual translation as their conceptual point of departure to generate insight into the micro negotiations.

Likewise, investigations into the change and reception of ideas from international employee relations could equally be investigated through a language and translation lens. An example provided in Chapter 3 relates to Hyman (2005) and that translating *shop steward* (a union representative appointed by members in the workplace) into French is complicated as no equivalent exists in how employee relations are practiced in France. Similarly, in Chapter 3 it was also discussed how three employee participation models and their respective vocabulary and technical terms, reveals complex historical genesis, reflection of social-political differences, and an underlying deeper significance for each of the three countries (Germany, UK, USA). It was also demonstrated how legal changes (the example given was *gangmaster* and the Italian *caporali*) make a difference in how a role and practices are either embedded in the law or remain illegal – pointing to a potential for misunderstandings and irritations if such difference in meaning becomes hidden in the translation process. Manzella (Chapter 5 in this volume) offers a detailed analysis of the genesis and use of the words *gangmaster* (English) and *caporali* (Italian); he provides the historical background how these terms came to be interpreted in different ways and are now either considered to be illegal activity, punishable by law in Italy or have become integrated into the legal structures as in

the UK. By leaving translation decisions of these two terms visible in the text, he follows what is called a ‘foreignization strategy’ of writing, whereby one leaves visible the ‘foreign’ aspects of one’s thoughts and themes.

In the example selected by Manzella, a comparative approach between the different meanings of the terms *gangmaster* and *caporali* works well as it enables this author to reveal the historical dimensions of how these terms were integrated into different legal systems; which in turn could lead to misinterpretations as *gangmaster* has become misnomer, expressing the opposite meaning to *caporali*. Thus, detailed translation work, including providing historical details as relevant to the employment practices of *gangsters/caporalis*, are used in this chapter to make a case for combining language/translation work to parse this employment practice and to explain where the differences in meaning and cultural connotations come from.

This is a useful approach to develop as it reveals that some key vocabulary does not translate easily from one language to another and, for example, in classrooms the reasons for this could be established and debated. Likewise, research projects relating to how workforces from these three different institutional systems enact their understanding of ‘voice’ when in collaborative contexts, for example, will provide additional depth in how pre-understandings are enacted and potentially re-negotiated.

<a>CONCLUSION: FROM COMPARISON OF SYSTEMS TO THE TRAVEL OF PRACTICES

In a global epoch difference and similarities between ER systems have been explored from a comparative perspective. This is a useful point of departure to understand the diversity of practices, perspectives and underpinning ideologies that exist and likewise this approach enables the establishment of differences between systems and practices. However, these approaches could usefully be supplemented by a focus on the dynamics of what happens when ideas and practices travel around the globe and how localities, traditions and different meanings inform the existence of variance and differences between them. Therefore, it is advocated that a useful focus for future inquiry could be on the ‘travel of bundle of ER practices’, how and why they change, under whose agency and how vocabularies (in translation) are used to achieve this. Taken a dynamic, relational approach instead of a strongly comparative one, this approach enables investigations into the complexities that occur in local contexts. Translation and language work form part of interactions and relationships through which bundles of employment relational practices are understood and performed.

A useful focus of research into global employment relations could be developed by drawing more attention to the language- and translation-related aspects of practice. This has been successfully done in some chapters of this book. Such approaches, however, can only be developed if ‘language’ (or language diversity) is no longer taken for granted and integrated as a topic into research projects. Likewise, translation needs to be seen not as a mechanistic, automatic act, but inextricably linked to data analysis and interpretation (Xian, 2008).

In Chapter 2 some possible future scenarios and contexts are described for which the contemporary IR or ER scholarship has not yet developed the conceptual tools to engage with situations and scenarios of employment relations that escape the scholarly gaze as they fall

outside the conceptual scope of how ER/IR scholarship frames. Brewster in Chapter 2 points out that ‘Words cannot always be translated directly or exactly into other languages’ and words always come with a background and meaning and have implications. One wonders, for example, how English is used by people living outside their home country, 250 million according to the United Nations in 2017, and only a small percentage is the global elite, able to access English to gain information, share knowledge and create opportunity for themselves. The majority of people will be economic migrants, or people displaced by natural disaster, climate change, political oppression or war, as Brewster points out. These people come with less ‘access to English’, but equipped with local languages and some equipped with the ability to translate between different worlds. Understanding what their ‘bundle of practices and experiences’ are remains a challenge for all social science fields.

Some academic fields, for example, accounting, international business, organization studies scholars have begun to turn to translation and language to come to terms with the multifaceted nature of practices and meanings as they are generated and change in an ongoing and interrelated dynamic. These include situations where dominant logics are challenged, for example as documented in Chapter 1, where Ryanair was forced to recognize trade unions or where Google’s ‘benign individualism’ is disputed by staff walkouts. One wonders, how English as the language used by pilots was part of expressing active solidarity across language borders and how perhaps translation was also drawn upon to achieved shared visions and goals. Here, a focus on the micro setting and understanding language and translation as situated practices is useful to understand how the tensions of globalization are enacted in sometimes surprising ways.

Some approaches provided in this book, some themes provided in this book, some observations and insights provided in this book may well be part of the process through which new conceptual impetus is achieved. For example, the deliberate choice of leaving translation visible (Chapter 3) is a ‘foreignization strategy’ in terms of text and knowledge production. Most of the chapters in this book are informed by this approach, rather than by ‘domestication strategies’ of writing whereby difference is hidden and becomes subsumed within the English language. In Chapter 3 it is stated that contemporary knowledge about the ‘bundles of regimes and practices’ is not yet translated and that important insights that may assist the advancement of employment and industrial relations cannot be shared.

Ironically, this points to the importance of English as a shared language of knowledge, while simultaneously evoking the notion of translation as an always precarious and incomplete project. This is so, as ‘bundles of practices’ are historically grounded and situated in traditions and well as experiences – all of which do not translate all that easily.

From both a pedagogic and research perspective, it could be argued that comparative approaches could include comparing specific vocabulary, for example, the word *Betriebsrat* (English: work council) and how it translates, if at all, into other languages. Students and researchers could take this exercise as a point of departure to become sensitized to differences in meaning and practice, and also where they originate from. From thereon, comparison leads to discussions and explorations of uniqueness, which fold back into shared understanding through publications and exchanges facilitated through the two main global communicative sources we have got at our disposal: English and Translation. The pressures to publish in English-speaking journals almost exclusively have set undue constraints to the generation and exchange of knowledge (Tietze, 2018), leading to erroneous assumptions of attributing the

English language with universal powers of expression, an assumption that is as much misguided as it is wrong (Wierzbicka, 2014).

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