Can you speak Covid-19? Languages and social inequality in management studies

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<div align="center">**Can you speak Covid-19?**</div>

<div align="center">**Languages and social inequality in management studies**</div>

Introduction

The Covid-19 crisis makes the study of languages in management even more relevant and timely than before the crisis. This "black and brown epidemic," as Joseph Betancourt from Massachusetts General Hospital called it, brings to the fore social divisions and hardship, accelerating and magnifying processes and practices of linguistic inequality with fatal consequences (Goldberg, 2020). Millions of people lack the means and critical information to keep themselves and their families safe. Marginalized groups, in particular, have been disproportionally affected by the pandemic. Morbidity and mortality can be exacerbated because of no or low levels of literacy in the state language, lack of access to technologically mediated communication, as well as struggles to process expert talk and professional languages. We are now witnessing how medical knowledge has become prey for global geopolitical struggles and blame games such as American populist talk about the China virus and *vice versa*.

Some multilingual countries have approached crisis communication through a monolingual approach by relying on their respective state language or English as a *lingua franca*. In doing so, these societies have often overlooked the needs of minorities or peripheral groups for 'linguistic first aid' (Probirskaja, 2017). China is a case in point. The outbreak of the corona virus in Hubei province revealed that the spoken Wuhan dialect and standard Chinese are mutually unintelligible. Chinese authorities gave up the monolingual approach to crisis communication within 48 hours and rapidly brought in a team of linguists to create a 'Guidebook of Wuhan Dialect for Medical Assistance' (Piller, 2020). Critical health information is now communicated in a myriad of local languages and dialects, accentuating the

need for translation in the fight against Covid-19 (Translators without Borders, 2020). Thus, Covid-19 has underscored the insight that languages are the arena through which power asymmetries are enacted and articulated, reflecting the global social order between the 'West' and 'the rest.'

In this essay, we discuss the implications of the pandemic for the scholarly agenda of languages in management studies. Our starting point is that Covid-19 represents a major disruption, producing discursive voids that need to be bridged. The meeting of languages opens up a whole new arena for political and ideological struggles over meaning that have so far received limited attention from management scholars. We challenge existing assumptions, concepts, and practices and propose directions to guide future scholarship in this area of study.

Towards a future research agenda

The pandemic and its social and economic reverberations reveal novel research avenues for management scholars studying multilingual settings. First, although the field of management studies engages with language and discourse, it is implicitly monolingual in its orientation and tends to take the use of English for granted. We challenge this assumption by flagging the role of non-global languages and the social and power dynamics involved in using different languages (Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, and Säntti, 2005). In terms of vocabulary, many new words and phrases have been coined during the pandemic such as 'social distancing' with different connotations in various linguistic contexts. We emphasize the role of professional and technical languages because the Covid-19 debate morphs to an ideological struggle between health concerns, political, and economic interests. In this debate, not only are the concerns and arguments expressed differently in different contexts, but also the hegemony of English as the global language of science, economy and finance has a major impact on these discussions. Embracing the multitude of languages and their relationships provides management scholars

with ample opportunities for novel theoretical, empirical and methodological work, raising research questions such as: How does the complex interplay between multiple languages, including different expert language(s), unfold and what are the implications for actors' identities, status or power relations? What are the long-term ideological and material implications of these identity and power struggles? How does multilingualism serve as a hidden arena for social exclusion and inequality?

Second, management scholars increasingly acknowledge the performative and agentic role of communication in organizations and the communicative construction of institutions (Angouri, 2018). We suggest replacing the focus on communication with a focus on translation to emphasize that every act of human communication is an act of translating – of local meaning-making, change and transformation. For example, schools of thought such as the Communicative Construction of Organizations (CCO) (Cooren, Taylor, and van Every 2006) and the communicative co-constitution of institutions (Meyer and Vaara, 2020) draw on notions of language and discourse to explain why and how organizations or institutions are created, stabilized and transformed. A shift to Translation Constitutes Organizations (TCO) and institutions as translatorial co-constitution highlights that meaning-making is inherent in all language-based acts. Multilingual settings are characterized by additional layers of complexity because meaning needs to be translated between languages. In line with this thinking, multilingual organizations can be seen as translatorial spaces, where different forms of translation unfold (Koskinen, 2020; Piekkari, Tietze, and Koskinen, 2020). This 'translatorial turn' also represents a deliberate choice to wrestle with issues of discursive voids and language-based contingencies in new ways. Thus, using the word 'translation' instead of 'communication' demarcates a desire to change our habitus from a monolingual to a multilingual one and to make this shift symbolically visible, raising novel research questions such as: How are translations used in framing institutional or organizational change for

different audiences? What is the role of multilingual practices in processes of (de-)legitimization, silencing, and (de-)institutionalization? How does the use of new, rather than entrenched, vocabularies foster innovation? What role do language practices, especially translation, play in fostering creativity in organizational change? What are the limits of individual and collective agency in these creative processes?

Third, the pandemic has also revealed in painful ways the risks associated with delays in translation and the limits of verbal language. This provides opportunities for machine translation as a fast and economic solution as well as multimodal communication strategies (Höllerer, van Leeuwen, Jancsary, Hestbæk Andersen, and Vaara, 2019) that rely on visual, audio, and video content to convey vital information. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) has relied on graphic designers to produce 'infographics' to better reach its audiences. Multimodal texts, however, are not *a priori* 'accessible'. Speakers who do not speak majority languages can also be also excluded, or misinformed, by a monolingually-informed design of visual materials. Furthermore, crisis communication often comes digitally mediated, which raises questions regarding fair and equal access to technology. Essential contributions can be made by researching the following questions: What is the role of visual and multimodal communication in multilingual organizations and organizing? Does its role grow when fast understanding is essential? How do multilingual societies use new virtual tools of communication and digital technologies, especially social media, during the pandemic? How do multilingual societies and organizations overcome challenges of digital poverty and digital illiteracy? When developing solutions that rely on machine translation and digital language services, is the standard still a monolingual English speaker?

Fourth, the pandemic invites philosophical and methodological reflections about how management scholars produce knowledge in multilingual settings (see, also Karhunen, Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen, and Piekkari, 2018). There are no established conventions

as to how to reveal or report the multilingual reality of fieldwork. Although many language and translation decisions tend to permeate the entire research process from conceiving the project to writing it up for publication, these decisions often remain unacknowledged in published accounts. Furthermore, due to challenges in accessing physical research sites during the pandemic, researchers have been pushed to digital spaces, to pick up 'netspeak', or to revisit existing data sets. The pandemic has also highlighted recent technological advances in artificial intelligence and machine learning that offer new data sources as well as new data analysis techniques, raising important questions: Do these technological advances enable the production of 'faster' knowledge to understand dynamic phenomena such as health crises without losing nuance and meaning? How can 'thick' qualitative data collected and stored in non-global languages be combined with big data in English? What new methodologies and data analysis techniques can be used to conduct research in multilingual digital spaces? For example, at present, popular data analysis software such as NVivo cannot accommodate multilingual texts. How do big data, machine learning and new technologies enable, constrain or change multilingual practices in organizations?

Conclusion

In times of crises there is an opportunity for new insight and knowledge to emerge, but crises also make communication gaps and voids of social meaning painfully visible. Covid-19 is foregrounding the consequences of what it means (not) to have access to knowledge, safety, justice, and voice – and lack of access is often aggravated, if not produced, by language barriers. Exclusion and inequality grow in the shadows of linguistic dominance and fragmented expert talk. We have highlighted four areas of research for management scholars that demand taking multilingualism seriously. Given the central role of language in our field, these four are but a start, offering promising synergies with other disciplines, notably linguistics.

While other, equally severe disasters such as Covid-19 have hit the humankind in history, they have not been written about to the same extent. We believe that because the pandemic has disrupted the Western world so dramatically, we were invited to write this essay. Despite our privileged geopolitical position, our task is to encourage the community of management scholars to stop 'masking the multilingual by the requirements of clarity, cohesion, transparency' when aiming to publish their work (Phipps, 2019, p. 6). There are currently two global communicative resources at our disposal: English and translation. As an academic community we have chosen English. As such, embracing translation cannot amend systemic inequalities and injustice, but it can point to critical experiences located at the nexus between words and worlds.

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