

## **International Business and Translation**

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## **International Business and Translation**

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## **International Business and Translation**

### **Introduction**

International Business (IB) is an interdisciplinary field, which builds on economics, strategy, sociology, psychology, economic geography and cross-cultural studies. IB scholars typically study areas such as activities, strategies and structures of multinational corporations; interactions between multinationals and other actors, institutions and markets; cross-border activities of firms; the effects of the international environment on firms as well as how firms grow and expand internationally through different operation modes (e.g. strategic alliances, mergers and acquisitions, foreign direct investments). What unites these research areas is a focus on international phenomena that cross borders, often also cultural and language borders.

Although “acts of translation... form a central element of an incalculable number of cross-border exchange processes” (Holden and Michailova 2014:907), mainstream IB research still has an under-developed link with translation studies. IB scholars typically associate translation with interlingual translation and the technicalities of back translating research instruments in cross-cultural and comparative research (Chidlow, Plakoyiannaki, and Welch 2014; Holden and Michailova 2014; Usunier 2011). When studying e.g. the move of organizational practices such as total quality management or talent management or knowledge flows across borders that also involve shifts in meaning, IB researchers have tended to employ concepts of “transfer” or “recontextualization” rather than translation. Transfer is commonly used when referring to headquarters of a multinational corporation exporting its organizational practices from the home country to foreign subsidiaries in host countries. The concept of recontextualization in turn draws on semiotics to examine various meanings that social actors assign to organizational practices and symbols when they move to a new cultural context (Brannen 2004). Since imported management models and organizational practices “do not speak for themselves” but “require articulation and interpretation” (Westney and Piekkari 2020:61), the notion of translation has considerable potential in IB research.

In this entry, we argue that the integration of translation into the intellectual trajectory of IB is currently gaining momentum (e.g., Tietze and Piekkari 2020; Westney and Piekkari 2020). A sub-stream in IB, commonly referred to as language sensitive research, has emerged, establishing language plurality and its consequences as a central area of study (Brannen, Piekkari, and Tietze, 2014). Scholars within this stream have started to pose the following question: If language plurality exists and the use of English is not a universal solution to

language plurality, is translation the inevitable global communicative resource? Recent research has begun to use translation studies as a source of inspiration and innovation (Gutierrez-Huerter O, Moon, Gold, and Chapple 2019; Holden and Michailova 2014; Westney and Piekkari 2020). Translation has also been applied reflexively to deepen our understanding of cross-border language research, both qualitative (Xian 2008) and quantitative (Chidlow et al. 2014; Usunier 2011). This is not to say that there was no prior research on the role of language plurality within international business preceding the contemporary development. However, the early studies focused more strongly on methodological considerations in cross-national research and cross-cultural management rather than the significance of language plurality for the strategy and inner workings of the multinational corporation.

### **Increasing awareness of the potential of translation studies for IB scholarship**

In order to understand the contemporary use of translation in IB scholarship, it is necessary to briefly sketch out the development of the language-sensitive research stream. The advances of this stream have been documented in three reviews which summarize the field's take on language plurality: Karhunen, Louhiala-Salminen, Kankaanranta and Piekkari (2018) identify the approach of language as social practice as the most promising trajectory of how language plurality is enacted in multilingual environments. Tenzer, Terjesen and Harzing (2017) accept the "transformative power of translation" (Brannen, Piekkari, and Tietze 2014:501) and encourage researchers to transcend disciplinary boundaries and turn to translation studies. Tietze and Piekkari (2020) capture the momentum of this field as being based on three significant junctures of development (Language as sideshow, late 1980s to 2010; gaining momentum 2011 to 2014 and from 2015 onwards into the future). These authors see translation as a way to break away from the dominance of English as the pre-given language of knowledge production in IB and therefore as a major concept for future research.

The integration of translation into IB research is seen as an "important intellectual shift" (Tietze and Piekkari 2020:187) to address some of the hidden key processes which underpin international business operations. As Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio (2011:293) put it, '[s]omewhere in between, products, systems, plans, visions, strategies, budgets and contracts... are translated. Which aspects are picked out for translation, by whom, how faithfully the translations are conducted, at what cost, and to which standard of quality, we do not know.'" Since then, language-sensitive IB research has woken up to the validity of this statement and

systematically focused its inquiry upon translation phenomena in empirical settings. Recent IB research has also incorporated some of the vocabulary taken from translation studies such as indirect and direct translation (Westney and Piekkari 2020) as well as equivalence, ambiguity and cultural interference (Holden and Michailova 2014) into its conceptual repertoire.

An important contribution to contemporary development was made by Janssens, Lambert and Steyaert (2004:415) who advocated “an interdisciplinary move to translation studies” to understand the way in which international companies approach language diversity. They proposed “three metaphorical perspectives each with a different conception of translation and language”: mechanistic, cultural and political translation strategy (Janssens et al. 2004:414). This publication remains influential as it was an early piece that demonstrated the usability of translation within IB discourse for example by referring to the work by translation scholars (e.g. Venuti). Thus, this publication marks the beginnings of awareness within IB scholarship of the role that translation could play to explain strategic phenomena in internationalizing firms.

While Janssens et al. (2004) remained for some years the only reference engaging with both IB and translation studies, an increasing number of IB scholars have now followed suit. In contemporary research, there is an on-going conversation about collective translation behaviour (Ciuk, James, and Śliwa 2019; Piekkari, Welch, Welch, Peltonen, and Vesa 2013) as well as the agency of individual translators (Tietze, Tansley, and Helienek 2017), including their political translation behaviour (Logemann and Piekkari 2015) in international firms. IB researchers have also incorporated insights from translation studies to shed light on the move of organizational practices in and around multinational corporations (Outila, Piekkari, Mihailova, and Angouri, 2020; Westney and Piekkari 2020). These authors describe the collective sense-making of practices and meanings that have been imported from headquarters to foreign subsidiaries that are located in very different institutional, cultural, political and linguistic contexts. Holden and Michailova (2014:907) further “problematize the translation of management terms and concepts across languages” and highlight the importance of embedding the translation process both historically and culturally. Piekkari, Tietze and Koskinen (2019) develop a conceptual matrix which explains the relationship between interlingual translation and metaphorical translation (i.e. sense-making processes) in multilingual settings. Together, these contributions unravel the nature of mundane translation work, the identity of the translators and the direction of translation flows and processes that take place in multilingual contexts.

Thus, contemporary language-sensitive IB research has embraced the notion of translation and is now using it rather comfortably as part of its key vocabulary and thinking. Based on an analysis of a management text, Holden and Michailova (2014) advocate a wider view of translation that also covers the historical and cultural embeddedness of translations, translation processes and the translators themselves. They invite IB scholars to move beyond the “microscopic concept of translation in IB research” (p. 906) that “detaches language from its sociocultural context” (p. 909) to understanding translation “as cross-border interplay of entire terrains of corporate contexts and experience linking multiple mental and social frames of reference” (Holden and Michailova 2014:906). Concomitant with the increasing popularity of translation in conceptual and empirical studies, the field is starting to engage with translation-related questions of epistemology and methodology in cross-language research (Chidlow et al. 2014; Tietze 2018; Xian 2008). These publications challenge the equivalence paradigm between languages, denying that “translation is the quest for identical meanings” (Chidlow et al. 2014:563) and problematizing whether such equivalence actually exists (Tietze 2018). These authors argue for making translation central in all cross-language research.

## **Conclusion**

For a considerable period of time, IB was “translation-blind” and did not seriously engage with the notion of translation beyond concerns for back translation in cross-cultural and comparative empirical research. Through the establishment and influence of a sub-field titled language-sensitive IB research, language plurality became a legitimate phenomenon of study and translation a significant part of exploring cross-border exchanges (Tenzer et al. 2017; Tietze and Piekkari 2020). Consequently, more specific questions arose about the role of translation in mediating language plurality as well as the use of English as a *global lingua franca*. This dawning awareness and interest has recently materialized into a fleet of empirical studies and conceptual papers as well as a vivid conversation about language-related methodological and philosophical questions (cf. Tietze, 2020).

Thus, in the main, empirical studies in IB favour the view of translation as an enacted social practice (Karhunen et al., 2018) that situates the agency of individual and collective translators within their relevant socio-political and historical contexts. IB researchers have also been inspired by a micropolitical perspective on language plurality and translation that allows to identify language hierarchies and shadow structures in multilingual organizations as well as

to redefine the boundaries between privileged and the disadvantaged groups (Piekkari and Tietze 2014). However, the reception and appropriation of translation within IB research is rather recent and the conceptual and theoretical work still in its infancy. Therefore, it is difficult to predict with certainty which of the contemporary approaches such as machine translation will solidify into trends or avenues of exploration (e.g., Piekkari et al. 2019). Finally, we firmly believe that the notion of translation offers a means to challenge orthodox IB discourses which have taken the use of English as a universal language for granted.

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