

Translation Studies in/and International Business Studies: Mapping the Main Research Topics

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Over the past two decades, the convergences of translation studies and international business studies have attracted a growing amount of attention from stakeholders in the respective research field. This is particularly because professionals and scholars in international business and management realize the importance of the role of language and translation in international trade and multilingual communication. The research results in this interdisciplinary field could provide basis for making critical decisions, such as the staff recruitment, company language policy and company development strategy. However, few reviews have been available that provide a comprehensive overview of relevant practice and research in this cross-disciplinary efforts. The present article therefore aims to offer a state-of-the-art review and investigate the existing literature to map the main research topics and discover future agenda. This article first provides an overview of the perception of “translation”, the role of translator, and translational activities in international business studies. Second, the review focuses on the translation and knowledge transfer in multinational corporations. Lastly, it identifies future directions towards the cross-fertility of the interdisciplinary collaboration.

Keywords: translation studies, international business research, interdisciplinary research, multinational corporations

Introduction

The internationalization, globalization and digital era shape the developmental trajectory of the interdisciplinary research between translation studies (hereafter TS) and international business studies (hereafter IB). Over the past decades, the global market has witnessed ever-increasing cross-border mobility of people, goods, services, technologies and information, which drives the demand for high-quality translation services. Translation not only promotes but paradoxically hinders the transnational commercial, intellectual, social and cultural flows. This has attracted the attention from business professionals and scholars and the interdisciplinary research between TS and IB has become an emerging and vibrant line of enquiry. However, little effort has been made to provide a comprehensive state-of-art review of this interdisciplinary research. This is precisely the focus of the present article. We aim to take stock of translation practice and research associated with IB over the course

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of two decades or so. More specifically, the common grounds between TS and multinational corporations (hereafter MNCs) are explored. This article aims to draw a map of the mainly-discussed research topics up to date.

Though the wide range of topics are addressed in this interdisciplinary field, the map of research would include: the perception of “translation” in IB, the role of “translator” in IB, the translational activities in IB, translation and knowledge transfer in MNCs. This review, tries to provide an updated understanding of this cross-disciplinary collaboration as a worthwhile research area.

2. The Translation/Translator/Translation(al) Activities in IB Research

2.1 The Perception of “Translation” in IB Research

It is unarguably that IB could not happen without translation. Almost every cross-border business activity involves translation. The relevant literature shows that translation in IB is perceived as “a mundane, peripheral and technical activity” (Piekkari et al, 2013, p. 772) and has not gone beyond a narrow technicist approach (Chidlow et al., 2014, p. 562). However, Holden and Michailova (2014) propose that a more expansive perspective on translation should be adopted. The authors scope the literature involving five IB journals and find that the majority of research dealing with translation largely adopt a microscopic view of translation, which distances language from its sociocultural context. The authors advocate that translation in IB should be understood as “cross-border interplay of entire terrains of corporate texts and experience linking multiple mental and social frames of reference” (Holden & Michailova, 2014, p. 906), and highlight the embeddedness of history and culture in translation process. Chidlow et al. (2014) find the equivalence paradigm of translation dominates in IB research and advocate the contextualized approach to conceptualize the translation process as the intercultural interaction.

Besides the largely narrow and some broad perceptions of translation in IB research, some literature moves beyond and views translation as the power-yielding tool. Logemann and Piekkari (2015) explore the power of translation in MNC. Their research is based on a case study of a European MNC undergoing strategic change and this qualitative study find that actors at both headquarters and in the subsidiary employed translation to exert power over meanings. Headquarters exercise control over “mindsets” and practices, while subsidiaries respond by resisting these meaning systems to (re)define his and his unit’s power position in the headquarters-subsidiary relationship. This study sheds light on translation as a political and hidden activity in the MNC.

2.2 Multifaceted Role of “Translators” in IB

Translators are the key agents in the transnational business activities. Studies show that bilingual and bicultural agents play crucial mediating role in the IB contexts. The quotation-marked translator means that in most cases the “translator” is not the professionally trained translator defined in most TS literature. The role and identity of translators in the IB are multifaceted and complex. Piekkari and Westney (2016)¹ employ Tuylenev’s definition of paraprofessional translators, which refers to individuals who are not trained but translate alongside their regular work tasks, and distinguish two types of paraprofessional translators, direct and indirect translator. Piekkari and Westney think expatriates as direct translators who have first-hand experience of the front line at the

¹ Cited from CETRA lecture,

<https://videolab.avnet.kuleuven.be/video/?id=8b0b7f20ab8f8dfed5605d28ca38df3e&height=390&width=640&autoplay=false>

headquarters and “experts” of management as indirect translators who do not have first-hand experience and translate indirectly via a mediating disciplinary language. The authors present the example of translators in Japanese transplants in US. The Japanese engineers and functional specialists assigned to US transplants act as direct translators who render the organizational practices for US staff and form a dense network with other Japanese to collectively translate practices in the transplant. Piekkari, Tietze and Koskinen (2016)² further define the translation work in multilingual organizations as a combination of interlingual and organizational translation undertaken by language-skilled paraprofessional individuals and communities to initiate, maintain, edit and resist “foreign” organizational practices. It involves interpretation processes of sense-making and sense-giving as well as interlingual translation between different languages. In practice, these two forms of translation work are intertwined and agency-driven. And translators’ agency is conditioned by four elements, (1) the characteristics of the organizational practice itself; (2) the context into which the practice is translated; (3) the characteristics of the translator; and (4) types of translation work.

2.3 Translation(al) Activities and Localization in IB

Holden and Michailova (2014) find there are four general subsets of translation activity in IB based on the investigation of five IB journals, namely the translation of documentation and materials used in firms and their networks, back-translation in the context of cross-cultural and comparative research, the translation of management materials (e.g., textbooks) and translation in the modern global knowledge economy. This shows the activity of translation is contextually and linguistically varied. Piekkari et al. (2013) explore the translation behavior in a service MNC. This case study finds that the organization or the individual (practicing manager or employee who are not trained as a professional translator) deal with emergent translation needs in various ways such as self-translation, technical translation tools, social networks or the translation department, which are influenced by contextual factors including growing language diversity, accuracy, response speed, cost considerations, confidentiality of the information and task criticality. The authors posit the translation activities are critical to service delivery, organizational functioning and ultimately firm performance and propose the concept of language absorptive capacity, which refers to the organization’s ability of understanding and absorbing communications in a different language.

Based on the relevant literature, the most discussed translational activity in IB is localization, though TS scholars’ opinion of the inclusion of localization in TS are varied. The emergence of personal computer and internet moves the world to a digital paradigm. Digital texts (i.e. product brochures, website, software and video games) are being produced, distributed, and accessed at anytime and anywhere, which enables all sorts of digital communication exchanges across physical country barriers. This dramatically changes how international businesses are conducted worldwide. Digital texts should be modified to reach the international audiences, thus the term “localization” emerged. Localization, as an industrial phenomenon, represents a “lucrative, dynamic and interprofessional field, often involving marketing, design, software engineering, as well as linguistic processes” (Pym & Windle, 2011, p. 410). In the author’s opinion, this phenomenon can be seen from the TS perspective as

² Cited from CETRA lecture,
<https://videolab.avnet.kuleuven.be/video/?id=8b0b7f20ab8f8dfed5605d28ca38df3e&height=390&width=640&autoplay=false>

a communicative, textual, cognitive and technological process by which the source texts are adapted to use in different sociocultural communities around the world.

Jiménez-Crespo and Singh (2016) discuss the interdisciplinary links between TS and IB and marketing with the focus of different approaches to localization of websites. The authors are eminent scholars in TS and IB respectively and they talk about the cross-fertility of these interdisciplinary efforts. The paper mainly consists of five questions and follow-up commentaries: (1) the need of IB to adopt the concept of translation or web localization and how this concept adapted to and understood in IB; (2) the way the “translation” is used in IB; (3) the theoretical, conceptual, methodological inputs the IB research benefit from TS; (4) the perception of translation in IB; and (5) the gains, if any, of IB by applying ways of thinking about translation.

3. Translation Studies in/and MNC Research

3.1 Language and Translation in MNCs

With the fast development of MNCs, growing attention has been paid to the MNC management, organization and strategy. From the late 1990s, the challenges of language in multilingual business context have been recognized and the issue of language in IB research represents an emerging research stream, spawning much scholarly discussion and debate over the past two decades (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch, 1999; Kassis Henderson, 2005; Hazing, Köster & Magner, 2011). Such developments are accompanied by an increasing number of monographs, edited books and journal publications. For instance, the 2014 special issue of the prominent IB journal, *Journal of International Business Studies*, dedicates to the research of importance of language in IB. Research on language in IB mainly focuses on the role and impact of language in international organizations. However, translation has received relatively less attention in the communicative network of international companies. Janssens, Lambert and Steyaert (2004) introduce TS in order to theorize the ways in which international companies deal with language diversity. The authors identify three metaphorical perspectives of translation, which are the theoretical basis of three language strategies: a mechanical, cultural and political strategy. Within each language strategy, the authors discuss the role of languages, the role of translators, the method of validation and the type of texts to be produced. Their study increases the understanding of ways in which language diversity can be organized.

Piekkari and Tietze (2011) argue that translation indeed form part of the daily activities of the MNCs and is concomitant with the existence of multiple languages. The authors call for the incorporation of insights from TS and the 2011 special issue of *Journal of World Business* edited by the authors carried forward the work started by Janssens et al. (2004) in the same journal.

3.2 Translator/tion and Knowledge Transfer in MNC

Business practices are moving beyond national borders in ever increasingly volumes. The global business network of a multinational corporation (MNC) poses great challenges to the effective and efficient knowledge transfer between source (e.g., headquarters) and recipient (e.g., subsidiaries) units. Knowledge transfer occurs when knowledge is disseminated and communicated across geographically dispersed units in the MNC global operation. The business models, practices, and ideas are travelling as they move across time and space and are introduced and adjusted in the target locale. Holden and Kortzfleisch (2004) believe that knowledge transfer resembles the acts of translation and TS theory throws light on knowledge transfer processes from four

perspectives: (1) translation as a networking activity; (2) process and end-product quality; (3) levels of accuracy; and (4) constraints on the production of good translations. Their research argues that concepts from translation provide useful analogies for understanding the nature of the transfer of knowledge. Knowledge in IB context can be generally divided into explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge can be expressed in written words, diagrams and mathematical formulas and is easier to transfer while tacit knowledge is hard to be codified and articulated and closely embedded in the MNC context. Demir and Fjellstrom (2012) focus on the process of knowledge translation and explain how the translation of relational practices by local Chinese managers occurs in a Swedish MNC subsidiary in China. The researchers conduct semi-structured interviews with 10 local Chinese managers and develop three relational practices, enrolment, long-term orientation and communication. This study shows that middle managers in the subsidiary adopt three different translation strategies—symmetrical, asymmetrical and substitutive—to render the relational practices actionable in the Chinese setting. These three strategies reflect different extent to which the top management intentions are understood, agreed upon and enacted. This study provides a preliminary conceptualization of various modes of translation work between expatriates and subsidiary management in MNCs.

Besides the analysis of the translation strategies of knowledge transfer process, TS also inform the research into the outcomes of knowledge transfer due to varied translation approaches. Kjell Arne Røvik (2016) argues that translation of knowledge is rule-based and how actors perform translations could be decisive for the outcomes of knowledge transfer processes. This study builds the instrumental translation theory and develops three translation modes, the reproducing mode (copying), the modifying mode (addition or omission) and the radical mode (alteration), and the translation rule(s) bracketed after each mode. The three translation modes could uncover and explain the outcomes of knowledge transfer, which means the extent to which the recipient unit adopts, routinizes and integrates the new knowledge.

Concluding Thoughts

Translation is currently a hot topic in international business and management studies as several business journals deal with the issue of translation, such as the special issue of *International Journal of Management Reviews* (Vol 18, 2016), the translation of management knowledge—challenges, contributions and new directions and the 2016 Call for papers of the *Journal of Management Studies* on connecting eastern and western perspectives on management: translating practices across organizations, institutions and geographies. It is evident that in business studies, the term “translation” carries multiple meanings and not only refer to the interlingual translation, which is evident in the above review. Insights from TS contribute to enhancing the understanding of the practice and research in IB. However, though the TS and IB interdisciplinary research covers several areas, Holden and Michailova (2014) argue IB studies do not genuinely draw on linguistics and translation studies when they look at language and translation issues. The interdisciplinary nourishment from the insights from both discipline is far from desirable. In the last, we identify future research agenda that need to be addressed, which calls for sustained attention from all relevant stakeholders.

Most literature on the multilingual MNC communication show that a certain language selected as the mandated corporate language is the most common case. A common language is expected to speed up internal process, enhance knowledge sharing and cut costs. However, imposing a common corporate language doesn't

remove the pressure to translate, or the above-mentioned “localization”. The assessment and evaluation of the effectiveness of translation in MNCs have not drawn enough attention from scholars, which need further research.

The applications of TS theories in international business and management studies have received less attention and the majority of the research takes the translation in the narrowly linguistically view and do not benefit from the new research results in TS. Most do not attend the TS theories after the “cultural turn”, so which theoretical strands (e.g. descriptive Translation Studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, sociology of translation) are relevant for studying translation in IB and the translation of knowledge transfer? Also, the research question concerning the conditions under which translators engage in the production, dissemination, and reception of knowledge in MNCs need to be explored in the future agenda.

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