

Interlingual translation and the transfer of value-infused practices: an in-depth qualitative exploration

Sylwia Ciuk and Philip James

It is common place in a range of literatures, including those relating to international business, cross-cultural management and organisation studies, for processes of knowledge creation, capture and transfer to be viewed as exerting a crucial influence over organizational performance (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005). It is similarly common to perceive the multinational form of organization as one which facilitates the accessing and utilisation of knowledge and expertise; a view well captured in the tendency to conceive of multinationals as international knowledge networks that create, integrate and apply knowledge in multiple locations (e.g. Lam, 2008: 292) and across cultures. These observations, however, exist alongside others that draw attention to the challenges that organizations confront in managing and more specifically transferring knowledge, ideas and practices effectively, particularly in the diverse cultural contexts within which multinational enterprises (MNEs) operate (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000).¹ In particular, attention has been drawn to the way in which subsidiary level interests and perceptions can lead to promulgated corporate policies and practices facing resistance, and, as a result, undergoing processes of significant local adaptation.

A substantial body of research has consequently developed exploring the nature and dynamics of MNE knowledge transfer and creation. Within this, attention has increasingly been drawn to the socially embedded nature of knowledge and the processes of decontextualisation and re-contextualisation involved as ideas travel across organizational contexts separated through ‘time, space, culture and language’

(Ambos and Ambos, 2009: 3). In addition, the notion of ‘translation’ has come to be viewed as particularly useful to the understanding of these processes (Callon, 1986; Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996; Latour, 2005)

These lines of enquiry have done much to enrich our understanding of knowledge transfer within MNEs. For example, they have highlighted the way in which ideas and practices can be subject to processes of both symbolic and technical amendment as they travel from one context to another (Lervik and Lunnman, 2004) and pointed to how the former can involve their being ‘linguistically masked’, in order to make them more palatable (Røvik, 2011: 642-643). A range of cultural and material factors that can exert an important influence over how ideas and practices are re-contextualised and potentially transformed as they enter new receiving environments have also been valuably identified (e.g. Morris and Lancaster, 2006; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008).

Such contributions exist, however, alongside a marked lack of studies exploring empirically the role of language and more particularly interlingual translation in the travel of ideas and practices across organisational contexts. This empirical gap is both surprising and problematic. As anthropologists, linguists and translators, among others, remind us, language is an integral element of culture and as such influences the way we see, make sense of and respond to the world that surrounds us (e.g. Bassnett, 1991; Eco, 2003; Tietze, 2008). At the same time, languages also reflect the different ways in which societies are organised, the technologies they use and their prevailing value systems (Tymoczko, 2013). Natural languages, as a result, must be viewed as a potentially important source of influence over the way in which knowledge travels internationally. Indeed, it has been argued

that, as a ‘reconfiguration agent’, language has the potential to affect the ‘total system within which knowledge transfer takes place’ (Welch and Welch, 2008: 354).

The present paper therefore sets out to explore empirically the relevance of interlingual translation to processes of knowledge transfer within MNEs, while also shedding light on its role in shaping these processes. It does so by providing a contextually grounded (Westney and Van Maanen, 2011) and language sensitive analysis (Piekkari and Tietze, 2011) of an attempt by a group of managers in a Polish subsidiary of a U.S company to translate centrally promulgated corporate values into the local language and context.

Building on insights from Translation Studies (Holz-Mänttari 1984; Snell-Hornby, 2006), and in particular the notion of translation as a situated practice (Risku, 2002), our analysis highlights the cultural and political aspects of a translation act and how it was utilised to proactively contextualise the corporate values that formed its focus. By prompting sensemaking around a value-laden text, the studied translation exercise is shown to have encouraged discussions around understandings of local needs and preferred meanings which served to trigger debates and reflections around local identity and affinities with the parent company. In doing so, it provided a ‘situated platform’ through which participants exercised a collective agency aimed at establishing what were perceived to constitute appropriate and productive accommodations between local and extra-local pressures.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Initially, existing literature is reviewed to locate our study theoretically and details of its methodology are provided. The study’s findings are then utilised to both contextualise and explore the undertaken

interlingual translation. Finally, the implications of the presented findings are discussed.

Theoretical context

Much of the early research on knowledge transfer within MNEs treated ‘knowledge’ as an ‘invariant substance’ (Hong et al, 2006) and ‘transfer’ as mostly involving its downward, unidirectional transmission from parent to subsidiary (Cantwell, 1989). More recently these perspectives have been widely displaced by conceptualisations of knowledge based on social embeddedness and construction (Gherardi, 2000), and acknowledgements of the significance of the bi- or even multi-directional way in which it is transferred across internal MNE boundaries (Frost, 2001). These conceptualisations have, in turn, been enriched by lines of analysis focussed on how ideas and practices diffuse and transform when they travel across time and space. The most important of these lines of analysis have emerged under the umbrella of Scandinavian Institutionalism, particular through the work of Czarniawska and Sevón (1996), and Actor-Network Theory (Callon 1986; Latour, 2005).

This process of theoretical enrichment has, in challenging the validity of diffusion theory (Ortenblad et al, 2011), supported a view of knowledge transfer as comprising a ‘social and interactive process, rooted in spatial and relational proximity’ (Lam, 2008: 298). A further important and related outcome has been that the process of translation has come to be viewed as an important tool for analysing how knowledge is socially disembedded from one organizational location and re-embedded in a potentially transformed manner in another (Helin and Sandström, 2008, 2010; Becker-Ritterspach et al, 2010).

The concept of translation, while the subject of somewhat varying conceptualisations, challenges simplistic notions of knowledge diffusion by according recognition to the ongoing processes of modification and transformation that ideas undergo (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002) when they are transferred and re-appropriated in new contexts. For example, Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) have argued that within these processes ideas are turned into object-like linguistic or physical artefacts (e.g. texts) that are then read by different people in different ways prior to their being enacted in revised forms. As a result, as they travel, ideas and practices are subjected to ongoing processes of interpretive readings, or as Sahlin-Andersson (1996) has suggested, re-editing, that enable them to be integrated into the new receiving context.

More specifically, translation has been successfully employed to study the consumption of popular management philosophies, concepts and ideas (e.g. Dobosz-Bourne and Kostera, 2007; Heusinkveld et al, 2011; Morris and Lancaster, 2006; Røvik, 2011). It has similarly been productively drawn upon in the international management literature to examine processes of knowledge and practice transfer (e.g. Fenton-O’Creevy et al, 2011; Glover and Wilkinson, 2007). Together these two strands of research have shown how during the course of their transfer ideas, popular philosophies and centrally promulgated policies and practices alike undergo a process of change, with the result that those adopted frequently take the form of ‘hybrids’ (Ferner and Varul, 2000; Sharpe, 2001) of those intended. In fact, the notion of hybridity has been central to studies written from the postcolonial perspective that have explored what happens to knowledge ‘when it travels between the West and the Rest’ (Jack and Westwood, 2009:17). Thus, for example, Yousfi (2013), in an examination of the implementation of the US management model in the Tunisian context, has demonstrated how hybridity is a product not only of local cultural

frameworks of meaning but also processes of identity construction and power dynamics.

Research indicates that ‘value-infused’ practices, the present focus of empirical interest, appear particularly vulnerable to such processes of ‘hybrid’ re-interpretation and adaptation (Blazejewski , 2008; Gersten and Zølner, 2012). This apparent vulnerability accords with a substantial body of evidence pointing to the challenges and difficulties that confront attempts to change the values, as opposed to behaviours (Beech, 2000; Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 2003). In fact, initiatives by top management to promote corporate values have been found to produce ambiguity, ambivalence and indifference among staff (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2008; Murphy and Mackenzie Davey, 2002). It would consequently seem that the role that individual, as well as collective, agency can play in challenging the transfer of desired corporate policies and practices should not be underestimated, particularly in situations of conflict between local organisational and wider cultural values (e.g. James and Jones, 2014; van Nimwegen et al, 2004).

In line with this, existing literature highlights the contingent nature of translation processes. It shows, for example, how ideas and practices can be the subject of conflicting translations undertaken across and within a multiplicity of different actors, including senior and middle managers, supervisory personnel and more junior members of staff, with these reflecting varying material and ideational considerations (Jensen et al, 2009: 536), hence the observation of Yanow (2004: 16) that ‘translation is a matter of agency and intent’. In particular, relations of power, and surrounding social and cultural contexts more generally, have been noted to influence both translation processes themselves and how far and in what ways their outcomes

become embedded, or internalised, in day-to-day local organizational life (Demir and Fjellström, 2012; Kostova and Roth, 2002).

While processes of organizational translation have then been the focus of considerable academic attention, the role that interlingual translation plays within them has, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Helin and Sandström, 2010; Steyaert and Janssens, 2013; Wong and Poon, 2010), been largely overlooked. This lack of attention has been noted to echo the way in which such translations are treated within MNEs as a technical and culturally insignificant activity (Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio, 2011; Blenkinsopp and Pajouh, 2010). It must nevertheless be viewed as problematic against the backdrop of three, overlapping strands of analysis.

First, work within the fields of sociolinguistics and Translation Studies (e.g. Bassnett, 1991; Eco, 2003) has shown how through language phrases and ‘texts’ are ascribed different meanings. As a consequence, people not only speak a variety of mother tongues but more importantly also ‘hear in a variety of different ways.....because they tend to use different interpretive mechanisms due to their diverse backgrounds’ (Henderson, 2005: 69). Hence the observation of Venuti (2008:13) that ‘Meaning is a plural and contingent relation’ which is shaped by different cultural contexts.

Secondly, as has also been demonstrated within the field of Translation Studies, interlingual translation involves much more than the mechanical task of finding close lexical equivalents (Tietze, 2008). Indeed, since the ‘cultural turn’ in Translation Studies in the 1980s (Snell-Hornby, 2006) and in particular the skopos theory (stimulated by different publications by Vermeer, e.g. 1984: 86 cited in Snell-Hornby, 2006), it has long been accepted that translation requires familiarity with the

cultural settings within which languages (and their users) are situated (Janssens et al, 2004) and the involvement of translators in exploring differences between multiple meaning systems and working within ‘the space between two or more speakers, languages, texts and cultures’ (Steyaert and Janssens, 1997: 148).

Thirdly, building on the points above, Holz-Mänttari (1984) has more radically argued that translation constitutes a form of intercultural communication and so should be studied as an act and practice which entails negotiations among different parties. Translation has hence been argued to be a ‘situated practice’ (Risku, 2002) and ‘a unique, one-off process rooted in specific situations and cultures’ (Risku, 2002: 524) in which translators act as mediators (Pym, 2006). These strands of overlapping analysis point to the fact that processes of interlingual translation involve translators in making decisions between alternative linguistic frameworks of understanding and meaning. They further highlight that these processes of decision making are themselves embedded in wider social and cultural systems, including ideological ones (Tymoczko, 2013); a point which has been one of the key tenants of the postcolonial perspective on translation. In so doing, they also suggest that translators’ actions and choices cannot be viewed as politically neutral (Temple and Young, 2004: 164) as translations entail ‘negotiation among participants with shifting agendas and unequal levels of control over the interaction’ (Baker, 2006: 335); with the result that they can involve some discourses (and voices) being privileged at the expense of others (Janssens et al, 2004).

It is in the context of these last conceptual observations, and in particular the argument that interlingual translation constitutes a ‘situated practice’, that our findings are reported and subsequently analysed below. Before, however,

commencing on these tasks, attention is paid to detailing the methodology of the study.

Methodology

As stated earlier, the paper offers an in-depth analysis of a translation exercise undertaken in a Polish subsidiary of a US multinational. While the findings reported are centred on a fine-grained analysis of a crucial micro-event (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001), a six hour interlingual translation session, we also draw on contextual insights arising from a wider ethnography-inspired study. The wider study explored how local subsidiary actors engaged with and carried out culture work initiated by their corporation. The data collection of the wider study was spread over a year and corresponded with the timeline of the studied project to promote long standing corporate values in the local context. The bulk of the data was collected through 70 semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected participants from across the organization. The interview guide included questions about staff's perceptions of, and reactions to, the values project and the corporate values themselves, as well as contextual questions about their perceptions of the subsidiary's current situation and its recent (turbulent) past.

Additionally we used documents and observation as important sources of insights. The studied company documents included PowerPoint presentations on the corporate values that were used in various meetings, both by consultants and local managers, and articles from internal newsletters and the company website discussing them. Observations included two meetings key to the values project: the translation meeting, which is the focal point of this paper, and an Annual Sales Meeting during which the newly translated values were presented to staff.

The six hour long translation session was attended by the first author, a Pole and a linguist by background, in the role of a participant observer (Gill and Johnson, 1997). It was during this meeting that the corporate values were translated into Polish and defined with a view to adjusting them to the local context. The observation was unstructured and open-ended, this approach being adopted because of its value when trying to ‘understand and interpret cultural behaviour’ (Mulhall, 2003:306). The meeting in question was recorded in full, with the exception of a 30 minute ice-breaking exercise and three short breaks. Field notes were taken throughout the duration of the session. The meeting was subsequently transcribed verbatim in the original language.

Analysis

Analysis commenced, as recommended by Huberman and Miles (1994), with data collection and note taking. Initial observations were included in the field notes, which were carefully studied alongside the transcripts. Fairly early in the research process the theme of translation started to emerge as one worthy of investigation given its apparent significance for the organization, as our triangulated data revealed (Jick, 1979).

After translation emerged as a key theme, a series of detailed readings of the translation transcript and accompanying field notes commenced, which was accomplished by the first author of the paper in discussions with the second one. We deliberately delayed translating our data into English in order for the first author to remain closer to the data in their original context. In the light of the earlier discussed cultural and political perspectives on translation, we also viewed this process of interlingual translation as constituting a form of data transformation (Temple and

Young, 2004). Consequently recognition was accorded to the need to ‘bring [our] translation out of the shadows’ (Wong and Poon, 2010: 151) and to thereby avoid what Venuti (2008) has referred to as the translator’s invisibility. For this reason in what follows we have used Polish names as pseudonyms for our participants to remind the reader that the data were collected in a different language from the representation one. In addition, footnotes have been used to alert the reader to instances where linguistic nuances gave rise to particular issues of interpretation.

More generally, in line with the conceptualisation of translation as a situated practice (Risku, 2002), we analysed the observed translation event as a set of activities rather than a text. To this end, we initially open coded the meeting transcript relying largely, but not exclusively, on the first-order categories (Gioia et al, 2013) used by the research participants. Initially we focused on discussing the particular challenges encountered when translating each of the values, and coded for problems with finding suitable lexical equivalents, concerns about the incompatibility of the corporate text to the local context and expressions of the preferred local understandings. However, when the initial codes were compared, it was noticed that there were clear patterns cutting across our data and so we started to look more carefully for these wider patterns grouping the initial codes into wider, theory informed categories. As a result, a set of activities, such as interpreting the source text and negotiating preferred local meanings, were identified, each of which included a subset of different manifestations. For example, interpreting the source text entailed reading out the source text, discussing its different elements and their perceived importance and pointing out what was missing from the text and what should be included in it.

It was at this stage that our attention was drawn to the relevance of the concepts of identity and alterity to the data, something which had not been anticipated at the commencement of the study. When this observation was considered against the backdrop of our wider study, and in particular discussions with those participating in the translation event, we concluded that these concepts did not fit our original focus on the challenges associated with interlingual translation but instead highlighted the opportunities that the translation exercise had provided as a situated platform for dialogue and reflexivity, a conclusion which became a central part of our argument.

The Case Study Context

The research was conducted in a Polish subsidiary of a well-established pharmaceutical MNE with its headquarters in the USA. Pharmacia (a pseudonym) employs approximately 230 staff in Poland, the majority of whom are sales staff. Since its appearance on the Polish market, Pharmacia has had a number of General Managers, all of whom, with the exception of the last one, were foreigners appointed by the parent company. During the incumbency of the last of the expatriate leaders, dramatic changes took place in the subsidiary resulting in unprecedented staff turnover, undermined staff morale, a dramatic drop in sales and a troubled image for the company. When the expatriate was moved to a different site, a Polish General Manager took over. At that time, the situation of the subsidiary was seen as fragile and the pressures from the headquarters to improve its financial performance were mounting.

In an attempt to rescue the subsidiary from ‘the downward spiral’, as one of the participants vividly observed, the new management team undertook a number of steps to improve the performance of the organization. These included, among other

things, actions to tame an overgrown bureaucracy and thus encourage initiative-taking, a shift in the company's marketing strategy and the filling off all existing staff vacancies.

The influx of a large number of new staff, however, posed considerable challenges. In interviews and informal conversations with staff, references were often made to perceived divisions between the old and the new staff:

We have a number of groups here: we have people from 'the old Pharmacia' who have been working here for 4-5 years, there are some people who have been here for two, three and four years, so this is old-new Pharmacia, and there are people who have come here recently and there are several subgroups among them. ... So my aim, and the aim of everybody who reports to me, should be to get rid of these differences.... (Tomasz, GM)

In light of this, the corporate initiative to promote its four official values among subsidiaries was seen as a potentially useful means of creating such integration. In addition, it was seen to link well with other local priorities, most notably the instilling of a more customer-oriented approach in staff and, as the official presentation of values to local staff made clear, achieving a resulting improvement in the 'business effectiveness of the subsidiary'.

It was consequently decided to launch a one year project in which the long standing North American values would be first translated into Polish and then gradually embedded into the everyday operations of the subsidiary through a number of mechanisms, most notably the inclusion of the values in staff appraisals as a key competency, the establishment of a system of awards under which the praiseworthy

realisation of the values would be rewarded, and more widely a programme of staff ‘education’. The studied interlingual translation therefore formed an integral part, or a ‘stepping stone’, in the words of the General Manager, of a rather larger cultural project.

This project was facilitated by two local consultants. These consultants attended the relevant translation meeting, along with 13 managers and the first author of the paper. The managers who took part were either direct reports of the General Manager or middle-level managers who had been appointed to act as ‘value leaders’.

The Translation Act

The observation of the translation meeting revealed how the interlingual translation constituted a significant cultural and political process which opened up spaces for reflexivity and dialogue among those involved. As a result, in common with the linguistic and translation-based literatures reviewed earlier, our analysis highlighted both the decision-making nature of the translator’s role and the way in which this was embedded, or ‘situated’, in the surrounding organisational context.

In what follows, we start to illustrate these points by initially drawing on the data to show how engagement in the translation prompted discussions around the meaning of the corporate values and stimulated dialogue around the preferred local meanings. We then move on to highlight how these discussions in turn triggered further reflections around the subsidiary’s identity as an integral, but distinct, part of its parent company, as well as the responsibilities and obligations associated with it. Following this, the data are used to detail how these features of the translation were perceived by those who undertook it.

Interpreting the source text

A central feature of the translation was the way in which close readings of the corporate texts sparked discussions over its content and in particular the elements that it was seen to emphasize, as well as the things that it failed to mention. These talks led to a recognition on the part of the local managers acting as translators that there were marked discrepancies between the official definitions of the corporate values and their preferred meanings of these values. For example, participants expressed their surprise that the corporate definition of care had a very general focus and referred to ‘improving people’s lives’, whereas they thought it preferable to conceptualise the value in relation to their customers:

Agnieszka (consultant): Who does this care refer to?

Tomasz (GM): It’s care about the client, the company, the business.

...

Adam (middle-manager): It is strange that in the American version, [caring is understood as] changing people’s lives. *We see this totally differently.*
[emphasis added]

Similarly, when discussing the corporate value of ‘achieving’, it became clear that the corporate definition focused more on intentions to achieve results, while for the gathered local managers the value should focus primarily on the successful delivery of goals, and so the wider local objectives of achieving enhanced effectiveness and efficiency:

Anna (top manager): ... [In the corporate definition it says that] we are committed, that we focus on achieving results, there is no present perfect¹ here; it is in the label itself but not in the definition.

Tomasz (GM): This is efficiency.

Irena (top manager): [In the corporate definition the focus is on] the importance of the goals, ambition, co-operation, serving², keeping promises, reliability, trustworthiness. This is a big array of things. This can't be five words for everybody.

Tomasz (GM): It seems to me that it should be the achieving of goals, so reliability in the context of effectiveness.

These discussions over the preferred local meanings enabled the local managers to realise that in order to make the official values more meaningful in the local context, they had to move beyond corporate meanings and add new elements to them:

From the corporate point of view [emphasis added], we are delivering innovative solutions which make our lives longer and better. *From our point of view* [emphasis added], it might be choosing a doctor who has the best knowledge. (...) We are taking care of the client within our scope of duties.

(Tomasz, GM)

The added local elements corresponded closely with the issues identified by the local managers in interviews as being problematic in the subsidiary. These issues included

¹ The participant in fact referred to a past tense 'czas dokonany'. It's meaning, however, appears to us to be closer to the English form of present perfect, as reflected in our translation.

² The Polish word used 'sluzba' also implies that the service performed might entail some personal sacrifices.

a lack of customer focus, an unwillingness to take risks, and the inconsistent maintenance of high standards of work. The dialogue below, for example, focuses on the perceived need to promote risk-taking in a still largely risk-averse bureaucratic organization:

Jacek (top manager): I have been with this company for only three months and when I analysed these values which the corporation imposes on us here in Poland, I see the biggest discrepancy here, in the first value [‘pioneering’]. This is a company that avoids risk.

Anna (top manager): Exactly, here ...it’s safety above all.

The translation exercise was then centrally concerned with influencing the behaviour of staff and hence with crafting the values in a way which would facilitate a positive reception by them, as is further illustrated by the following observation:

I like the word ‘innovativeness’. We can never separate ourselves from what we have in the organization. ... We always have some past. I get the feeling that if we say: ‘novelty’³, people will say: Here: 1, 2, 3 and 5 examples [that this is not the case]. We have people with different length of service. I want to rule out a situation that they won’t buy into it, because they do not see this ‘novelty’ in our activities. For me, ‘innovativeness’ is a safer word as a label.

(Anna, top manager)

³ The original word used ‘nowatorstwo’ implies in Polish the introduction of something new. It can also be translated into English as ‘innovation’.

Importantly, discussions of the corporate definitions and the preferred local interpretation also raised some fundamental questions about the subsidiary's identity and responsibilities.

Between identity and alterity

The corporate values referred to the corporation as a whole and contained some bold claims about the company's activities. From the perspective of the Polish managers, this was seen as problematic as these claims were perceived not only as being largely detached from the activities of some support staff, but most importantly misrepresented what the local managers felt the subsidiary stood for. However, in choosing how to translate the central text it was clear that a number of the local managers did not feel they had the option to disregard to any great extent the corporate perspective. These conflicting tensions of wanting to remain true to the corporate perspective while developing a values statement which would resonate with the local personnel underpinned most of the discussions that took place.

Arguably, the most problematic value in this respect was 'pioneering'. The following quote serves to give a flavour of this:

Kamil (consultant): Pioneering⁴ would mean being first in something. A pioneer – an American settler.

Other voices: We are an American firm. [laughter]

Kamil (consultant): This means somebody who was first here, right? He dared to be first, but not necessarily better.

⁴ The Polish word used 'pionierstwo' is phonetically the closest to the English word 'pioneering'.

Tomasz (GM): *From the corporation point of view, this is ok [emphasis added], because when you discover a new method of treatment which does not exist yet, and our corporation has such products, then we are this pioneer, right? In our case, though, we cannot really say this [emphasis added]*

More widely, the often reiterated concern was that the translated values would not be able to guide the action of local staff, as was hoped:

This is still a corporate perspective. We want this value to be a living value and like this it is going to be a dead value, because none of us is currently working on a new molecule. (Jeff, top manager)

Nevertheless, in some instances, bold corporate statements were interpreted as potentially beneficial for the subsidiary and therefore worth highlighting. The above quoted example of pioneering is a case in point. While the fact that the corporation was an innovative company working on ‘pioneering ways of treatment and products’ was perhaps less visible in the Polish reality, the ability to subscribe to corporate success seemed quite appealing for local managers, some of whom themselves appeared unaware of the fact that the corporation as a whole had a much stronger market position than the Polish subsidiary:

Krystian (financial specialist): Is it true that we are a leader in drugs?

Radek (top manager): Yes.

...

Jola (financial specialist): This is a really good question because we are not really aware of this.

As a consequence, the managers decided to include in the translated text a reference to the company being a market leader. This, in their view, was to help to improve the morale and impact the behaviour of the sales force by drawing links between the local identity and the wider corporation:

Anna (top manager): A sales rep who is constantly thinking about his competitors might feel bad when compared to them⁵ because they do not know the whole picture.

On a number of occasions, the discussions of the preferred local meanings also prompted more fundamental reflections, as well as heated debates, about the company's responsibilities. For example, as we show in the excerpt below in relation to the 'care' value, participants expressed a strong preference to add to the Polish translation references to patients and doctors. This, however, entailed reaching an agreement over the relative importance of these two groups and by implication, the primary responsibility of the subsidiary's staff:

Agnieszka (consultant): ... I allowed myself to put this [summary of earlier discussions] as follows: Delivering top quality knowledge and solutions to our clients which will give patients unique solutions

Tomasz (GM): Personally, I would start with the patient and then move on to the more indirect ones.

Kamil (consultant): It turned out that we did not think about the patient who came last.

⁵ The original phrased used 'na jego tle może się źle czuje' could also arguably be interpreted as suggesting a possible feeling of inferiority.

[a lengthy discussion during which one of the consultants summarises debates by saying that the agreement was that the clients/ doctors were a means to delivering solutions to patients]

Olek (top manager): So we say that doctors are a means for us?

[multiple voices] No.

Agnieszka (consultant): You don't want this [in your local definition]?

Adam (middle-manager): [Doctors] are our partners.

Radek (top manager): Of course the patient is important, but the client is more important.

Kamil (consultant): Attention: this is a big change, because we said that the patient was more important.

Anna (top manager): But we can't diminish the role of our clients!

Radek (top manager): We're not.

...

Tomasz (GM): The patient is our primary objective and additionally doctors are our partners....

In short, the translation was a complex performance of local actors trying to interpret and stay reasonably true to the imposed source text and at the same time attempting to imbue the translated text with locally sponsored meanings which would enable them to effect changes in behaviour among other recipients of the translated text.

Perceptions of the translation exercise

At the outset of the project, the majority of our participants, including some of the managers appointed to act as value champions, expressed their reservations about what they saw as a largely corporate project:

I think that all these values are an integral part of big corporations. I reckon that it's good to have some frame of reference at work and to look at things differently. (...) I think that this is a bit exaggerated, let's not fool ourselves, this is a characteristic for big corporations. At work all these values look differently every day. (Sebastian, Sales Representative)

I think that this [initiative] will be suppressed by the amount of projects and work that needs to be done, that it will disappear in the flood of other corporate ideas. (Marcin, top manager)

The process of translation, however, helped the involved managers overcome this initial scepticism towards the corporate values initiative. It also provided a space where the participants could express and clarify their confusion about the purpose of the corporate initiative, as became apparent at the beginning of the translation:

Kamil (consultant): If these values did not exist, would you not be able to achieve good business results?

Marcin (top manager): Of course, not.

Kamil (consultant): So, which change makes the change? What will make the introduction of these values increase efficiency?

Radek (top manager): Yes, this is what we are talking about. We don't really know.

The discussions also enabled the participants engaged in translation to move towards agreement regarding their wider business priorities, namely, as has been seen, the

securing of improvements in the effectiveness and efficiency of the subsidiary's operations, as demanded by the parent company, and the reconciliation of these materials considerations with the promulgated corporate values:

Kamil (consultant): Since your organization is trying to embed these values, since we know that we want it to lead to more effectiveness,

why are values to improve it and not systems or procedures?

Jacek (top manager): Because attitudes result from values. [reiterating a point made earlier by the GM who introduced the project at the outset of the meeting]

(...)

Kamil (consultant): (...) It accelerates the decision-making process.

Radek (top manager): It accelerates the decision-making process but I don't know why. Why is it to accelerate the effectiveness of work?

Oskar (top manager): It is about an innovative approach.

Radek (top manager): So when we say that pioneering is a value for us, are we to launch drugs that do not generate profit for the company because they are innovative? I guess that this depends on the market analysis.

Jacek (top manager): This is down to an approach. (...)

Jarek (marketing specialist): But you launch the product only when it guarantees some profit.

Radek (top manager): Yes, sure.

In fact, a number of managers admitted when interviewed that being actively involved in the translation process had lessened their own reservations about promoting the corporate values and gave them the feeling that they were ‘creating a really good document’ and being part of a project that had more local relevance than they had originally assumed:

Initially, I was very sceptical about [the project]. ... However, this has changed a bit. I like the process. It is very consultative; people are able to take part in defining these values... We are talking about this. It is not that somebody translated these values for us in a more or less skilful manner and then we are imposing them on people. (Marcin, top manager)

At the beginning [I had a] distrustful [attitude], honestly speaking.... But I have to admit that because of (...) conversations and analysis of corporate documents I developed some kind of enthusiasm. (Jeff, top manager)

In a similar vein, some other organisation members who were not directly involved in the interlingual translation voiced a degree of appreciation of the fact that the values that they were encouraged to identify with and embrace in their everyday practices were finally being voiced in their mother tongue:

Nobody has ever bothered to translate these values. I believe an advantage of this project is that, from the outset, the people here from our subsidiary who are dealing with this have taken the trouble to translate these values into our Polish reality. I really see this as a big advantage. (Olek, internal consultant)

Discussion and conclusion

To date the international business, cross-cultural management and organisation studies literatures have, with a few exceptions (e.g. Helin and Sandström, 2010; Janssens et al, 2004), largely overlooked or downplayed the role of interlingual translation in influencing the way in which ideas and practices travel within MNEs; thereby also ignoring the way in which language sets ‘the ground and trajectory for knowledge activity to occur (Tietze, 2008: 221). Drawing on insights from Translation Studies, and particularly the notion of translation as a situated practice (Risku, 2002), the present paper has consequently explored an interlingual translation of a set of corporate values undertaken by a group of managers based in a Polish subsidiary.

Shifting the focus away from translation as primarily a matter of language to translation as a unique process inextricably tied to a given context (Holz-Mänttari, 1984; Tymoczko, 2013), our study demonstrates that interlingual translation can turn into an important cultural and political event. Thus, our analysis shows how the translation act opened up spaces for reflexivity and dialogue among those involved and in this way triggered discussions among subsidiary level managers as to their subsidiary’s identity and how it should be understood in relation to the parent company. It further reveals how such processes of translation can potentially lead to significant changes in the meaning of transferring practices as managers seek to strike a balance between central compliance and adaptation to local needs and interests.

In highlighting the decision-making agency of the translators, the findings consequently caution against viewing their behaviour as straightforwardly reflecting national or organisational cultures, and point to the need for culture and cultural

contexts, as well as such related notions as locality and extra-locality, to be conceived of as relational and processual phenomena (Jack and Westwood, 2010: 309) that can be differently enacted in different contexts (Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Ybema and Byun, 2009). They are therefore also seen to support the argument of Gersten and Zølner (2012:126) that we need to ‘go beyond a focus on culture in a national context and integrate social actors’ creative interpretations in a particular context’ in order to better understand the travel of value-infused practices.

At the same time, the study’s findings further showed the way in which such interpretations, and related actions, were to some degree shaped by surrounding structural and institutional factors. Thus, on the one hand, the opportunities for local adaptations that the observed interlingual translation opened up largely flowed from the fact that the translation exercise was undertaken in an environment within which the participants were given some freedom to negotiate their preferred meanings and make choices in light of their understandings of the local needs and context. Meanwhile, on the other, these choices were constrained ones since an important concern of those involved was to formulate meanings that would not only be appropriately compatible with corporate levels but also congruent with the operational goals and their interests.

The findings obtained therefore accord with analyses within the field of Translation Studies that have drawn attention to the need for translation processes to be viewed as political exercises in which the views of powerful interested actors exert a significant influence (see e.g. Venuti, 2008: 34). They can also be linked to the distinction drawn by Sahlin and Wedlin (2008) between programmatic elements of practice and more technical or operational ones that are often predicated on the

former. For, in highlighting the ‘framing influence’ wielded by wider corporate and business objectives, they suggest that managerially undertaken interlingual translations may not stray significantly beyond the confines of the programmatic ideas, aims and objectives espoused by more senior corporate actors (see also Lamb and Currie, 2011).

Overall, then, the present study has served to demonstrate the relevance of the processes of interlingual translation to the analysis of the transfer of knowledge and practices within MNEs. In doing so, it has drawn attention to the crucial role that local translators, in our case selected top and middle managers, can play not only as the recipients and interpreters of a corporate authoritative text, but as co-creators engaged in its ‘re-writing’ and ‘re-production’ (Freeman, 2009, emphasis added). It has also highlighted the need to situate and understand the individual and collective agency that such translators can exercise in the organisational and wider contexts within which they are located.

More widely, the study’s findings therefore draw attention to the value of integrating processes of interlingual translation into broader analyses of how ideas and practices travel and undergo revision within multinationals. Furthermore, by demonstrating the influence in this regard of ‘situated’ local managerial agency, they add weight to recent analyses stressing the importance of adopting ‘actor-centred’ and political approaches when seeking to understand and explain the nature and dynamics of parent-subsidiary relationships (Clark and Geppert, 2011).

Nevertheless, further research into such processes of translation is undoubtedly merited, not least in order to validate and extend the findings reported and hence overcome the limitations of data gathered from a single, relatively narrowly

focussed, case study. More specifically, future studies could usefully explore in much more detail the objectives of those undertaking translations and the personal and organisational considerations shaping them as they act as locally based ‘bridging agents’ or ‘gatekeepers of meaning’ (e.g. Fenton-O’Creevy et al, 2011; Welch and Welch, 2008). They could also examine the achievement in practice of such objectives and the factors shaping them, including the attitudes and values of the recipients of the undertaken translations, and, perhaps via a multiple case study approach, or a multi-sited ethnography, investigate how processes of translation vary across different organisational contexts, including between subsidiaries belonging to the same MNE. Finally, and more widely, the present study could be extended by focussing more directly on the role of interlingual translations within wider processes of translation, as conceptualised in Scandinavian Institutionalism.

Notes

¹This diversity is often seen to stem from the differing national cultures within which subsidiaries are embedded. However, as Caprar (2011) has valuably highlighted, care must be taken not to overstate the role of such cultures since host-country employees may vary in the extent to which they reflect them, as opposed to those of the employing multinational. This argument takes on particular weight given how some MNEs seek to create their own transnational cultures (see e.g Ailon and Kunda, 2009), and the way in which work cultures may, through a process of ‘negotiation’, come to embody elements of both parent and subsidiary level ones (see Brannen and Salk, 2000).

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Notes