# Working Across Language Boundaries:

# New Perspectives on Language-Sensitive International Management Research

### Introduction to the thematic issue in the *European Journal of International Management*

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## AIM OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

"The limits of my language are the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein, 1922). Whereas philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein already acknowledged the importance of language for human expression and understanding in the early 20th century, international management research only started to recognise its crucial role in globalised business communication in the 1990s. Over the last three decades, however, the study of language has developed from "the most neglected field" within international management research (Reeves and Wright, 1996, back cover) to an issue "at the heart" of it (Brannen et al., 2014, p. 495). While the years from 1987-1999 have only seen 14 articles published on language in business settings, there were 73 publications from 2000-2009, and more than 177 from 2010 to present (Tenzer et al., 2017). As the phenomenon has moved "from the periphery to the core" of the subject area (Mughan, 2015, p. 79) language is now considered a social phenomenon, which affects every aspect of international management (Piekkari et al., 2014).

The exponential growth in publication activity is accompanied by increasingly diverse and nuanced conceptualisations of language. This special issue showcases current trends in language-sensitive international management research to stimulate further development of this vibrant field. It particularly focuses on three major shifts in research focus: from discrete national languages to dynamic and hybrid language use, from top-down language policy in multinational corporations to employees acting as linguistic agents, and from a simply technical to a more sophisticated conceptualisation of translation.

Firstly, international management research has traditionally focused on national languages, which were conceptualised as stable and discrete entities and as tools for international management practice or research. This instrumental notion raised awareness of language as a practical challenge in international management, but has now come under scrutiny. Following the "linguistic turn" in the humanities and social sciences, the traditional conceptualisation is gradually replaced by more complex and nuanced conceptualisations of language inspired by academic disciplines such as (socio)linguistics, social psychology, anthropology, and organisation studies. Whereas earlier international management research primarily focused on barriers between stable and discrete national languages, current studies increasingly acknowledge that languages often intermingle in employees' speech (Cohen and Kassis-Henderson, 2015; Janssens and Steyaert, 2014). Concepts such as "codemeshing" (Canagarajah, 2011) and "translanguaging" (Langinier and Ehrhart, 2015;

Langinier et al., 2016) are developed to capture the hybrid codes (Beeler and Lecomte, 2015), which speakers create by drawing on their knowledge of different languages. Recent studies show how national languages are further complemented by professional and department-specific jargon (Aichhorn and Puck, 2017; Logemann and Piekkari, 2015) or sociolects (Tietze et al., 2016). Studying the creative and situation-specific ways in which individuals appropriate languages, international management scholars increasingly acknowledge language as a complex, contradictory, and dynamic concept.

Secondly, early language research in international management primarily studied the impact of officially mandated corporate languages, defined as “administrative managerial tool[s]” (Latukha et al., 2016), which facilitate or hinder internal and external communication (Piekkari et al., 2005). Studies in this tradition implicitly viewed language as amenable to top-down strategic management. Recently, however, the field has become aware that actual language practices carried out by employees do not always correspond to the prescribed policies, but are much more flexible and creative. Subsidiary employees recontextualise the language policies mandated by headquarters in different ways (Brannen and Mughan, 2016; Fredriksson et al., 2006; Peltokorpi and Vaara, 2012) and adapt them to local needs (Zhang et al., 2017). Thus, employees no longer appear only as passive recipients of corporate language mandates, but also as agents shaping everyday practices at their workplaces.

Thirdly, language-related management research has developed an increasingly sophisticated conceptualisation of translation. Whether we consider translation in its traditional sense as “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language” (Jakobson, 1959, p. 233), “the process of moving communication in any form (verbal or written) from one language to another” (Piekkari et al., 2013, p. 772), or extend the notion to incorporate the conversion of knowledge from one group to another (Holden, 2002), the translation process is at the heart of collective understanding (Piekkari et al., 2013). Cautioning against the conventional view of translators as simple transmitters of texts and instruments of communication (Holden and Michailova, 2014), management scholars have started describing translation as a creative activity, in which the message of the source is reinterpreted into a new reality (Tietze, 2017a). Translation is now conceptualised as a process of interaction across cultures (Chidlow et al., 2014), where meaning may lie in the space between cultures recognising the “transformative power” of translation (Brannen et al., 2014, p. 501) and its important role in cross-border knowledge transfer.

Management scholars are increasingly drawing on semiotics (Lorino, 2011) or expansive learning (Engeström, 2001) to gain a deeper understanding of translation processes.

Considering these fluid, hybrid, and agency-driven views of language in multinational corporations, Wittgenstein’s (1922) tenet “The limits of my language are the limits of my world” may become increasingly obsolete. In the era of interconnected and globalised business, individuals are expanding the boundaries of their world by actively and creatively using all kinds of languages. This special issue sheds light on how language-sensitive international management research has begun to charter these trends. It contains both conceptual critiques aiming to stimulate further theoretical development and empirical studies uncovering emerging issues at global workplaces.

## OVERVIEW OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The contributions to this Special Issue have all been presented at the 10th International GEM&L (Groupe d’Études Management et Langage) Conference in Paris in March 2016. Collectively, these articles provide new conceptual and empirical perspectives on globalised work across language boundaries.

The article by Angouri and Piekkari shows how sociolinguistic notions can enrich the theoretical and methodological repertoire of language-related international management research. The authors criticise management scholars’ tendency to simplify reality by juxtaposing large and “multilingual” multinationals with local and “monolingual” domestic firms, arguing that these static, structural, and binary categories cannot capture the fluidity, change, and complexity of modern workplaces. To guide the field towards a more holistic and context-sensitive concept of language in organisations, they advocate the constructionist notion that language shapes organisational reality rather than simply mirroring it. They also encourage academics to investigate fluid and hybrid language practices rather than rigidly distinguished national languages. Providing a compelling stimulus and an inspiring agenda for future research, Angouri and Piekkari call for multidisciplinary research synthesising international management, applied linguistics, and sociolinguistics, connecting different levels of analysis and capturing language dynamics in a variety of modern business settings.

Tietze’s contribution also challenges core assumptions in international management to guide the discipline towards a more language-sensitive research practice. The author reveals a striking discrepancy between the multilingual nature of international management research, which involves multiple tongues during research design, data collection, and data analysis, and the monolingual practice of publishing results exclusively in English. She unveils a widespread, yet erroneous assumption that translation is merely a mechanical process ensuring complete equivalence of meaning and challenges this view based on recent insights into linguistic relativity. Positioning translation as an interpretive process, which is embedded in cultural and historical-political contexts and influences knowledge production in international management, Tietze argues that this process should become visible in research reports to avoid an undue dominance of English as the language of publication. Building on the achievements of translation studies, she calls for more translation-sensitive research methods and encourages the editors and reviewers of leading journals to scrutinise English-language publication standards and practices.

The article by Komori-Glatz answers to Angouri and Piekkari's call for interdisciplinary perspectives by reviewing and synthesising "English as a lingua franca" research in international management and linguistics. In line with Tietze's insights into the hegemonic role of the English language, the author outlines current debates in both disciplines about English as the dominant medium of (business) communication. She presents a linguistic spectrum ranging from a common corporate language implemented through top-down language strategy and oriented around the norms of Standard English on one end to a hybrid and dynamically adapted variety of English as a business lingua franca on the other end. Depending on the setting and requirements of the particular situation, the reality of language use in international management communication can be located somewhere along this continuum.

The piece by Daly and Davy offers an empirical perspective on the taken-for-granted nature of academic "Englishization" as described by Tietze. Based on semi-structured interviews with non-native English speaking faculty at French business schools, the authors report on a range of lexical, semantic, pragmatic, and rhetorical challenges management scholars face when using English as a medium of instruction. However, they also show positive effects of English usage in terms of enhanced cross-cultural competence and pedagogical gains due to more carefully prepared course material. Outlining the strategies their informants employed to cope with linguistic challenges, Daly and Davy highlight the faculty's agency, self-efficacy, and resilience. Their study carries valuable implications for individual scholars teaching in a foreign language and for business schools aiming to promote English as a medium of instruction.

The contribution by Gaibrois embraces a social constructionist perspective on hybrid language practices derived from heterogeneous language sources. Her interview study showcases multilingual conversations in which all participants speak their own languages, mix tongues, use broken language and jargon, or create new languages. The author demonstrates the empowering effects of this hybrid language use, which puts speakers at ease and enables more efficient and inclusive communication, but also mentions its limiting effects in particular contexts. Her study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of multilingual repertoires and positions hybrid language use as an integral part of organisational human capital and language operative capacity.

Sanden and Lønsmann's article uses interview and document data to shed light on the language boundaries employees are facing in Scandinavian multinationals, which operate with English as a corporate language. The authors show how individuals adjust their communication styles and modes according to specific situations, draw from online resources, seek help from translation departments and proficient colleagues, or avoid communication in a foreign language altogether. Whereas some of these behaviours align with top-down language mandates, others reveal a discrepancy between language policies crafted in the executive suite and practices used at the front line. Focusing on the role of individual agency in the implementation of language mandates, Sanden and Lønsmann emphasise the complexity and dynamic nature of real language use, highlight speakers' discretionary power, and offer valuable recommendations for language management tools.

Chiocchetti complements Sanden and Lønsmann's study of language practices in large multinationals with insights into the language strategies and struggles of small and medium-sized enterprises located in multilingual regions. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data collected in South Tyrol, she illustrates language-based power distortions and elucidates the challenges SMEs encounter when trying to leverage their staff's multilingual competencies as a competitive advantage and as a resource for knowledge sharing. Whereas SME top managers play a stronger role in shaping actual language use than their counterparts in large corporations do, language and translation practices still depend on employees' linguistic repertoires.

The articles in this special issue attest to the vitality of language-related research in international management. We hope that they will add nuance to our understanding of linguistic phenomena in business, stimulate further theorising, encourage empirical studies, and foster interdisciplinary collaboration on this topic.

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