Language and cognition.

Implications for transfer of organizational practices within multinational corporations.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines factors that may influence the transfer of organizational practices within multinational corporations. Drawing from the existent literature in the field of international business, as well as from cognitive linguistics theory, this paper investigates the relations between individual cognition and language, and relates these to the transfer of organizational practices. Firstly, I discuss the relations between individual cognition and language. Secondly, I discuss the current state of research on language issues within the field of international business. Finally, this article suggests that: further study on the relationship between language and cognition and its relation to practice transfer should be conducted; and that focus on the cognitive perspective may further exploit the practice transfer phenomenon.

Key words: practice transfer, language, cognition, multinational corporation, knowledge translation

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Introduction

The foundation of multinational corporations' competitive advantage lies in their ability to effectively transfer organizational knowledge and practices across units (Doz and Prahalad, 2001; Gupta and Govindarajan, 1991; 2000; Hansen, 1999; Mudambi, 2002; Phene and Almeida, 2008). The issue of the transfer of organizational practices across national borders has been a topic of several studies which indicate that practices within multinational corporations might differ in different countries (Lincoln et al., 1986). Even though headquarters can make the decision to transfer a particular practice to its subsidiary, this decision does not automatically mean that a recipient subsidiary will actually introduce and sustain such a practice. The literature provides plenty of evidence that transfers of organizational practices do not always work out as it was planned by the headquarters.

In spite of the extensive literature on organizational knowledge transfer (Argote and Ingram, 2000; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Hansen et al., 1999; Szulanski, 1996; Zander and Kogut, 1995) many questions remain unanswered. Mainstream of existing research focuses on cultural (Adler and Bartholomev, 1992; Barkema et al., 1996; Li et al., 2001) and institutional contexts (Dacin et al., 2002; Ferner et al., 2001; Tolbert and Zucker, 1983) and their impact on transfer of organizational practices within multinational corporations. Although institutional and cultural contexts are very important, intra-organizational factors such as corporate language or individual cognition of organizational members

should also receive more attention. As it will become apparent, this article is limited mainly to the cognitive perspective of practice transfer.

One of the first barriers that companies face on the path of internationalization is differences in natural languages, and the fact that multinational corporations need to reproduce the meanings of certain documents or practices while translating a practice in different languages. Surprisingly though, language, apart from cross-cultural communication research, has rarely been in dispute within the field of management. However, perhaps the most serious reason for this ignorance towards language issues in business research has been the absence of its clear conceptual frameworks and operationalizations.

Most of the work on cognition has been done in the field of education or psychology. In the field of management the work on cognition researchers have focused mainly on how cognitive patterns can influence decision-making process, and on studying the relation between organizational behaviour and information processing, learning processes and creation of shared meanings (Fiske and Taylor, 1984). The concept of managerial cognition, however, has received much of attention from researchers studying internationalization processes. For instance, Welch and Luostarinen (1988) argue that personal beliefs and attitudes of managers are key factors that influence the process of decision-making related to commitment and organization's mode of internationalization. Also, Maignan and Lukas (1997) focused on studying the manager's cognitive frameworks in order to understand how managers make the entry mode decisions. Additionally research by Reid (1981) relates more to the issues of export strategies and decision-maker

characteristics. Nevertheless, the attention devoted to studies of cognition in international business can is somehow similar to the attention devoted to language aspects. Furthermore, the researchers that have approached the phenomena of knowledge sharing from the cognitive perspective, focused mainly on taking the perspective of the whole organization, rather than focusing on individual level and studying individual organizational members (Cook and Yanow, 1993).

For the above mentioned reasons, this paper discusses language and individual cognition in the field of international business, and also suggests that the perspective of cognitive linguistics with regard to transfer of organizational practices within multinational corporations can bring further insights to the field, especially in relation to the process of "translation" of an organizational practice. Hence, this paper contributes to the research field through suggesting further focus on the relatively new perspective of studying transfer of organizational practices. The ambition of this paper is to contribute to international business research and to our understanding of why differences exist in the extent of transfer of organizational practices within subsidiaries of multinational corporations.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Firstly, the field of cognitive linguistics, as well as the relations between cognition and language are discussed. Secondly, on the basis of the existent literature, discusses the state of research on language and individual cognition in the field of international business. Finally, I suggest that language in organization studied from the cognitive linguistics perspective may bring further understanding of the transfer of organizational practices. I base this paper on the area of the knowledge and

practice transfer, as well as on cognitive linguistics theory. The article ends with discussion on limitations and suggestions for further research.

Studies of cognition and their relation to language

According to neuroscience, the human mind originates from the brain infrastructure that supports mental processes of perception, cognition, emotion and consciousness. The process of cognition includes such aspects as thought production, attention, language and reasoning and refers to the belief systems that individuals use to perceive and construct their environment (Weick, 1979; Swan, 1997). Human beings create their own representation of the surrounding world and the social world in which they have to accommodate themselves. People also behave according to their internal, cognitive frameworks that allow them to make sense and interpret the phenomena and the social interactions in the surrounding world (Ensink and Sauer, 2003; Markus and Zajonc, 1985; Orlikowski and Gash, 1994; Weick, 1979). Researchers in the field of social and cognitive psychology refer to these frameworks in various ways, labelling them as personal constructs (Kelly, 1955), schemas (Neisser, 1976), mental models (Johnson-Laird, 1983), or structures of expectations (Tannen, 1993). These individual frameworks are partly predetermined by one's culture and partly based on one's experience that originated from similar situations (Boland and Tenkasi, 1995; Tannen, 1993). Furthermore, schemas are not static, but change during communicative social interaction (Ensink and Sauer, 2003; Eysenck and Keane, 1990).

Social cognition is a subfield of psychology that studies people's mental representations and processes that lie beneath social perception. Additionally,

organizational cognition focuses on investigation of how individuals' mental frameworks influence the behaviour of organizational members, their decision-making, and information processing and organizational learning. Furthermore, organizational cognition widely accepts that organization is a network of combined meanings that are maintained through the usage of language and social interaction between organizational members. (Fiske and Taylor, 1984)

Human cognition is crucial for language, human understanding of the external world, as well as for the relations between these two. The interactions between the external worlds, language and human mind play an important role in understanding the micro-foundations of the process of transfer of organizational practices. Cognitive linguistics is a research area that emerged in late seventies and early eighties of the twentieth century, originating mainly from the work done by George Lackoff and Ronald Langacker. Cognitive linguistics researchers build upon the cognitive semantics field; however, they reformulate it to the study of the interdependencies between the language and the cognizing mind. Thus, cognitive linguistics theory combines the analysis of cognitive frameworks, conceptual frameworks, and the semantic structure.

Cognitive linguistics researchers focus on language and perceive it as part of the human cognition. Specifically, they argue that the linguistic activity of a person cannot be treated separately from the human cognitive abilities that enable all the mental processes of a human being; on the contrary, they should be treated as a fundamental element of cognition. According to Geeraerts (1997, p. 7), the theory of cognitive linguistics relates to "the analysis of natural language that

focuses on language as an instrument for organizing, processing, and conveying information" and "the formal structures of language are studied not as if they were autonomous, but as a reflection of general conceptual organisation, categorisation principles, processing mechanisms, and experiential and environmental influences". Hence, language is both a container and an organizer of knowledge within the human mind (Langacker, 1988, p. 58).

Cognitive linguistics tries to explain the relation between human cognition and perception; additionally it perceives language as randomly unstructured. Furthermore, language is embedded in one's social, cultural, and physical experience (Johnson, 1992). Such an embodiment approach (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999) has its roots in phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962 and 1963). Researchers argue that human mental and linguistic categorizations are not disembodied and abstract; on the contrary, they are figurative and embodied in human experience.

Although, as in any research area, cognitive linguistic researchers carry on some disputes, Newman (1996) managed to summarize the most essential assumptions in this research field. First, researchers in this research area tend to agree about the existence of key links between the linguistic structure and the human cognitive frameworks. Furthermore, they acknowledge the importance of human cognition and personal experience in both triggering and clarifying the linguistic structure used by an individual. Second, there is agreement that a group which uses certain language may impose its own categorisations upon the entity which constitute external reality, and that as a consequence, there may be

significant differences in such categorization between various groups of language users. Finally, it seems widely accepted that when whenever one tries to elaborate on the meaning of a certain form, s/he has to take into consideration the whole bigger context or appeal to a certain cognitive framework; otherwise, the description of the meaning may turn out to be faulty.

According to Langacker (1987, p. 11) language provides a speaker with "an open-ended set of linguistic signs or expressions, each of which associates a semantic representation of some kind with a phonological representation." Consequently, there is a certain association between the semantic and the phonological representation. However, there is always some sense of randomness in the association of words and their meanings. Nevertheless, this randomness is very often restricted by common rules of some language. For instance, even though a word "to see" relates to the activity of using the sense of sight, it may also acquire other meaning (depending on a situation and the context in which it is used) such as "to realize" or "to know". People see similarities between the process of seeing and knowing and therefore can conceptualize them as related to each other. This means, that according to context, people will intuitively choose different meaning when referring to the same word – the choice of word may not be semantically proper, but well-motivated by the perception of the speaker and his/her cognitive frameworks.

The example mentioned is simple, but it illustrates in a straightforward manner that the production of meaning may sometimes bring confusion. The situations, when the sender and the recipient of certain information experience

misunderstanding are not only happening in daily life between members of a family or colleagues, but also occur in organizations. Transfer of organizational practices within multinational corporation can be an example of a process in which potential miscommunications and misunderstanding is highly possible, especially if it is a process of transferring practices across borders which involves necessity of "translation".

Language in international business

Human relations cannot be easily understood without paying attention to language; language seems to be the necessary foundation of any kind of relationship. Language skills are prerequisites that enable people to interact with each other, but also work like 'glue' that keeps the relations alive. Likewise, the idea that shared language can be a significant aspect of social interaction and integration within organizations has been widely accepted by social capital theorists (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Bolino et al., 2002; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998); however, language has mainly been perceived as part of the broadly perceived culture of the cognitive dimension of social capital (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998).

Even though the significance of language skills has sporadically been mentioned in the literature on the management of the multinational corporation (Govindarajan and Gupta, 2001), the research on language barriers seems to be rather limited and language has been neglected by scholars who seem to assume that it has been already discussed and accommodated by including the concept of culture in their studies (Marschan et al., 1997). Also, early contributions to

language issues in management were limited mainly to mentioning it in some other contexts, for instance: language barrier as an obstacle to "heterarchy" (Hedlund, 1986), language use and its implications for firms behaviour (Holden, 2002), language as a part of internalizations' psychic distance (Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975), or language use and social mobility (San Antonio, 1988).

However, since the late 1990s, international management researchers have started taking into consideration the topic of language issues in MNCs (Marschan et al., 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a and 1999b). Most of the work related to this issue is relatively new, published in the 2000s. Researchers studied language mainly as a source of power (Marschan et al., 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a, 1999b; Piekkari and Zander, 2005, Piekkari et al., 2006; SanAntonio, 1988; Vaara et al., 2005); examine language strategies for multinational corporations (Vaara et al. 2005); as part of the cross-cultural management (Feely, 2003, Feely and Harzing, 2003; Harzing and Feely, 2008); the role of language in facilitating the communication within multinational corporations (Barner-Rasmussen and Björkman, 2005; Buckley et al., 2005; Fredriksson et al., 2006); and the relation between language and shared vision and perceived trustworthiness between MNC's units (Barner-Rasmussen and Björkman, 2007).

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) address the problem of language in their discussion of social capital – they classify it as an aspect of the cognitive dimension of social capital. Shared language can provide shared interpretations

and meanings among organizational members, and can help communicate values, norms and rituals. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) classified the effects of language on knowledge combination and exchange in three separate categories: direct impact, perception impact and combination capability enhancement. The first one relates to the degree to which a certain language skill enables those who speak that language access to the people and their knowledge. This relation may offer certain implications with regard to organizational power. Those members who possess language skills of high level or represent high level of significance may be able to use those skills in order to develop a broad informal network of contact within organization. Thereby, they can influence the structure of informal power of individuals inside the organization (Marschan et al., 1997; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a, 1999b). Those implications bring noticeable consequences for the transfer of organizational practices within multinational corporations.

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) suggest also that language may also influence individuals' perception. The specification of this problem can be found in the study of Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999a, 1999b), who claim that natural languages may lead to individuals or even units to be 'left outside' organizations. For instance, limited language skills may therefore affect the structural social capital by isolating people or units from each other and making them inaccessible.

Researchers have stopped treating language as merely a barrier that can be easily overcome by means of translation. Recent studies demonstrate that language is a key component of international management and a crucial factor that may influence multinational corporations' operations (Piekkari and Zander, 2005;

Welch et al., 2005). Consequently, one could imagine that language would be a crucial factor in the knowledge transfer process within the globally dispersed network of subunits of a multinational corporation. However, language has not yet been sufficiently recognized in research on organizational practice transfer. We still do not know much about how language influences the relationships between headquarters and subsidiaries, and little is known about language's impact on transfer of organizational practices within multinational corporations.

Heading for the cognitive perspective on practice transfer

Even though the research literature in the field of managerial and organizational cognition puts an increasing emphasis on the role of individuals in organizations and the role of their perceptions and mental frameworks on the process on the process of practice transfer, most of the research in practice transfer is still done with regard to the institutional perspective (Dacin et al., 2002; Rosenzweig and Nohria, 1994; Tolbert and Zucker, 1983). Additionally, management researchers still assume that the success of the process of transfer is to a high degree determined by the understanding the culture of the host subsidiary (Adler and Bartholomev, 1992; Barkema et al., 1996; Li et al., 2001). However, such an approach is rather simplified in its nature, as it neglects other factors that could possibly provide an answer to how the construction of meaning and representations, and the individuals' perception influences the transfer of organizational practices. Furthermore, a large part of the literature concentrates mostly on the environmental factor that are relevant to the host country and which may be significant in the process of practice transfer (Buckley and Lessard, 2005).

Additionally, practice transfer itself is not a process that exists in a particular location; on the contrary, it is a two-directional process on discussion, exchange and finally diffusion among all the parties that are involved in it (Jankowicz, 1996). Furthermore, it often includes the sub-process of negotiation over the meaning of knowledge and thereby, involves creation of a new knowledge or an addition to the one that existed previously. Consequently, the process of translation of practices should be seen as part of the larger process of practice transfer.

Holden and Von Kortzfleisch (2004, p. 127) suggest that "translation is a very robust analogue of knowledge transfer and that theory provides insight into cross-cultural sharing processes". They propose a productive analogy to the field of knowledge management by relating it to the science and practice of translation. Furthermore, Hurn (1996) refers to international management activity as to "translating one's own knowledge from one's own cultural context". In the same way, Garvin (1988) argues that firms must become "adept at translating new knowledge into new ways of behaving". Dixon (2000) states that "knowledge [in practice transfer activity] is translated into a form usable by others". Translation is certainly a process of converting the knowledge in order to come to the same cognitive foundations of people involved in the process, specifically in the situation when differences in languages form a significant barrier to achieving understanding.

Sager (1995) notes that "translation consists of producing in the target language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, firstly

with respect to meaning and secondly with respect to style". Hence, "successful" translation can be described by the level of quality and accuracy of the final outcome and the process of translation itself. Pinchuk (1997) suggested a four-level model of translation accuracy: level-1) universal idea is conveyed; level-2) enough information is conveyed; level-3) most of the information is conveyed; and level-4) nearly all the information is conveyed. Hence, the success of the "practice translation" process comes from the ability to convey and communicate information so that people who receive it can make sense out of it.

Interpretive differences over a meaning of a certain word, measurement, and so on, stemming from these differences in languages may lead to major limitations to the effective flow of knowledge between actors from different environments, effective management across borders, and "successful" transfer of organizational practices within subsidiaries of a globally dispersed multinational corporation. This has been considered by the interpretivists who widely conclude that different dimensions, for instance mental frameworks, create interpretive discrepancies in the creation of a meaning of particular phenomena. Hence, they call attention to such concepts as "shared meaning" (Dougherty, 1992) and its creation through participation of different organizational members in the same activities, the role of cross-functional teams (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992), or the role of individuals as unofficial translators (Alle, 1977; Hargadon and Sutton, 1991).

Moreover, the research within area of practice transfer has also emerged from various epistemological approaches that constitute different methodological

standpoints. Nevertheless, there are two epistemological approaches that have dominated the field of knowledge and practice transfer, namely: positivism that puts an emphasis on tools and techniques (Swan et al., 1999); and social constructionist research that assumes that knowledge is socially constructed. Crotty (2003) suggests the meaning of the object is unrelated to human consciousness; moreover, positivistic researchers assume that this meaning is embedded in the text itself. Therefore, only by appropriate decoding of the text, one can achieve the "successful" practice transfer. Positivist researchers refer to knowledge as to an objective thing that can be accumulated and shared without the interference of the perceiving mind (Buckley and Carter, 1999). For example, Gupta and Govindarajan (2000) suggest in their study on practice transfer within multinational corporations that this transfer is dependent on knowledge characteristics, the structure of communication channels, and finally on the recipient's ability to absorb knowledge. Therefore, even though positivist researchers are aware that miscommunication often occurs, they argue that the lack of "successful" transfer of practices has its roots in absorptive capacities rather than from existence of different interpretive processes. Even if some level of absorptive capacity is vital for understanding to happen, this may not automatically guarantee that the "sender" and "recipient" will share the same cognitive patterns that would allow them achieve the stage of mutual understanding. Consequently, positivistic approach towards practice transfer rejects all the very complex nature of linguistic and cognitive patterns that people

need to have in common before they can adjust to each other, and ultimately reach a high level of mutual perception (Ringberg and Reihlen, 2008).

In contrast to positivist approach, social constructionist researchers within the field of practice transfer assume that knowledge is socially constructed and is defined by its social usage. Words/texts retain their meanings only within a certain context of different activities and relationships between people (Gergen, 1994). Therefore, organizational practices are constructed by social and cultural processes, and exists in sets of organizational practices (Brown and Duguid, 1991 and 2001; Orlikowski, 2002), activities (Blacker, 1993; Spender, 1995), shared beliefs (Dougherty, 1992), and/or discourses (Bechky, 2002). Consequently, it is these organizational practices and structures that form transfer "channels" (i.e. Handley et al. 2006; Roberts, 2006; Wenger, 2000).

Having in mind the positivist and social constructionist research done in the field of knowledge sharing, this paper adheres to the alternative viewpoint that current approach towards practice transfer overlooks all the interpretive processes that are performed by the perceiving mind (Dougherty, 1992). Research in the field of international management seems not to question how individual organizational members make sense of their surrounding environment in which they interacts and how this may influence their perception, creation of meanings, decision-making processes and ultimately knowledge sharing.

The socio-cognitive approach challenges the positivist and social constructionist epistemologies and their relation to practice transfer (see: Table 1). Both of these epistemological traditions assume that knowledge is embedded in

words/ texts, which meanings are separate from the perceiving mind; consequently assuming semantic stability of these meanings. However without pre-existing mental frameworks that would allow a person to decode the meanings, transfer of organizational practices and ultimately understanding will be very unlikely to happen; hence this transfer would be just a meaningless imitation rather than a process of learning and/or understanding. Even though environmental, cultural and social contexts may influence people's understanding, the process itself always occurs in cognizing mind. These contexts and all external events however do gain their meaning only on the basis of people's pre-existing mental frameworks and cognition, emotions, will, creativity, memory, intelligence, and so on. (Bandura, 1986)

Table 1. Practice transfer across different research approaches

Approaches towards practice transfer	Positivism	Social constructionism	Socio-cognitive approach
Knowledge characteristics	Objective; Meaning embedded in words/texts; Meaning separated from the perceiving mind	Socially constructed; Defined by social usage; Meaning is retained only within a certain context; Meaning separated from the perceiving mind	Socially constructed based on the cognitive frameworks; Meaning dependent on the perceiving mind
Practice transfer	The aim of transfer is to decode the meaning; Dependent on knowledge characteristics, communications channels and recipient's absorptive capacity	Dependent on the context, discourses, organizational practices and relations	Dependent widely on the individual cognitive processes
Barriers to transfer	Insufficient absorptive capacity	Lack of socialization	Unique cognitive dispositions (private/cultural

Approaches towards practice transfer	Positivism	Social constructionism	Socio-cognitive approach
			models) and insufficient social interaction
Level of analysis	Different levels of analysis, from individual, group, organizational, etc.	Group level, community	Individual level

Excluding cognitive processes from the whole picture may lead to problematic situations in transfer of organizational practices. For example, how can the researcher explain the situation in which two people with the same cultural background, the same education, the same position in organization, performing the same activities, may end up constructing various conceptualizations about a given object? Without addressing the role of unique individual mental models and different cognitive processes, this situation seems hard to explain. The socio-cognitive approach, which emphasizes that practice transfer depends widely on individual cognitive processes (Bandura, 1986), can therefore offer a fruitful perspective for the field of transfer of organizational practices.

Some conclusions and suggestions for future research

Transfer of organizational practices refers to various definitions, constructs and methodological paradigms. Although the existing research in this area is broad, the paper suggests that the scope of studies should be extended with reference to other disciplines and methodological approaches. The main aim of this article is to suggest that the different perspective for studying the phenomenon of transfer of organizational practices within a multinational

corporation, by referring to the concept of individual cognition and the theory of cognitive linguistics. The paper indicates that language used by individuals in organizations, as well as the meanings about the transferred practice that they create during the process of "translation", are an outcome of cognitive processes embedded in one's own culture, organizational cultures and social interactions. Thus, the cognitive linguistics approach towards language enables to generate deeper understanding of the "translation" of organizational practices and may provide a fruitful research agenda for the study of transfer of practices within multinational corporation.

I suggest that further research should be conducted on the relationship between individual cognition and practice transfer, and also on the influence of individual cognitive patterns. Individual cognitive patterns may affect the transfer of organizational practices, but as these patterns are unique to each individual their influence on practice transfer may vary in different contexts. For that reason, it seems significant to investigate various types of contexts in order to bring deeper understanding to the issues of "translation" stemming from individual cognition and language usage.

The socio-cognitive approach calls for qualitative and longitudinal studies of the process of practice transfer. Hence, it would be interesting to investigate how this influence changes over the time, for instance before and after the transfer and implementation of a certain organizational practice. In order to explore in detail the social, cognitive and linguistic aspects and their influence on transfer of organizational practices, it is necessary to analyze these in their own context.

Thus, further studies could be done by conduction of qualitative case studies that would analyze individual cognition's influence on transfer of organizational practices to multinational corporation's subsidiaries in different organizational and cultural context. For example, one can focus on observing teams responsible for transferring organizational practices across borders, with regard to the problems of translation of practices from one language to another, and social construction and changes of the initial meaning throughout the whole process of transfer.

Even though one may argue that such studies will lack in generalizability, they would increase the understanding of the role of individual cognition in relation to practice transfer phenomenon in different contexts, and also could provide further managerial suggestions. However, I also suggest that more attention should be given to measurement issues, specifically to development of sound measures and operationalizations of individual cognition, so that the observations and conclusion would not suffer from interference from other factors that may influence the transfer of organizational practices.

Although the discussed perspective cannot provide an all-inclusive picture of practice transfer within multinational corporations, it can be useful for obtaining new theoretical and practice insights on explanation of practice transfer. Consequently, this paper is an attempt to bring further focus to the importance of the relationship among language and individual cognition, and its possible influence on transfer of organizational practices.

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