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Harnessing a Hidden Power – International Corporate Communications, Translators and Translatorial Agency¹

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Abstract

Organizations that operate internationally are challenged to manage communication strategically across different cultures and languages. However, it is questionable whether current principles are adequate for organizations looking to convey identities and strengthen reputations internationally. Key competences that help develop and transmit strategic corporate messages according to senders' intentions and receivers' cultural situation are not systematically harnessed. Translators possess these, but the current mechanistic view of communication management, with translators acting only at the end of the communication design chain, inhibits their value-adding potential. Recent research from Organization Studies and Translation Studies, including a study by the authors, indicates that the hidden power of translators can constitute a valuable asset, but one insufficiently integrated in planning and design. In particular, professional translators' agency appears to be restricted by an inadequate self-concept and overly linear models that prevent an iterative, interactive involvement in developing and conveying identities and strategic messages.

Keywords

International corporate communications, organizational communication, Organization Studies, Translation Studies, translation, strategic communication management, translatorial agency, agentic translation, professional translators, paraprofessional translators

Introduction

Due to its reputational and value-adding impact, corporate communications has been increasingly recognized by senior management to hold an important strategic function. Essentially, it is still guided in theory and practice by the principles of strategic communication (e.g. Argenti, 2013; Cornelissen, 2014; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015), according to which all organized internal and external communication activities should be planned and designed.

Derived from the concept of strategic management, strategic communication management seeks to apply a specific method to plan an organization's communication. This requires initially analysing an organization and its environment, formulating a communication strategy, implementing communication measures and, finally, evaluating them. Typically, all these steps are documented in a communications plan, providing guidance for communication practitioners. The communication strategy specifies communication objectives, target groups and the details of the communication strategy (e.g. core messages, a storytelling strategy and/or an argumentation strategy). This information is crucial in order to enable communication specialists to plan detailed communication measures, specifically by choosing appropriate communication instruments, defining the content of contributions and designing their language.

With increasing globalization, companies have been confronted with the challenge of managing communication strategically, not only among stakeholders in the company's country of origin, but also across all cultures in which the organization operates. Having to

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cater to a variety of stakeholders with different cultural value sets, expectations and communication needs, corporate communications still has to find ways of creating a coherent international image. It needs to balance the standardization and differentiation (Huck-Sandhu, 2016, p. 430) of communication measures. Corporate communications must ensure that both source-text contributions and translations meet the requirements of the communication strategy in order to build an international reputation.

Despite the ubiquity of English as a *lingua franca*, stakeholder groups, target markets and target cultures still need to be addressed in their local native languages with due consideration of their specific cultural values, traditions and habits. It is clearly important “for a globally-engaged corporate communicator to be knowledgeable about the levels of target countries, target institutions, target contents and target actors (or why he or she should ensure that employees or service providers have the necessary knowledge)”, yet a systemic understanding of how to position “specific content through specific institutions by means of specific people in specific media in a specific country” (Sievert, 2010, p. 2) – the working definition of international corporate communications that is also adopted in this paper – is still largely lacking. Although individual researchers have identified the growing significance and complexity of international corporate communications (e.g. Sievert, 2008, 2010; Sievert and Porter, 2009), the international and, in particular, multilingual dimensions of corporate communications have not yet attracted the broader attention they deserve and need in research, and practices are still in the process of professionalization (Massey and Wieder, 2019). The tools and methods that communications professionals currently deploy are not necessarily adequate to handle the growing intercultural demands and complexity of corporate communications. These conditions hold real prospects of an expanded, value-adding, agentic role for translators.

A widespread misconception about translation is that it is a mechanistic, neutral transcoding process from one natural language into another, fully and faithfully preserving an invariant core of meaning across languages and cultures. Crucially, however, translation is a situated, multimodal, *skopos*-led (i.e. purpose-driven) activity (e.g. Nord, 1997) involving multiple actors, factors and interests, including the interpretations and cultural filters (House, 2015, p. 68-70; Venuti, 2019) applied by the human translators themselves, not to mention the clients, receivers and end-users of their work. It is deeply contextualized both in individual workplace settings and in the wider complex socio-technical environments (Ehrensberger-Dow and Massey, 2019a, 2019b) that the organizations they work for represent.

It is in such contexts that translators have, through the prism of Organization Studies, been described as having a “hidden power” (Piekkari, Tietze and Koskinen, 2020, p. 1315) as they reshape meaning through the chain of interpretative decisions they make when they translate. This endows them with a profoundly agentic role in the strategic and operational communication that takes place within organizations operating in more than one language (Piekkari, Tietze and Koskinen, 2020; Koskinen, 2020b), but also in the way that an organization presents, brands and markets itself, its services and its products to target groups and markets in other linguistic cultures. The potential added value held by the agentic power of translators in international corporate communications is, however, inhibited by three major factors.

The first is the way corporate communications traditionally organizes and models communication. The fully aligned, integrated and consistent communication it aims for regulates employees to an extent that denies them participation and empowerment (Christensen, Morsing and Cheney, 2008). Its underlying models for communication are predominantly linear, reducing communication to a conduit between sender and receiver and reinforcing a “sender-biased view on communication that ignores or at least downplays the interpretative propensities and capabilities of the alleged receiver” (Christensen and

Cornelissen, 2013, pp. 50-51).

The second is the invisibility of the translator's role. This has been nurtured, on the one hand, by the non-specialist public misunderstanding of what translation involves. But, as Venuti (e.g. 2019) repeatedly observes, such an "instrumentalist" conceptualization has also been promoted by a widely held professional self-concept of neutral, non-interventionist translation sustained by mainstream translation theories, training practices and professional ethical codes. Survey data (Katan, 2011, 2016; Massey and Wieder, 2019) does indeed show that a large proportion of professional translators themselves do not have a professional self-concept or identity conducive to adopting more creative mediatory or advisory roles. This is reflected in the priority given to fidelity (to the source text) found a large number of ethical codes of practice among professional translation and interpreting associations worldwide (Katan, 2016, pp. 369-371; Schäffner, 2019, p. 66). The situation is neatly summed up by Lambert (2018, p. 269, pp. 284-285), who critiques the "fictional construction of the translator as a neutral conduit" that these unrealistic codes perpetuate and suggests that they should more properly be adapted to "proliferate an empowering image of translation as an active, multi-faceted activity that requires expert knowledge and judgement, while openly exploring its inevitably manipulative basis".

The third is the relatively strict linearity of prevailing models that guide translation service provision. Translation typically takes place after a source document has been produced, with translators rarely involved at the document drafting stage, only limited feed-forward mechanisms and very restricted, mediated channels for providing feedback or advice (cf. Massey and Wieder, 2019). The ISO 17100 (2015) quality standard for translation services, the "lynchpin document for the certification of translators and translation service providers" (Wright, 2020, p. 31), lays down a strictly linear process of twelve components encompassing pre-production, production and post-production processes with little possibility of direct interactions between the translators, commissioners, authors, clients and end-users. This severely restricts the agency of translators as linguistic and intercultural experts in the production processes of international corporate communications.

Translators and Translatorial Agency in Organizations

In organizational settings, interlingual translation performed by what have been termed paraprofessional translators (Koskela, Koskinen and Pilke, 2017; Koskinen, 2020b; Piekkari, Tietze and Koskinen, 2020) – as opposed to professionals who earn an income directly from their activity and unsalaried non-professional translators – constitutes a growing research field in Organization Studies (e.g. Piekkari Welch, Welch, Peltonen and Vesa, 2013; Chidlow, Plakoyiannaki and Welch 2014; Tietze, Tansley and Helienek, 2017; Ciuk and James, 2015; Ciuk, James and Sliwa, 2019). Research has shown how the language resources and translatorial repertoires of members of an organization decisively affect their positions and roles at the workplace and the way they can use their translatorial agency to advance personal and organizational goals (e.g. Koskinen, 2020; Piekkari, Tietze and Koskinen, 2020).

Piekkari, Tietze and Koskinen (2020, p. 1325) consider the performative functions of the decisions made by paraprofessional interlingual translators as they move organizational practices across language boundaries to receiving organizations. Their translatorial agency is seen as directive (in sending organizations in particular directions) and concluding (by closing down alternative interpretations of messages), but also creative and innovative (Piekkari, Tietze and Koskinen, 2020, p. 1325). There is evidence to indicate that, being unconstrained by professional norms, codes of conduct and the self-concepts engrained in professional translators' habitus, they might push the boundaries of conventional professional translatorial behaviour (Koskinen, 2020b) by exerting more agency and adopting more adaptive and creative translation strategies than professional translators. An example is presented by Tietze, Tansley and Helienek (2017), who describe how a paraprofessional deals with English terms

for which he can find no equivalent in his native Slovak tongue. He omits large parts of the source text and embellishes it with invented examples, which the authors consider creative. This and other examples are also cited by Piekkari, Tietze and Koskinen (2020, pp. 1319-1324).

Tellingly, Piekkari, Tietze and Koskinen (2020, pp. 1323-1324) contrast what they regard as the creative and innovative approaches adopted by paraprofessional translatorial agents, “more visible on the organizational scene”, with the “invisible activity” of professional (interlingual) translation, and claim that “the *skopos* of the translation is often likely to be much more personal than for professional translators rendering their services to clients, and the former can therefore be expected to take on more agentic roles”. In characterizing professional translation as they do, they therefore appear to subscribe to the invisible, instrumentalist conceptualization of professional translators’ roles and responsibilities that Venuti, Katan and others take such issue with.

While few Translation Studies scholars or practitioners today would disagree with Piekkari, Tietze and Koskinen’s (2020, p. 1315) basic position that the task of the professional translator is to use their agency to produce an optimal text to forward the *skopos* or intended purpose of those commissioning a translation, the situation is more complicated. For instance, the *skopos* might well require adaptive or transcreative approaches from the translator, especially – but not only – in reputational or marketing communication. In other words, the creative solutions ascribed to the paraprofessional in Tietze, Tansley and Helienek’s (2017) study lies very much within the professional translator’s scope, as the now established professional field of transcreation (e.g. Pedersen, 2014, 2019) demonstrates. Indeed, the increasing shift in demand for human translation towards user-centrism (Koskinen, 2020a; Suojanen, Koskinen and Tuominen, 2015), intercultural mediation and adaptive, transcreative work (Katan, 2016, 2018; Liddicoat, 2016; Massey and Ehrensberger-Dow, 2017) as well as ethically grounded risk management (Canfora and Ottman, 2015) requires the entire profession to adopt a more identifiably interventionist role in the agency that translators exercise. Alongside finely honed technological and digital literacy skills, the intercultural competence basic to current translation competence models (e.g. EMT, 2017) and the intercultural mediation inherent in translators’ work (Liddicoat, 2016) make them ideally positioned to do so.

This is borne out by data gathered during an ongoing series of interviews about the current state of (strategic) international communication management and international corporate communications that we are conducting with senior communication managers of international companies based in [place reference removed]. To date, the results of three in-depth interviews, all of which took place between July 2019 and September 2019, have been processed in depth, furnishing us with some useful initial insights. The first important result concerns how international communication management is organized: strategic international communication management consists of complex coordination and controlling processes between headquarters and local units. Their purpose is to allow the chief communication officer or other senior communication managers at the company’s headquarters to ensure that global strategic messages have in fact been communicated to and ideally been received by stakeholders in the target culture as intended. The reason for these extensive processes is the lack of simultaneous knowledge of two cultures and languages among most communications staff. Such simultaneous in-depth knowledge of two cultures and languages, however, is the typical core competence of professional translators, who have the distinct potential to play a much more integral part in co-developing, and assuring the quality of, output.

The interviewees also agree that international communication specialists need not only be familiar with the principles of communication management and digital channels, but also possess a near-native command of English in addition to their mother tongue, ideally complemented by fluency in another (Asian) language, depending on the company's international scope. They should also be able to oversee communication quality in the organization's key languages, have a sound knowledge of one or more foreign cultures and possess intercultural sensitivity. Organizational knowledge and work experience, project management skills – standardly taught on translation degree programmes – and a thorough understanding of basic business principles are also mentioned. Here, too, translators are by default well suited to assume key agentic roles in international communication management if they receive the necessary grounding in business and communication management.

The potential “hidden power” of agentic translation therefore appears to represent an untapped resource that can be key to how organizations develop and reach out to target groups and markets worldwide. With appropriate training and professionalization to develop paraprofessional translators' competences, their agency could be more effectively channelled to develop a corporate identity and convey strategic messages across linguistic and cultural borders, both to organizations receiving internal communications and to external target groups and markets. More importantly, with appropriate recognition and improved integration in the organizations they work for, professional translators could be far better deployed as active translatorial agents in international, multilingual corporate communications.

Yet, the limited consideration given to the productive value-adding agency of professional translation that is observable in organizational communication studies is matched by its almost total absence in corporate communications theory and practice. The monolithic, metonymic organizational identity that corporate communications pursues, in which the parts are manifestations of the whole and vice versa, give rise to a conduit-like linearity of communication models that have been convincingly critiqued by Christensen, Morsing and Cheney (2008), Christensen, Firat and Torp (2008) and Christensen and Cornelissen (2013). This appears to have cemented a concept of professional translation as a neutral, conduit-like process of transferring the invariant semantic core of a unified corporate brand across languages and cultures. Because of such a mechanistic perception of communication design and the translation process, organizations do not seem to see the need to integrate translators more fully into international corporate communications. Instead, translators are positioned at the very end of the planning and design chain. To gauge the accuracy and contingent effects of this assumption, we now briefly present some initial research spanning corporate communications and translation.

Interfaces between Corporate Communications and Translation

As we have seen, international communication management is gaining momentum as a profession and discipline in its own right (Huck-Sandhu, 2016). At the same time, translation is taking on an increasingly strategic function in organizations (Massardo, van der Meer and Khalilov, 2016, p. 10). Despite this, the role of translation in the processes of international corporate communications has hitherto remained under-researched and under-developed.

Massey and Wieder (2019) are among the few researchers to have broached the complex interplay between corporate communications, translation and translatorial agency. Their online survey among translators and translation project managers (n=190), on the one hand, and organizational communication professionals (n= 59), on the other, took place in [place reference removed] in 2017. It focuses on the particular form of agency represented by the feed-forward and feedback flows between communications professionals, professional

translators and translation project managers working in [place reference removed]. It reveals that translators' and translation project managers' access to the communication strategy appears to be restricted, that translators and translation project managers receive hardly any advice on how to contribute to the organization's communication objectives and that communication specialists are to a large extent unaware of translation's strategic and agentic role. This obviously prevents translators from realizing the target-text's full potential with regard to the company's communication strategy.

Yet, there is also the question of the translators' own agency and awareness of their agentic role as providers of feedback and advice from their position as experts in intercultural communication and mediation. Whether due to inhibiting structures or processes or to their own self-concept, the 2017 survey results showed professional translators (and translation project managers, the vast majority of whom have been trained as translators) to themselves provide very limited feedback to communications professionals on the (strategic) adequacy of the source-texts. The same survey also included an item on how translators saw their professional role. Despite indications of a fundamentally assistive and adaptive role awareness, the aggregate responses ranked overt mediatory, co-creative and advisory roles lowest, whereas the less agentic categories of fidelity to source-text writers' intentions and meeting client requirements, document specifications and project-management standards scored highest.

In follow-up interviews conducted within a few weeks of the 2017 survey with three professionals working in [place reference removed], an institutional and a commercial staff translator plus a freelancer, the former two stressed the constraints on their agency imposed by organizational structures, processes and the corporate communications mindset (cf. Christensen and Cornelissen, 2013, pp. 45-48). It was the freelancer who, when working directly with long-standing clients on a basis of trust rather than through a translation company or agency, exerted substantial agentic influence on the development and translation of messages, documents and campaigns by receiving systematic feed-forward and providing continuous feedback. Indeed, her descriptions came closest to the iterative, interactional role of translators that forms the core of the user-centred translation (UCT) model recently developed in Finland (Koskinen, 2020a; Suojanen, Koskinen and Tuominen, 2015). This is a tentative indication of the as yet untapped potential for transforming international corporate communications within organizations.

Massey and Wieder's (2019) above-mentioned pilot study was designed as an initial foray into this interdisciplinary field to ascertain the viability and scope of future interdisciplinary endeavours in this wholly under-researched field. It has shown enough to warrant further study. The authors plan to do so in a follow-up European project using linguistic ethnographic methods (cf. Koskinen, 2020b) to trace the production of corporate communications output in public and commercial organizations through the complex web of actor interactions to its reception by audiences and end-users. The aim is to describe, evaluate and suggest ways of optimizing the models, processes, practices and products under investigation.

Discussion

Christensen and Cornelissen (2013, pp. 63-66) call for a thorough examination and deconstruction of the current corporate communications ideal. They contrast its reification of organizational identity and prescriptive univocality with an emergent model of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO; cf. Schoeneborn, Kuhn and Kärreman, 2019), according to which organizational identities evolve and change through the polyphonic multiplicity of voices that constitute them. In the international and multicultural contexts of

organizational communication, these, of course, include the paraprofessional and, above all, the professional translators they employ.

In an increasingly open and participatory communications ecology, where traditional role distinctions between senders and receivers, stakeholders, target groups and cultures are blurring fast, monolithic approaches to corporate communications should be seriously questioned. This is especially evident in the nascent professional field of international corporate communications, where the largely untapped potential of translators has as yet to be properly harnessed. By ensuring that the structures, processes and incentives are place to promote rather than constrain the agency of translators, organizations can shape the affordances that sustain the emergence of corporate identities and the adequacy of the way these are communicated strategically across linguistic and cultural borders.

What we think is needed is an organic, seamless integration of translation into international corporate communications that allows translators to make full use of their agency and play a more visibly co-creative and adaptive role. Although much more extensive research is clearly needed, the early indicators at this stage suggest that this can only be achieved if the following conditions are met.

First, international corporate communications should be open to a CCO perspective that breaks up the univocal linearity of prevailing corporate communications models. This would allow translators to participate as active agents in an iterative, interactive process of multilingual text production such as that put forward in the UCT model. Second, the linear processes governing translation service provision must be remodelled to permit iterative interactions and constant, unmediated feed-forward and feedback flows. Third, organizations need to overcome their simplistic view of translation as a mere transcoding process and see translators for what they can be: adaptive, creative linguistic and intercultural experts with the profoundly agentic potential to shape and convey corporate identities and strategic messages for international target groups and markets. And fourth, the translation profession must break with a traditional instrumentalist conceptualization of itself and the “illusion of neutrality” (Lambert, 2018).

Here, educational institutions like our own are called upon to do more to promote competent translatorial agency among their graduates, whether as communications specialists in paraprofessional roles or as professional translators working in and for corporate communications. Indeed, in a world increasingly characterized by participatory communication across linguistic and cultural borders, they should do far more to overcome artificial distinctions between professional fields that, like corporate communications and translation, show signs of growing convergence. Only by promoting shared knowledge and competences across traditional disciplinary boundaries can such interprofessional fields emerge.

Conclusion

We contend that to perform effectively in today’s participatory communications ecology, international corporate communications has to rethink its monolithic models and prescriptive, univocal ideals in favour of CCO. It should also draw more actively and engagingly on the resources it has to hand, harnessing the hidden power of paraprofessional and professional translators. But the translators, too, will have to change in order to adopt a more agentic role, casting aside an inhibiting self-concept, reflected in misconceived ethical codes, of neutral conduit-like fidelity to invariant source-text meanings. Finally, translators’ agency in international corporate communications is also restricted by the linearity of the models that

currently underlie translation service provision. These, too, need to be adapted to allow a more iterative, interactive involvement of translators in developing and conveying corporate identities and strategic messages.

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