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Trapped in conformity? Translating reputation management into practice

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Summary This study investigates the translation rules used by Norwegian hospitals to adapt reputation management to their context. Drawing on a linguistics-inspired approach to organizational translations developed by Røvik (2007), the study identifies the application of three such rules, copying, omission, and addition. The study contributes to our understanding of organizational translations by pointing to their regularities, challenging the Scandinavian translation theory assumption that every translation leads to the emergence of new and unique local versions. The findings show that the hospitals intentionally remove from and add components to the reputation management idea in a strikingly similar way. In so finding, the study also challenges the assumption often put forward by branding and reputation textbooks that similarity implies being trapped in conformity.

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Introduction

The Scandinavian institutionalist notion that ideas are translated as they travel from one setting into another (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996) has gained increased acceptance among scholars who seek to understand the diffusion and adoption of management knowledge (Boxenbaum, 2006; Frenkel, 2005a, 2005b; Hwang & Suarez, 2005; Mueller & Whittle, 2011). As it travels, an idea may be subject to different types of modifications (“translations”) and contribute to increased heterogeneity in organizational fields. While the conventional expectation of diffusion across fields

is homogeneity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), the Scandinavian institutionalist notion of translation paves the way for a closer look at local organizational variations.

In order to improve our understanding of the production of local versions of management ideas and homogeneity- and heterogeneity-producing dynamics, this paper combines the Scandinavian institutionalist notion of translation of ideas with Røvik’s (2007) adaptation of insights from the academic discipline of translation studies (Gambier & Doorslaer, 2010; Kuhiwczak & Littau, 2007; Venuti, 2004). Following Røvik (2007), we suggest that field members that adopt a particular idea may translate it, not in different and unpredictable ways, but in ways that are curiously similar. Just like translations of cultural artifacts, including language, images, and symbols, adhere to basic patterns, translations of managerial ideas may display regularities that can be analyzed and subsumed under more general translation rules (Røvik, 2007). By investigating such regularities, we aim to shed light not only on organizational translations in general but

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also on the dynamics of field level homogeneity and heterogeneity. Prior research on the adoption of management practices tends to neglect the potential existence and significance of such regularities. An extensive body of research exists on the diffusion of practices (Abrahamson, 1996; Lieberman & Asaba, 2006; Rogers, 2003; Strang & Macy, 2001; Strang & Meyer, 1994) as well as a growing awareness that practices vary as they diffuse (Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010; Lounsbury, 2007; Powell, Gammal, & Simard, 2005). Within translation studies in organizational analysis, the notion of local variants is a key assumption (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Røvik, 2007; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). However, to date, no empirical studies have identified patterns of translations in specific organizational contexts and examined their common features.

The main contribution of this paper is to draw empirical attention to such patterns, expanding the study of organizational translations beyond the assumption of heterogeneity as an exclusive field-level outcome of translations. Through a study of reputation management practices in Norwegian hospitals, which increasingly operate in a market and compete for patients, personnel, and resources, we demonstrate how practices result from a rather similar application of a series of translation rules. Instead of producing multiple local versions of the same idea in the field, parallel understandings and outcomes of a modified version of reputation management are identified. The findings thus offer support to a neoinstitutional understanding of field dynamics (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The guiding questions for the study are: (1) which translation rules were involved in the translation of reputation management and (2) what are the implications of these rules for the heterogeneity–homogeneity distinction pertaining to organizational fields?

Our study proceeds as follows: We first review the literature on translations and present four translation rules derived by Røvik (2007) from the field of translation studies. The empirical setting is described next, followed by a presentation of the methodology. We then detail the findings from our study of the Norwegian hospital field, and conclude with some remarks on the theoretical implications of our findings.

Theoretical observations

A number of researchers acknowledge the dominating position of the neoinstitutional perspective in organizational analysis in general (Greenwood, Oliver, Suddaby, & Sahlin, 2008) and in our understanding of the dissemination of organization ideas in particular (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Scandinavia has become a stronghold for research on these matters (Johansson, 2002; Røvik, 2007): In the introduction to the special issue of the academic journal *Nordic Organization Studies* (“Nordiske Organisasjonsstudier”) on the neoinstitutional perspective, the tradition is described as having had “... great impact and has over the last year almost become a dominating theory, perhaps particularly in the Nordic area” (issue 3/2009: 3). However, through the concept of “translation”, the Scandinavian version has developed an approach that differs from its American counterpart. In the following theory section, we outline the main tenets of the Scandinavian translation

theory, how it differs from the American version, and how Røvik’s theory supplements and expands it. Finally we present the management idea to be studied in the empirical part; reputation management.

The translation perspective on the dissemination of organizational ideas challenges two assumptions made in early (American) neoinstitutional theory. First, while the latter’s understanding of diffusion treats ideas primarily as symbols decoupled from actual practice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Westphal & Zajac, 2001), studies performed by Scandinavian institutionalists focus on the *actual* adoption of new management ideas, using intensive, rich, process-oriented and qualitative approaches (Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009). From this perspective, translation involves selecting an idea, disembedding it from one setting, and re-embedding it in others (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996). In the course of this process, the idea is subject to context-specific modifications (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). The inspiration comes from Actor-Network (ANT) theory and its “sociology of translation” (Callon, 1998; Latour, 1986), and particularly from Latour’s model of translation (Latour, 1987), where agency is attributed to all individuals involved in the dissemination process. Management ideas are not “just” symbols, as they often are portrayed in the neoinstitutional literature – they turn into practice over time while retaining their symbolic value (Røvik, 2011). The neoinstitutional version of diffusion attributes the first stage of the diffusion process to considerations of instrumental efficiency, but subsequent adoption is based on considerations of legitimacy (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983). However, from a translation perspective the process is reversed: The reason for adopting an institutionalized idea is attributed to symbolic considerations of legitimacy, but subsequent events are more concerned with making sure the idea has lasting effects on performance.

Second, while the neoinstitutional diffusion perspective, at least in its early version, assumes that the field-level outcome of decoupling is increased structural homogeneity (*isomorphism*) between organizations in the same field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), the translation perspective predicts field-level heterogeneity. When management ideas spread between and across fields with multiple actors modifying it, the field is characterized by a number of “local” variants due to context-specific translation processes (Ansari et al., 2010; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005; Lounsbury, 2007; Powell et al., 2005; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). As a result, management ideas in one context may not mean the same, or be practiced the same way, as in other contexts.

However, the Scandinavian translation perspective can itself be challenged. Although the existence of rule-like patterns of translations has already been suggested (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996), few empirical studies have addressed the specific outcomes of such processes. As a result, conceptual categories for understanding the conditions under which translations may produce heterogeneity or homogeneity in organizational fields are lacking. In following Røvik’s (2007) argument that such insights can be acquired by relying on theoretical concepts from the field of translation studies, below we outline how this may occur and how we intend to use those concepts in our study of the translation of reputation management in the Norwegian hospital sector.

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