

# Working paper

## Strategy as texts: How one becomes many

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### Abstract

This article shows empirically how managers translate a strategy plan at an individual level. By analysing how managers in three organizations translate strategies, it identifies that the translation happens in two steps: First, the managers decipher the strategy by coding the different parts of the strategy into four categories. Second, the managers produce new texts based on the original strategy document by using four different ways of translation models. The study's findings contribute to three areas. Firstly, it shows that translation is more than a sociological process. It is also a craftsmanship that requires knowledge and skills, which unfortunately seems to be overlooked in both the literature and in practice. Secondly, it shows that even though a strategy text is in singular, the translation makes strategy plural. Thirdly, the article proposes a way to open up the black box of what happens after the strategy document has been produced, by concluding that no one implements strategy – they implement their translation of the strategy, which can be very different from the original.

**Introduction:**

Research in strategy processes has tended to follow one of two processes. The first studies how actors make a strategy and the second one studies how actors use it. The first approach understands a strategy document as an outcome of a process, like an entity that finalizes a complex process of negotiations and stabilizes meaning in a text document by closing it (Kaplan, 2008, 2011; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). However, the second approach doesn't define the strategy document as an end. It is understood as a new beginning (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Giraudeau, 2008). The document has often been produced by a small group of people called strategists, planners or decision makers. Others might have given input, but a small group has produced the finale version of the strategy. When the strategy document has to be turned into action, it becomes an obligation to many other managers. They have to orient the document towards their own concerns and obligations. Managers have to compare the document's openness with their existing obligations and their abilities to meet resistance and opportunities in their own context. How they do this, have been studied from social and political perspectives, including sensemaking and sensegiving (Bartunek et al, 1999; Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Corneliussen et al; 2014), actor network theory (Czarniawska & Hernes 2005), cognitive theory (Kaplan, 2008) political decision-making process (Pettigrew, 1977; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977) and discourse theory (Laine and Vaara, 2007). With this in mind, a strategy document seems to be a focal point in strategy, since process research either focus on how to produce it or how actors use it. However, as strategy as practice reminds us: a strategy is not only something you have, it is also something that you do. These practices have been studied from multiple theoretical perspectives (See for example Hodgkinson et al, 2006; Johnson et al, 2007; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Jarzabkowski, 2003, 2004;

Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Whittington, 1996, 2002, 2003, 2004). When the strategy document goes from being an end to a beginning it also goes from being a general text to a local tool. Jarzabkowski, P. (2004) describes this as “localized practice” which is heterogenetic. Røvik (2007) defines the process as decontextualisation and contextualization. The majority of research focuses on how actors use a strategy document in a group. Pälli, Vaara and Sorsa (2009) sum up the discussions by stating: *“We show that while strategy text and talk aim at defining the form and content of strategy they simultaneously include statements that leave room for different understandings. This ambiguity of meanings is an essential part of strategy work and it is a key part of the intersubjective and intertextual processes of negotiating strategy.”* This is interesting because it can be reasonably assumed that a collective negotiation does not necessarily result in an individual meaning. There doesn't have to be any correlation between what actors say and what they think, because they are able to play a role (Goffman, 1990). It is also likely that when a strategy text allows for multiple interpretations, it will be interpreted differently depending on where and who read it in the organization. Depending on the level of conscious among the actors, the existing research sees strategy document can be a political tool or a cue, but research such as Giraudeau, Røvik, Pälli, Vaara and Sorsa indicate that there are more to the individual practices, where actors have to do something with a strategy in order to make it work in their own context. It is true that a strategy document can function as both a political tool and as a cue, but what actors exactly do with the text is under-studied. We investigate how individual actors translate a strategy document to their own part of the organization with a new approach to strategy practices using translation theory from the field of literature. We do so to understand how actors edit the document in order to understand how actors use strategy documents in local

practices.

### **Strategy – opening, closing and moving the text**

A strategy document can be studied as an end and as a beginning. When it is an end, the researcher studies how actors close a strategy. An example of the first approach is Kaplan (2008). She draws on “...*social movement research on framing which offers one way for thinking about the integration of cognition and politics and brings into focus the actions taken to shape the frames of others.*”. She shows how cognitive frames influence strategy making. She shows that actors try to establish dominance in producing the strategy by transforming their own cognitive frame into the frame for the strategy. Strategy making becomes a framing contest. This is in line with Pettigrew (1977) and Bower and Doz (1979) that also showed that strategy might be about politics and conflicting interests. A later study by Kaplan (2011) shows that actors mobilize PowerPoint to create spaces where discussions about the strategy can take place since “*PowerPoint functions as both a medium and an outcome of discursive practices, its use is essential to the strategy-making process.*” Laine and Vaara (2007) studied how actors discursively make sense of and give sense to strategic work in an organization. In this case it is also a struggle, but it is about how subjectivity is affected by discourses. Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) demonstrate that strategy making is a communicative process with a recursive relationship between talk and text. Over time the strategy text will gain increasing authority because the text and the talk will become similar. Corren (2004) also showed that texts have agencies. What these studies have in common is that they show aspects of how different actors negotiate the content of the strategy document and how the text affects them through this process. This could also be understood as attempts of

closing the text through negotiations even though there will be resistance caused by the power that the text distributes among the actors. When studying strategy documents as a beginning, scholars are interested in how actors use the strategy document by closing it. Giraudeau (2008) studied how plans are tools for practice. Drawing on strategy as practice and Actor Network Theory, he defines strategy plans as artefacts and shows how these plans create room for different readings because he is interested in “...*the various possibilities offered by plans, by both reading them ourselves and showing how corporate actors read them.*” A strategy plan becomes an artefact that is more than a tool for communication and control. He shows that “*Even though this 1994 document was presented as a closed programme for action, it proved to be a support for quite open strategic thinking. But this depended, of course, on the ability of decision-makers to allow their reasoning power to go beyond the explicit propositions of the plan, i.e. not to take the plan too seriously as a definitive proposition.*” He shows that a strategy document isn’t per se closed or opened. It is the actors, in this case, the decision-makers, that can open it by using it in another way, but they could also have used the plan as it was presented: at a closed programme for action. This is consistent with Spee & Jarzabkowski (2009) that show that strategy is a flexible tool depending on how actors interpreted it. Giraudeau shows that a strategy plan has multiple since a strategy document is open in that sense that it can be read in different ways. This is the opposite of how Mintzberg (2007) defines the function of the plan: “*plans by their very nature are designed to promote inflexibility - they are meant to establish clear direction, to impose stability on an organization.*” Giraudeau starts an interesting analysis about the use of strategy documents by showing that plans can be used in different ways depending on the reading of the plans because “*the reading of plans consists of an attempt to close*

*down strategies, in order to make decision possible.*” The actors are able to change the function of the plan. This seems like a contradiction compared to conclusion of the first perspective where the plan is closed. Vasques et al (2016) “*show that attempts of ordering through language use and texts (i.e. by closing and fixing meaning) tend to induce disordering (i.e. by opening the possibility of multiple meanings), at the same time*” Strategy plans seem to stay open even though that actors use resources on closing them in the process of producing them. Pälli, Vaara and Sorsa (2009) came to the same conclusion by using discourse theory. They concluded, “*Our analysis showed that strategy meetings are venues for both interpreting strategy text and producing new text that is based on previous texts.*” This points to the agency that actors have when it comes to texts. They can act on them or they can interpret them and use them in another way than they were intended, but they have to do something with it. Since a strategy can be both something you have and something you do, there should be a distinction between the theoretical definitions and the empirical use. Different perspectives have different definitions (Mintzberg, 1987; Mintzberg et al, 2009), where it is assumed that strategy is one thing at a time. This makes sense theoretically, but not empirically. A strategy can both be a plan, a process, a perspective, a pattern, a position and a ploy and more at the same time, because it is the reader of the strategy that has the power to define it as such. We must separate the meaning of the strategy document from the meaning it gets when different actors read it, if we want to gain more insights in these practices that treat the strategy as a new beginning. This would define strategy documents as the focal point for strategic work. Either how to make a text or what happens with the text when it has been produced.

**When a strategy document changes context**

The studies above indicate that individuals do something with strategy texts, when the context changes, or when it goes from being a collective compromise to an individual tool. What actors do with a strategy document when the context changes have been studied as translations even though the meaning of translation differs depending of the perspective (Røvik, 2007; 2016; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Mueller & Whittle, 2011; Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987; Van Veen et al, 2011; Scheuer, 2006; Wæraas & Nielsen; 2016; Doolin et al, 2013; Izak, 2016; Mueller & Whittle, 2011). Callon describes translation as: ” *These moments constitute the different phases of a general process called translation, during which the identity of actors, the possibility of interaction and the margins of manoeuvre are negotiated and delimited*” (1986; 2). The concept translation is used to describe the process, where actors agree upon the meaning of a certain object. In that sense translation has more in common with negotiations and framing (Kaplan, 2006; Pettigrew, 1977) than from the literal meaning of the word. The word translation is also used by researchers as Kaplan & Norton (1996) Czarniawska (1996, 2009) and MacLennan (2011). Their understanding of the term is not based on literary studies, but on sociology because they use translation as a synonym for transformation to analyze how ideas and practices change or materializes into physical objects (Czarniawska, 2009).

These approaches could be used to study how actors use strategy document when it changes the context. However, due to their focus on collective practices, the concept of translation is less suited to explain what individual actors do with a strategy document, when they bring it from one context to another. When a manager act as a link between different parts of the organization, it becomes this manager’s individual

translation of the strategy document that is central to analyze how the strategy document changes according to the context. Translation studies offer a whole series of related concepts, which is not the case with the understanding of translation as transformation (Røvik, 2007: 254). Thus, offers the field translation studies an overall conceptual framework that deals with individual actors can do with texts in order to make it work when it has to function in different contexts.

Røvik (2007) draws on translation studies in order to analyze how ideas change when they move from one organization to another. By developing a rich vocabulary based on a theory generated analytical framework it makes it possible to see new and important empirical phenomena, such as what actors do with strategy texts. This is similar to Johnson, et al (2007) that point to the need for more levels of analysis that connects different levels inside the organization. Including more actors, variables and theories, than usual, could be helpful. Especially, the informal practices, which connect the formal practices, could be of interest. The choice of theoretical framework to study strategy should not be underestimated because the theories affect what can be described using their vocabularies (For an overview see Loewenstein et al 2012). This means that each theory has its strengths and limitations. In his classic analyse, Allison (1969) demonstrates how different theories explain the same situation differently by focusing on different aspects of the situation. No theory is able to explain everything. This could be the explanation of the different conclusions in the above research because they study different aspects of the process of using a strategy text. The analyses stop too early in order to explain how actors close a text in order to use it for their own purpose. Vaara (2010) speaks of taking the linguistic turn seriously and stresses: *“Although we have seen a proliferation of studies examining*

*the discursive aspects of strategy, the full potential of the linguistic turn has not yet been realized.*” This points to a need for a theory that offers concepts for what actors do with texts, which could be translation studies (e.g. Pym, 2010; Niranjana, 1992; Venuti, 1995; Maier, 2007; Lefevere, 1992; Nord, 1997; Reiss, 2000; Vermeer, 1989), just like Røvik uses. Since actors need to do something with a strategy text, these theories about translation could help understanding these practices when an actor takes a strategy that was produced in one setting to their own setting. As both Giraudeau, Kaplan and Pälli et al have showed, the strategy leaves room for interpretations. The translation theoretical perspective claims that a text consists of many parts, and therefore offers many different ways in which the text can be understood. Secondly, a text like a strategy has to be translated to be understandable and useful in a different context than the one in which the strategy was written. This means that a strategy is not translated in its entirety, but the text is divided in its entirety and each word, sentence and reference must be analysed to decide how to make the best translation. This could also be true in strategic work, where managers might read the strategies in different ways and apply the knowledge found in it in a way that fits into their everyday practices. The discourse of an organization is not complete, but fragmented in the same way, as we know it from countries with different languages and cultures. Therefore, this theoretical perspective on the strategy texts could be able to handle this diversity and explain how the strategy documents is interpreted depending on the context and the person who reads the document. The focus will be on the individual unique, rather than the collective common. This will complement the other perspectives that focus on the collective processes of producing a strategy by looking at individuals, instead of groups (Balogun & Floyd, 2010; Lê & Jarzabkowski, 2014). The literature on boundary

object shows that a strategy tool is flexible (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009). Apart from strategy as a political tool or a cue, we know very little of how and why the strategy changes function over time or space, beside that actors do something with it.

Translation theory deals with the functions of texts and is aware that the translators can change the function if they want to.

This article draws on strategy as practice and translation studies focusing on the micro level in how actors use strategy documents. To our knowledge, this perspective has not been used before studying strategy practices, but we argue that it is an ideal theory to use since it describes how actors read and changes texts in order to make them function. Thereby this field can contribute the organization studies by adding words and concepts to the vocabulary that works as an analytical framework for studying strategy practices.

### **On translation studies**

Translation studies are a field within the science of literature, which is the study of how texts are or should be translated, the relationship between actors and texts, the role of translators in society and the impact of texts and translations on society (Nord, 1997; Baker, 2006, 2009; Gentzler, 1993; Gile, 2009; Pym, 2004; Tymoczko & Gentzler, 2002; Schulte & Biguenet, 1992). In that sense, it differs from how sociological theories use the term translations (See for example Røvik, 2007; 2016; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Mueller & Whittle, 2011; Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987; Van Veen et al, 2011; Scheuer, 2006; Wæraas & Nielsen; 2016), because the term translation is taken literally, instead of being a synonym for transformation or used as a metaphor. From this perspective, translation is not something that just happens as a

part of a social or psychological process. It is also a craftsmanship that requires knowledge and experience. As a research field, translation studies have existed since the first bible translations and the need for translators in conflicts and negotiations (Venuti, 1995; Snell-Hornby, 2006; Munday, 2008; Baker, 2010). Translation studies are considered to be interdisciplinary, since it is used within philosophy, history, organization theory and psychology (Munday, 2009). Translations studies remind us of that a language can be more or less accessible (Ricoeur, 2006). This goes for national languages as well for professional languages (Rombach & Zapata, 2010; Haried, 1972, 1973; Smith & Taffler, 1992).

A translator's task is to decipher the original text and make the best translation according to the situation (Pym, 1993). There is a debate about what best is. According to translation studies there are four ways to translate a text. (Munday, 2008; Pym, 2010): the linguistic, the cultural, the functional and the ideological. These four perspectives don't agree on what is the best way to translate since they each represent different ways to do it. Each perspective focuses at one aspect of the translation, and therefor can be considered to complement each other, since they together illustrate the choices a translator faces when a text has to be translated. The linguistic perspective focuses on the words, and tries to find equivalent words on another language. The cultural perspective reminds us that words are always in a context, and the context affects the meaning of the words, which means that texts are not only words, but also culture. The functional perspective considers the function of the text, which is defined by the author's intention. The ideological perspective studies power in translations, including the power of translators, texts and these effects on society. The translator has a huge influence on the translation but is

invisible in the process, since the focus is on the text and it is assumed that the translator only changes the words, and not the meaning. Unlike, perspectives that define strategy as the smallest entity, translation studies don't assume that a text can be read as a monolithic unit. A text offers different readings and understanding, depending on which lines, sections or pages you read. This allows further studies on what actors do with the strategy they have by looking at how they translate it.

### **Method**

This article is based on a case study in three large public organizations in Denmark from 2011-2013. The cases were selected as a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2004). The methods used were interviews, observational studies and text analysis of the main strategy documents in the organizations. 35 interviews were conducted with managers from three levels, top management, heads of departments and team managers. They were interviewed about the contents of the strategy documents and how they used them. The interviews were transcribed in Nvivo using a mixed coding approach with both a theoretical coding and a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Saldaña, 2012). I also participated in 14 strategy meetings between different groups from the organizations. The agenda on the meetings were to discuss the strategy and its implications. The number of the participants in the meetings were between 12 and a couple of hundred. Finally, I analyzed the strategy documents from the three organizations. The strategy documents were coded the same way as the interview in order to analyse how they corresponded. In the analysis, the documents are treated like one, because it is not the documents, which are being analysed but how managers translate them.

**The strategy documents**

Since the strategy documents were from three different organizations, they differed in their contents, but at the same time there were similarities, which can be ascribed to the characteristics of the strategy genre. Strategy A was a digitalization strategy written by the IT department, but approved by the top management. It was 36 pages and described the trends in society and the digitalization projects within the organisation from 2010-2013. Strategy B was an organization strategy consisting of three documents; the strategy plan (20 pages) that describes the objectives in abstract terms, the business plan (21 pages), which is a specification of the objectives described in the strategy plan, and the production plan (88 pages) that describes all the activities in the organization and the KPIs. Strategy C was the business strategies for the six agencies, which combined was the strategy for the organization. They described which actions the organization would take in order to create results for their target group using a casual model showing the relationship between activities, output and outcome. In addition to this description, there was also KPIs for each activity. The documents were 8-12 pages each. The words in the documents were all abstract in the beginning and became progressively more detailed towards the end of the text. The abstract parts tell what the goal is, and the detailed parts describe the actions in order to achieve the goal. The language of the strategies was also influenced by the professionalism of the authors. The language was academic and / or discipline-specific, such as written with IT, governance or management terminology.

**Closing the strategy document by focusing on the understandable and agreeable**

The first step to found out what to do with the strategy is to find out what it means.

The managers found out what the strategy was about by first reading the strategy to

see which parts they agree upon and which parts they understand. They call this for “the strategy makes sense”, but a more accurate description would be “which parts of the strategy make sense”. It isn’t a surprise that there can be parts that the manager doesn’t agree upon. Nevertheless, because of the use of a certain professional language in the documents, there were parts in the strategy that a manager didn’t understand. This means that some of the managers only understood part of the strategy. In order to turn the strategy document into a useful tool, the manager didn’t read the strategy and understood it as a whole, but coded it into four categories.

A manager illustrates why a strategy is not read as monolithic unit:

*“There are parts of the strategy that are irrelevant to me because I do not have an opinion about it, or because it has nothing to do with my work. The part about IT isn’t relevant. To say it’s irrelevant to me is perhaps a little far-fetched, because my employees’ IT have to work, or they cannot do anything, but again, I do not really care about how we implement an IT strategy as long as my employees are happy and satisfied with the IT systems they use. So, there may well be things in the strategy that I don’t care about. “*

This manager divides the strategy into different parts by looking at what is relevant for his job and what is not. He ignores the parts that he doesn’t find relevant. Another manager explains how he finds out what is relevant by using the phrase that it has to make sense and tells how the strategy makes sense:

Interviewer: *“How does the strategy make sense?”*

Manager: *“It makes sense if it is something that is compatible with our work. It may also be a nice challenge if it does not simply fit into your daily work. It may well be*

*something that we really have to work with to make it fit. But if it is meaningful, then we also want to do it.”*

This manager is an example of a manager who takes the translation task seriously. It doesn't have to be easy, as long as he agrees upon it and he understands it because it makes the strategy compatible with his work.

Another manager explains about the roles of the words in the strategy:

*“I have been involved in Nordic language policy, and I know that the world of IT is influenced by English. A part of the digital strategy, although they have worked a lot with it, is still an internal tool for those of us who know the terminology.... And you can see that IT strategy is still so heavily influenced by an English set of words, and I think that the ministry should promote the Danish language, but I also know that it can be difficult. So, I rather Danishfy it. So, instead of using English terms, we use a Danish word. There is too much English terminology in the strategy and I'm relieved that I don't have to share it with all employees because they would not be able understand certain elements of it.”*

This manager explains why some parts of the strategy don't make sense. It is because of the language in the strategy. Some things are hard to understand since it is written in a foreign tongue. He uses the homemade expression “Danishfy” to explain how he tries to make the strategy understandable for people who don't speak the language in the strategy. What he calls Danishfy, is actually to translate the text. It seems that managers only focus on what is relevant for them in the strategy by looking at what they understand and what they agree on.

After the strategy is divided into these four categories, understandable, not understandable, agreeable and disagreeable the managers handle the strategy in four different ways. The first is that they translate the specific parts of the strategy they consider to be understandable and agreeable to their tasks. The managers translate the strategy by producing a new text that suits their context. This is similar to Giraudeau's findings, when he describes how a strategy plan can act as basis for imagination, but it seems to be more than just imagination. It is a kind of craftsmanship, where the manager translates parts of the original strategy and turns it into a tool that he can use.

The second approach is that they just repeat what is in the strategy because they consider the strategy to be not understandable but agreeable and therefore not relevant to their tasks. The repetition can happen at a meeting where the manager simply reads from the strategy or by mail, where the manager just cut and paste words from the strategy.

A manager points to this:

Manager: *"It is a difficult task to communicate the strategy to an office with 23 employees and make them show some interest in it."*

Interviewer: *"Why is it difficult?"*

Manager: *"Because the strategy is comprehensive. It is written in another professional language, and for most of my employees, that language is as far away as it is for me. It is a little easier for me it because I get more information on how ... Well, I am better prepared than they are."*

The manager says that it is difficult to communicate the strategy because her employees' professionalism isn't addressed in the strategy. Even though she says that she is better prepared, her words show that she doesn't know what to do, because she doesn't understand certain words in the strategy.

The third approach is that they consider the strategy to be understandable, but disagreeable. They cannot ignore it because the strategy affects their work in the wrong direction. Therefore, they try to sabotage the strategy and neutralize it, as a later section on ideological translation will show.

The fourth approach differs from the other approaches because the manager is not capable of reading or translating the strategy. The strategy is both not understandable and disagreeable. The manager remains silent because they do not know what to do with the strategy. It may be that these managers do not understand the strategy or do not know how to translate it to their employees, as it is written in a language they are not familiar with or uses the wrong words.

The remarkable thing about this approach is that the strategy may be relevant for the employees, but the manager does not know how the strategy can be translated to them. Therefore, the employees are not familiar with the strategy regardless of whether they are already following it or not. One example is a manager who has had an unread mail with the strategy document lying in her mailbox for 8 months: *"And I also read my boss's mail for the first time the other day which said that it is important and I should pass it on to my staff. And I have not done this yet. When I read the strategy, I think that it makes no sense to try to communicate it to my employees. Not*

*in this language it is written in now. It's simply too boring. And there is too much nonsense, which will not be interesting to my staff. The five focus areas and the drawings are too difficult to understand. So, I have not."* The thought provoking element of this example is that, despite her inactivity in telling the employees about the strategy, the manager believes that it is a theme that is very important to the department, as they spend many resources on this theme. The manager explains further: *"We are really far ahead here with the topic of the strategy, but I should probably be sorry and say that I do not think there is a single employee here who feel they are part of the overall strategy."*

It's a judgment call whether employees should feel like a part of the overall strategy. However, it is interesting to note that the employees are not familiar with the strategy, even though the subject is very close to their daily tasks. This is because the manager does not translate the strategy in one of the ways described below. The manager has an expectation that the strategy can be passed on in its original form, and when this form is not suitable for the employees, the strategy remains in an unread mail.

#### **Four models of translations**

When the manager has decided which parts of the strategy that needs to be translated, the next step is to decide on how to translate it. There are four models of translations, linguistic, cultural, functional and ideological. The four models can be used on the same text, since every word, line and section has to be translated according to what the translator thinks is the best translation.

**Linguistic translation**

A manager tells us about his thoughts on the language in the strategy and how he translates it: *"...So the strategy is not a bestseller among the employees because the strategy uses many words that are derived from English terminology, and even many abbreviations that even I am just beginning to understand ... And I must admit I prefer to use Danish words, and in our communication with our employees, we all use the Danish words, when we can get away with it."*

The consequences are that some people within the organization have difficulties understanding the words in the strategy if it is not translated. Though the strategies are written in Danish, they are written in professional or academic terms. This means that the content can be easier or more difficult to read and understand depending on the specific professionalism of the recipients.

In one of the interviews a manager tells me what she does, when the words in the strategy is difficult to understand:

Interviewer *"What do you do if you don't understand some of those words or phrases?"*

Manager: *"I ask my manager."*

Interviewer: *"Okay. Have you experienced that he agrees that some of those words are somewhat academic, or ...? "*

Manager: *"No, he has a law degree, so I don't think there are words he doesn't understand. So, we google it. It's always helpful to google something. "*

Another manager explains what happens when the words seem strange.

Interviewer: *"Are there any words or phrases that seem strange to you in the strategy?"*

Manager: *No, you can probably just say that something that comes from our corporate centre, is probably written in a sophisticated language ... "*

Interviewer: *"How?"*

Manager: *"Sorry to say, but it is academic language. We are practitioners at my office, so it is hard for them to understand. Also for me"*

Interviewer: *"Do you remember some formulations that made you wonder, "what does it mean?" "*

Manager: *"No, not right now. But there are some words that sometimes make us laugh."*

Interviewer: *"Yes? Do you have an example of that?"*

Editorial: *"Interaction, I remember we talked about that one"*

Interviewer: *"Interaction?"*

Manager: *"Yes, because it is just cooperation."*

Apparently, people can google the words that they do not understand, but it does not mean that they come to an understanding of the strategy. Others try to overcome the problem by making a linguistic translation of the words; for example, "interaction" becomes "cooperation" or English abbreviations are translated into Danish. In this case the words that seem academic, translated into another word that is a better fit for practitioners. But only after they ridiculed it.

**Cultural translation**

A cultural translation is based on the meaning is not formed by the word, but the context. Sometimes a word in the source language has no equivalent on the receiving language, or that the word will have a completely different meaning in another culture. This makes not only the relationship between the source language and receives language relevant, but also the relationship between source culture and the receiving culture.

A manager talks about what culture means for the strategy:

Interviewer: *"You say that you have been working with strategy. How did you do that?"*

Manager: *"Well, we are in five different locations all over the country... And we will probably say that we are an organization that speaks our tribal languages. But as we work differently, for there are differences between the different parts of the country."*

He continues to explain what the differences are:

Manager: *"The mentality, the pace, in which degree they accept changes, when is an order an order, and when is it up for discussion. There are some who believe that everything is up for discussion, although it is actually an order. The local units just want to take care of themselves and be left in peace by the central units. And those in the central units say it is a disruptive element that we have someone sitting in local units."*

He was asked what he does, and he explains: *"We put some more words to the strategy. And I've put what our manager team agreed on: where we can contribute the*

*most. We must contribute to the whole strategy, but there are some areas where we can make a special contribution.”*

The cultural translator takes a greater degree of freedom in the translation than a language translator, since he puts more words to the strategy. Instead of just finding another word for the same, the text changes, because a cultural translator wants to make the text relevant for the reader.

### **Functional translation**

This type of translation adds a functional twist, as the manager asks how he or she can use the strategy. This is something else than that the strategy is relevant, because in this case the translator can take a text and make it relevant. There are two possibilities for functional translation. The first is that the manager condenses the strategy and extracts what he or she considers to be the intention of the strategy. They will not produce a new strategy if the intention of the strategy is already present in either their work or in another management tool. If they produce a new strategy, it is not the words that are translated, but the intention. As is the case with a cultural translation, the functional translation of the strategy and the original strategy itself can look radically different to outsiders, but for those involved there is a clear connection between the two. There is an example of a manager who reads the strategy and says it's about legal rights:

*"It's not all [of the goals in the strategy] that are relevant for me. But I've chosen the one of the goals that is important to us. It is legal rights. We are very focused on this goal. We focus on it and talk a lot about when there are new regulations: How does it*

*affect the legal rights. So, this is the way we work with the strategy. Without thinking about that it is actually a vision or strategy. So, we say that it is important, for example, that legal rights are in focus, and it's a recurring theme for the work we do. So, we pick some things out and say that it is relevant to us. That we have a special obligation and there are some specific expectations to us in that area. So, we have an extra focus on it in our work."*

The manager has not talked with anyone but his employees about the strategy being about legal rights. One can only speculate how many of this type of functional translations that exist in organizations and how much variation exists between the translations.

A manager tells a story about their strategies, which is an example of a functional translation.

Manager: *"Not very long ago the business strategy was the document we had made ourselves. And we didn't send it to the central offices. They knew we had it but our dialogue with the central offices was based on the performance contracts. We just thought that the contracts weren't enough. There were some specific goals, but no descriptions of how to reach them. It was up to ourselves to make a document that showed our priorities and what we think is important in order to reach the goals in the performance contracts plus some other goals that we thought were important, because the 8-10 goals in the contracts were not adequate. There was nothing about HR and the entire HR area, so we made a strategy that also included that ... So, this is what we have called the business strategy until not so long ago, but the whole*

*organization have been working on a strategy concept and it is called the business strategy. So, we made one of those. Now we call this one for our business strategy or our external strategy, and the document that I talked about earlier, is our internal strategy."*

His statements show that managers are able to produce new texts that either serve as a supplement for existing texts or that text can have the same name, but have different functions. The production of the first strategy is a functional translation since it is a translation of the performance contract. It doesn't translate the words or the culture but the function that he describes as "*a document that showed our priorities*".

### **Ideologically translation**

An ideologically translation is about the ideology in the text. Every text has a notion about good and bad, problems and solutions or heroes and villains. This goes for a strategy text too. A translator can thereby translate the ideology or change it. This allows other actors to gain knowledge about how the top management is thinking. If they disagree, they can take countermeasures, and provide resistance in an elegant way, or just prepare to argue their case within the ideology of the strategy.

An example of this is when a manager was sent a series of PowerPoint slides on the strategy to be presented to employees. The manager says that she commented on the presentation:

Interviewer: "*Can you give an example of such a comment...?*"

Manager: "*Yes, it could be, for example it here with [name of action point in the*

*strategy] Will it impact us? What can we expect it will have of influence on the work we do? Are there some of the employees that will have to move from the department? And that is a threat, and how can we deal with it. Perhaps we could do something to avoid it? And my employees accepted that I took some other tasks into the department so we avoided to provide resources to the [certain department]. We said, if we optimize our help to those who are not as good at [certain task], and so instead delivered something, then we could avoid to deliver to the [certain department]. So we try to see how we can help the organization, so that we will not be moved, by giving them an offer they can't refuse."*

By knowing the strategy, the manager can take counteractions that dismantles the parts of the strategy that could threaten her department.

Another example of ideological translation is to simple take the ideology in the strategy and make a new strategy based in it:

*Manager: "The strategy has an area that says that it has to have consequences if you don't comply. They should be hit with a hammer, and we have to deal with them and be tough on them. My job is to unfold that part of the strategy towards my own area and say what does it mean that you have to use the main ideas about crimes. Based on that we have made our own strategic plan that translates the overall strategy to the employee level.... "*

Here is a manager who takes on the translation task. Note that he will choose the part of the strategy, which he believes is relevant by looking at his own department. He

does not focus on the words, but on what he believes are the basic ideas in the strategy: that there must be consequences when you do not comply. This ideology is translated by making a new strategy for his own department.

**Discussion:**

In the literature, strategy is normally defined in singular with the main focus on how to make one, and less on what happens afterwards, because it is assumed that strategy is the end, instead of the beginning. However, this study shows that a strategy becomes many through a translation process, where each manager translates the original strategy. In relation to Girardeau's distinction between open and closed strategy, it seems like strategy is always open, because it can be read and translated in multiple ways. This connects to discussions in sociological translations, the notion of intended, deliberative, realized, unrealized and emergent strategy and the strategy as practice literature. The findings indicate an overlooked phase in strategic work, which is the translation. The term has been used as a synonym for transformation, but hasn't been taken literally even though most strategies are texts. When the original strategy is translated, it can change in such a way that is no longer recognized as the strategy, since it can be changed at four levels; the words, the culture, the function and the ideology. All four ways can be used on the same text.

On one hand, it is surprising that so many managers consider it necessary to produce new strategies to help realizing the strategy of the organization. On the other hand, the strategy of the organization is written in abstract language or uses words specific to a certain profession. The abstract language secure that as many actors as possible from the organization may consider the strategy to be right, which most do. There are far

fewer who see the strategy as relevant if they do not translate it, so the strategy matches their own context. It could give the impression that the management tool that, popularly speaking, is said to ensure that the organization is going in the same direction instead is making the people to produce new strategy documents, which increases the number of strategies that might compete with each other and are making them go in different directions.

### **Emergent strategy or translated strategy?**

The first discussion is the relations between the different kinds of strategy in Mintzberg's and Water's model from 1985. In the model, there is no connection between emergent and intentional strategy, since they are perceived as two different kinds of strategies. The results of this study show that there could be a connection, since a translation of the intended strategy could be mistaken for an emergent strategy. It could also be the case that unrealized strategy merely is a faulty translation, since it is possible to translate the strategy wrong. A suggestion would be to investigate this further and add a new category to the model called translated strategy.

### **Translation is more than a sociological process of transformation.**

The second discussion is the assumption that actors just translate strategy, as is the case when the term translation is used as a synonym for transformation. The findings show that it is not that simple, since the translator has to be able to understand the text, which is not always the case. Translation studies add a normative perspective, where the translator needs competences in order to avoid translation errors. In other words, a translation can be wrong even if the actors involved don't know it.

**Strategy as practice needs more theories**

The studies also show that the choice of theory as an analytic tool has an impact on how and what can be studied. All theory highlights and hides certain aspects. It is a viable option to follow Johnson, et al (2007) and include more actors, variables and theories in order to gain more insight in the strategy practices. Since the individual practices can't be studied by using sociological theory that focuses on the collective, it seems like a logical solution to use theory that focuses on the individual level.

**CONCLUSION**

This article uses translation studies as a framework for analysing how managers in three organizations translate the overall strategy document. The theory differs from the sociological use of the term, since translation studies understand translation literally and not merely as a metaphor for transformation.

The findings show how managers translate strategies by producing new texts based on the original one. The translations process is in two phases, the selection and the translation. In the first phase, the manager divides the strategy into four parts based on understandably and agreeable. Those parts that meet these two criteria will be translated, while the other parts will either be repeated, ignored or meet resistance. Phase two is where the selected text has to be translated, which can it be done by translating the words, the culture, the function or the ideology. It is up to the managers to choose which model they use and they can use all four models on the same text. This leads to the conclusion that no one is implementing the strategy. Everyone is implementing his or her own translation of the strategy.

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