Reversal of language hierarchy and the politics of translation

in a multinational corporation

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explain the reversal of language hierarchy in a Finnish multinational corporation (MNC) from a political perspective. We situated the language hierarchy in the historical context of the colonial-style relationship between Finland and Russia. From a post-colonial perspective, the colonial legacy of Russia has had an influence on language strategy and everyday translation work in the Finnish multinational until the present day.

Design / methodology / approach

We undertook a case study based on qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) of existing datasets. These datasets originated from two previously conducted studies of the same Finnish MNC.

Findings

Our findings revealed a reversal of the traditional corporate language hierarchy. Russian, as the host country language of powerful local subsidiaries, rose to the top of the hierarchy at the expense of English, the common corporate language, and other languages. The colonial-style relationship was enacted by professional and paraprofessional translators who collaborated by using "the master's language and imitating the master's voice" to reap the strategic benefits of local responsiveness.

Originality / value

In contrast to previous work drawing on post-colonial theory in the study of MNCs, this paper represents the headquarters in Finland as the "colonised" party and the Russian subsidiaries as the "coloniser". Due to its colonial legacy, Russian, the host country language, became very powerful and influenced the language strategy of the entire MNC. We conceptualized translation as a multilevel phenomenon and offer a holistic explanation of why the language hierarchy in the Finnish MNC was reversed.

Keywords: translation, translators, politics, language, multinational corporations

Paper type: Research paper

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Introduction

Language-sensitive international business (IB) research has recently turned its attention from the opportunities and limits of a common corporate language to language diversity and translation (Tietze and Piekkari, 2020). IB researchers have studied collective translation behaviour (Ciuk, James and Śliwa, 2019; Piekkari, Welch, Welch, Peltonen and Vesa, 2013) and the agency of individual translators (Tietze, Tansley and Helienek, 2017) in advancing professional or personal agendas at the workplace (Logemann and Piekkari, 2015). Steyaert, Ostendorp and Gaibrois (2011) proposed the concept of linguascaping, which refers to the everyday negotiations of language use grounded in the multilingual realities of the workplace. Language users in MNCs live in "multi-optional contexts", where they combine "English with other language options" (Steyaert *et al.*, 2011, p. 277). Understanding the interplay between languages of different status and influence calls for embedding the translation process both historically and culturally (Holden and Michailova, 2014).

In this paper, we explain the reversal of language hierarchy in a Finnish MNC with subsidiaries in Russia by adopting a political perspective and by situating it in the historical context of the colonial-style relationship between the two countries in the 19th century. Russia was also "an imperialist/colonialist state in that it forcibly acquired and unilaterally settled the lands of other peoples and exploited them for its own purposes" (Gibson, 2002, p. 182), including Finland. Our case company had invested heavily in Russian, not English. However, the preference for Russian was unexpected because the official corporate language is English. We show how Russian, as the host country language of strategically important subsidiaries, affected the language strategy of the headquarters in Finland and the entire MNC. Different groups of translators working both at headquarters and local subsidiaries engaged in collaborative translation to ensure that the MNC was locally responsive in Russia.

This paper makes two contributions to language-sensitive IB research. First, we adopted an explicitly political perspective to translation in MNCs and uncovered a reversal of corporate language hierarchy. In the Finnish MNC, Russian enjoys a higher status than English, reflecting the "coloniser-colonised" relationship between Finland and Russia. From a post-colonial perspective, Russia's colonial legacy has had an influence on the language strategy and everyday translation work undertaken in the Finnish multinational until the present day. Ciuk *et al*. (2019, p. 930) argue that "there is still considerable scope

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for developing the 'political perspective' (Janssens, Lambert and Steyaert, 2004) on language and translation in IB through in-depth examinations of the interactional dynamics of translation processes as they unfold". We studied the politics of translation work holistically as a multi-level phenomenon beyond and within the firm, ranging from the frontlines of translators and translation processes in foreign subsidiaries to the historical, colonial-style relationship between the two countries. This holistic approach allowed us to "locate the phenomenon within the wider global political economy" between Finland and Russia and extend "the existing focus on intra-MNC language dynamics" in IB research (Boussebaa *et al.*, 2014, p. 1165). In this regard, colonial legacy gives structure to everyday interactions.

Second, we analysed collaborative translation between professional and paraprofessional translators to ensure local responsiveness (Prahalad and Doz, 1987) and foster prosperous business with Russia. The two groups of translators scattered across headquarters in Finland and foreign subsidiaries in Russia enacted the colonial-style relationship and language hierarchy by using "the master's language and imitating the master's voice" (Prah 2009, p. 4). The term "paraprofessional" (Koskela, Koskinen and Pilke, 2017) refers to a group of translators who work for the organisation. These managers and employees translated alongside their recognised organisational role and are therefore more extensively embedded in the organisational reality than translation professionals. Previous research has largely examined these two groups of translators separately, and paraprofessional translators are only starting to gain more attention (Piekkari *et al.*, 2019; Tietze *et al*., 2017).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We first review research on a common corporate language and translation in MNCs from a political perspective as well as post-colonial theory. We then introduce the datasets of two previously conducted qualitative studies on the same Finnish MNC, which we analyse for the second time from a political perspective. After presenting our findings, we situate translation practices in the broader context of historical and colonial-style relationships between Finland and Russia and provide managerial implications as well as suggestions for future research.

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Literature review

As mentioned above, IB research has tended to conceptualise translation in a rather narrow, interlingual sense to refer to the technicalities of back translation in comparative research. This contrasts sharply with organisation studies – a sister discipline to IB – where translation is commonly understood as metaphorical, non-linguistic sense-making (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996). Recent research has made an effort to build an understanding of translation as both metaphorical and interlingual activity (Outila *et al.*, 2020; Piekkari *et al.*, 2019). In this paper, we focused on translation in an interlingual sense but go beyond methodological considerations to theorise language as a political resource. In doing so, we drew on insights from both post-colonial theory and translation studies.

Common corporate language as a political resolution

Much of the IB literature has focused on the use and choice of a common corporate language as part of MNC language strategy (Harzing and Pudelko, 2013; Marschan-Piekkari *et al.*, 1999). We defined language strategy "as the pattern of language policy responses a firm uses to cope with the multilingualism arising from international operations" (Welch and Welch, 2019, p. 619). In line with this definition, our case company adopted English as the *de facto* corporate language rather than as an explicitly codified choice that is strictly adhered to[1].

However, even a carefully chosen corporate language is highly political and contested (Piekkari and Tietze, 2014). It shapes processes of inclusion and exclusion (Lauring and Klitmøller, 2017) and privileges certain voices, rendering bodies of knowledge that cannot be expressed in English less valid than others (Tietze, 2018). Whether the common corporate language becomes the "unwritten rule" through an emergent process or gains its status through strategic decision-making by top management (Sanden and Kankaanranta, 2018, p. 1356), it reveals the headquarters' desire for control: to attempt to reduce the ability of actors in foreign subsidiaries to modify, restrict or even subvert corporate mandates and take unauthorised courses of action at a local level. Although Vaara *et al*. (2005, p. 596) argued 15

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[1] We thank the anonymous reviewer for this comment.

years ago that "corporate language policies… should be viewed as exercise of power", relatively few IB researchers have taken up this challenge (see, Kroon, Cornelissen and Vaara, 2015, for an exception).

From a political perspective, a common corporate language creates an internal language hierarchy with some languages "more equal" than others (Piekkari and Tietze, 2014, p. 264). This hierarchy of languages tends to privilege the home country language and the common corporate language – typically English – at the expense of host country languages employed in foreign subsidiaries, which are often considered less prestigious. Nordic firms also designate English as the common corporate language to improve the efficiency of communications and information-processing (Harzing and Pudelko, 2013). However, in recent years, IB research has started to challenge the superiority of English as a corporate language (Brannen *et al.*, 2014). The notion of "linguascape" by Steyaert *et al.* (2011, p. 276) attests that different languages exist simultaneously in the MNC. In later work, Janssens and Steyaert (2014) went even further to conceptualise the common corporate language as a multilingual 'franca', highlighting how different languages interact and mix with each other.

In Bourdieu's (1991) sociological theory of cultural capital, language possesses symbolic capital with an exchange value comparable to that of material goods. For Bourdieu (1991), language is not only a mediator of communication but also a medium of power. Drawing on Bourdieu's linguistic market and symbolic power of language, the linguistic anthropologist Heller (2010) talks about commodification of language in the post-colonial world, where language moves from socio-political frames toward economic ones. Commodification leads to competition over who defines what languages are legitimate and commodifiable. Languages are sociocultural constructs that exist and evolve in changing political contexts and follow societal norms and trends (Holmes and Dervin, 2016). In this landscape, foreign subsidiaries can draw on language as a political resource to gain – literally and metaphorically – both "weight" and "voice" to manoeuvre in power games (Bouquet and Birkinshaw, 2008). Individuals use the power of language to pursue their own interests, accumulate linguistic resources and adapt their expressions to the demands of their audience or social context (Bourdieu 1991).

Translation as a political act

As firms expand their international operations to new language markets, their language strategies evolve and often come to include translation as well (Welch and Welch, 2019). Adapting Meylaerts' (2010, p. 229) point on multilingual societies to MNCs, it can be argued that "there is no language policy without a translation policy". In this paper, translation is a political act through which professional and paraprofessional translators enact colonial-style relationships and language hierarchies. In this regard, our definition differs from the view of Janssens, Lambert and Steyaert (2004, p. 424), who see translation as "an act of power, determining who is acknowledged as a full-fledged partner, who is allowed to communicate and whose interests can influence the decision making".

In translation studies – the discipline that focuses on the products and processes of translators and interpreters across languages – translation is defined as "an analytical-synthetical, research-intensive process that requires extensive background knowledge (both tacit and explicit) of the source and target languages and cultures, as well as the subject matter of the text, purpose of the translation, requirements of the target audience, potential roles of the translator and translation methods and strategies suitable for different cultures and communication situations" (Risku, Dickinson and Pircher, 2010, p. 93). This broad definition suggests that the knowledge and skills of professional translators extend far beyond the source and target language.

In business contexts, especially in marketing translation services, the term "transcreation" is sometimes used to signal the complexity of a translation task. The term refers to the creative and transformative nature of the translation process when the translator rebuilds the entire text "so that it sounds and reads both natural and creative in the target language and culture" (Risku, Pichler and Wieser, 2017, p. 58). Translation scholars also talk about adaptation, domestication, localisation and skopos, i.e. the functional adequacy of the translated text. Translators aim to "produce a target version that keeps the 'look and feel' of the original, yet passing itself off as the original" (Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006, p. 20). From a scholarly perspective, however, translation is a generic term that always involves a certain amount of cultural adaptation and creativity (Risku *et al.*, 2017). In the disciplinary language of IB, we would talk about local responsiveness (Prahalad and Doz, 1987).

In their influential conceptual article, Janssens *et al.* (2004) draw on translation studies to develop three metaphorical perspectives on language strategies for MNCs. They differentiate between mechanical, cultural and political metaphors for translation. The political perspective, which is particularly relevant for our study, is "envisaged as a more particular perspective of the cultural one" (Janssens *et al.*, 2004, p. 418). Translation always implies a degree of manipulation or negotiation between major stakeholders in the translation process. Unlike the mechanical and cultural metaphors, the political approach highlights the colonising effects. As an approach, the political perspective "redefines the translation phenomenon as a constant struggle and competition between different cultural systems", emphasising "the importance of status and power relationships of languages and cultures" (Janssens *et al.*, 2004, p. 418).

Ciuk *et al.* (2019) also build on insights from translation studies and the conceptual work by Janssens *et al.* (2004) in their study of a Polish subsidiary of a US multinational. Their findings show how interlingual translation was used "as a forum for the exercise of power and micropolitics and a management tool aimed at promoting desired behaviours and attitudes among staff, and pre-empting resistance" (p. 933). In embracing the political perspective, they argue that "translators seek to navigate between the potentially conflicting interests of a range of stakeholders, and to invoke particular responses in the recipients of translated texts" (Ciuk *et al.*, 2019, p. 927). In our study, the recipients of translations are Russian customers in the housing business who prefer to buy in their native language as well as Russian-speaking monolingual employees of the case company.

Post-colonial theory

Post-colonial studies on MNCs provide us with a critical lens for analysing the politics of translation as "there is a need for more focus on the internal dynamics of MNCs from the perspective of the origins of such firms in special imperial relationships" (Boussebaa and Morgan, 2014, p. 102). Post-colonial theory is a broad school of thought that examines "a range of social, cultural, political, ethical and philosophical questions", recognising "the salience of the colonial experience and its persisting aftermath" (Jack et al., 2011, p. 277). Post-colonial researchers situate the phenomena in a wider historical and geo-political context which is why it is a particularly suitable approach for us. Neo-

colonialism, in turn, refers to the persistent influence that the colonial past has on the lives of former colonies that are now independent (https://iep.utm.edu/neocolon/). MNCs exercise Western superiority in contemporary societies through "political, economic and cultural control" (Banerjee and Prasad, 2008, p. 91).

Western MNCs are primary agents in what Boussebaa (forthcoming) calls "corporate-driven cultural globalisation". As socio-political actors and sites, MNCs "are actively involved in the creation and diffusion of norms, practices and identities at the transnational scale" (Boussebaa, forthcoming). These corporations are among the most significant carriers of neo-colonialism worldwide as they reproduce the distinction between the core and the periphery from colonial times and maintain coloniser-colonised power relationships inside the organisation (Boussebaa et al., 2014; Boussebaa & Morgan, 2014; Storgaard, Tienari, Piekkari and Michailova, 2020).

Such colonial-style power relationships are often sustained through the spread and imposition of language (Boussebaa et al., 2014; Phillipson, 1992; Śliwa, 2008; Vaara et al., 2005). The notion of linguistic imperialism refers to the dominance of English and its privileged position and hegemony in the world (Phillipson, 1992; see also Tietze, 2018). The influence of American-style capitalistic business culture on a global scale is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the normalisation of English as the language of corporate globalisation (Boussebaa, forthcoming). In Bourdieu's (1991) terms, English has become a socially dominant linguistic form that empowers its speakers within their social space. Mastering the legitimate language within the reference group also creates substantial linguistic capital. In a study of Indian off-shore call centres, Boussebaa et al. (2014) show how, by training local Indian employees to speak "pure" English, corporate englishisation generated tensions and social inequality between native and non-native speakers. It reproduced colonial-style power relations between employees, their clients and customers.

Post-colonial theory has also been a source of inspiration for studies conducted in non-English contexts. Śliwa (2008, p. 231) analysed from a historical perspective how Polish society experienced the "forced spread of Russian and German" after 1795. She drew on Phillipson's (1992) concept of "linguistic imperialism", suggesting that a language can be employed as a tool to dominate or colonise people in another country. Her rich description of "almost 200 years of linguistic imperialism" (p. 237)

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in Poland uncovers local "resistance against russification and germanisation of the society" (Śliwa, 2008, p. 239). During the socialist era the Poles perceived Russian as an idiom "of a lower status, somewhat vulgar, and, most importantly, the language of the communists." (Śliwa, 2008, p. 235). In their study of a merger between a Swedish and a Finnish bank, Vaara et al. (2005) also identify a post-colonial hierarchy along the coloniser-colonised axis. Adopting Swedish as the corporate language of the new financial institution reflects the perceived superiority of Swedes in relation to Finns.

Societal context of our study

As a result of the 1808-09 war between Sweden and Russia, Finland was annexed by Russia. It became an autonomous part of the Russian Empire and maintained this status for over one hundred years. During that period, the Grand Duchy of Finland retained its former laws and faith, but also experienced russification campaigns from 1899 to 1905 and 1908 to 1917. Russia did not succeed in assimilating Finland and its people linguistically or culturally. Finland enjoyed a high degree of internal autonomy during the first century under Russian rule, and the administrative russification efforts evoked outrage leading to organised resistance. Despite imposition of the Russian language and administration and press censorship, and strengthening of the status of the Russian Orthodox Church, Finland was less affected by cultural and societal russification than parts of the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and other borderlands of the empire (Halzel et al., 1981). Finland declared its independence in 1917 following the turmoil of the Russian revolution. Yet, the colonial influence of the Eastern neighbour on Finnish business life has persisted until the present day.

During the Second World War Finland tried to secure its independence by joining the Axis powers and was consequently forced to pay post-war reparations to the Soviet Union consisting of various industrial goods. This marked the birth of intense trade between the countries, which continued on a bilateral clearing basis until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia's position as one of Finland's main trading partners has endured; in 2019, Russia was the fifth most important country for exports and the second for imports (Statistics Finland 2019a). A recent survey shows that 71% of Russians have a positive or very positive attitude towards Finland; Finnish companies in Russia enjoy a good reputation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2019). Our case company is one of the biggest

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Finnish investors in Russia. Thus, Russia has historically had – and still has – a special position in Finnish foreign trade.

As Russian is one of the world's most spoken languages, Russians are used to interacting in their own language; English proficiency remains remarkably low. According to a recent ranking of 100 countries and regions, the English proficiency score in Russia did not improve during the period of 2014 to 2019 (EF English Proficiency Index, 2019). In 2014, only 11% of Russian adults reported the ability to have a conversation in English, while 70% stated that they had no knowledge of any foreign language (EF English Proficiency Index, 2019). For Russians, their language is the defining feature of their culture (Holden, Cooper, and Carr, 1998). Recent nationalistic sentiments also emphasise the importance of Russian as a unifying force in the Russian-speaking world and hence reduce the need for Russians to master any other language.

In contrast, Finnish represents a small language group and therefore Finns do not expect others to master their language. The Finnish educational system ensures proficiency in several languages. Consequently, Finns are among the world's best non-native speakers of English (EF English Proficiency Index, 2019). In fact, multilingualism is inherent in Finnish society. Finnish and Swedish are the official languages of Finland and Saami languages enjoy official status in the northern parts of the country (Institute for the Languages of Finland, 2019, Statistics Finland, 2019b).

Despite the excellent educational system and awareness of multilingualism, Finnish companies have a hard time finding competent staff with requisite skills in both Finnish and Russian. While Russian-speaking residents are the largest minority in Finland, only 9.5% of all Finnish high school students chose Russian as a foreign language in 2017. In contrast, 19.2% studied German and 15.9% Spanish. The vast majority (98%) opted for English (Education Statistics Finland, 2017; Statistics Finland, 2019). Although cross-border business with Russia offers lucrative opportunities it is rather surprising that so few Finns seek to learn Russian. The burden of the past may still influence attitudes towards the Eastern neighbour and many Finns consider Western languages and cultures more attractive than the Russian language and culture.

Case study methodology

Our case company is a Finnish MNC – a construction and property company that we call Genro for the sake of anonymity. Genro started doing business with the Soviet Union in 1961. Over the years, it concentrated on business-to-business and delivered constructions and equipment to a range of industries, including mining, metal, hospitality, housing and oil & gas. Genro has recently focused on housing, property maintenance and service. In 1987, the number of employees in the Soviet Union peaked at 1000; this increased demand for interpreters.

Since 1997, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the company has established subsidiaries in six cities in Russia through joint ventures and greenfield investments. By 2008, Genro had become the largest foreign construction company in urban development in Russia. Genro decided to staff the new subsidiaries with Russian rather than Finnish management because local responsiveness was considered a key success factor in a large, culturally and linguistically diverse market. The emphasis on local responsiveness was also coupled with the practice of operating in Russian. Despite a decline in business with Russia, Genro did not reduce the number of services provided in Russian. The significance of the Russian language and Russian business for Genro reflects its long-term commitment to the Russian market and the historical relationships between Finland and Russia.

We chose a case study method because it allows us to provide a rich description of the social scene and reveal deep structures of social behaviour (Dyer and Wilkinson, 1991). As a case company, Genro was particularly fitting for our research purpose because it produces a lot of translations and even has its own translation unit at headquarters in Finland. We purposefully selected Genro because it is an information-rich case for in-depth inquiry (Patton, 2002). Risku, Pein-Weber and Milosevic (2016, p. 989) note that "in-house translators are gradually becoming a rare commodity", which underscores the uniqueness of the case. Genro has operated in the Finnish market for over a hundred years. Besides Finland, the company operates in seven CEE countries including the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. At the time of our study in 2016, Genro generated revenue of 1.8 billion euros and had 5300 employees. In that year, Russia accounted for 15% of the revenue and 27% of the personnel. We gained access to the company as one of the authors had

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worked there previously as Head of Human Resource Management for Russian Operations and interacted closely with the translation unit of the company.

Reuse of existing qualitative case studies

For the purposes of this article, we revisited two separate qualitative case studies on Genro that the members of our research team had conducted previously and reanalysed them (Outila, 2016; Ristolainen, 2018). When combined, the two projects provided us with a holistic view of the translation process. Tarrant and Hughes (2019, p. 541) argue that reusing and "scaling up" data require that the combined qualitative studies are linked with each other.

In our case, both studies focused on Genro, both examined translation, albeit from slightly different perspectives, and both occurred not too far apart in time. The first one, conducted in 2013–2014, was about translating Western organisational practices to Genro's subsidiaries in Russia in a metaphorical and interlingual sense (Outila, 2016). We call it the subsidiary study. This study provides an in-depth view of the Russian organisational and socio-cultural context. We also included one interview from this study in our paper. The second study, conducted in 2016, dealt with interlingual translation at headquarters; we primarily drew on this study in our findings. We label it the HQ study (Ristolainen, 2018). The data were collected from multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews and secondary data. The researcher of the HQ study interviewed seven professional and paraprofessional translators. Table 1 details our data sources.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In the HQ study, all interviews lasted from 30 to 85 minutes and were conducted in Finnish, which was the native language of both the interviewer and the interviewees. Since the topic of the HQ study was to explore the translation process of an MNC, the interview questions centred around the translation process and covered issues such as the languages used in the company, the translation process, and any problems encountered therein. The researcher of the HQ study had previously worked as a professional

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translator and project manager in a translation agency; this equipped her with a solid understanding of translation and translator agency. As our topic is the politics of interlingual translation, we focused on a rereading of the interviews collected for the HQ study and complemented them with insights from the subsidiary study.

Qualitative secondary analysis of existing data

Qualitative secondary analysis (QSA), or reanalysis of existing data, is becoming an established research method in social sciences because of increasing demands for transparency and the challenges faced by researchers in negotiating access to new research sites (Bishop and Kuula-Lummi, 2017; Corti, Thomson and Fink, 2004; Tarrant and Hughes, 2019). This method allows researchers to pose new research questions, approach "the data in ways that were not originally addressed" and make various interpretations (Corti et al., 2004, p. 293).

We undertook a political rereading of the "sister" datasets, recontextualised them in relation to each other and brought them "into analytical conversation" (Tarrant and Hughes, 2019, p. 549). In practice this meant that we located the two studies in the wider political context, focusing on the economy, history and colonial-style relationships between Finland and Russia. We also sought to integrate the broad spatial and temporal context into our explanation of why Genro had invested so heavily in Russian. We used contextualised explanation as a mode of theorising (Welch et al., 2011, p. 747); this approach aims at rendering contextual information from descriptive to explanatory material. In other words, we theorized in context rather than away from context (i.e. to generalise). This approach is closely aligned with the underpinnings of post-colonial theory. When rereading the interview transcripts and listening to the recordings of the two studies, the political perspective provided us with a critical lens through which to reanalyse the data set. While we did not collect any new primary data, we incorporated novel secondary data on the shared history of Finland and Russia as well as on Genro's history, and information about the spoken languages in these two countries to arrive at a contextualised explanation.

We conducted a qualitative thematic reanalysis of the transcribed interviews. This included identifying, coding and categorising the raw data (Patton, 2002). We used open coding to segment our

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data into meaningful expressions (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Our initial codes described the translation process, challenges in translations and roles in translations in accordance with the interview guide. Early on in the qualitative secondary analysis, we noticed that Russian seemed to gain much more managerial attention in Genro's translation process than English. We found this puzzling because Genro's official corporate language was English. We therefore turned to the literature on power and politics in translation work (Janssen *et al*., 2004). This body of research shed light on status differences between languages and cultures as well as language hierarchies in MNCs (Piekkari and Tietze, 2014). It also drew our attention to the interplay between the two groups of translators – professional and paraprofessional – involved in translation of documents into Russian. We categorised our data into three main themes: 1) the dominance of Russian in translations, 2) the lack of attention to English and other languages, and 3) collaboration between translator groups. The reanalysis showed that at Genro the corporate language hierarchy was reversed.

In line with post-colonial theory, researchers need to be open about their own position in knowledge production and detail the implications for the research process and its outcomes (Banerjee and Prasad, 2008; Westwood, 2006). Our team consisted of three Finnish researchers; two of us teach and conduct research in business schools (one located in a monolingual country and another in a bilingual country) and one of us is a management practitioner for a Swedish-owned MNC. We are highly aware of language issues not only through our own research interests, but also through our personal trajectories with work experience and language studies abroad. Yet, we acknowledge that we presented our findings from the Finnish rather than the Russian perspective, thus giving priority to the views of the colonised. Our work reflects the historicity of our own mindsets and perspectives; we were all raised in Finland and socialised into the narrative of a small country with a large neighbour. This may have made us particularly sensitive to the historical impact of Russia on contemporary business relations with Russians. The fact that we were surprised by the dominance of Russian over English in Genro and use the notion of a *reversed* language hierarchy suggest that we have internalised and normalised the hegemony of English in the corporate world, including Russia.

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Findings

Our findings show that Genro has invested heavily in Russian, the host country language of its foreign subsidiaries. Since Genro's *de facto* official corporate language is English, the emphasis on Russian instead of English is striking. Some members of the management team at HQ in Finland could communicate directly with local management in Russia. These multilingual employees did not necessarily need to rely on translation services; this ensured more timely and efficient communication and reduced costs. Hence, Genro had direct access to local management and probably held a tighter managerial grip over the local subsidiaries. Overall, our findings show that Genro had a very positive and appreciative attitude towards Russians as a business partner.

Our rereading of the interview material provided evidence of how Genro's language hierarchy was reversed by the preference for Russian, the language of powerful local subsidiaries. Hence the local language took precedence over the official language and thereby redirected Genro's language and translation strategy. To reap the benefits of local responsiveness, Russian translations were implemented through collaborative efforts between professional and paraprofessional translators. While much emphasis was put on the Russian translations, other subsidiary languages received hardly any attention at HQ. In addition, translations into English, the common corporate language, were not coordinated and therefore suffered from fluctuations in quality. In the following, we first describe the preference for Russian over English and thereafter the lack of attention to English.

Russian in the spotlight

Language-related practices emerged, developed and became established during Genro's internationalisation process. The subsidiary study shows that Genro started operating abroad in English, but after its initial expansion to Russia, Russian language experts were recruited to facilitate business negotiations on the local level. As the proportion of international business grew at the beginning of the 2000s, Genro decided to adopt English as the official corporate language. Even though, as the HQ study reveals, the language strategy did not exist in written form, the role of English was emphasised by all interviewees, as the following quotation of the communications manager shows:

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Officially, English is the common language for all, each subsidiary is able to use it on some level.

Although English formally enjoyed the highest status and hence would have presumably had priority over the host country language, Russian had already gained a solid position in the internal language hierarchy. The subsidiary study reveals resistance to English as the corporate language. A new managing director of a Russian subsidiary attempted to implement the corporate language mandate. However, the new practice did not resonate among the other members of the management team:

Lately, the management team meetings have been conducted in English; presentations are also in English. Even the presentations aren't translated into Russian! But the company operates in Russia and almost 100% of the employees are Russian speakers… Perhaps, as I personally don't know English, 'each woodcock praises its own marsh'. If I spoke English fluently, perhaps I would have a different opinion.

This management team member resorted to a proverb to convey his frustration and disappointment with the new language strategy. By using the proverb 'each woodcock praises its own marsh', he emphasises how people acclaim everything close to them; unlike the new managing director, he did not consider English proficiency important in Russian business because he himself was not fluent in English. The subsidiary study reveals that the attempt of the new managing director to use English locally failed and he was soon replaced. Consequently, the language of management meetings was switched back to Russian, demonstrating its inherent position in Genro.

The preference for Russian over English was upheld by the in-house translation unit and collaborative translation work between paraprofessional and professional translators, which we will turn to next.

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In-house translation unit

To meet the need for Russian translations, the HQ in-house translation unit was in charge of all translations from Finnish into Russian. It also shared translation commissions with subsidiary translation units when the source language was English. Throughout Genro's history, the HQ translation unit has played a central role in creating and maintaining Genro's voice, tone and style in Russian communication. While the number of translators and interpreters employed at the department varied from year to year, it had resisted outsourcing pressures and market fluctuations. As the chief interpreter recalls:

> In the 1990s there were almost twenty of us translators [and] we had lots of projects in Russia. Then the number of translators decreased and there were times when I was here alone. When Genro started to establish subsidiaries in Russia in the 2000s, we recruited a couple of persons so that there are now three of us.

The group communications director explains how Genro's attempt to implement English as a common corporate language failed due to the limited English proficiency in the Russian subsidiaries:

> The reason why we do translations in Russian is that in Russia we have a lot of employees who simply cannot speak any other language, and even though the corporate language is English, we cannot change the situation in a fortnight.

A translator adds:

> Russia is a special case [in terms of languages] because there the personnel have less proficiency in English. Now the younger generation is starting to master [English], but for example in the management of the subsidiaries, there are still persons who cannot speak English. Therefore, all the material needs to be translated into Russian.

Because housing and property business is very local in character, Genro's management prefers employees with solid skills in business management rather than in English. Also, since very few foreign companies operate in the Russian housing business, the number of potential recruits with advanced foreign language skills is limited on the job market. It was easier for Genro to find specialists and managers proficient in Russian in Finland than specialists proficient in English in Russia. A native Russian translator states – with a hint of sarcasm – how her work will not come to an end in the near future:

> In every subsidiary few than 50% of staff can speak English. Even in management not everybody speaks English, and will not learn it, of course, because they don't have time. Some of them have studied German or some other language at school or at university, [but] English is totally alien to them.

The perceived greatness of Russian as one of the world's most spoken languages in the wider historical and political context supports the view that knowledge in foreign languages is not necessary. Genro gives in and makes an effort to serve the target market and in-house customers in their own language. The development director of the Russian division highlights the need for an in-house Russian translation unit:

> We simply have so much material to be translated and such a great need for those translations! We have our own [in-house] resources, they know our topics and our vocabulary [so it makes sense to have this unit].

Indeed, the in-house translation unit was able to provide speedy and high-quality translations because of its long history at HQ. Over the years it had accumulated in-depth understanding of the business and specialised terminology required at Genro.

Collaborative translation work between professional and paraprofessional translators

Both the HQ and subsidiary study reveal that continuous collaboration between professional and paraprofessional translators ensured the quality of translations into Russian. The group communications director explains:

> The Russian translations provided by the translation agency did not meet our quality standards. We translate the most important and sensitive texts ourselves. The more generic type of translations can be outsourced.

Hence most Russian translations were done internally and only in exceptional situations, when the workload became too large, were translations into Russian ordered from external providers. Genro's translators had worked with a select group of external professional freelance translators for decades and could therefore rely on the high-quality of their work.

The subsidiary study provides evidence of how both in-house professional translators and paraprofessional translators at HQ and in the Russian subsidiaries worked side-by-side to make translations more locally meaningful. Translation of marketing material was a case in point as the following quotation by the communications manager reveals:

> … our local colleagues in marketing and internal communications proofread the text and then we start a discussion about what we want to say and which word we should use. Is this the word you [the Russians] have been using in your translations and does it work well in your context?

Much time and effort was devoted to ensure that the terms and expressions in the Russian language were properly translated. The development director also found this "constant dialogue" about different language versions with the Russian subsidiary staff important because sometimes the expressions "simply did not sound right". If the translation services were ordered from outside, a similar kind of "brainstorming" between external professional translators and HQ representatives would not be

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possible because these translators do not communicate directly with end customers. Not all texts were handled with similar "care". However, the exchange of ideas with internal translation professionals was especially important when the text was critical or the outcome to be published outside Genro.

The interviews reveal that providing locally adapted marketing material in Russia was crucial. Genro wanted to reach its Russian customers in a familiar language. The marketing material was refined even to the point where local language variations in various Russian cities were taken into account. In fact, use of the customers' native language is always important, but especially in "high-involvement" encounters (Holmqvist, 2011) such as those involving housing. Although marketing was fine-tuned and localised according to the target audience, the communications manager explained that Genro still wanted to keep the voice and visuals of the company brand-coherent. With its promise of good quality and reliability, Genro had positioned itself as a Finnish company rather than a local one. The look and the feel of foreignness were maintained by not adapting certain corporate message elements to the target market. For example, translations regarding Genro itself and its slogans were kept as close as possible to the source text even if the result probably sounded foreign to the Russian audience.

English in the shadows

Genro's translations into English, the corporate language, and other languages used in subsidiaries received far less attention than those into Russian. Genro needed various kinds of translations ranging from external corporate reports, press releases and annual reports to internal communication such as human resource policies and work safety documents as well as marketing materials.

Genro had contracted an external translation service provider to handle the needs of languages other than Russian. Translations into the Baltic and Slavic languages were mostly made locally in the target countries using English source texts with little monitoring from HQ. Unlike Russian, the languages of the Baltic and central and eastern European (CEE) countries did not seem to play a role in Genro's language strategy. Instead, Genro adopted English as the common corporate language in CEE countries and followed a global integration strategy. The interviewees in the HQ study argued that subsidiary staff in the CEE countries were more familiar with English than the Russians, as described by the group communications director:

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> In CEE subsidiaries the personnel can speak English pretty well [and] many of them are able to read English. If the texts need to be translated locally, our local subsidiary managers take care of them.

At Genro's HQ, communication, marketing and business development departments used the translation agency when they needed translations from Finnish into English or other languages. Genro ordered translations into 20 different language combinations from the translation agency interviewed in 2016. The majority were Finnish–English (63%) and Swedish–Finnish (11%). The rest of the orders mainly comprised translations from English into Baltic and Slavic languages used in the CEE region. Only 0.3% of all language services commissioned by Genro were proofreading assignments.

The translation agency had two project managers dedicated to Genro's translations who coordinated all incoming translation orders. Otherwise, translation work done by the external agency was not coordinated at Genro; instead, anyone working for Genro could order translations by following instructions on the company's intranet. This was also confirmed by a project manager of the external agency:

> Really many make orders from Genro, [translations]. Typically among our customers, only a few [contacts] place orders but Genro is an exception. …Some 20 persons order translations, so it [the translation process] is not centralised.

The research material indicates that HQ control over English or other language translations was much looser than in the case of Russian. Paraprofessional translators translated independently without having the outcome checked by a professional translator or proofreader. Genro strategically hired Finnish employees with appropriate language skills, typically English and/or Russian, because it valued the benefits of having managers and specialists work independently with foreign partners and customers. These employees translated material, wrote emails and spoke on the phone in different languages as part of their daily duties. Genro supported language learning by providing training during office hours.

The lack of coordination of English translations, however, seemed to have an impact on quality. The corporate communications director commented on English texts written by native Finns:

> I know many [persons], whose emails are full of examples of imperfect English. They fulfill their purpose. But there are some very hazardous situations when we hold presentations for large visitor groups and incidents with 'Finglish' occur… How does it look when it [this kind of language] spreads outside the company? I think that at least for documents published outside … quality control would be needed, so that a native would read it [the translation/text written by a non-Finn].

Even though the director above explicitly articulates her concerns about the quality of the English and its negative ramifications for Genro, no improvements were planned. The translation unit had voiced a need to have a professional English proofreader in-house but management had not responded favourably. The external translation agency did some language checking and proofreading but very few paraprofessionally translated documents were sent to the service provider for a check-up.

Interviewees pointed out that professional translators closely followed the ethics and code of conduct of their professional communities. Therefore, Genro's in-house translators refused to translate or interpret from Russian into English because they considered that their English language proficiency did not meet "professional expectations". Ideally a professional translator would only translate towards his/her first language, as one of the native Russian interpreters commented:

> It is difficult for people to understand when they call and say that we are going to have a seminar for all lawyers in the group, where all subsidiary lawyers are coming and the language is English and [they think] you know both English and Russian, so you will come to interpret, right? Well, I won't come… I don't have the routine and the terminology needed.

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The above quotation suggests that professionally trained translators are more likely to recognise the limitations of their language skills and linguistic repertoire, i.e. registers, dialects, styles and accents, than paraprofessional translators who may not be as self-aware. Paraprofessionals are less likely to be aware of risks associated with the word-to-word equivalents provided in bilingual dictionaries or by machine translation, which may unintentionally mislead the target audience. At Genro, paraprofessional translators often drafted their English texts even though they lacked formal training in translation. The interview material shows that this group of translators tended to be either overconfident or alternatively overly critical of their own linguistic capabilities.

Discussion

In this paper, we have made two contributions to language-sensitive IB research. First, we adopted an explicitly political perspective to explain the unusual language strategy and translation work of our case company. The politics of translation has received limited attention in previous research. From a post-colonial perspective (e.g., Banerjee and Prasad, 2008; Boussebaa and Morgan, 2014), the legacy of the colonial-style relationship between Finland and Russia shaped everyday translation work undertaken at HQ and foreign subsidiaries.

Second, we showed how close collaboration between professional and paraprofessional translators of Russian enhanced the MNC's local responsiveness (Prahalad and Doz, 1987). These two groups of translators enacted the colonial-style relationship and language hierarchy by using "the master's language and imitating the master's voice" (Prah 2009, p. 4). To date, translation scholars have largely studied these two groups of translators separately and paraprofessional translators are only starting to gain more attention in IB and organisation studies (Piekkari *et al*., 2019; Tietze *et al*., 2017). A clear advantage of studying translation work in the context of an MNC is that it brings together the full range of translation resources, from in-house multilingual employees and translation professionals to external language experts at both HQ and foreign subsidiaries.

Our findings showed that Genro, the Finnish case company with subsidiaries in Russia, invested heavily in Russian translations although its official corporate language was English. In contrast to

previous research reporting on the privileged position of the MNC home country language, or the high status of English as the most common corporate language (Piekkari and Tietze, 2014), our study has demonstrated a reversal of corporate language hierarchy; Russian, as the host country language of powerful subsidiaries, gained a notable position at the expense of English as the official corporate language. Hence Genro's long history in Russia combined with the status differentials between Finnish and Russian due to their colonial legacy explain why the language strategy of this company was unusual.

Previous research drawing on post-colonial theory in the study of the MNC has tended to represent the HQ as the coloniser and foreign subsidiaries as the colonised (e.g. Storgaard *et al*., 2020). In our study, the coloniser-colonised relationship was inverted as the Finnish HQ represented "the colonised" and Russian subsidiaries "the coloniser". Furthermore, our geographical context is different from that of much previous research, which has been set in the Nordic countries or English-speaking regions. Similar cross-border relationships with a corresponding colonial legacy could be found in the Baltic countries or other Central and Eastern European countries such as Poland (e.g. Śliwa, 2008). Recently, calls have been made to investigate the languages of BRIC countries such as Russian, Chinese and Portuguese, which are likely to become more influential in the changing political and global economic landscape (Tenzer et al., 2017).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Thus, we conceptualize translation as a multilevel phenomenon and offer a holistic explanation of why the language hierarchy in the Finnish MNC was reversed. Figure 1 shows that the historical sediments of a colonial-style relationship between the countries may still have a persistent influence on the language strategy and translation work undertaken in an MNC in present day. Finns endured the russification efforts, but the heritage of subordination to the former "coloniser" persisted after Finland achieved independence in 1917. During the Cold War, Finland remained officially neutral, but kept good relationships with both the West and the Soviet Union. This complex geopolitical era is known as 'Finlandisation', which refers to Finland's receptiveness and adaptation to political pressure from the

Soviet Union. This politically sensitive time was imprinted in the 'DNA' of the Finnish MNC and its employees. As Figure 1 shows, our conceptualization does not provide a cause-and-effect type of an explanation because the influences of the colonial legacy are more indirect and implicit in nature.

Conclusion

One of the biggest challenges in today's multilingual societies is "the elaboration of a fair translation policy" (Meylaerts, 2010, p. 228). It is vital for the survival of any democratic society because deciding whether or not to translate is a strong political statement. As Meylaerts explains, a fair language and translation policy has far-reaching implications for the inclusion of individuals, social groups and organisations alike as translation affects the spread of information, knowledge and ideas. Without translation, those lacking necessary language skills in multilingual settings run the risk of being excluded from decision-making, workplace communication and common activities. Language also provides access to understanding how social systems operate – "it pervades everything we take to have sense and meaning in society" (Grenfell, 2011, p. 198). There is considerable scope for further exploring the relationship between multilingualism, equality and social justice.

From a management perspective, a common corporate language is often introduced to foster global integration within the MNC. However, a dominant corporate language may also constrain the development of relationships with local stakeholders such as customers and reduce the degree of local embeddedness in a host country. Consequently, the MNC may suffer from liability of outsidership (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009) and be excluded from local communities if its identity is excessively tainted by a corporate language. To address this, MNCs such as our case company, often place native speakers at language interfaces in a host country. The ability to communicate in the customer language – rather than using English as an intermediary language – brings economic value to the MNC and ensures that it functions effectively in a multilingual environment (Welch and Welch, 2015; see also Heller, 2010).

However, unlike our case company, few MNCs have a separate budget for translating basic manuals or providing training to monolingual employees, let alone an in-house translation unit. For example, the

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introduction of new global IT systems for people management is likely to increase English-language requirements even on the factory floor. This may cause resistance to change and fear among employees who struggle to use English professionally. Unless resources are devoted to translation some groups of employees are likely to remain excluded from new initiatives and the goal of these initiatives to make work processes more efficient may be undermined. Thus, a well-aligned language and translation strategy improves internal and external communication, enhances cohesion and control in the MNC and sends the signal that translation is at the very heart of inclusive multilingual organisations.

We undertook a qualitative secondary analysis of two existing data sets which has limitations. Since the focus of the original studies was not on the politics of translation, some interesting research questions were left unanswered. For example, while we approached the phenomenon from a Finnish perspective, i.e. that of "the colonised", incorporating the Russian perspective as well would have provided a more balanced view. For future research, we believe there is considerable potential in conducting text-level analysis of translated documents to shed light on the agency and choices of translators. Are shifts in meaning intentional or unintentional? Researchers could also follow the full journey of a translated text within an MNC and document the translators' fingerprints as it undergoes translation (Koskinen, 2020). To conclude, we believe that translating meaning across borders is the very essence of IB as a field.

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Table 1. List of data sources

Sources
HQ Study:
Seven semi-structured interviews conducted in October–December 2016
Duration 30–85 minutes

Subsidiary Study:
100 semi-structured interviews with Russian managers, employees and Finnish expatriates conducted in May 2013-April 2014
Duration 40-90 minutes

Selected data sources for the qualitative secondary analysis	*Position of the interviewee within the organization*	*Age*	*Language of the interview*
Translator-interpreter (team leader)	HQ translation unit	62	Finnish
Translator-interpreter	HQ translation unit	52	Finnish
Development director of Russia division	HQ management	34	Finnish
Communications manager of Russia division	HQ management	39	Finnish
Communications director of the Group	HQ executive	48	Finnish
Project manager	External translation agency employee	~40	Finnish
Project manager	External translation agency employee	~30	Finnish
Manager	Russian subsidiary management	55	Russian

Documentation selected for the qualitative secondary analysis

Genro's internal guidelines for ordering translations
Genro's internal guidelines for making translations
Genro's internal guidelines for ordering interpretation services
Statistical data on Genro's translation provided by the external translation agency (Language pairs in translation commissions, number of linguistic services purchased in 2016, names and departments of those ordering translations in 2016)
Translation process descriptions provided by the external translation agency
Company website
Annual reports
Videos and a book on company history

Figure 1. Reversal of language hierarchy in a historical colonial context