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Translating Culture in the Global Workplace: Language, Communication, and Diversity Management

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In the highly multicultural workplace of today's multinational corporations (MNCs), translating across different cultures becomes a crucial issue. But what precisely counts as culture in the global workplace of the MNC? What does it exactly mean to be able to translate across cultures under the regimes of evaluation adopted by MNCs? In this article, I consider these questions through a discussion of the corporate discourse of diversity management, in which the cultural diversity of the workforce is understood as a resource for maximizing profit. Based on a critical review of diversity management literature and a study on Korean managers working for non-Korean MNCs in Singapore, I first show how diversity management's claim of openness and inclusivity actually works to reproduce unequal relations in the workplace. I then argue that attention to the politics of translation, where the ideological nature of evaluations of cultural (in)commensurability is highlighted, is needed for applied linguists' engagement with language and communication in the multicultural workplace.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article contributes to this special issue's focus on cultural translation in global times by extending our discussion to the context of the global workplace. In their introduction to the special issue, guest editors Claire Kramsch and Zhu Hua (this issue) present diversity and difference as competing frames for understanding acts of communicating across cultures. The perspective of diversity, which views multiplicity of cultures as co-existing in a democratic and inclusive fashion, considers all languages as equally capable of communicating meaning across communities of speakers, insofar as each language is guaranteed equal opportunities for participating in such exchange. The perspective of difference, on the other hand, focuses on the deep-seated discrepancies in the way different languages represent and shape realities for their speakers, thereby pointing to fundamental incommensurabilities between cultures and how such cultural difference may be infused with power and inequality. This article aligns with the stance of the special issue editors, as well as that of other contributors to this issue, in problematizing how the perspective of diversity has become increasingly dominant in the context of neoliberalism, where market-based freedom of individuals is valorized as the

ultimate guiding principle for all domains of life. Confronting the tension between diversity and difference, this article thus critically assesses how the neoliberal celebration of diversity in the workplace of today's multinational corporations (MNCs) obscures and rationalizes inequalities grounded in cultural difference.

Because MNCs, by definition, operate across national and ethnolinguistic boundaries, work at a MNC necessarily involves translation of meaning across cultures—that is, those working at MNCs must confront the question of how to make sense of culturally laden linguistic, discursive, and communicative practices that people from other social and ethnolinguistic backgrounds bring with them. In the context of neoliberalism, in particular, corporations actively incorporate and appropriate culture to access more diverse markets and to project a culturally open and inclusive image of themselves. Thus, today's MNCs expect their employees to work easily and efficiently across cultural boundaries, flexibly joining and leaving project-based teams that include members from different cultural backgrounds, and fluently preempting potential conflicts that may arise due to cultural misunderstandings. For this reason, employees' competence in cross-cultural communication routinely comes under scrutiny as their performance is appraised by their superiors. But what precisely counts as culture in the global workplace of the MNC? What does it exactly mean to be able to translate across cultures under the regimes of evaluation adopted by MNCs, whose ultimate goal is not cultural understanding per se but maximization of profit in the global economy? Who gets to be seen as an ideal employee with good skills in translating across cultures?

This article considers these questions through a critical analysis of the corporate discourse of *diversity management*. A dominant paradigm within management literature and practice since the last decades of the 20th century, diversity management views the varying cultural provenances of the workforce as a resource for maximizing profit, which must be subject to careful management and control. Diversity management is one context that highlights the tension between diversity and difference outlined above. Proponents of diversity management claim that it not only makes corporations more competitive, but also more open and inclusive, as it explicitly acknowledges the diversity represented by their employees and channels it into a positive energy for all. It is founded on the assumption that the cultural meaning inherent in employees' own linguistic and communicative practices can be translated into practices meaningful to the corporations' profit, and therefore adheres closely to the perspective of diversity. But this also means that diversity management denies historically and materially grounded difference in the way people from different communities mediate their realities through language, which may make such work of cultural translation difficult or impossible—in other words, diversity management refuses to acknowledge potential incommensurability of cultures. As I will discuss below, such denial of difference is not innocuous. It has significant consequences for employees and for how their

contributions to the corporation are evaluated, and thus serves as a major juncture through which power and inequality in the global workplace is reproduced. To elaborate on this point, this article interrogates diversity management from the perspective of diversity and difference as contesting frames for conceptualizing cultural translation, based on a critical review of diversity management literature and an empirical study on Korean managers working for non-Korean MNCs in Singapore.

This article is organized in the following way. The next section spells out this article's theoretical orientation by situating its argument among previous studies that draw our attention to the politics of translation and incommensurability of cultures (Sakai 1997; Povinelli 2001; Pratt 2002; Gal 2015). In particular, it presents Gramling's (2016) concept of translational monolingualism as a concrete foundation for analyzing the ideological mechanisms by which diversity comes to be foregrounded over difference in global capitalism as well as in some strands of applied linguistics research. The third section introduces diversity management in greater detail, reviewing its origin and historical development, and then problematizing its assumptions based on earlier critiques of diversity management as well as my own critical reading of diversity management literature. In particular, I link previous critiques of diversity management with the issue of cultural translation by focusing on diversity management's call for employees to ''bring their whole self to work'' (Ferdman and Roberts 2014), considering the implications this has for employees' self-positioning in the workplace and appraisal of their contributions to the corporation. The fourth section demonstrates such consequences of diversity management through a report on my research on Korean mid-level managers working at regional offices of non-Korean MNCs. My discussion focuses on a specific communicative practice associated with the Korean managers: their tendency to not speak out their thoughts, particularly against superiors. I show that, even though this was argued to be a typical ''Korean'' cultural practice by both the Korean managers and their colleagues, it was not seen as contributing positively to the working of the MNC and worked to the Korean managers' disadvantage, despite the purported inclusiveness of diversity management which invited all employees to be their own cultural selves. The final section then summarizes the argument of this paper by highlighting the ideologies and structural conditions that allow communicative practices of certain speakers to be seen as inherently more commensurable across cultures than those of others, and how this contributes to the reproduction of relations of power and inequality in the global workplace and beyond.

2. TRANSLATION, (IN)COMMENSURABILITY, AND DIVERSITY

Translation is political (Gal 2015). Here, I am not merely talking about the political implications engendered by the hybridity and layering of multiple voices that necessarily take place in the process of translation. The idea of translation itself is always already political, in the sense that it presupposes

two distinct linguacultures—ideologically constituted amalgamations of language and culture, which 'constitute a single universe of its own kind' (Friedrich 1989: 306; see also Agar 1995)—that must be bridged by the act of translation, and in doing so, it identifies disjunctures in the otherwise continuous field of social interaction, constructs contrasting relations of sameness and difference, and creates hierarchies of power. In the words of Pratt, 'the idea of cultural translation bears the unresolvable contradiction that in naming itself it preserves the distances it works to overcome' (2002: 34). That is, translation posits an incomprehensible and inconceivable other that is located beyond the boundaries of one's language and culture; and then, it proposes to bridge that gap between self and the other by claiming a voice that can identify points of commensurability between the two worlds.

Both of these aspects—the construction of the distant other, and the claims of commensurability—have enormous implications for power, generating and justifying relations of inequality between the distant other and translating self. On the one hand, while translation is typically assumed to take place between different languages, what counts as different languages is determined by politically situated ideologies (Irvine and Gal 2000), and each decision that a certain text requires translation therefore reestablishes and reinforces the relations of inequality that the linguistic boundary indexes. On the other hand, to claim a perspective that can mediate between linguacultures is to claim a position of universality and commensurability, an all-knowing vision that transcends the limitations of one's own social and cultural provenance to exert control over the flow of knowledge across languages and cultures (Povinelli 2001; Briggs 2005). In this way, translation perpetuates the very notion of culture as bounded entities, simultaneously using it as grounds for excluding certain language users and as a means of rationalizing such exclusion (Zhu and Kramsch 2016; Piller 2017).

The implications of power inherent in this contradiction of translation become salient in our modern world through the notion of *translational monolingualism*. Gramling (2016) defines translational monolingualism as a view which posits a world of self-sufficient monolingual tongues, each complete and equal in its capacity for representing meaning, where semantic correspondences between languages can be transparently identified to ensure smooth, frictionless intercultural communication. Gramling borrows the terms glossodiversity and semiodiversity from M.A.K. Halliday to further explicate the concept: what is highlighted in translational monolingualism is glossodiversity, or the diversity of distinct linguistic codes in terms of numerical many-ness, rather than semiodiversity, or how historical and social experiences of different communities of speakers may lead them to organize and represent meaning in divergent ways to the extent that such meaning becomes untranslatable (pp. 31–36). In other words, translational monolingualism emphasizes the boundaries and distinctiveness of languages, but downplays culture-specific, historically grounded local meanings that obfuscate and thwart efforts to find neat cognates between those languages.

Gramling's discussion shows how translational monolingualism represents the dreams of Enlightenment modernity—'imperatives of empirical rigor, bourgeois mobility, logistical pragmatism, epistemological sovereignty, and the mastery of complex systems' (p. 29)—which continues today in the form of visions of a globalized world where capital can flow freely across cultural and linguistic borders, as translational monolingualism 'empowers speakers to say the same thing in many languages, to disseminate intellectual property translingually with heightened efficiency and reduced incidence of accidental content' (p. 32). Erased through such visions are the material and ideological conditions that presuppose these modes of smooth intercultural communication, such as the crisis of capitalism that necessitates expansion of markets on a global scale, and the needs of transnational elites to rationalize and naturalize their socioeconomic privilege.

The field of applied linguistics is not irrelevant to this vision of global transposability of meaning. Throughout most of its history, mainstream applied linguistics has presumed the foreign language learner as its typical subject—a speaker of a national language variety learning another national language variety. The orientation to translational monolingualism is apparent in this idealized figure, who strives and manages to develop balanced, yet distinct, competence in both her own language and the foreign language, utilizing her autonomous cognitive capacities for language learning (as theorized in approaches to second language acquisition based on Universal Grammar and psycholinguistics) and functional strategies for carrying out real-world tasks in the target language (as emphasized by communicative language teaching) (Kramsch 2005). Through this focus, we can read the rationalist assumptions of applied linguistics about the possibility of smooth information transfer between speakers from two different linguacultures (Block 2002). Such assumptions overlook the fact that what counts as successful and efficient intercultural communication is not evaluated in rationalist, task-based terms, but in terms of power, including relational conditions of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and social class (Collins and Slembrouck 2006; Jacquemet 2009; Jenks 2017; Piller 2017; Rosa and Flores 2017; Lee 2017).

The recent pluri/multilingual turn in applied linguistics (Kubota 2016), which emphasizes the hybridity, plurality, flexibility, and complexity of the bi/multilingual speaker's linguistic repertoire, legitimizes communicative practices that do not fit the image of rational, pragmatic transfer of meaning across neatly demarcated languages and cultures, and in this sense can be seen as a move away from the assumptions of translational monolingualism. Yet, many critics have pointed out how these new perspectives still do not do enough to challenge the hegemonic relations of power that undergird such assumptions, and in fact risk collusion with the logic of neoliberal capitalism by emphasizing individual creativity of speakers rather than collective politics and class-based inequality (Flores 2013; Kubota 2016; Kubota and Miller 2017).

Indeed, the vision of translational monolingualism often continues to constrain the way bi/multilingual practices are studied in applied linguistics. For

instance, researchers who take the frame of translanguaging to understand the practices of multilingual speakers rightfully draw our attention to the fluidity and constructedness of linguistic boundaries, but when it comes to specific analyses, many of them still tend to describe such speakers as actively and creatively drawing from distinct language varieties (e.g. by identifying the linguistic resource those speakers use as coming from language A as opposed to language B, and so on). As a result, these translingual speakers are frequently presented as if they are alternative, unpretentious versions of elite bilingual speakers; just like elite bilinguals who competently mediate two cultures by fluently switching between the distinct standard varieties of the language associated with each culture, translingual speakers are imagined as equally competent in their ability to negotiate between the separate and bounded linguacultures across which they live, albeit in a way that does not respect institutionally sanctioned orderliness of language boundaries. In other words, applied linguistic research often reads the practices of translingual speakers through the lens of translational monolingualism, overlooking the ideologies that make the vision of translational monolingualism possible in the first place, and failing to offer a critique of those ideologies that serve as a foundation of political economic power—a power which is also the basis for inequalities that constrain the very lives of many translingual speakers (Lee 2017).

All this highlights the importance for the field of applied linguistics to attend to the politics of translation, particularly to its underlying ideologies that determine which cultures come to be seen as (in)commensurable with others, who gets positioned as legitimate subjects qualified to mediate between distinct ethnolinguistic cultures, and how cultural and linguistic difference gets valued. This becomes an especially pertinent mandate in the context of neoliberalism, where the logic of capitalism actively appropriates cultural and linguistic difference as a semiotic and material resource for profit. Translational monolingualism is essential for such acts of appropriation, for global capitalism requires meaning to be neatly transposable across cultural and linguistic boundaries so as to secure a steady flow of production, circulation, and consumption between multiple markets. The frequent reference to and celebration of 'diversity' under neoliberalism, for instance, presumes a happy co-existence of multiple, commensurable cultures, which are expected to be amenable to a transparent transposition of any meaning that global capitalism may wish to propagate globally (e.g. by allowing capital to say 'I'm lovin' it' in as many different ways as needed: Gramling 2016: 32)—rather than recognizing the complex, contradictory manners in which historically constituted local meanings intersect each other in uneasy and unresolved political tension. In this way, 'the messiness of marked social identity is reformulated and tidied up as ''diversity''' (Urciuoli 2016: 31), erasing the relations of power that serve as the foundation for translational monolingualism and the interests of capital that ride upon them.

It is such a critical perspective on the politics of translation that I bring to the analysis of diversity management in this article. Much applied linguistic and sociolinguistic research on language and culture in the global workplace has critiqued the simplistic assumptions of intercultural communication literature that reduce the question of culture to that of national culture: that is, how it tends to treat the task of intercultural communication as a matter of mastering a set of essentialized cultural traits to be used in interaction with cultural others (Angouri 2010; Ladegaard and Jenks 2015; Piller 2017). However, as I show below, the evolution of corporate conceptualizations of diversity in the context of neoliberalism means that a deeper analysis of the underlying ideologies about language, culture, and translation becomes important for further developing such critique. The current discourse of diversity management, while maintaining essentialist understandings of culture, also introduces complex issues of power, legitimacy, and self for workers in the multicultural workplace, which often get obscured through cultural and ideological practices associated with neoliberalism. In this article, I aim to offer a viewpoint for confronting such issues, based on a critical analysis of diversity management, which I introduce in greater detail in the next section.

3. DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS

Diversity management, alternatively called managing diversity, or diversity and inclusion (D&I), is a prominent theme in contemporary management literature. The idea first emerged in the 1980s in the USA, in response to the rapidly changing demographics of the workforce. Johnston and Packer's influential 1987 report, *Workforce 2000*, predicted that in the USA, 'the workforce will grow slowly, becoming older, more female, and more disadvantaged', and 'native white males' will form an increasingly smaller part of new entrants to the labor force by the turn of the century (1987: xiii), thereby highlighting the need to prepare for a diversified workplace. In particular, as a reaction against the framework of Equal Employment Opportunity or Affirmative Action, diversity management was presented as a more forward-looking model of dealing with diversity, which, instead of passively incorporating the diversity of the workforce as a legal requirement, actively embraces it as a source of productivity. In other words, diversity management claims that diversity is good for business, and willingly attempts to exploit the diversity of its workforce through careful management of employee's cultural identities. In this sense, diversity management is clearly a part of the neoliberal impetus to commodify every aspect of human life, in this case the 'culture' that the employee can bring to work for the profit of the corporation. By the mid-1990s, diversity management had already become a dominant paradigm for addressing issues of diversity at work (Strachan *et al.* 2010), with its principles being adopted by MNCs around the world and their local subsidiaries.

Despite its claims towards equality and inclusion, diversity management has been criticized for its ahistorical and individualized view of diversity. Instead of

directly addressing the historical and material conditions that serve as the basis for inequality in the workplace, diversity management purports to achieve inclusion by focusing on the qualities that the individual worker brings. This reflects the way in which the term 'diversity' is promoted over the notion of inequality in domains other than business management, where the term 'individuates difference, conceals inequalities and neutralizes histories of antagonism and struggle' (Ahmed and Swan 2006: 96; see also Gordon 1995). For instance, in an influential early paper on diversity management, business scholar and consultant R. Roosevelt Thomas opposes diversity management to affirmative action by arguing:

> I doubt very much that individuals who reach top positions through affirmative action are effective models for younger members of their race or sex. . . . Unless we are to compromise our standards, a thing no competitive company can ever contemplate, upward mobility for minorities and women should always be a question of pure competence and character unmuddled by accidents of birth. (Thomas 1990: 109).

Examples like this demonstrate the problems of diversity management, for they naively suggest that we can solve the problem of discrimination by treating race and gender as mere 'accidents of birth' and by focusing on 'pure competence and character' of individuals, thereby completely ignoring the historical conditions of inequality that prevent such equitable evaluation of competence in the first place. Since frameworks that foreground structural inequalities in the workplace, such as affirmative action, are presented as 'ineffective' models that 'muddle' transparent evaluation of competence, diversity management emerges as a fair and empowering system that recognizes and values minorities and women for who they truly are. By dehistoricizing and dematerializing social relations of inequality while also embracing diversity, then, diversity management presents diversity in terms of a range of essentialized, yet innocuous identity categories—it welcomes minorities but obscures racial politics, celebrates women but not feminism. According to sociologist John Wrench, 'it risks perpetuating a view of the permanence and immutability of cultures, while reducing ethnicity to simplified constructs that can be easily summarised in management training sessions' (2005: 77). In other words, diversity management perfectly aligns with the world view of translational monolingualism—it values the diversity of cultural identities that make up the multicultural workplace, but refuses to acknowledge the historically rooted experiences of disenfranchised communities that cannot be translated into the self-image of fairness and inclusivity that corporations strive to claim for themselves.

But a more important question to ask, one which forms the main point of contention for this article, is: what are the consequences of diversity management when we look at it from the perspective of cultural translation? I suggest that the imperative of diversity management places a complex burden on

employees, because of the contradictory ways in which they are expected to enact, perform, and communicate their 'cultural identities' as defined by the neatly bounded world view of translational monolingualsim. Here, I am not so much concerned with critiquing the cultural essentialism inherent in the discourse of diversity management itself (which would take us far beyond the scope of this article), but with outlining the effects that such essentialist categories produce through the way they are understood in terms of commensurability within the discourse of diversity management. Let us consider this point in more detail below.

As the very source of the multiple 'cultures' that fill the workplace, employees are expected to be their fully authentic selves (typically imagined in essentialized ways) in their communication with others at work—that is, to appropriately translate their own cultures in ways that become commensurable for others they are working with. For example, in a textbook on diversity management, authors Ferdman and Roberts identify 'bringing one's whole self to work' as the key for successful diversity management (2014: 95), an idea they explain in the following:

> Much of the emphasis in diversity and inclusion work is on how organizations can effectively incorporate differences of various sorts, as well as on how individuals can better engage with dissimilar others without seeking to eliminate the differences. Given this, in discussing inclusion, the focus is typically on what organizations must do to be inclusive and how each of us can be more inclusive of others. Yet inclusion starts with oneself . . . knowing, accepting, and expressing one's whole self creates a platform for welcoming inclusion within one's organization. We believe that the ways in which we as individuals combine, manage, and express our multiple identities—in short, how we show up and express our full selves at work—is a key part of the dynamic process of inclusion. (2014: 95)

In other words, instead of assimilating themselves to what they might perceive as the culture of the organization, employees are encouraged to 'be themselves'—to be aware, accepting, and expressive of their own cultural sense of who they are. Such self-awareness and inner stability, in turn, is supposed to allow the employee to better find her own place in the multicultural workplace, and to facilitate deeper interpersonal relations with cultural others. But we can note that this shifts the responsibility for ensuring a workplace conducive to diversity from the corporation to the employees. That is, by framing diversity as something that the employee brings to the workplace through being their full selves, diversity management guides employees to become self-managing subjects, leading to a form of Foucauldian governmentality (Foucault 1997). That is, they are expected to carefully cultivate their cultural selves and actively seek out ways to make such sense of identity relevant to their work, all the while believing that it is for their own good and self-

fulfillment, even though such management of selves is clearly meant to contribute to greater profit for the corporation.

But obviously not all modes of cultural self-expression and communication will be equally valued by the corporation. What is most likely to take place is a selective legitimation of particular kinds of cultural practices as normative, while others are conceived as aligning to such norms to varying degrees. This is apparent in Ferdman and Robert's discussion, as they argue that their call to bring one's whole self to work 'does not constitute the freedom to behave impulsively at work in ways that will be detrimental to other people in that environment—and likely harmful to oneself as well' (2014: 112). The problem here is of course who gets to determine what counts as 'being detrimental to other people', and one of the examples that Ferdman and Roberts provide clearly implies that communicative practices that foreground directness, rationality, and transparency should take precedence.

> Specifically, in finding effective and appropriate ways to be authentic, we need to figure out and decide when and how to address our individual connections to culturally and group-based experiences as well as when it may make sense to hold back. For example, ... a mid-level manager, who often finds herself disagreeing with her new boss's strategic plans, may struggle with determining when and how to express her concerns with his plans. In this circumstance, the need for diplomacy is clear; we advocate not undermining one's boss by gossiping about or sabotaging his plans, but rather being clear, specific, and direct in communicating how the specific concerns expressed are related to specific outcomes within one's own purview. (2014: 114)

This example is interesting because it highlights how, despite their invitation to employees to be their authentic selves at work, Ferdman and Roberts indicate that not all modes of expressing our selves are equally welcome—there are 'effective and appropriate ways to be authentic', and in some cases it may even 'make sense to hold back' one's authentic self—thereby revealing the limitations of diversity, which ultimately subordinates cultural self-expression to 'efficiency and appropriateness'. Here, the example of the mid-level manager who has concerns about her boss's strategic plans is used to construct 'clear, specific, and direct' modes of interaction as an ideal way of communicating that is neutral enough to not conflict with the call for authenticity while efficient enough to sustain a smooth flow of the business process. Overlooked here is how 'clear, specific, and direct' communication can hardly be neutral—not only is this a typical characterization of Western style of communicating as it is discussed in traditional intercultural communication literature, but even in the example itself, it is contrasted with other modes of communication described with heavily negative terms such as 'gossiping' and 'sabotaging', revealing how the authors consider communicative values of directness and transparency as morally superior than their cultural alternatives.

This points to the conflicted position in which diversity management places employees. Diversity management's celebration of cultural identity leads employees to identify themselves with, and to be identified as, particular cultural person types (such as members of an ethnonational culture), which becomes the basis for their contribution to the corporation's diversity. Yet, since not all cultural practices and values are given equal recognition, the burden is placed on the employee to simultaneously perform their supposed cultural identities and find a way to align those identities with the dominant culture of the corporation (such as clear, specific, and direct communication, as above). In other words, employees of MNCs constantly need to carry out the work of cultural translation, finding ways to make their culture become commensurable with the regime of diversity management, even though some cultures are deemed inherently incommensurate with that very regime. But since diversity management's neoliberal vision of diversity does not admit the existence of intractable and untranslatable cultural difference, any unmediatable gap that exists between the employee's culture and the dominant culture must therefore become the employee's responsibility—evidence of her failure or unwillingness to adapt to the culture of others, her being out of tune with the ideal of diversity, stuck in her own culture—rather than a demonstration of the insincerity of diversity management's commitment to inclusiveness. As I will show in the next section through a case study of Korean mid-level managers working at MNCs in Singapore, such tensions can have the effect of rationalizing and naturalizing unequal relations of power and reproducing ideologies that serve as the foundation for such relations.

4. KOREAN MANAGERS AT MNCs IN SINGAPORE

Work at a MNC in Singapore frequently involves communicating across cultural boundaries. Due to Singapore's strategic location and the country's positioning of itself as a global business hub, many MNCs set up their regional headquarters in the city state, and managers for such corporations not only need to interact with the local population that is highly multicultural, but have to work with other transnational colleagues who come from all around the world, supervise personnel in subsidiaries in multiple countries where the MNC has its presence, and deal with clients that are spread out across the region. For the 12 Korean mid-level managers working for non-Korean MNCs in Singapore with whom I carried out my fieldwork in 2010 and 2011 (see Park 2013 for more details), their language of work was predominantly English, so they had little or no need to communicate in languages other than English through their line of work. Nonetheless, these Koreans worked at the regional office along with other similarly recruited personnel from the many countries around the region, and for this reason, they worked in a highly multilingual and multicultural workplace. In so far as they were able to carry out their daily routine of work, we could therefore say that they were competent in communicating across cultural boundaries. Indeed, it was partly

on the basis of their accomplishments in such intercultural work that they were employed at the regional headquarters of their respective MNCs, which was an upward career move for them, theoretically leading to further promotion in even higher positions in the global headquarters typically located in the West (Park 2017).

The MNCs for which the managers worked all highlighted diversity as a key component of their corporate image and everyday operation, as is the case for virtually all MNCs nowadays. While this did not always mean these corporations systematically invested in the promotion of diversity (e.g. by providing explicit training in intercultural communication), and it certainly did not mean that the MNCs were spaces of true inclusion and equality (e.g. the top management of most MNCs were predominantly filled by White men), all of the companies that the Korean managers worked for emphasized their diverse workforce as a unique and valuable characteristic that added to their competitiveness in the market. And this discourse was often adopted by the employees themselves, who frequently talked about the diversity of the regional offices where they worked as an amazing blend of people from different national, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. The neoliberal discourse of diversity management was thus frequently manifest in the way the diversity of the MNCs' workforce was emphasized and celebrated as a strength and resource, rather than complained about as a burden and problem.

In this context, through their interviews with me, the Korean managers sometimes presented themselves as actively engaged in what could be seen as instances of 'bringing your whole self to work'.[1] That is, rather than distancing themselves from cultural and communicative practices that are typically considered Korean in order to highlight their cosmopolitan and transnational standing, they would occasionally talk about how (what they identified as) 'Korean way of doing things' actually contributed well to the global and multicultural workplace. For example, in his interview, Mr. Won, a manager with over 10-year's experience of working at the Singapore branch of a US-based manufacturing conglomerate, recounted how he uses *hoesik*, the Korean cultural practice of bonding with co-workers over after-work meals accompanied with heavy drinking, as a strategy that allows him to carry out his managerial role more effectively, as we can see below (translated from Korean):

> Since two or three years ago, (I started thinking) wow, (people in my section) don't talk much, all of them. They don't have any *hoesik*, after work they just (leave). (So) once in a while I tell two or three of them, 'hey, let's go', and take them to a Korean restaurant. Have them drink *soju* [Korean distilled liquor]. I did that several times and they liked it very much. ... After that, they start talking, stuff they were not able to talk about in the office, like 'I wasn't happy about this or that', 'why is my pay so low', that kind of stuff. ... Then later I might adjust the salary, if it's really too low I can mention it to human resources, even if it's not time for a raise. ... So it's an opportunity for me to get a lot of feedback. This kind of

> stuff is simply impossible if you're just talking over coffee. Not so much about socializing, but mediating between people. So if a section head and a subordinate have some problems, they might say, 'I said this to him and he didn't seem to understand'. Then I say ''don't worry'', and I speak to him and then things get resolved easily. So the Korean style can be better. If you use it strategically, it can be very effective.

What is notable is how Won explicitly presents his adoption of the Korean practice of *hoesik* as a 'Korean style' of management, and contrasts it with other communicative practices such as 'talking over coffee', a cultural practice he uses to characterize the current culture of his company (see underlined). Even though *hoesik*, in post-authoritarian 21st century Korea, is increasingly devalued due to its association with forced drinking, aggressive masculinity, and undemocratic collectivism (Harkness 2013), Won highlights its usefulness in making people articulate their feelings and concerns they would normally be careful about sharing; it allows him to play the role of the authoritative but sympathetic manager to whom subordinates can spill out hidden grievances, aided by alcohol and atmosphere—something that 'talking over coffee', with its associations with the egalitarian and rational ideals of western public culture (Gaudio 2003), would not enable him to do. In other words, Won's account can be seen as an act of cultural translation; he makes relevant a particular aspect of his cultural identity (as a Korean male in his late-40s who spent his early career in a Korean corporation) to the MNC he works for, contributing to its diversity and productivity. Indeed, in his claim that the 'Korean style' can be a 'very effective' way of managing the complaints of subordinates, we find echoes of Ferdman and Roberts' argument that being one's authentic self benefits everyone in the workplace.

But more often, the Korean managers were not too successful in making their Korean cultural self work to their advantage. The Korean managers generally saw their future career prospects at non-Korean MNCs as limited, and took for granted that further promotion within the company beyond their current position as mid-level managers was not likely. In fact, at all of the MNCs for which my participants worked, there were no cases where a Korean made it into the ranks of higher management. This was often explained, both by the managers and their non-Korean colleagues, in cultural terms. For instance, Koreans were frequently presented as demonstrating the cultural trait of 'unwillingness to speak their thoughts', not keen on sharing their opinions or assessment of situations with others, particularly against someone with higher authority or in a highly public setting. For this reason, according to this view, Koreans were disadvantaged in being recognized for their work performance, as such communicative behavior tended to be interpreted as indicating lack of confidence, initiative, or critical thinking.

For instance, in an interview with me, another Korean manager named Mr. Shin, who worked for a Swiss-based manufacturing company, characterized

the way Koreans interact with their superiors in the following way (translated from Korean):

> Other (Korean) people who come here, when they speak with their supervisors, this is how they express their opinion. . . . 'What do you think about this?' 'Oh, I think plan A is good.' 'Bullshit, B is the best.' 'Yes.' This is how it works in Korea. But in Singapore, if someone acts like that, he is just someone with no thoughts of his own. If one just goes along with the boss and says, 'Yes, that sounds like a good idea,' that person is just brainless. He looks like someone without any strategy. So, Koreans should be taught to do that. For example, to explain why I believe this is right, and uh, to have a clear logic, to be able to give an example. They should develop such communication skills. When the supervisor says no, they should not take it personally. For example when the supervisor says 'You're not making any sense, no,' Koreans typically just back down and go away. They need to learn how to deal with these things.

Here, Shin characterizes Korean managers' communicative style when speaking with their superiors using what almost sounds like a textbook description of the supposedly 'high power distance' culture of Korea, where people take for granted unequal distribution of power and authority deriving from social status (Hofstede 2001). Other Korean managers I spoke with also recognized such communicative difference as something that characterizes their subjective experience of communication in the global workplace (Park 2014, 2017), and as Shin's story above implies, they considered this as one reason why they were unsuccessful in moving beyond the mid-manager level; that is, they are good at implementing plans and delivering results when the goals are set out for them, but they are not good at coming up with ideas on their own and persuading others to follow them—something they believed a higher level leader must be able to do in a global workplace. Indeed, some of the managers' non-Korean co-workers also perceived Koreans as lacking in such qualities.

The Korean managers did not necessarily see their communicative style as deficient in itself. Based on their experience with or their knowledge of Korean corporate culture, they felt that there is at least some value in their reluctance to engage in debate with superiors over broader strategies and abstract goals; it allowed them to be good and efficient implementers who deliver results—and they contrasted themselves with other Asians (such as Indians or Singaporeans), whom the Koreans felt were very vocal and articulate in internal meetings but were not as good at getting things done as they were. Yet, in their interviews with me, the Korean managers never made explicit positive evaluations of how their communicative practices contributed to their MNCs' operation, unlike how Mr Won talked about his use of *hoesik* culture. Even while they grumbled about getting less recognition about their achievements due to their communicative difference, they did seem to accept that their

communicative style did not translate in a meaningful way within the global workplace of the MNC.

In fact, in the context of diversity management, this characteristic of Koreans became particularly problematic, because 'not speaking one's thoughts' was not only disadvantageous to Koreans themselves, but also conflicted with the culture of openness and inclusiveness that diversity management actively promotes. While diversity management demands that employees actively divulge and share their cultural selves with the expectation that this will allow them to constitute a dazzlingly diverse workforce where a multitude of cultures, personalities, and ideas create greater synergy, the Korean managers' cultural practices happen to involve *withholding* participation in such open communication, and therefore end up being seen as an intractable outlier that does not make sense within the framework of diversity management. In this case, valorization of participation, conceived here as active verbalization of one's ideas, opinions, and achievements, not only belies a Eurocentric privileging of openness and direct communication (which undermines the Korean managers' focus on actual accomplishments rather than self-promotion), but also becomes a condition according to which the Korean managers' adaptability to the global workplace is evaluated.

Such effects can be observed, for instance, in a conversation I had with Shin and his colleagues, in which Donna, a Singaporean mid-level manager, talked about the Korean managers at her company. Before the excerpt below, she had been proposing three possible hypotheses regarding why Koreans might be less likely to speak their thoughts, attributing it to: (i) cultural difference (as in Shin's explanation above), (ii) Koreans' tendency to be more careful when choosing their words, and (iii) the fact that Koreans are not native speakers of English. And then, she presented the problems that Koreans might face in the workplace in the following terms (originally in English):

> Yeah, that's why it's safe for Koreans who join [name of company], this kind of MNC organization, where you're encouraged to speak up. If you have those three things to overcome [culture, speed, English], ... you might not be viewed very positively because you will always be slower. You know by the time you speak up it might be (that) somebody already have made the point, or something like that. ... I think that uh, when they first come, they get a culture shock sometimes, I think even our Korean branch is not as open, as you know maybe as the regional headquarters, so you know when they come they're like, hey, why are these guys talking so much.

Here, Donna first presents the MNC as a 'safe' place where it is okay to articulate one's thoughts even when one feels uncertain about it, and then, suggests that such corporate culture can be beneficial to Koreans who come to work there, for it will provide them with an opportunity to ''overcome'' the cultural and communicative practices that obstruct their active participation. In doing so, she acknowledges that Koreans who do not speak up would be

disadvantaged ('by the time you speak up, somebody may have already made the point'). But she frames this issue not as difference between Korean culture and some other national culture on a comparable level, but as a matter of maladjustment to the culture of the regional headquarters. Even people coming from the Korean branch of the MNC would find the culture of the regional headquarters different enough to experience 'culture shock'; yet, this organizational culture is not some powerful national culture that is arbitrarily imposed upon its employees, but a neutral, beneficial, 'open' culture which 'encourages employees to speak up' in a 'safe space'.

In other words, the Korean communicative practice of not speaking up is not presented as one of the cultures that make up the diverse workplace characterized by its pursuit of openness and inclusion. The Korean managers could indeed be seen as acting according to (what is widely perceived in the corporation as) their authentic Korean selves when they refrain from quickly speaking their thoughts in front of superiors or in meetings; yet, the metadiscursive regime of diversity management does not, and cannot, recognize this as a valid form of 'bringing one's whole self to work', and uses that very principle of diversity management to devalue the Korean managers' alternative ways of communicating across cultures.

What is more insidious is the way the ideology of diversity management not only disadvantages Korean managers but leads them to internalize its logic and to willingly subjugate themselves to the ideal communicative order of the corporation. We can see this in the way that Shin ultimately problematizes Korean managers for their own failure to be promoted further by framing the normative order of corporate communication as more open, rational, and clear, and as something that Koreans need to learn—a communicative skill that they should make the effort to acquire so as to become ideal employees of the inclusive and diverse global workplace. Indeed, the way diversity management renders certain cultures as incommensurable with the dominant culture of the global workplace leaves the Korean managers with no choice. Caught in the tension between a reluctance to embrace a communicative practice they find jarring and a metadiscursive regime that presents itself as open, clear, and inclusive, the Korean managers eventually accept the purported untranslatability of their own cultural practices, rationalizing their limited career prospects as a result of their failure and inability to adapt. And in this way, the contradictions inherent in diversity management's call to bring one's entire self to work are explained away.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The discussion above has shown that, in diversity management, translating across cultures does not point towards a truly inclusive and democratic possibility of mutual understanding, but guides subjects to internalize and embody the normative order of communication that is meant to facilitate profit for capital. Diversity as it is imagined within the framework of diversity

management reduces historically grounded and materially conditioned cultural difference into a multiplicity of fungible, bounded identities, desiring a smooth global transposition of meaning. In this process, modes of self-expression and communicative practices that are not seen as commensurable with the dominant culture of the corporation become excluded from the celebrated mosaic of diversity, and rejected as backward, obstinate, and lacking value. Tracing the discourses of diversity management in the global workplace and their consequences can thus help us identify the contradictions of translating culture in neoliberal times.

Through the analysis presented above, I have tried to demonstrate how critical attention to the politics of translation is crucial for uncovering the working of such contradictions. Earlier studies have already noted how, just like the MNCs for which the Korean managers worked, intercultural communication at white-collar multicultural workplaces tend to become dominated by 'global ideologies of effective, proactive, direct, upfront communication Anglo-Saxon style' (Ladegaard and Jenks 2015: 4). The most important consequence of diversity management, however, is not simply the fact that certain communicative styles become valorized over others, but the naturalization of particular ideologies about language, culture, and commensurability. In his critical assessment of translingualism-based research and advocacy that aims to legitimize non-normative uses of English across the world, Jerry Lee suggests that such studies tend to 'miss the point that the criteria for what is legitimate are readily adapted according to the whims of dominant institutions and interlocutors' (2017: 18), calling for scholars to question why and how such acts of legitimation take place in the first place. Likewise, the goal of our critique should not be, say, to argue that alternative communicative practices such as those of Korean managers can be valuable to the global workplace, too, which would ultimately work to reify the logic of capitalism that lies behind the whole project of diversity management. Rather, we should focus on ideologies and structural conditions that allow certain people and certain modes of communication to be seen as more commensurable than others to begin with, and on how this process interacts with more general relations of power that are continuously evolving in the context of the neoliberal economy.

Particularly important for our discussion above was the place of translational monolingualism in diversity management. In imagining the world as consisting of self-sufficient linguacultures that are equally capable of representing meaning, the ideology of translational monolingualism considers translation a simple question of identifying semantic correspondences between distinct, bounded languages, rendering meaning globally transposable. Diversity management adopts this idea as a way of presenting the multicultural, global workplace as a space in which diversity of cultures can happily coexist. In this workplace, differences between cultures are imagined to be easily overcome through the transparent act of translation, which allows the corporation to freely draw upon this diversity to maximize its profit—all that employees need to do is to find a way to translate their cultural selves in terms relevant

to the multicultural workplace that welcomes everyone. However, this buoyant vision of translation obscures the very violence that it performs. Meaning that cannot be accommodated by such a vision, or communicative practices and identities that cannot find a transparent translation within the culture of the MNC, are denied a place in the diversity of the workplace, and are instead presented as failures in cultural self-management that is denigrated by the corporate regime of performance review. In other words, in the tension between diversity and difference, diversity suppresses difference, condemning certain cultural practices and identities as incommensurable with the neoliberal ideal of flexible adaptability of selves.

Based on our discussion, we may suggest that diversity management works at the intersection of the commodification of communication (Cameron 2000; Heller 2010) and translational monolingualism. On the one hand, diversity management views the culturally grounded communicative practices and cultural identities that each employee brings as a resource for maximizing profit; on the other hand, it presents global transposability of meaning as the foundational goal for managing diversity, forcing historically and materially constituted cultural difference into a straightforwardly translatable diversity of cultures. These two aspects are indeed indispensable to each other. Imagining language and identity as resources that can be mobilized for profit must be mediated by ideologies that reframe them as bounded, comparable, and transposable entities, so that their relative value can be measured and assessed; at the same time, constructing a workplace where all cultural and communicative practices are supposedly welcome requires subjecting employees to a regime of evaluation where their willingness and ability to translate their cultural identity in terms meaningful to the corporation become an important commodifiable skill. The all-knowing subject presumed by translational monolingualism again emerges here, representing the managerial perspective that aims to control and govern every aspect of human life so that they can be channeled for the corporation's profit. This demonstrates once more that the vision of translational monolingualism, which seeks to depoliticize the process of translation by stripping away culturally and historically specific meaning from intercultural communication, is not a view from nowhere. The ideal of openness and inclusion foregrounded by diversity management, however, obscures the partialness of this view, transforming it into a liberating and empowering platform upon which employees can become their true selves. Our critique of diversity management, then, must focus on uncovering this partialness—the ideological nature of translational monolingualism as well as the interests of capital that fuel its pursuit.

Note

1 The extracts presented in this section come from open-ended interviews I conducted with my Korean participants, where my questions largely focused on how they chose to come to Singapore, their general experience of working in Singapore, and the difficulties they faced during their work, including those related to communication issues.

Additional interviews with non-Korean colleagues of the Korean managers focused on how they perceived the Korean managers to be different from them. While the questions I asked made frequent reference to the category of 'Korean', I have sufficient reason to believe that the participants' talk about such cultural categories was not simply triggered by my questions. For instance, the MNC workers readily drew upon national identity categories to talk about their co-workers both in and beyond the interview context, which suggests that those essentialized identities served as a pervasive resource for making sense of interaction in the workplace. For more details, see Park (2013).

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