Book review

Kjell Arne Røvik, *A Translation Theory of Knowledge Transfer. Learning across Organizational Borders*, Oxford University Press, 2023.

REVIEWED BY ULLA ERIKSSON-ZETTERQUIST

University od Gothenburg, Sweden

uez@gu.se

Why are some organizations able to adopt new innovations while others are not? What capacities are lacking in those organizations that fail to acquire and utilize knowledge from other organizations? Such questions are typically examined within the broad field of knowledge transfer, an area that has attracted increasing attention from both scholars and practitioners since its emergence in the 1980s. Knowledge transfer is central to organizational success, as competitiveness, progress, and survival depend on the ability to imitate and learn from the practices and ideas of others. Whether the goal is to develop new products or to increase returns on investment, organizations must possess the capacity to search for knowledge and transfer learning from other organizations. For readers seeking an overview of the now increasingly multifaceted field of knowledge transfer, Kjell Arne Røvik's most recent book is highly recommended. In addition to providing a comprehensive review and analysis of existing studies and theoretical orientations within the field, Røvik introduces a new theory explaining why learning outcomes vary so widely between organizations. By conceptualizing these variations as acts of translation, he offers both scholars and practitioners practical tools for developing translation competence. According to Røvik, knowledge transfer rests on two fundamental components. First, translators must possess an understanding of both the source and the contextual conditions of the receiving organization. Second, they must be able to apply the translation rules that are most appropriate, given the specific circumstances.

A distinctive feature of Røvik's book is its analytical approach, which is used to present both studies of knowledge transfer and studies of translation. One example of this is the structure of the book's seven chapters. After introducing the topic and demonstrating how effective knowledge transfer between organizations often fails, or at the very least proves highly challenging, Røvik points out that despite numerous attempts, there is still a lack of theories capable of explaining why such wide variations in knowledge transfer occur. The book is therefore organized as a stepwise process: it begins with an overview of the extensive literature on knowledge transfer, proceeds to show how metaphors can contribute to the development of new theories, and then draws on two core components of translation theory to provide more precise arguments and propositions for theoretical advancement. The argument unfolds across four main parts: "The State of the Art," "In Search of a New Theory," "The Theory," and "Implications for Knowledge Transfer Practices."

For readers who are not fully familiar with research on knowledge transfer, Røvik's book offers a rich and comprehensive source of insight. He not only summarizes the field but also

deepens it through a clear and systematic categorization. Knowledge transfer as a field has expanded rapidly—from a handful of studies in the late 1980s to approximately 3,000 by 2007. Although it does not constitute a unified theory, the field has attracted significant interest among both scholars and practitioners. A key premise is that, for organizations, knowledge represents the most central strategic concern. Drawing on the theoretical orientations and explanatory frameworks developed in studies of inter-organizational knowledge transfer, Røvik divides the field into seven main approaches, focusing upon formal organizational structure, absorptive capacity, social networks, geographical distance, cultural distance, institutional distance, and the character of the transferred knowledge. The latter highlights that tacit knowledge is often considered more valuable but also more difficult to transfer than explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge, being unarticulated, uncodified, strategically significant, or ambiguous, poses particular challenges for transfer.

Taken together, these studies have established key concepts for understanding knowledge transfer as a phenomenon. They show that transfer outcomes vary widely and that the nature of knowledge itself significantly shapes those outcomes. As pointed out by Røvik, these studies do not explain why such variations in outcomes occur, what roles different actors play in the process, or how knowledge transfer actually unfolds over time. This is where the concept of *translation* offers new explanatory potential. In other words, a paradigmatic shift is offered to the field of knowledge transfer.

Yet, the concept of translation itself also requires clarification. This brings us to Røvik's second major contribution, his clear and systematic account of the field of translation studies. In doing so, he draws on two distinct but complementary traditions. The first is the academic field of translation studies that has developed since the early 1970s, focusing on translation in the linguistic sense and as a professional practice. The second is the French tradition of the sociology of translation, grounded in research from Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT). As Røvik notes, Barbara Czarniawska and her colleagues introduced the sociology of translation into organization studies in the early 1990s to explore how ideas travel across time and space. Until then, the dominant perspective in organization theory had been the diffusion model, which assumed that ideas spread from a powerful source outward. Czarniawska and her colleagues instead argued that each actor within a network energizes an idea by serving as its active translator, and that it is through this energy that ideas spread. To be an active translator of an idea thus also means to shape and reshape it through the very act of translation.

In one of his many pedagogically clear expositions, Røvik identifies five key features of how ideas are translated between organizations, illustrating important differences between linguistic translators and translators of ideas. The first feature is that translation objects become quasi-objects, that is, tangible artefacts such as concepts, PowerPoint presentations, images, or manuals that make an idea possible to translate. The second feature concerns the nature of the translator. In organizational contexts, translators differ from professional (linguistic) translators in that they may not always be aware of what they are doing. Conversely, it may also be the case that someone who promotes an idea, such as lean management or new leadership models, is fully conscious of its potential relevance for other organizations and works strategically to translate and adapt the idea to a new context. The third feature is that translation entails variation and heterogeneity, especially when many actors are translating ideas simultaneously. Translation takes time, and since most studies in this area are longitudinal to capture these processes, translations within organizations often

appear as arenas of power struggles, conflicts, and negotiation. A fourth feature, shared by both linguistic translators and translators of ideas across organizations, is that translation involves both contextualization and decontextualization. In other words, the translator must understand the context from which the idea and its practices originate, as well as the context into which they are to be introduced. While many studies focus on how ideas are received in their new settings, fewer have examined what happens during decontextualization, that is, when ideas begin to move away from the contexts in which they were originally established. Taken together, translation represents a process of transformation. As Serres (1974/1982) observed, any act of translation changes both the translator and the object being translated.

Røvik's theory, *"Reframing Knowledge Transfer as Acts of Translation,"* is presented in Chapter 4 through a series of propositions. The central premise is that knowledge transfer between an organizational source and a recipient can be understood as a translation process. Another key assumption is that the way translation is performed helps to explain the outcomes of the process. A crucial part of the theory is the focus on those who transfer ideas: *the translators*. These may be consultants, experts, middle managers, or employees at headquarters who disseminate ideas to other parts of the organization. Translators may thus operate both externally, as consultants, and internally as organizational members who possess experience with the relevant practices and are capable of communicating knowledge externally. Translators can expect to encounter various obstacles that delay or distort the idea. Such barriers may include differences between organizational types, national contexts, or technological systems for instance, when the source and recipient organizations use different financial systems. The translatability of an idea also depends on its degree of explicitness. When the knowledge in question is tacit, translation becomes more difficult, and some aspects of the knowledge may be lost in the process. Knowledge embedded in networks, specific technologies, or particular individuals likewise tends to be harder to translate. To summarize, from this perspective, knowledge transfer becomes less a matter of transmission and more one of transformation.

A consistent feature of the argument underpinning Røvik's new theory is the extensive use of examples drawn from organization theory. The 48-page reference list alone testifies to the breadth and depth of the material on which the book is based, adding several layers of richness to the reading experience. For readers interested in how new theories are developed, in the rigor–relevance debate, or in exploring organization theory through the lens of translation, the book offers numerous valuable insights. The reinterpretation of the sociotechnical analysis of change in the British coal mines of the 1930s and 1940s, later taken up by the Tavistock Institute, is a central contribution to the field. Equally significant is the transfer of the Performance and Counselling System (PAC) in Norway, which laid the foundation for the Scandinavian practice of performance appraisals. This case offers an important perspective on how ideas travel between North America and Scandinavia, the resistance they may encounter, and how they eventually become institutionalized within Scandinavian working life. Such examples are highly relevant for anyone involved in introducing new innovations.

Throughout, the book is exceptionally well structured. Each chapter and each argument is carefully developed, supported by well-reasoned analysis and solid references. In many chapters, the key ideas are summarized in thoughtfully designed tables. This is particularly evident in Chapter Seven, which focuses on translation competence. Here, Røvik discusses how the performance of translators can determine whether the desired knowledge transfer is achieved. At this stage, readers might be tempted to think that successful knowledge transfer

simply requires improving translators' skills: decontextualizing appropriately, ensuring that knowledge is explicit and translatable, and, with an understanding of the recipient organization's context, ensuring a smooth translation. However, it is not quite that simple. From a linguistic perspective, it is evident that a one-to-one, or direct translation, as Røvik calls it, is not possible. This is because contextual and cultural factors inevitably create obstacles. Management theorists, on the other hand, tend to be less patient with such complexity, often harboring an implicit expectation that direct translation between the sending and receiving organizations can indeed be achieved. Røvik engages openly with the discussion of success and failure and develops it further. When the gap between the source and recipient organizations is large, there is a risk that knowledge cannot be effectively translated. If the source practice is ambiguous, or if the translator lacks full understanding of it, the likelihood of failure increases. Similarly, if the learning process proceeds too slowly, the translation may not succeed.

Building on Røvik's work on knowledge transfer, there is ample room for further questions. One that frequently lingers in the background of inter-organizational translation studies concerns who, or what, defines the goal of translation. In other words, who determines when a translation has been successful? Given that translation, by its very nature, transforms both the idea being translated and the translator, the notion of a "successful translation" becomes problematic. One might instead consider copying, which also requires a high degree of skill. Røvik illustrates this with the Japanese institution of Kata, where the objective is to masterfully replicate the work of a teacher, a process that is, in itself, iterative. Achieving such replication, however, is even more difficult in organizational settings. While explicit knowledge may be copied from Organization A to Organization B, Organization A continues to refine and evolve its practices even as B adopts them. This continuous process of change poses challenges for anyone attempting to analyze knowledge transfer using a fixed model. Nevertheless, it remains essential to acknowledge this dynamic. Ideas are decontextualized from their sources; translators infuse them with energy through their interpretations; and receiving contexts reshape and adapt them to fit their own circumstances. Ultimately, Røvik's theory invites organizations and scholars alike to reconceptualize knowledge transfer not as the passive transfer of best practices but as an ongoing process of translation, an act that is creative, context-bound, and transformative. Sustaining up-to-date knowledge, therefore, depends less on access to information than on the continual renewal of translation competence.

References

Serres, M. (1982). *Hermes: Literature, science, philosophy*. Baltimore (MD): Johns Hopkins U.P.