

## ARTICLE

# Translating management ideas: consultants as language artificers

JÉSSICA MONTEIRO VALVERDE <sup>1</sup>  
SAMIR ADAMOGLU DE OLIVEIRA <sup>1 2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DA PARAÍBA (UFPB) / PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM ADMINISTRAÇÃO, JOÃO PESSOA – PB, BRAZIL

<sup>2</sup> INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE ESTUDOS E PESQUISAS SOCIAIS (IBEPES), CURITIBA – PR, BRAZIL

## Abstract

Using translation theory and management ideas literature, we aim to understand how organizational consultants use linguistic elements to circulate management ideas. We carried out a qualitative study with 16 consultants, using content and rhetoric analysis in semi-structured interviews. Results indicate the use of translation throughout the consultants' work, allowing them to obtain legitimacy in the field. We showed that to move between different segments and organizational sizes, consultants persuasively use rhetoric, combined with practical and theoretical knowledge, through a mechanism we call 'translation into practice,' which aims to adapt concepts to the realities consulted. Consultants also resort to specific vocabularies and language games, emphasizing the strategic importance of language use for this occupational group that aims to professionalize itself in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Translation. Management ideas. Consultancy. Rhetoric. Language.

## *Traduzindo ideias de gestão: consultores como artífices da linguagem*

### Resumo

Com base na perspectiva da tradução e edição de ideias, buscamos compreender como consultores organizacionais utilizam elementos linguísticos para fazer circular ideias de gestão. Para isso, realizamos um estudo qualitativo com 16 consultores, por meio do emprego de análises de conteúdo e de retórica em entrevistas semiestruturadas. Os resultados apontam para o uso da tradução durante toda a atuação dos consultores, o que permite que eles obtenham legitimidade no campo. Evidenciamos que, para transitar entre os diferentes segmentos e portes organizacionais, os consultores utilizam a retórica numa perspectiva persuasiva, aliada ao conhecimento prático e teórico, por meio de um mecanismo por nós denominado "tradução para a prática" que visa à adaptação de conceitos à realidade consultada. Os consultores também recorrem a vocabulários específicos e a jogos de linguagem, o que enfatiza a importância estratégica do uso da linguagem para esse grupo ocupacional, que busca profissionalizar-se na sociedade contemporânea.

**Palavras-chave:** Tradução. Ideias de gestão. Consultoria organizacional. Retórica. Linguagem.

## *Traduciendo ideas de gestión: los consultores como artífices del lenguaje*

### Resumen

Con base en la perspectiva de la traducción y edición de ideas, nos proponemos comprender cómo los consultores organizacionales usan elementos lingüísticos para hacer circular ideas de gestión. Realizamos un estudio cualitativo con 16 consultores, utilizando análisis de contenido y retórica en entrevistas semiestruturadas. Los resultados indican el uso de la traducción en todo el trabajo de los consultores, lo que les permite obtener legitimidad en el campo. Mostramos que, para moverse entre diferentes segmentos y tamaños organizacionales, los consultores utilizan la retórica de manera persuasiva, combinada con conocimientos prácticos y teóricos, a través de un mecanismo que llamamos 'traducción a la práctica', que tiene como objetivo adaptar los conceptos a las realidades consultadas. Los consultores también recurren a vocabularios específicos y juegos de lenguaje que enfatizan la importancia estratégica del uso del lenguaje para este grupo ocupacional que aspira a profesionalizarse en la sociedad contemporánea.

**Palabras clave:** Traducción. Ideas de gestión. Consultoría organizacional. Retórica. Lenguaje.

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## INTRODUCTION

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The need for management expertise to help organizations from different fields provided opportunities for knowledge professionals, among them organizational consultants. Their rise to their current relevant status would not have been possible if organizations, i.e., environments where labor is hired, had not spread in society, including encompassing professional activities that were previously performed independently (McKenna, 2006).

In this context, it is crucial to understand the diffusion and circulation of management knowledge that is so intrinsically embedded in society. According to Sturdy, Heusinkveld, and Strang (2019), although there are many debates about the nature of management ideas – whether they change over the years or are “labeled” in a new way – the fact that they continue to be used, reproduced, adapted, and even contested demonstrates the importance of researching this field. Management ideas, also known as management knowledge or “fads”, are prescriptive guidelines for managers and other management practitioners to deal with organizational demands (Bort & Kieser, 2019). According to Pope and Bromley (2019, p. 411), the expansion of managerial activity demanded an investigation of what management is capable of doing. Thus, “the study and practice of contemporary management are first and foremost about ideas”.

Consultants are pointed out as “carriers” of management knowledge (Faust, 2012); in this research, they are also considered “translators” of this knowledge. By understanding that the transmission of ideas occurs in an institutional environment, these carriers of knowledge are endowed with influence and agency in its transmission, i.e., they not only transport knowledge from one place to another but edit it through specific uses of language employing their rhetorical and discursive capacity (Abrahmson & Piazza, 2019; Scheuer, 2021).

The transformation that knowledge undergoes during this “journey” of ideas is represented by the term “translation”, coined by Scandinavian institutionalism to describe how concepts are converted into artifacts and sent to other places where they will be translated again and again, thus becoming institutions (Czarniawska & Joerges, 2011; Nielsen, Mathiassen, & Newell, 2022; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017).

Suppose consultants are seen as authorities on management. In that case, their seal of approval may give one idea greater visibility than another, as some ideas become popular not because of their strength per se but because of who presents them (Czarniawska & Joerges, 2011), which may clarify why some of these circulate quickly than others.

According to Kipping and Clark (2012), the importance of studying management consulting is embedded in the main contributions of the object itself: (i) it is an economic activity of significant impact; (ii) it accounts for the diffusion of management concepts and practices (e.g., management tools and technology) as consulting firms absorb students fresh out of business schools (Wright, 2019), who may subsequently assume positions in other organizations, taking with them experiences and knowledge coming from their various clients (Bort & Kieser, 2019; Engwall & Wedlin, 2019), thus reproducing the models and practices learned; and (iii) it promotes economic, social, and organizational change (Wright, 2019) since it is inserted in virtually all market segments, including public administration.

In turn, recent studies on translation have been concerned with identifying the main theoretical currents that underpin research in the field (Firsova, Bilorus, Olikh, & Salimon, 2022; Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016), while others have identified how translation has been conceptualized through discourse theories (Doolin, Grant, & Thomas, 2013; Mueller & Whittle, 2011), as well as defined a typology of translation approaches based on a literature review (van Grinsven, Heusinkveld, & Cornelissen, 2016) or grounded in the mechanisms associated with it (Nielsen et al., 2022; Waldorff & Madsen, 2022). These same studies point out that the concept of translation has been used to primarily analyze phenomena of change in organizations and issues of knowledge circulation in management. In Brazil, although less recent, the literature involving management concepts and organizational consulting highlights the process of diffusion and circulation of management practices, including their adoption and use by organizations in which consultants are seen not only as normative elements of legitimation but also actors who popularize these concepts and actions, institutionalizing them in ways that are sometimes mischaracterized, or even emptied of their original semantic contents (Donadone, 2002, 2005; Machado-da-Silva & Vizeu, 2007; Paula & Wood, 2008).

We seek to contribute to this literature by integrating and articulating analytical categories which are usually studied in isolation, namely (i) management ideas, (ii) translation, and (iii) organizational consultancies, to understand how these three components connect and are operated rhetorically, further understanding the translation process. We understand that by transacting management ideas through translation mechanisms, management consultancies facilitate their circulation in the pulverized organizations in contemporary society. In this sense, we investigate **how consultants translate using rhetoric and other elements, e.g., specific vocabulary and language games, to operate language as a strategic resource** to reach client companies and various interlocutors, gaining access to different environments.

## **THEORY CIRCULATION, TRANSLATION, AND EDITING OF MANAGEMENT IDEAS**

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The concept of translation emerged in Scandinavian institutionalism and comprises a linguistic approach that, when applied to management ideas, explains how concepts are translated into artifacts – be they books and documents or models – and spread to other places to be translated again into objects and actions that “if repeated, might stabilize into institutions” (Czarniawska, 2009, p. 425). It can be stated that translation does not reach its destination as it was initially because “each act of translation changes the translator and what is translated” (Czarniawska, 2009, p. 424) recursively.

Translation goes beyond the linguistic concept usually associated with the term – it involves the displacement or replacement of something, which results in its transformation. Thus, from this perspective, every translation changes the translator and what is being translated. When applied to management ideas, translation results in books, models, and documents, which will be reproduced and may become institutions as they influence the social practices that support that structure (Czarniawska, 2009; Morris & Lancaster, 2006).

Therefore, translation can be considered a micro-process that occurs among a small number of actors at a time, with technology being responsible for accelerating the dissemination of a translation worldwide. In this way, “it is this network of humans and hybridized technology that is the material basis for more complex translation mechanisms: fashion and institutionalization” (Czarniawska & Joerges, 2011, p. 24). According to Faust (2012), it sends the textual account of a practice, which will undergo additional interpretations and readings to be later applied. Thus, translations result in local models because those who translate do so to meet their own needs (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). It is also important to consider the interpretive viability that allows for variability of actions by those who translate ideas and those who receive them.

Translation involves “a complex process of negotiation during which meanings, claims, and interests change” (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016, p. 237) because it also involves a political dimension, in which specific interests that require strategic maneuvering and argumentation are pursued to persuade the actors who participate in the process (Siebert, Martin, & Simpson, 2020). According to Wæraas and Nielsen (2016), there are four stages of translation: (i) problematization – when solutions are pointed out by the translators, who argue they have the necessary resources to solve the problems being faced; (ii) intersement – when the bond of the people involved are strengthened; (iii) enrolment – when there is the acceptance and participation of the actors in the process; and (iv) mobilization – the maintenance of the actors in the network in a cohesive way to ensure that interest is kept.

Management ideas comprise concepts and practices that spread in/among organizational fields that allow the circulation of specific knowledge (technical and technological) and that are appropriated and translated by different types of organizations (Nielsen et al., 2022; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). For Abrahamson and Piazza (2019), management ideas are first rhetorically articulated through language to be later organized into models and, consequently, innovations. They categorize levels of abstraction, rhetoric being the most abstract one and innovation the most specific. Thus, it is possible to relate their framework to the concept of translation: in its most abstract form, the idea circulates to later materialize in practice at the most specific level.

Derived from the concept of translation, “editing” emerged to explain the local changes that an idea or model undergoes when translated. New meanings are inserted in each translation and reinterpreted in light of the translators’ experiences, making the circulation of a concept a continuous translation and editing process. Therefore, editing explains how models are reformulated and recontextualized when inserted into new contexts due to a certain level of plasticity necessary to diffuse and effectively introduce management ideas and concepts in a given organizational environment (Donadone, 2002). Although it seems an open process, there is a particular adherence to rules and social norms in the institutional context of reference (Waldorff & Madsen, 2022; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017).

## CONSULTANTS AND THE RHETORICAL FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE

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Management consultants are part of a group of specialized occupations known as the “knowledge industry” that has been greatly influenced by management as a practice and culture (McKenna, 2006). They are a reference when talking about knowledge workers (Sturdy, Handley, Clark, & Fincham, 2009), and various types of organizations recognize their skills as critical competitive advantages (Kipping & Clark, 2012).

Sturdy et al. (2009) point out the actors involved in the “knowledge industry” who bring news to firms are valued. In this scenario, consultants are “often placed at the forefront of these activities” (Sturdy et al., 2009, p. 9). Consultants hold a privileged position because they deal with various clients, optimize their knowledge base, and are external carriers of this knowledge with the legitimacy needed to promote organizational changes. These changes proposed and promoted by consultants are directly linked to the management knowledge they carry and transfer. Because of their ease in moving between management research, practice, and teaching fields, consultants are positioned as central actors in developing and applying management ideas (Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Wright, 2019).

While discussing which ideas are disseminated or not, Wedlin and Sahlin (2017) concluded those that become strong as they circulate, i.e., they are not intrinsically strong. Some ideas become popular not because of their strength per se but because of who carries them (Czarniawska & Joerges, 2011) or because certain actors have adopted them in the field (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). Since consultants are relevant actors in this field, we understand that their influence is decisive in spreading these ideas.

Despite being carriers of management knowledge, consultants use tacit knowledge, professional experience, and analytical skills in their work, making it difficult to measure and replicate (Kirkpatrick, Muzio, & Ackroyd, 2012). According to Heusinkveld and Benders (2012), the knowledge consultants have is as important as how it circulates in the market. In this context, rhetorical techniques are relevant because they help consultants argue about a concept, model, or management tool as the ideal solution to specific organizational problems.

For a long time, rhetoric was understood as the art of convincing, based on Aristotle’s studies (Raffaelli, Garcias, Espejo, & Portulhak, 2017). However, a “new rhetoric” has put the spotlight on persuasion in social change (Browning & Hartelius, 2018; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), bringing rhetoric and argumentation closer together, highlighting the agency underlying the act (Hoff-Clausen, 2018). According to Suddaby and Greenwood (2005, p. 40), rhetoric “is an essential element of the deliberate manipulation of cognitive legitimacy” because it is loaded with interests that are displayed in texts and speech but is employed to exert influence on other actors. With the “new rhetoric”, it is understood that argumentation is not emptied of content, not a superficial study of communication, but rather a powerful tool of persuasion that can be used strategically.

When used strategically, rhetoric joins two other constructs: vocabulary and language games. According to Loewenstein, Ocasio, and Jones (2012), vocabulary is a set of words that holds specific meanings for a social group, building identification with other actors in an environment. Thus, professional vocabularies are responsible for attributing meaning to the theoretical contents of the abstract body of knowledge common to the professions, being shared – or penetrable – since they are absorbed into common language (Loewenstein, 2014).

On the other hand, language games are “[...] a rule-governed practice, integrating communication and action” (Mantere, 2013, p. 1413), in which “learning to play” is about knowing different realities and knowing how to behave appropriately in front of them. Thus, understanding the dynamics between rhetorical elements, vocabulary, and language games helps reconcile the persuasive movements and tools capable of granting access to specific groups. Thus, by establishing shared meanings, it is possible to create a connection with interlocutors and use language as a strategic element to translate ideas and knowledge for specific purposes.

## METHOD

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This qualitative research uses primary empirical assets that consist of semi-structured interviews with consultants in the state of Paraíba before going to the field. It is divided into three sections: preliminary information, interviewee information, and questions, based on pre-defined analysis groups.

A total of 37 consultants were contacted through e-mail, WhatsApp, and direct messages on social networks, namely Instagram and LinkedIn. Of these, 16 consultants were interviewed, including people from the cities of João Pessoa, Campina Grande, and Guarabira. The data saturation parameter used was the repetition of terms and content during the interviews, which does not indicate that the topic was exhausted but points out sufficient data was gathered to perform the analysis.

Given the changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/2021 that led to a home office/remote model, all participants chose to be interviewed by video call using the Google Meet platform, and the audio was recorded with their permission. The recordings were made with the help of a cell phone and the computer itself and were later saved in the private digital storage of one of the researchers. The duration of the interviews ranged from 11 minutes to 1h10 and reached a total of 10 hours of captured audio.

For the analysis of the empirical material collected, the qualitative content analysis method was initially applied, according to Schreier (2014). The first step in the analysis consisted of categorizing five thematic groups based on the research goals and the theoretical frame of reference. The analytical categories were chosen based on the literature, starting from sociology-based institutionalism and its conceptions associated with the New Institutionalism (mainly, the concept of “legitimacy” and the notion of “secondary socialization”)<sup>1</sup> to ramifications, new approaches, and applications already strongly influenced by Scandinavian institutionalism (especially the concepts of “translation”, “edition”, and “artifacts”), complemented by the notion of “competencies”<sup>2</sup>.

The second step was coding by grouping words and themes of interest for each analysis set to find trends in the transcripts. We emphasize that our focus of analysis and discussion herein is anchored most strongly in categories 4 and 5, the first three being a basis for recognizing the characteristics of the consultants’ working methods. The pre-established analysis groups and their respective codes are shown in Box 1.

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<sup>1</sup>We did not adopt the concept of “diffusion” – which is common in New Institutionalism – because the Scandinavian institutionalists emphasize that it evokes something static, displaceable from one place to another in its entirety, which would make it difficult for us to capture the processual dynamics that interested us: “In Management studies, the traditional explanation of the circulation of ideas, objects, practices, customs, and even institutions employed the notion of **diffusion**. This physicalist metaphor, dating from an old school of thought in anthropology [...], was embedded in many a physical and chemical connotations of doubtful utility in a social context, and has recently been replaced by the notion of **translation**” (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005, p. 7, emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup>By “competencies”, we refer to the set of skills related to the consultants’ practical performance which are important for carrying out the translation process. They involve their academic and professional experiences coming from secondary socialization processes, not necessarily corresponding to the functionalist conceptual framework with which the term is usually associated.

**Box 1**  
**Analysis Groups**

Classification	Analysis Groups	Codes
C1	Competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professionals</li> <li>• Academic</li> <li>• Life experiences</li> </ul>
C2	Secondary Socialization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relational aspects</li> <li>• Training (formal or informal)</li> <li>• Previous experiences</li> </ul>
C3	Artifacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Own or third-party documents</li> <li>• Previous experiences (same or similar projects)</li> </ul>
C4	Translation of Management Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language use</li> <li>• Model replication</li> <li>• Usage in the form of innovation</li> </ul>
C5	Editing of Management Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Particularities of each context</li> <li>• Adoption of rules</li> </ul>

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

We also performed a rhetorical analysis on the questions referring to the “translation” and “editing” of management ideas. It is important to clarify that this is not a study on the rhetoric of the consultants *in situ* but an analysis of how these actors use rhetorical elements in their conversations, as they report. It was not possible to witness the moments in which these talks took place since we only had access to them indirectly, through the accounts and examples provided in the interviews. Thus, we sought to highlight the rhetorical elements – Pathos, Ethos, and Logos – that emerged in the consultants’ discourse, using Raffaelli et al. (2017) as a basis to classify each of the predominant elements, considering the meaning employed by the consultant in their report. Box 2 presents the rhetorical categories of analysis applied in the transcripts.

**Box 2**  
**Rhetorical categories of analysis**

Categories	Assigned meanings
Pathos	Emphasis on the risk for the organization, exploiting market uncertainties, inspiring trust and loyalty.
Ethos	Emphasis on the aspects of efficiency in the organization, with an emphasis on numbers and data.
Logos	Emphasis on the organization’s ability to perform its activities competently based on its values.

Source: Adapted from Raffaelli et al. (2017).

This classification enabled us to interpret and analyze the data by connecting and contrasting it to the theoretical framework adopted to understand the object of this research.

## ANALYSIS: THE TRANSLATION AND EDITING OF MANAGEMENT IDEAS BY CONSULTANTS

During their practice, consultants deal with client companies of different sizes, fields, and various cultures and objectives. Thus, using the rhetorical tool becomes strategic so that it is possible to access each organization and its staff, which is how consultants spread their knowledge and attract attention to their expertise (Heusinkveld & Benders, 2012).

Usually, the first step of a consultant in an organization is to perform a diagnosis to understand which project should be executed. This investigation can be done in a structured way, using pre-defined models, or an unstructured way, by cognitively concatenating the information during the conversation:

In some situations, I use **design thinking**; in others, **I use Scrum**. Now [...] I don't use it in its pure form, how it must work. I know the methodology, **I combine it with a few MEG processes**, and sometimes I put together a squad to solve something. Sometimes, I put together the process to be able to create an idea, to be able to implement it. So, I kind of marry them (I7).

Often, the client comes to us with what they think is the problem itself, but **we need to make a quick diagnosis to establish what the real problem is** and, with that, establish what the goals of that project will be and what it will try to do. So, this is the first step with the client, **to educate them to really understand what the problem is**, what is the solution he will have to implement, what the goals are, **and then we develop the project scope and show the methodology we will implement** (I15).

We identified that, regardless of how it is used by the consultant – which says much more about their ways of organizing the work than the result itself – translation begins during that first interaction with the client, in which tools, ideas, and concepts are presented. It also involves interests and meanings shaped in a complex negotiation process between the actors (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). The relational and political aspect involved in translation is perceived when interviewee I15 assigns a certain pedagogical purpose to the interaction since, in this position, the consultant is the bearer of knowledge, the person qualified to transfer it, and the client, although they think they know what the problem is, may not have a clear perception of it.

The difference between the two forms of diagnosis is that, initially, the consultant must identify the client profile so they can combine the rhetorical strategies (Pathos, Ethos, and Logos) with the best diagnosis and convince the client of their capability to perform the project and get the desired results. Thus, for a client that values results while appreciating tangible metrics, a diagnostic tool allied to the use of the Logos and Ethos rhetorical strategies can be used to generate indicators:

**We try to understand what the communication channel of this decision-maker is. What is their profile?**

Because it is no use trying, for example, to sell human development to someone extremely focused on numbers. It is not their level, it is not what they use to make decisions; you will say that people will be happier, and they will answer: "But why more happiness?" Then I have to tell them, "**People with more motivation, more meritocracy, will yield 40% more in your revenue**". Then he will say: "Oh, so it is 40% more money in your pocket? Then I'm in" (I10).

The Logos and Ethos rhetorical elements are perceptible by the appeal to efficiency: I10 argues that hiring the service will benefit the organization financially, even though the project focuses on people management. The use of Pathos – e.g., an argumentation that emphasizes the listener's feelings – can be identified in I1's speech: "It's showing the pain, how this pain is affecting them [...] in general, when they search, they already know they have the pain, but to search for the pain, if their pain is financial, you will search and find the cause in another corner.". In this case, I1 enunciates the client's problems as "pains" and uses linguistic aspects that evoke the notion of cure as the solution to the problems. Here, it is possible to allude to the notion – sometimes identified in the consulting field – of consultants as "company doctors", able to mitigate suffering and provide a medication that promotes organizational restoration.

The use of diagnosis as the initial tool of the translation mechanism, in a structured or unstructured format, demonstrates the fluid nature of knowledge in consulting. There are no standardized methods that can be widely used regardless of the type of company, so consultants need to rely on their theoretical framework, practical experiences, and critical skills, which are often only tacitly present (Kirkpatrick et al., 2012):

I take something that already exists, which is the MEG [*Modelo de Eficiência em Gestão*, Management Excellence Model], I take the management and strategy theories [...] and make them applicable according to each client. So, each situation is personalized, right? **There isn't a proper methodology, but there is a base, which is the existing processes. I just adapt and add a little of my experience** that relates to that, ensuring that it generates more client results (I7).

In the case of I7, the diagnosis performed in companies is a combination of their experiences in previous consultancies, in the *Programa Paraibano da Qualidade* (PPQ, Quality Program of Paraíba), and in formal education (which corresponds to secondary socialization processes) plus the subjective issues of judgment regarding implementation priorities. That results in a “unique” product that is presented according to the company's needs and with the goal of achieving quick results.

The literature supports the practice of considering the diagnosis the beginning of the translation process; according to Wæraas and Nielsen (2016), the translation method has four stages, the first of which is “problematization” – the moment when actors raise issues and seek to persuade others that they have the ideal solution. Since translation is an ongoing process that lasts throughout the consulting project, the other stages presented by the authors (interest, engagement, and mobilization) are identified.

The consultant's first contact with the company happens with the owner or the manager, depending on the size and management style of the organization. The search for external help indicates that the company identified that its problems need a specialist analysis, i.e., management support capable of bringing knowledge and innovation. Thus, there is no way that a company can perform a consultancy without being oriented toward change. However, the decision maker's lack of knowledge in management becomes an obstacle in this process: “Until today, very few company owners, company directors knew management. I think there have only been two or three in all these years. The others are all adventurous. They have notions, but very shallow ones.” (I3).

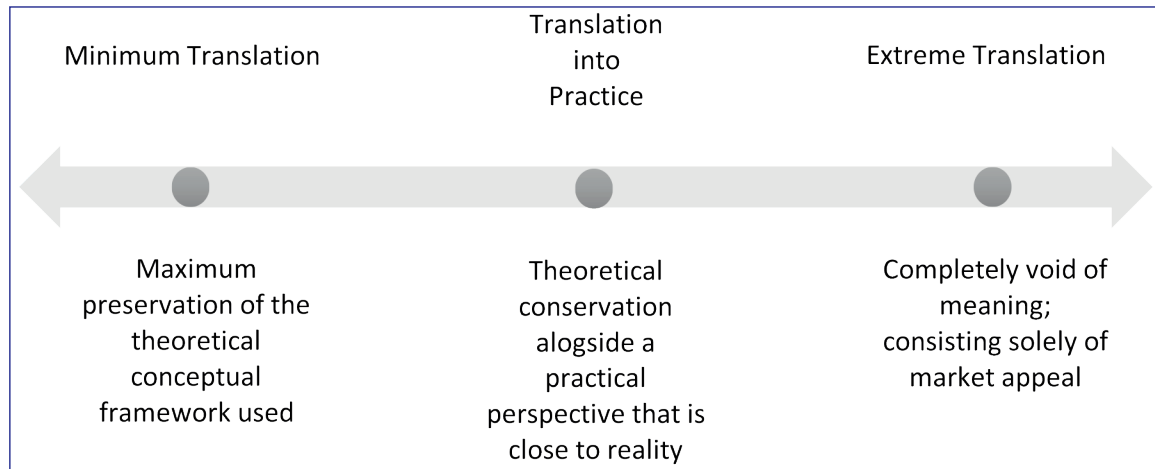
So, knowing how to use rhetoric alongside management knowledge is a determining factor for the consultant to perform an initial company analysis and start the translation process effectively. An important point is that because many entrepreneurs have no management knowledge, the consultant must use an accessible language that allows the understanding of the content that will be applied. Understanding the practical application of concepts makes it possible to have much more access to the client, making it possible to share common and concrete meanings with him in a process that can be defined here as “translation into practice”.

**The “translation into practice” is a linguistic mechanism** associated with a series of skills acquired during the consultant's professional experience and theoretical training that enables them (after diagnosing existing problems) to pitch a solution that employs management methods and tools. In this type of translation, the rhetorical tool is used to argue about the consultant's competence to deliver what they promise, i.e., that the management ideas proposed will lead to a beneficial change for the company and that they are capable of executing them, taking into account all the particularities of the context, as I10 argues: “There are many good managers who will not make a decision based on a nice speech, no, they want to know if you have arguments and if you can do it, really do it.”.

That leads to a continuum in which, at one end, there is a minimum translation with the maximum conceptual structure of the proposed idea and, at the other end, an extreme translation, utterly devoid of semantic content and aimed only at the marketing appeal generated by the use of buzzwords. “Translation into practice” would be at the center since it demands the use of scientific and academic knowledge while also seeking to form a closer bond with the client by using an accessible and easy-to-understand language. Figure 1 is a visual representation of this.



**Figure 1**  
**Consultant translation continuum**



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Translation happens at every stage of the consulting process because it is necessary to share the knowledge with the project participants at each meeting. Everyone involved must understand the concepts adopted to ensure cooperation with the activities that must be performed. According to Berglund and Werr (2000), ensuring the team's engagement in the project is a continuous practice in consulting, requiring effort and dedication from the professional in charge. This action is comparable to the act of teaching and involves a relational aspect: as a micro-process, translation happens between groups of people at a time.

A change occurs among those involved in each translation process: "They do it, they learn, it is a process that we call client transformation" (I4). Thus: (i) the participants absorb the knowledge and professionalize their activity; (ii) the consultants absorb the experiences and expand their repertoire; and (iii) the concept itself changes since it is remodeled to meet the specific needs of each client.

Empirically, it is possible to see that the translation process happens simultaneously with the editing process during the diagnosis, when the consultant changes the tools and methods by organizing them in the best way to meet the client's needs. The editing occurs so that it is possible to adapt the methods used to the organization's particularities. For Wedlin and Sahlin (2017), editing clarifies how the ideas and models applied are recontextualized when inserted into new scenarios and, thus, explains the local modifications and generates a unique product with each new consulting project:

Each job is customized and handcrafted. **There is no package that I bring under my arm and say, 'I have already done it this way, and I will do it here'; no, each case is unique.** So, you must know the company and its needs (I8).

While the consultants describe the translation as "teaching", it is possible to consider editing as "adapting". Together, the two concepts explain how the consultant manages to convince the client that their methodology is valid and can be employed to produce results. Rhetoric is between these two pillars, helping the consultant argue with the client by deliberately manipulating knowledge in their own favor, according to the needs and expectations presented.

Editing is based on pre-defined models from the company or third parties that are adjusted to each project according to the malleability of the semantic content of the ideas. These, in turn, tend to be partially shared/socialized according to the contractor's demands. Besides adapting to multiple realities possible, editing allows the consultant to be more efficient since they already have a base to work with: "We work with some models. Then, based on these models, we adapt them to the needs of that client." (I3).

The translation that consultants perform is continuous and highly dependent on relational aspects, given that the consultant is the professional who holds the knowledge but must argue and convince the client of its legitimacy. To do this, the consultant uses the rhetorical function of language, appealing to rhetorical elements based on their ability to understand and perceive the decision-maker's profile.

## DISCUSSION

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Our analysis helps us understand the role of consultants as legitimate bearers of management knowledge (Faust, 2012; Seidenschnur & Krücken, 2019) and their central role in producing and spreading management ideas (Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Wright, 2019). Thus, much of consultants' work focuses on building narratives that legitimate them before their target audience (Berglund & Werr, 2000).

Complying with what is expected of a consultant, maintaining a cohesive network of relationships, and receiving validation for their activity are of great value for professionals in this field since their reputation is the foundation of their job. For this to be possible, the consultant uses tricks and strategies that, alongside the operational results of consulting projects, promote their image and ensure their permanence and stability in the market (Kipping, 2011). The use of linguistic elements, e.g., the rhetorical elements of Pathos, Ethos, and Logos (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), weighs heavily in this regard.

Consultants use rhetorical elements at various moments of their professional activity. Still, for the results to be positive, there is the need to know aspects of the reality in which their interlocutor is in, e.g., the person in charge of the company. As there is no complete standardization of management knowledge within organizations – even in management education – it is impossible to know a company's management maturity level before talking to the person responsible for it.

This first moment, which consultants call "diagnosis", is a crucial stage of the process because it is here that the elements necessary to establish effective communication between the project participants. **Using the competencies and skills acquired in academia and their practice, consultants investigate the organization using structured or unstructured methods, and adjust their discourses by dosing the number of technical terms and specific vocabulary according to the client's profile.**

**Consultants intertwine their own vocabulary with rhetoric, using specific terms to get the client's attention and establish a shared meaning.** According to Loewenstein et al. (2012, p. 48), "selecting a vocabulary, and selecting particular words within that vocabulary, persuades through generating meaning and identification". Thus, using a **management vocabulary** that explicitly refers to management tools and technology can be beneficial in a company with an advanced/sophisticated management level, with managers skilled in the technical knowledge of the field, which signals mastery of the content addressed and creates a relationship of trust between the people involved (Glückler & Armbrüster, 2003). Similarly, using inappropriate words may create fissures in communication. That would hinder identification with the proposal and make the client believe that the suggested method is too robust for the company and therefore not applicable, giving the idea that hiring the consultancy would not be profitable.

Knowing how to use the appropriate vocabulary combined with rhetorical elements according to the profile of each client gives the consultant a strategic advantage in establishing a fruitful dialogue (Mantere, 2013) that may result in their hiring. It is important to mention that these two linguistic elements can – and should – be used throughout the consulting process because the consultant does not deal only with the owner or the manager; their actions impact several hierarchical levels of the organization. Knowing how to communicate with the collaborators may be the difference in gaining approval for the changes that will be proposed during the project.

To some extent, the phenomenon of managerialism facilitates the use of professional management vocabulary by consultants, since there is a wide circulation of it, both in organizations and social life (Engwall & Wedlin, 2019). According to Loewenstein (2014, p. 66), "parts of professional vocabularies are taken up by non-professionals and absorbed into common parlance", which enables a set of shared meanings and symbols to be identified and employed, even in cases when the client does not have in-depth management knowledge. This recognition allows trust to be built among professionals using these vocabularies, which is an indication that consultants should not stop using them. However, they should know how to dose and balance them with rhetorical elements specific to each client.

Since consultants deal with companies from different segments and of various sizes, it is clear that they move through different linguistic universes. However, although organizations need management and, thus, are familiar with its vocabulary, the consultant also needs to know the vocabulary that the organization uses to communicate, so they can

correctly translate the management ideas to that reality. Thus, we must highlight the importance of consultants mastering various “language games” that allow them to understand the social rules of each organization and the meanings and symbols present there.

According to Mantere (2013, p. 1413), “a language game can be conceived as a rule-governed practice, integrating communication and action”. During the initial stages of a consultancy, the consultant must adapt to norms and structures and learn how to use language properly to do their job within the scope of the present context. Since organizations are a network with different people that share a specific language, knowing how to play the different games will allow the consultant to be more efficient in the translation process, following a path that promotes the best understanding and enabling the necessary changes that the project demands.

By employing the linguistic resources presented, **translation carries a powerful strategic meaning for consultants**. It is done during meetings and moments of contact with the client and their team, where the consultant can do it almost automatically, by applying management concepts and theoretical models to problematic situations in organizations and offering opportunities for improvement. When consultants discuss management ideas with their clients using rhetoric to argue about the importance and need to execute specific projects in the company, they start the process of circulating management knowledge. Thus, they persuasively instill in managers the urgency of performing specific actions to solve the problems that bother them.

Consultants act both on managers’ uncertainties and also to show the legitimacy of the proposed changes (Machado-da-Silva & Vizeu, 2007). As carriers of management knowledge, they possess autonomy and influence on its circulation (Faust, 2012). By employing their hands-on experience and other competencies acquired along their professional trajectory, the consultant is capable of transforming translation into practice as a strategic way of uniting knowledge, concrete action, and competent use of language in their job (Siebert et al., 2020). Thus, they manage to chain abstract and sometimes generic concepts – which were learned in their formal education – into models applicable to real situations and which, when implemented in organizations, can be turned into concrete, viable practices (Abrahmson & Piazza, 2019; Hedmo, Sahlin-Andersson & Wedlin, 2005).

Translation is, therefore, a strategic asset, and improving this skill is fundamental for consultants to develop within the field. Previous positive results are the credentials needed for new potential works. Plus, the more consultants work in various segments, the broader their repertoire will be, thus encompassing greater knowledge in terms of vocabulary and language games, since translation occurs in a dialectical relationship in which both the organization receiving the knowledge and the consultants themselves change.

## CONCLUSIONS

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By highlighting the role of consultants as translators of management ideas, we corroborate with the perspective of consultants as legitimate carriers of management knowledge, highlighting the relevance of linguistic issues such as those pointed out here (e.g., rhetoric, vocabulary, and language games) as essential elements for the consultant’s work. Therefore, we find that consultants are language crafters because, throughout their careers, they improve communication to the point of using it strategically, identifying client profiles and adapting to them by adopting more rhetorically appealing elements, and a more or less precise vocabulary. Despite transiting through various organizational levels, consultants make themselves understood and model, mix, and give meaning to management concepts and practices with which they are familiar, assertively applying them in the company-client relationship and using the linguistic elements shown herein.

Thus, the mechanism of “translation into practice” demonstrates that consultants handle management ideas not only for marketing purposes, but to deliver a viable solution to the manager, since their legitimacy in the field also depends on positive results. Furthermore, we emphasize that the management knowledge that the consultants translate is anchored in their academic training and is built together with their professional experience, in which both – theory and practice – complement and strengthen each other.

We contribute to the practice and study of management ideas, translation, and organizational consulting by demonstrating how the ability to use language is important to the activity of these professionals. It can impact the elaboration of institutional communication, social network posts, and portfolio material through the use of specific vocabulary for each client group (e.g., private companies, public companies, by niche or market segment) to achieve more effective results. We highlight the importance of oral communication to achieve positive consulting results and how this element can be crucial to maintaining legitimacy and permanence in this market. We also present translation as a strategic element for this profession, pointing out the need for ongoing study and balance between theory and practice so that the translation is not void of semantic content, mischaracterizing the original management ideas.

Contemporary literature emphasizes the importance of better understanding how certain occupations actively build knowledge through language and their relational skills to acquire the status of a profession while also becoming autonomous from other fields with which they interface. The field of management consulting seeks to achieve the status of a profession (McKenna, 2008). Thus, we hope that further studies will focus on mapping and understanding how the strategic use of language alters and brings management ideas, concepts, and practices to the forefront. That might prove relevant to help certain occupations to break away from others in an effort to professionalize.

Additionally, we also believe that future studies involving management ideas and organizational consulting may discuss which academic knowledge is consumed by consultants, which management tools are more widely spread, and which literature and authors have capillarity in this profession (even though we recognize it encompasses various fields). That would help assess the reach of the current academic practices and their communicative effectiveness based on the knowledge consumed, articulated, and disseminated in other social fields besides academia, pointing out ways of improving the interface between academics and non-academic managers: what is the actuality of the knowledge translated by these language craftsmen in their persuasion strategies?<sup>3</sup>

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Jéssica Monteiro Valverde  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2656-8502>

Master in Administration from the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB); Management professor and organizational consultant.  
E-mail: [valverde.jessicamonteiro@gmail.com](mailto:valverde.jessicamonteiro@gmail.com)

Samir Adamoglu de Oliveira  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4978-0557>

Ph.D. in Administration from the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR); Adjunct Professor at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB); Associate Researcher at the Brazilian Institute of Social Studies and Research (IBEPES). E-mail: [samir.oliveira@academico.ufpb.br](mailto:samir.oliveira@academico.ufpb.br)

#### AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

**Jéssica Monteiro Valverde:** Conceptualization (Equal); Data curation (Lead); Formal Analysis (Lead); Investigation (Lead); Methodology (Lead); Validation (Equal); Visualization (Lead); Writing- original draft (Lead); Writing- review & editing (Equal).

**Samir Adamoglu de Oliveira:** Conceptualization (Equal); Formal Analysis (Supporting); Investigation (Supporting); Methodology (Supporting); Project administration (Lead); Supervision (Lead); Validation (Equal); Visualization (Supporting); Writing- original draft (Supporting); Writing- review & editing (Equal).