

## **A Linguistic Relativity Theory Perspective on The Rise of Entrepreneurship Discourse in Three Languages**

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This paper draws on the theory of linguistic relativity (Boroditsky, 2011) to deepen our understanding of the relationship between entrepreneurship, language, and cultural context. The paper contextualizes entrepreneurship in time as well as in space. It does so by discussing the history of the word for “entrepreneur” in three languages spoken in OECD countries. By the end of the twentieth century, all of these languages had a word for entrepreneur. We hold that knowing about the evolution of the meanings attached to the words for “entrepreneur” and its derivatives (e.g., “entrepreneurship”) in different languages can help us to understand the evolution of the political and cultural contexts in which entrepreneurs operate. In a seminal paper, Jones and Spicer (2005) observe that “entrepreneurship discourse” is now pervasive in many countries. They claim that the rise of entrepreneurship discourse has caused people to talk obsessively about entrepreneurship and to unduly venerate entrepreneurs.

Recently, a growing body of research seeks to uncover how entrepreneurship discourses influence behaviour (Jones and Spicer, 2006; Achtenhagen, & Welter, 2007; Forsström-Tuominen et al, 2015; Tedmanson & Evans, 2017; Berglund & Johansson, 2007; Perren, & Jennings, 2005; Ahl & Marlow, 2017; Jones, 2014). This body of literature refers to “entrepreneurship discourse” as a habit within a culture of frequently using the word “entrepreneur” and of celebrating entrepreneurs as socially productive and worthy of

emulation. We adopt this working definition of entrepreneurship discourse here. As we show below, the extensive academic literature on entrepreneurship discourse has a puzzling omission, namely the lack of a historical account of *when*, *how*, and *why* entrepreneurship discourse became widespread in a variety of countries. Even Jones and Spicer (2005) say little about this historical phenomenon aside from associating it with the the late twentieth century.

Expressing dissatisfaction with our limited knowledge of the career of the concept of “the entrepreneur,” Boutillier & Uzunidis (2013) called for more substantial research on “the etymology of the word entrepreneur and its influence on our today’s vocabulary.” Given that academics are themselves participants in and diffusers of entrepreneurship discourse, it behoves us to know about the process by which the words central to this discourse became widespread. As Birkinshaw et al. have observed (2014, p. 50) understanding the evolution of management concepts “is critically important” because such historical knowledge can help management research to become more “self-reflexive.” Birkinshaw et al.’s argument demonstrates why we need more research on the history of the keywords that are part of the theoretical apparatus of management academics. Moreover, the absence of any literature on the rise of entrepreneurship discourse is a serious impediment to understanding what this discourse does in the present and how it is likely to evolve in the future. We introduce a model that is based on the history of the words for entrepreneur that gives guidance about the likely future evolution of entrepreneurship discourse. We use this model to make a soft prediction, namely, that we may now be living in the period of “peak entrepreneurship discourse.”

In our theory section, we discuss the literature on entrepreneurship discourses and the social-scientific literature on the linguistic relativity hypothesis. We argue that entrepreneurship scholars interested in discourse and language can profit from drawing on linguistic relativity theory, a paradigm that has been hitherto underutilized by entrepreneurship scholars. We then describe our research methodology that allows us to track changes in word meaning. We then discuss the history of the word for entrepreneur in English, Danish, and Hebrew before presenting our model for understanding how entrepreneurship discourse emerges in a particular language. We conclude by outlining the implications of our research for management academics and for practitioners.

This paper historicizes present-day entrepreneurship discourse by showing how its emergence was closely connected to liberal resistance to intellectual movements that questioned the legitimacy of private enterprise. In this paper, “liberal” denotes classical liberalism, an ideology that emerged in the eighteenth century and which favours a minimal or “night-watchman” role for the state (Klein, 1992; Klein and Stern, 2006). From the late nineteenth century, the theory and praxis of liberalism came under attack by collectivist movements including socialism (Klein, 1992; Foss and Klein, 2014; Bradley and Klein, 2016). We define neoliberalism as the transnational movement to resist socialist ideas and practices, thereby increasing the relative importance of markets versus states (Harvey, 2007; Martilla, 2013; Ostry, 2016). Although neoliberalism has antecedents in the early twentieth-century writings of anti-socialist economists such as Von Mises, Hayek, and Knight, (Hülsmann, 2007; Boettke et al. 2016), it only developed as a major political and intellectual force in the second half of the century, particularly after the Mont Pelerin gathering in 1947,

where classical liberal intellectuals gathered to plan their counter attack against socialist ideas (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015).

This paper shows that in the early twentieth century United States, anti-socialist writers repurposed the French loanword entrepreneur in the course of justifying capitalism. The word became an important part of the rhetorical arsenal of economic liberals in the US and the UK. In the 1980s, the equivalent words in Danish and Hebrew acquired new political meanings as Denmark and Israel were transformed by neoliberalism. At the close of the twentieth century, the meaning of the word “entrepreneur” in these languages were changed as its definition was broadened by actors with very diverse ideological commitments, some of which were very different from those the liberals who created entrepreneurship discourse.

Table 1

<b>Language</b>	<b>Current Word For the founder of a firm</b>	<b>Date the word entered common currency</b>	<b>/Etymological Roots of Word</b>	<b>Standard definition(s) of the word</b>
French	<i>Entrepreneur</i>	14 <sup>th</sup> century	Someone who undertakes	A building contractor (from 14 <sup>th</sup> century) An owner-manager of a firm irrespective of industry (17 <sup>th</sup> century)

English	<i>Entrepreneur</i>	c. 1850	Someone who undertakes	A musical producer (19 <sup>th</sup> century definition)  An owner-manager of a firm irrespective of industry (after 1907)
Danish	<i>iværksætter</i>	Late 1970s	Someone who begins something	The founder of an owner-managed firm
Hebrew	<i>yazam</i>	1912, reintroduced after 1953	Someone who proposes new ideas	The founder of an owner-managed firm

## Theoretical Considerations

### Entrepreneurship Discourse

Since the publication of the seminal work by Ogbor (2000) on the mythology and reification of the entrepreneur, researchers have published extensively on the consequences of entrepreneurship discourse that now pervades many societies (Jones and Spicer, 2005; Forsström-Tuominen et al, 2015; Tedmanson & Evans, 2017; Berglund & Johansson, 2007; Perren, & Jennings, 2005; Ahl & Marlow, 2017; Jones, 2014). These empirical studies have improved our understanding of the functions of the modern entrepreneurship discourse. For instance, we now know that while individuals who self-describe as entrepreneurs play a crucial role in propagating entrepreneurship discourse (Anderson and Warren, 2011), the state

can also be an important promoter of entrepreneurship discourse (Perren and Jennings, 2005). Researchers have demonstrated that while entrepreneurship discourse is, in certain contexts, closely linked to neoliberalism (Achtenhagen & Welter, 2004), it can also be used effectively by political actors who favour a larger role for the state, as was demonstrated in Pyysiäinen & Vesala (2013)'s study of Finnish agricultural policy.

Recent research has highlighted the downsides of entrepreneurship discourse (e.g., Dodd, 2013). Critical scholars have shown how many philanthropists have adopted entrepreneurship discourse by rebranding themselves as “social entrepreneurs” (Dey, & Steyaert, 2012). Whether this rebranding exercise has had any performance effects, positive or negative, on the efficaciousness of philanthropic organizations, continues to be debated (Mason, 2012). Ahl et al. (2016) and Ahl and Nelson (2015) argue that the diffusion of entrepreneurship discourse into the feminist movement has had pernicious consequences, particularly in the context of the Nordic welfare states, where entrepreneurship discourse has been used to legitimate reductions in state support for mothers. Similar findings appeared in a study of the impact of entrepreneurship discourse on the treatment of immigrant women in the Netherlands (Verduyn & Essers, 2017).

The literature on entrepreneurship discourse has paid little attention to the processes by which this discourse became widespread. Jones and Spicer (2005) observe that entrepreneurship discourse is now pervasive in many countries, but they do not specify when and how it became pervasive. They argue that the rise of neoliberalism, a term they neither define nor associate with an identifiable time period, was connected to entrepreneurship discourse, as association that is commonly made in the literature on entrepreneurship

discourse. Dey (2016) mentions in passing that entrepreneurship discourse became common in the 1980s but did not explore the process by which it became widespread, or the development of the discourse in earlier period. In our view, the absence of any literature on the rise of entrepreneurship discourse is a serious impediment to understanding what this discourse does in the present and how it is likely to evolve in the future.

### **Linguistic Relativity**

The linguistic relativity hypothesis implies that if a relevant concept is missing from one's language, one will act differently than a speaker of a language that has the concept. The strong variant of the linguistic relativity hypothesis holds that all human thoughts and actions is dictated by language. In effect, it depicts individual reasoners prisoners of whichever language they have happened to learn. The strong version is commonly associated with the so-called "Sapir-Whorf theory" and with 1970s French structuralism (Lenneberg, 1953; Lee, 1985). In our view, the strong version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis is objectionable because it reduces humans to "cultural dopes" (Garfinkel, 1967) and because the empirical evidence adduced by its anthropologist proponents in the early twentieth century was discredited by subsequent fieldwork (Pinker, 2001). However, newer research does support the weak version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis (e.g., Kay and Regier, 2006; Athanasopoulos et al., 2016; Bylund & Athanasopoulos, 2017), which is the variant that we use in this paper.

Much of the empirical research designed to test the theory of linguistic relativity was done on hunter-gathers whose languages different dramatically from those spoken in cultures characterized by writing, nation-states, and market economies. Some of this research relates

to languages that are missing words for colours and numbers that are found in European languages (Davidoff et al, 1999). More directly relevant to our paper, is the research on the less pronounced differences in cognition associated with the differences between the languages spoken in industrialized countries. This research has demonstrated that the subtle differences in grammar, syntax, and vocabulary between such languages do influence economic thought and action. For instance, experimental data demonstrates that languages influence how native speakers perceive time (Bylund & Athanopoulos, 2017) and macro-economic data suggests that linguistic differences can help to explain cross-national variations in household savings rates (Chen, 2013).

Although business scholars have very recently begun to use linguistic relativity theory, they generally work cross-cultural management (Santacreu–Vasut et al., 2014; Tenzer et al., 2017), not Entrepreneurship. In a path-breaking paper that introduced the concept of linguistic relativity into Entrepreneurship scholarship, Hechavarría et al. (2017) found that how languages deal with gender influences the entrepreneurial intentions of men and women and can explain 4% of the previously unexplained cross-national variance in the gender gap in entrepreneurial activity. They linked language to behaviour by suggesting that different languages change the “cognitive scripts” that influence entrepreneurial intentions. Hechavarría et al.'s argument support the view that changes in vocabulary affect thought and action and that words can become performative (Phillips and Knowles, 2012; Garud et al., 2017; Mauksch, 2017; Hjorth, 2017). We build on this insight here.



This paper applies the weak version of linguistic relativity hypothesis in the following ways. First, our interest in the history of the words for entrepreneur in different languages, the main empirical focus of the paper, is informed by the linguistic relativity hypothesis proponents' claims that vocabulary differences between countries matter because they revealed culturally-specific attitudes and because they can influence real-world behaviour. If there were no truth in the linguistic relativity hypothesis, tracing the histories of equivalent words in different languages would have little value for entrepreneurship scholars. The fact that social actors invest cognitive and other resources in coining, propagating, and contesting the meaning of keywords, a process shown below, suggests that the linguistic relativity hypothesis proponents are right to argue that terminology matters. As we have stated, we are committed to the weak variant of the linguistic relativity hypothesis, which holds that while language influences how people think, individual reasoners are not prisoners of their language and have the capacity to "see through" the cognitive constraints imposed via their language. In other words, reasoners have the capacity to push back against definitions of keywords that they regard as problem. In the generalizable model we present at the end of the paper, evidence of this capacity is presented.

## **Methodological Considerations**

*Begriffsgeschichte* or *conceptual history* involves looking at how the meaning of particular words shifted over time and how such shifts reflected evolving worldviews (Koselleck, 1985; Olsen, 2012). Since they emerged in the 1960s, conceptual history research

methods have become progressively more sophisticated and have come to include quantitative methods. The practice of conceptual history has also come to acquire a comparative element: whereas previously conceptual historians had focused on the evolution of a keyword's meaning in one particular language, conceptual histories frequently document the process by how keywords pass between languages and the history of a concept in a particular language is often "entangled" with the evolution of the (roughly) equivalent term in another language. (Pernau, 2012; Pernau & Sachsenmaier, 2016).

Corpus linguistics involves the use of large collections of text to identify patterns in how language is used. In the field of corpus linguistics, an n-gram is a contiguous sequence of items from a given corpus of text or speech. The development since 2004 of Google Books, which has seen the digitization of about 25 million of the estimated 130 books that have ever been published, has facilitated corpus linguistics research. Working with partner universities around the world, the Google Books project has digitized texts in English and large number of other languages (Rosenberg, 2017). Google Books Ngram Viewer emerged as an offshoot of Google Books, a programme that scanned millions of books. Ngram provides usage frequencies of words or phrases found in these scanned books (Juola, 2013).

In designing our research project, we noted the limitations of quantitative discourse analysis tools such as Google Ngram as a tool for studying conceptual history (Pechenick, 2015; Dobbs, 2015). In our view, the chief problem with scholarly overreliance on such technologies is that simple word counts can obscure differences in the acquired meanings of words (e.g., "orange" can refer to both a colour and a fruit). The meaning of words are also variable over time and sometimes imperfectly translatable, particularly as terms that are seemingly equivalent may have somewhat different connotations in different languages

(Baker, 2011). Indeed, even within a single language, there can be regional variations in the meanings attributed to particular words. Thus, we deemed a mixed-method approach to be most appropriate for answering our research question.

Therefore, while we have included word-frequency data in this paper, we also performed qualitative analysis. Since we are interested in how the meanings of words have changed over time, we have engaged in extensive hermeneutics, which is process “of textual interpretation that posits that the meaning of language and texts arise through their relationship to... “the cultural, social, as well as temporal context” in which they are created (Kipping et al., 2014, 320). We have done so by drawing on peer-reviewed secondary sources about the histories of the nations covered by our study.

### **Case Study Selection**

A single paper cannot discuss the equivalent of the words for entrepreneur in all of the world’s living languages. This paper will instead focus on the histories of the words for entrepreneur in three languages: English, Hebrew, and Danish. We have chosen these languages because they are spoken in countries that have well-documented differences in the cultural and institutional determinants of entrepreneurship (see OECD, 2015). Moreover, all of these countries were transformed by the rise of neoliberalism from the late 1970s onwards, as we show below. Moreover, these three languages have different relations to the state. As Givati (2018) has noted, some languages are curated by a government agency that seeks to control its evolution, while others lack a central coordinating agency and instead develop through a Hayekian, spontaneous order process. The three papers discussed in this paper are

English, which famously lacks any sort of controlling body, Hebrew, which is governed by an agency that is highly prescriptive on the model of France's Académie française, and Danish, which occupies an intermediate position in that it has a language authority that does not try to prevent the usage of foreign words.

### **Case Study One: English**

This section provides a conceptual history of entrepreneur in English. Before we discuss the history of the word in English, we need to briefly consider its origins in French. The word entrepreneur first appeared in French documents in the thirteenth century, referring to contractors who “undertook” building work (Vérin, 1982). The word gradually came to

acquire its modern meaning for French-speakers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries due in part to advocates of *laissez-faire* such as Richard Cantillon (Vérin, 1982; Filion, 1997) and Jean-Baptiste Say (Tuttle, 1927; TLFi, 1980). Say's 1803 economic treatise, which lionized entrepreneurs, had a strongly ideological dimension, as he was an economic liberal and a staunch critic of *dirigiste* economic policies (Forget, 1999).

In the nineteenth century, the term entrepreneur was rarely used by English-speaking advocates of *laissez-faire*, even by economists who could read French. When Say's work was translated into English in 1821, his translator, Clement C. Biddle, decided to convert "entrepreneur" into "adventurer", an already-archaic English term for "investor". As Biddle explained in a footnote, "the term entrepreneur is difficult to render in English, as the corresponding word, undertaker, [is] already appropriated to a limited sense" (i.e., a professional who prepares human bodies for burial). Since the early eighteenth century, the word "undertaker" had denoted a mortuary professional to English speakers (Oxford English Dictionary). The macabre connotations of undertaker meant that Biddle was unable to use a calque (i.e., literal translation) to introduce entrepreneur into English. Biddle explained to his readers that for French-speakers, the word entrepreneur "signifies the master-manufacturer in manufacture, the farmer in agriculture, and the merchant in commerce; and generally in all three branches, the person who takes upon himself the immediate responsibility, risk, and conduct of a concern of industry, whether upon his own or a borrowed capital." Since English lacked a precise equivalent, Biddle wrote that "for want of a better word, it will be rendered into English by the term adventurer" (Biddle's footnote [in Say], 1821, 78). Biddle's term adventurer did not enter widespread use.

John Stuart Mill was a leading English political economists of the nineteenth century and a frequent visitor to France (Capaldi, 2004). Mill used the loanword entrepreneur just once in his 1848 tome *Principles of Political Economy*, doing so in a footnote in which he “regretted that this word... is not familiar to an English ear” (1848, 497). Mill defined the “entrepreneur” as someone who owned the firm they managed, as distinct from both a passive investor and the hired manager of a company (Gras, 1942). Despite its use by Mill the prevalent meaning of the word entrepreneur in English did not change much in the late nineteenth-century (Hoselitz 1951). The *Oxford English Dictionary* of 1891 defined an entrepreneur as “one who ‘gets up’ entertainments, *esp.* musical performances”. Our keyword search of London and New York daily newspapers from this period indicates that the word entrepreneur was used mainly to refer to operatic and theatrical managers in the West End and Broadway, respectively (Times of London; New York Times). An economics textbook published in 1904 used the term “enterprisers” to refer to the same class of individuals that Mill had once denoted using entrepreneur (Fetter, 1904, 284). It is likely that the author, Cornell’s Frank Fetter, avoided the use of the French term to avoid confusion with musical producers, since contemporary newspapers still used that word to refer to the producers of operas (e.g., New York Times, 1903).

Figure 1. Frequency of “Entrepreneur” in English Books, 1800 to 2008



As Figure 1 indicates, the frequency with which the word entrepreneur appeared in the Google Books English books corpus increased around 1907. Our reading of other English-language texts from this period indicates that this surge in the word’s usage was connected to the displacement of the nineteenth-century meaning of the word (“a musical producer”) by a definition that is far closer to our own. The widespread use of the word “entrepreneur” to refer to the owner-manager of a business irrespective of industry dates from the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis of 1907. This period saw a sudden upsurge in anti-financier sentiment within the two main US political parties and an unprecedented degree of support for the Socialist Party’s presidential candidate in 1908 and 1912 (Bruner & Carr, 1907; Salvatore, 1982). The 1907 crisis stimulated national debate about inequality and led indirectly, to the introduction of progressive income tax in 1913 (Bruner & Carr, 2007) and the creation of the Federal Reserve (Lowenstein, 2016). A greater role for the government was championed by Progressives who wanted to replace the spontaneous order of the market with state planning (Leonard, 2016).

In April 1908, a *New York Times* book reviewer noted that the term “entrepreneur” was becoming widespread : “for some reason, the economists have discovered the entrepreneur. He seems to be the favourite specific against Socialism, whose philosophy allows him no excuse for existence” (New York Times, 1908a). The author was here referring to two new books (Davenport, 1908; Hawley, 1908) that had been released with the explicit intention of putting a “spoke in the advancing wheel of Socialism”. The first of these books had been published by Prof. Herbert Joseph Davenport, an early American supporter of Austrian Economics (Horman, 1931), whilst the second was by Frederick Barnard Hawley, a New York City cotton broker who published quasi-scholarly articles that defended the businessman’s right to his profits.

There was a surge in the use of the term “entrepreneur” in US publications in the period immediately after the First World War, when the legitimacy of capitalism again seemed threatened by the worldwide rise of revolutionary socialism, the 1919 Red Scare, and by the growing role of the federal government during the First World War. A key promotor of entrepreneurship discourse, and of the loanword entrepreneur, was the economist Frank Knight. Knight described his 1921 book *Risk Uncertainty and Profit* as a “contribution to the theory of free enterprise.” Knight believed that our understanding of this system would be promoted by a “fuller and more careful examination of the rôle of the *entrepreneur* or enterpriser, the recognized ‘central figure’ of the system, and of the forces which fix the remuneration of his special function (Knight, 1921, p.4, italics in original)”. Knight’s influential book, which emphasized the uncertainty-bearing function of the entrepreneur, can



be viewed as an attempt to justify the profits earned by entrepreneurs at a time when the legitimacy of such incomes was being challenged by advocates of progressive taxation. Knight's manuscript was published because he had won a 1917 essay competition on the benefits of free enterprise sponsored by Hart, Schaffner & Marx, a controversial Chicago clothing manufacturer that had frequently clashed with unions. Knight's book, which is still in print, proved to be influential in the academy and is still frequently cited. Milton Friedman's biographer has noted that Knight was an eloquent writer and classroom teacher who converted a generation of Chicago students who were initially sympathetic to socialism to his classical liberal views (Burns, forthcoming).

Knight did not explain why he decided to use the French loanword entrepreneur rather than Fetter's term "enterpriser" in his 1921 book. Perhaps part of the reason was that entrepreneur had already entered common currency in the US, as the 1908 *New York Times* book review quoted above suggests. We also suspect that Knight opted for the French loanword because its origins in the writings of respected French economists gave it a degree of academic respectability that likely would have been lacking in homely English words such as "enterpriser" or simply "businessman". It is widely acknowledged that French and Latinate words have greater prestige than words that come from English's Germanic base and that substituting a French word for a Germanic one can make one's ideas seem more sophisticated (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). Knight was likely aware of this linguistic phenomenon and appears to have used to it to lend additional rhetorical force to his ideas.

Another important economist who helped to promote entrepreneurship discourse in the English-speaking world was Joseph A. Schumpeter, an Austrian émigré who arrived at Harvard in time to participate in the Depression-era debates about the future of capitalism in the United States. Schumpeter's seminal writings in English, particularly his 1944 *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* helped to popularize the academic study of entrepreneurship in his adopted country. Moreover, as McCraw (2009, 496-7) has noted, Schumpeter's ideas about the social function of the entrepreneur filtered down into the general culture, where it had an "incalculable" influence on US political and business culture. In short, Schumpeter played a crucial role in the rise of entrepreneurship discourse in, to the curriculum of the Harvard Business School and, more importantly, the culture of the English-speaking world.

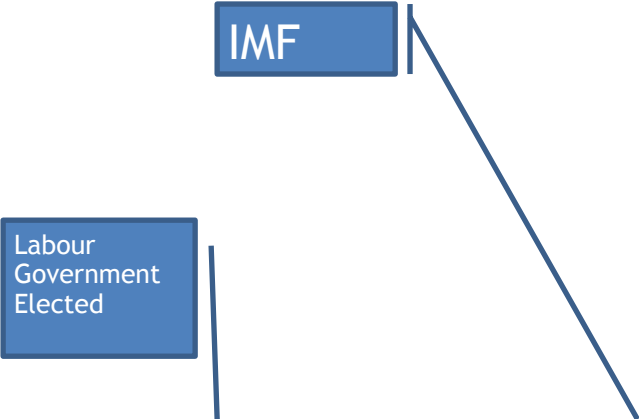
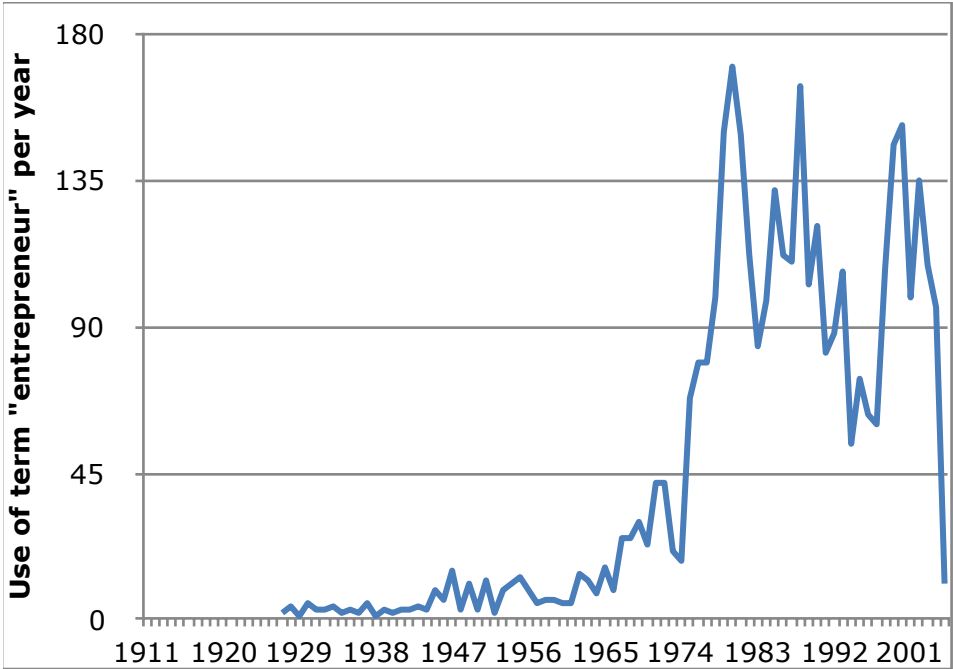
Following the publications by Knight and Schumpeter, neologisms related to entrepreneurs were coined and came into widespread use, thereby giving users of entrepreneurship discourse a richer vocabulary. The word "entrepreneurship", which first appeared in print in the United States in 1934, was used in a 1959 article in a British magazine, *The Economist*, that declared that "Entrepreneurship... might be common to all developing economies" (Oxford English Dictionary). The adjective "entrepreneurial," which quickly acquired a positive connotation for English-speakers, came into widespread use after its first appearance in print in 1945. For instance, the iconoclastic sociologist C. Wright Mills

bemoaned that the rise of Big Business and Big Government had meant that “the small businessman has been deprived of his old entrepreneurial function” (Mills, 1951, 26).

US-style entrepreneurship discourse crossed the Atlantic to the United Kingdom after the First World War. As Figure 2 shows, the word entrepreneur was rarely used by speakers in the British parliament until the 1920s. In our view, the reason for the adoption of this word by British politicians in the 1920s was the dramatic rise of the Labour Party. This overtly socialist party became the UK parliament’s second-largest political party in this decade and briefly governed the country in 1924, which meant that private enterprise felt under attack. Another surge in the word’s usage in parliament occurred in 1945-1951, when the word “entrepreneur” appeared frequently in the speeches of Conservative MPs critical of the Labour government’s programme of nationalization. A third increase in the frequency of parliamentary use of this word occurred after the 1976 IMF bailout of the UK, when Britain began debating bold economic reforms aimed at ending a long period of relative economic decline (Harmon, 1997; Levinson, 2017). Thatcher, who held strong neoliberal views, helped to diffuse entrepreneurship discourse in the UK. Thatcher spoke of promoting an “enterprise culture” in which self-made men would be encouraged to innovate boldly, thereby ending national economic sclerosis (Ritchie, 2015). Thatcher’s government oversaw extensive privatization, deregulation, and cuts to top marginal tax rates and social spending. The result of these changes was that the relative importance of the state and entrepreneurs in the economy was, by the end of the twentieth century, very different than it had been during the three decades after 1945 (Harvey, 2007). In the United States, President Ronald Reagan (Nodoushani, 1991; Nodoushani & Nodoushani, 2000) promoted a broadly similar discourse.

These discourse are reflected in Figure 1, which indicates that the use of the word entrepreneur in English books increased sharply beginning in 1980.

Figure 2: Usage of Word Entrepreneur in British Parliament, 1911 to 2005



In the 1980s and 1990s, entrepreneurship discourse in the US and the UK was modified due to the expansion of the category of “entrepreneur” to include a range of individuals not envisioned by classical liberal thinkers such as Knight and Schumpeter. The 1990s saw the diffusion of entrepreneurship discourse into the charitable and philanthropic sectors, as philanthropists and social activists in the English-speaking countries began to describe themselves as “social entrepreneurs” (Mason, 2012), a term that came into widespread use after 1982, according to the Google Books corpus. In the UK, for instance, so-called “social entrepreneurship” was celebrated by Civitas, a centre-right think-tank, and by Demos, a centre-left thinktank associated with the ideology of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair (Maltby and Rutterford, 2016). The result of this category creep meant the celebration of “entrepreneurship” lost much of its original political meaning. As charitable workers and activists rebranded themselves as “social entrepreneurs”, the discussion and celebration of entrepreneurship became detached from economic liberalism in the English-speaking world.

In English-speaking countries in the twenty-first century, there is broad agreement across the political spectrum that more entrepreneurship is required to solve pressing economic, social, and environmental problems. Even the left appears to have joined the cult of the entrepreneur, doing so either by adopting the term “social entrepreneur” or via a radical reinterpretation of the conditions that are said to promote entrepreneurship. An example of the latter, is the popular book by Mariana Mazzucato (2013), a socialist academic who argues that an actively interventionist state promotes entrepreneurship, which is the precise opposite of what economic liberals teach (Kubik, 2015).

A recent development in the history of entrepreneurship discourse suggest a growing awareness the word “entrepreneur” has acquired an extremely broad meaning and evidence that some individuals are starting to question what they regard as the misuse or overuse of this word. We see this process in both the academic world and the popular culture. For an example of the former, consider the 2011 blog post by the US management academic Peter G. Klein, who expressed his frustration with the fact the word “entrepreneurship” no longer had a clear definition (Klein, 2011). A 2012 article in *Forbes*, a popular business magazine, also indicated some confusion about what exactly is signified by the term “social entrepreneurship,” with the authors confessing that they were “not sure exactly what that is” (Fairbrothers and Gorla, 2012). The growing scepticism about whether the term entrepreneur is being used correctly has come about in a context in which there is increasing awareness, at least among academics, that rates of business formation, a key metric of entrepreneurship, have been falling in the United States since the 1970s (Bradley & Klein, 2016). Some observers are evidently worried that there is more and more talk about entrepreneurship and less actual entrepreneurship. Although these scattered public expressions of doubt about what exactly the word “entrepreneurship” now signifies suggests that there is growing scepticism in the English-speaking countries about the value of non-stop entrepreneurship discourse. Whether this awareness crystallises into an organized movement that would seek to apply a more restrictive definition of entrepreneur is unclear. To date, there have been no organized efforts to challenge the definition creep related to the word entrepreneur .

## Case Study Two: Danish

In the nineteenth century, Denmark and other Scandinavian countries had strong classical liberal movements. By the 1970s, the Scandinavian countries had become globally famous for their generous welfare states. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, neoliberals in Scandinavia began to push back against collectivist economic policies, changing the balance between states and markets (Fellman, 2007). As we show below, the rise of neoliberalism in Denmark was connected to the advent of a neologism corresponding to the English term “entrepreneur”. Unlike English, which famously lacks a central authority responsible for policing the language, Danish is supervised by an official body called the Dansk Sprognævn (Danish Language Council). As new words come into use in Danish the Language Council adds the new words to the official Danish dictionary, *Retskrivningsordbogen*, a reference book used by all government agencies. Incorporation into the *Retskrivningsordbogen* thus gives legitimacy to the word, and its associated concepts.

Around 1975 consulting engineer Niels Ravn returned home to Denmark from a management course at an American business school. The course had taught him that in order to be competitive in the future (Danish) companies needed to become better at thinking like the innovative champions and empire builders of the past. The Schumpeterian entrepreneur was the hero of growth and returning to Denmark Niels Ravn was eager to share these new ideas about entrepreneurship with colleagues and customers. This however turned out to be

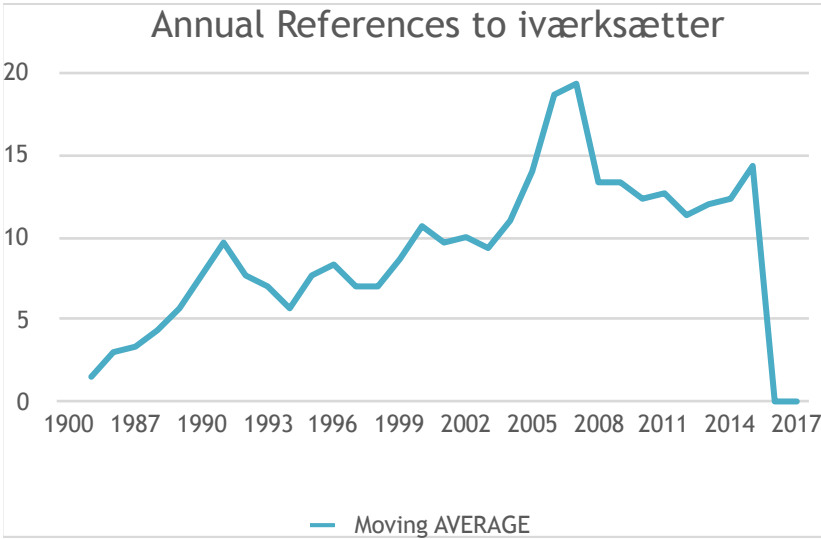
difficult and Niels Ravn's endeavour to share the American meaning of the concept of entrepreneurship with his colleagues mostly ended in confusion (Clément, 1996).

Niels' problem was that at the time the French loanword *entreprenør* (entrepreneur) had a very narrow meaning in Danish that denoted the manager and/or owner of a company in the construction sector. The adjectival form of this word, *entreprenant* (entrepreneurial), had and still has a negative connotation for Danish speakers and suggests a greedy or selfish person. Similarly, the much older Danish adjective *vindskibelig*, which also roughly translates as entrepreneurial, also had a negative connotation, for during the German occupation of Denmark from 1940 till 1945 it came to be mean those Danes who collaborated with the German occupiers (slang-dictionary from 1948).

After his return to Denmark, Niels Ravn quickly realized that Danish needed a new word to capture the American concept of the entrepreneur as an innovative person who thinks in new ways and is willing to run considerable risk in pursuing the realization of his/her ideas (Ravn, 1983). In typically Danish fashion, he turned to the authorities for help. He wrote to the Danish Language Council to ask what a Danish word for the modern American entrepreneur might be. In response, the Council coined the word *iværksætter*, which is a nominalization of *sætte i værk* meaning to begin something. In inventing this word, the Council was inspired by classical liberal thinker and literary critic George Brandes (1842-1927), who had coined the term *værksætter* for entrepreneur (Ordbog over det danske sprog, 1927). Brandes's word had neither achieved common currency nor gained official recognition by the language council prior to 1975, but *iværksætter* soon became widespread (Clément, 1996).



After 1978, the word *iværksætter* began to appear in Danish books as entrepreneurship discourse became widespread in Denmark. Google N-Gram is not available for Danish, so we cannot use it to engage in a word frequency count for *iværksætter*. However, our examination of the WorldCat bibliometric database, shows the number of books with *iværksætter* in the title, keyword, or subject line published in each year since 1978, when the word first appeared in print. These bibliometric statistics illustrate the rise of entrepreneurship discourse in Denmark. As we showed above, the 1990s saw the emergence in English of the term “social entrepreneur”. Similarly, the term *social iværksætter* appeared in Danish, although even today doubts remain as to whether it is a useful concept.



**Case Study Three: Hebrew**

Israel is now widely regarded as an extremely entrepreneurial nation, a land of high-tech start-ups (Senor & Singer, 2009). In a sense, entrepreneurship has become part of its national brand (Funk & Wan, 2011). The current perception of Israel as an entrepreneurial society is remarkable considering the important role of socialist parties in the creation of the State of Israel. This refashioning of Israel's identity shows that even the oldest nations can reconstruct identities in ways that are salient to our understanding of the global diffusion of entrepreneurship discourse. To understand the rise of entrepreneurship discourse in Israel, we need to know about the history of the Hebrew language and the nature of Israeli society's encounter with liberalism.

Since the second century CE, Hebrew was used exclusively for religious practice. In the diaspora, Jews spoke either a dialect of Yiddish or the local language of their place of residence. The revival of Modern Hebrew as a spoken language began at the turn of the 19th century in Palestine, as a central ideological tenet of Zionism which purpose was to signify the connection of the Jewish people to its land and to cultivate a national identity. The key figure here was Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858–1922), who arrived in Palestine in 1881, where he founded Hebrew newspapers. Due to the small number of Hebrew speaking people in Palestine, his newspapers failed commercially. Luckily, Ben Yehuda enjoyed the financial support of the Jewish-French banker Edmond James Rothschild (1845-1934), who sympathized with the Zionism and the Jewish settlement in Palestine. Ben Yehuda was also supported by Germany's Organisation für hebräische Sprache und Kultur. Such assistance enable Ben Yehuda to compile a Hebrew dictionary aimed at modernizing the language so that it was fit for everyday use (Aytürk, 2010; Glinert, 2017; St. John, 1952).

In addition to coining new words for modern concepts such “railways” and “telegraphs” that did not exist in Biblical times, Ben Yehuda altered the connotations of existing words in a fashion that reflected the differences between modern values and those that had prevailed during the time of classical antiquity (Glinert, 2017). One such term was “enterprising”. This word originally appeared in Hebrew in the Book of Genesis’s account of the Tower of Babel, a story about man’s arrogance . It carried a negative connotation that evokes arrogance and man’s unwillingness to accept the will of God. Aware of its original biblical negative connotation, Ben Yehuda substituted the original negative connotation with a more positive one, namely, that of a beginning of a challenging new deed (Ben Yehuda, 1946). Ben Yehuda’s word for entrepreneur, “yazam” appeared in the *Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew*, which was published in Berlin in 1908.

From the First World War until 1948, the present-day Israel was governed by the British as a League of Nations Mandate. In the interwar period, large numbers of European Jews arrived in the territory and a form of Hebrew became the language of everyday communication within this diverse population, which is now known as the Yishuv. In many cases, these immigrants preferred to use Latin-derived words rather than proper Hebrew terms in their daily conversation. Thus, the Hebrew word that Ben Yehuda coined, Yazam, was not used in this period, as the recent immigrants preferred to used Latin-derived word “Iniativa” to denote entrepreneurs.

Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the new national government created the Academy of the Hebrew Language to police the language in the same fashion as some European language councils do. The Academy of the Hebrew Language is

closer to France's Académie française than the aforementioned Danish Language Council since it is highly prescriptivist, which means that it actively tries to steer the evolution of the language. The Academy of the Hebrew Language maintains a list of approved words and works with the Israel Broadcasting Authority to ensure that only correct Hebrew vocabulary and grammar are used (Zuckermann, 2008). After Independence in 1948, the Israeli state aggressively promoted the use of pure Hebrew. Immigrants and military conscripts were obliged to become fluent and government officials were required to adopt Hebrew names. During this period, the Hebrew Academy reintroduced Ben Yehuda's term *yazam* into common currency, and it soon displaced *iniciativa* as the generally accepted term used in ordinary speech.

From the 1930s to the 1970s, few works that discussed, let alone celebrated private entrepreneurs appeared in Israel. During this period, Israeli politics was dominated by Labor Party. The Jewish population of Palestine certainly included many business owners (Pfefferman & Frenkel, 2015; Pfefferman & De Vries, 2015), but the dominant ideology was a socialist one. While the post-Independence Labor governments pragmatically cooperated private industrialists in developing the economy, the dominant socialist ethos required businessmen to subjugate personal ambitions in the interest of the common good and to follow state priorities (Horowitz and Lissak, 1973). We have found that businesspeople were commonly referred to in the Israeli press in the 1950s-1970s as "capitalists" or "industrialists" but not "entrepreneurs". We also found that the positive-connotation term "enterprising" was mainly used in the sense of political or social initiatives either in foreign affairs (peace

negotiations) or in internal labor market negotiations with unions. This term was not applied to business owners in the private sector in this period.<sup>1</sup>

US-style entrepreneurship discourse emerged in Israel after the election of the Likud Party in 1977. This election was a major turning point, as Likud was more supportive of private enterprise than Labour. Israel moved decisively in the direction of neoliberalism in 1985, when a comprehensive package of economic reforms was introduced to deal with the country's ongoing fiscal and monetary problems (Fisher, 1987). The 1985 Israel Economic Stabilization Plan, reduced the role of the state in the Israeli economy via privatization and deregulation (Mandelkern & Shalev, 2010 Maron & Shaev, 2017; Plessner, 1994).

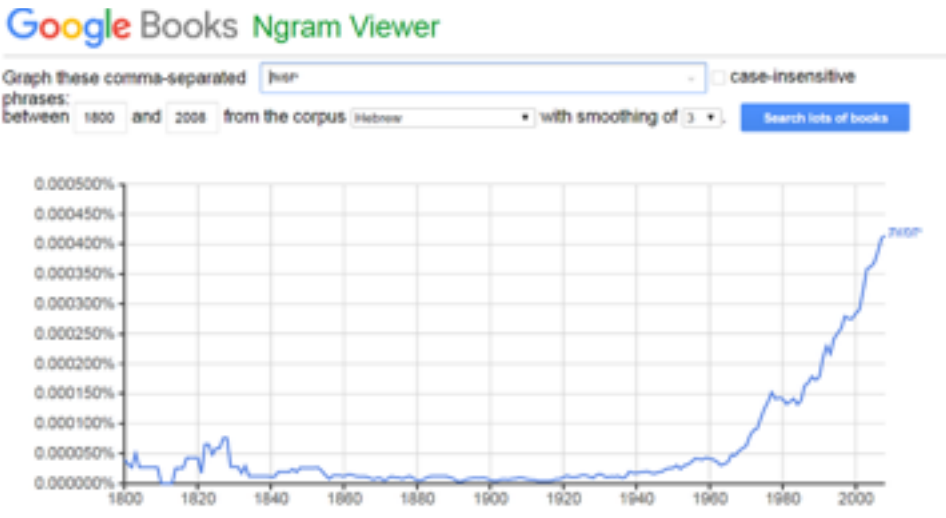
These profound changes in Israel's economic institutions was accompanied by the growing popularity of entrepreneurship discourse that is visible in the increasing frequency with which the Hebrew word for "entrepreneur" was used toward the end of 1970s and then a sharp rise in the middle of 1980s (see Figure 2). Our reading indicates that during these years, especially since 1987, press articles began describing profit-seeking risk-taking businesspeople as "entrepreneurs". Entrepreneurship discourse became even more widespread in the 1990s. Figure 3 indicates a sharp increase in the writing and publications concerning entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship since 2000, when entrepreneurship became a desirable occupation in Israeli society and entrepreneurs became celebrities. A term that translates as "social entrepreneur" also entered the Hebrew language at this point. For

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI\\_heb/?action=search&text=%D7%99%D7%96%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%AA#panel=search&search=1](http://www.jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI_heb/?action=search&text=%D7%99%D7%96%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%AA#panel=search&search=1) retrieved 31.10.2016

instance, a woman who founded a charity to help disabled children was described by a newspaper as “an educational figure, leader and social entrepreneur.”

Figure 3: N-Gram for the Hebrew word for "entrepreneurship"



### Summary

As we have shown, the word “entrepreneur” was redefined and repurposed by US economists who were engaged in intellectual combat with socialists. After achieving widespread currency in the US, the word entrepreneur spread to the UK in the 1920s, where it was quickly adopted by participants in debates about the optimum role of the state. The rise of neoliberalism in the UK and the US as represented by Thatcher and Reagan accompanied another surge in the usage of the word in English-language publications in the 1980s. In the late 1970s, an equivalent of the word entrepreneur was coined in Danish at the behest of a management consultant who had studied in the United States and who wanted to change the

business culture of his social-democratic homeland. Usage of the word for “entrepreneur” in Hebrew surged at about the time of Israel’s 1985 economic reforms.

Today we live in a world in which entrepreneurship discourse is present in many countries. In many countries, the “entrepreneur” is valorised and there is broad agreement across the political spectrum that more entrepreneurship is required to solve pressing economic, social, and environmental problems. We see this in Greece, a country where the left-wing celebrity economist and former Greek government minister Yanis Varoufakis has celebrated youth entrepreneurship and start-up enterprises. In 2015, he asserted that start-ups hold the key to Greece’s exit from its financial crisis: “Greece’s goal must be to become another California or Israel as far as entrepreneurship is concerned” (Newsroom, 2015). Varoufakis, a vehement critic of the cuts to public-sector spending that had been demanded by the EU Troika, was here suggesting that such cuts would make it harder rather than easier for Greek entrepreneurs to flourish, which is again the opposite of the classical liberal prescription for high levels of entrepreneurship.

## **Discussion**

Proponents of the linguistic relativity hypothesis proponents make two major claims about languages. The first is that vocabulary and other differences between languages are deeply rooted in the specific worldviews and histories associated with different linguistic communities. The second claim is that these differences matter because they can influence real-world behaviour. Our narratives about the history of entrepreneurship discourse in English, Danish, and Hebrew is broadly consistent with the first claim. Our conceptual history has shown how the terminology that is part of entrepreneurship discourse in each of these language communities is rooted in the distinctive histories, cultures, and worldview associated with that language. We have also shown how academics, businesspeople, and other actors invested cognitive and other resources in contesting the meaning of keywords. Our quantitative data indicates that the changing frequency in the usage of the word for entrepreneur was associated with changes in the real world, such as the relative importance of states and markets in national economies. For instance, there was a surge in the use of the word entrepreneur in the 1980s, the era of neoliberalism, deregulation, and privatization. Although this coincidence in timing certainly does not prove that prior cultural shifts (i.e., the rise of entrepreneurship discourse) “caused” the aforementioned changes in public policy, which is what the strong version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis would suggest, it does imply the linguistic change is associated with changes in the real world.

As we noted in our theory section, the authors subscribe to the weak variant of the linguistic relativity hypothesis, which holds that while language influences how people think, individual reasoners are not “prisoners” of their language, at least not to the degree imagined



by the proponents of the Sapir-Whorf theory or French structuralism. Our history of entrepreneurship discourse in English shows that reasoners have the capacity to push back against definitions of keywords that they regard as problematic. As we suggested above, there is some evidence that at least some English-speakers are becoming sceptical when they hear to the word “entrepreneur”, as there is growing awareness the word “entrepreneur” has acquired an extreme broad meaning.

Our historical research on three languages shows that entrepreneurship discourse tends to arise in a given linguistic community through the joint efforts of academics and businesspeople. For instance, our history of the word entrepreneur in English has demonstrated that the word entrepreneur was redefined and promoted by the joint efforts of academics and businesspeople. In the Danish context, Ravn, an individual who bridged the academic and practitioner world, played a crucial role in the invention of the Danish word for entrepreneur. In Hebrew, the key individual who changed the connotation of “enterprising” was the lexicographer Ben Yehuda, who was financially supported by the banker Rothschild. Readers will observe that in all these cases, there is evidence of cooperation between intellectuals and business people. At crucial turning points, such cooperation help create and disseminate entrepreneurship discourse.

Table 2: Our Model of Entrepreneurship Discourse Evolution

	Phase 1: Formulation	Phase 2: Dissemination	Phase 3: Adaptation	Phase 4: Critical Deconstruction
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Key Actors	Classical liberal intellectuals; businesspeople interested in ideas	Usage of the word is promoted by Politicians; the business press	Social democratic intellectuals; advocates of greater role for state in economy; leaders of non-profit organizations	Academics, business journalists
Meaning of Entrepreneur	“The owner-manager of a profit-seeking organization”	“The owner-manager of a profit-seeking organization”	Any manager, leader, or community organizer in the private or NGO sector	The definition of entrepreneurship is contested once again.
Ideological Colouration of Entrepreneurship Discourse	Classical liberal	Classical Liberal	None	Uncertain
Frequency with which word is used in published books	Low	Rapidly Increasing	High and Relatively Stable	Declining, as peak entrepreneurship discourse has been passed

Having reviewed the evidence presented above, we are now in a position to be able to develop a generalizable model for understanding how entrepreneurship discourse diffuses through a given linguistic community (see Table 2). Our model includes four key stages: *formulation*, *dissemination*, *adaptation* and *critical deconstruction*. In the first stage, entrepreneurship discourse is created by a small group of enthusiasts who are at the intersection of academic and business life. The enthusiasts who promote the term entrepreneur include academics who are strongly sympathetic to private enterprise as well as cerebral business owners who wish to

contribute to the intellectual defence of private enterprise. The next stage, *dissemination*, witnesses the growing popularity of entrepreneurship discourse within a linguistic community. In this stage, the usage of the word “entrepreneur” in books and other printed material surges, as entrepreneurship discourse spreads from the pages of scholarly texts into newspapers, politicians’ speeches, and bestsellers.

During the first and second stages of our model, entrepreneurship discourse is strongly associated with liberal movements that are seeking to defend capitalism. During the third stage, *adaptation*, entrepreneurship discourse becomes so widespread that it ceases to be associated with economic liberalism. During this phase, the term “entrepreneur” comes to be adopted by a variety of actors and is used to denote a wide range of phenomena than simply profit-seeking owners of private businesses. For instance, entrepreneurship discourse is appropriated by left-wing advocates of greater state intervention in the economy. We are tempted to call this phase *peak entrepreneurship discourse*, although we cannot be certain that entrepreneurship discourse will actually decline in frequency in the future. The fourth stage, which is as yet a hypothetical one that has not yet materialized to a large extent in any of our three languages, individuals begin to ask critical questions whenever word “entrepreneur” and its cognates are used. These critical questions are asked because the meaning of terms such as entrepreneurship have become too broad. If enough people rebel against the overuse of terms related to entrepreneurship, the frequency with which it is used could fall.

## Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

This paper points to several directions for future research. The model we have advanced above is based on just three language communities and should be tested against the experience of other language communities. Although entrepreneurship discourse is today widespread around the world, there may be examples of linguistic communities that have resisted the diffusion of US-style entrepreneurship discourse. If so, research on such communities would allow us to further refine the explanatory model outlined above.

This paper's main theoretical contribution has been to show how the linguistic relativity hypothesis can be applied to the study of the contexts in which entrepreneurs operate. It is our hope that other entrepreneurship scholars will take advantage of linguistic relativity theory to further develop our understanding of how language influences entrepreneurship. One important limitation of this paper is that our data set precludes us from venturing statements about causation that would link the rise of entrepreneurship discourse in a given linguistic community to measurable changes in actual business behaviour (e.g., rate of business formation). Our paper may inspire quantitative research aimed at establishing causal relationships between entrepreneurship discourses and behaviour.

Our research suggests another line of future investigation. We propose that scholars investigate whether variations in the literal root meaning of a language's word for entrepreneur influence decision-making by entrepreneurs who are native speakers,

particularly the propensity of entrepreneurs to exit. The literal meaning of entrepreneur in French (*entrepreneur*) and German (*Unternehmen*) is to take something under and thus refers to movement in space. The Danish word for entrepreneur, *iværksætter*, coined by nominalizing words that refer to beginning something. As we have seen, the common word for entrepreneur in Modern Hebrew in pre-1948 Palestine was *inītiativa*, a Latinate word with a similar meaning. After the creation of the State of Israel, the authorities successfully promoted the use of a different word for entrepreneur, *yazam*, which literally means one who proposes new ideas, a term that also focuses one's attention the creative elements of entrepreneurship. The words for entrepreneur in other languages have other lexical roots. For instance, the Japanese word is *kigyōya*, which is derived from the verb "to wake." The empirical question before us is whether differences in the literal meaning of the word for entrepreneur change how entrepreneurs perceived their roles. One possible hypothesis is that entrepreneurs who operate in languages in which the word for entrepreneur evokes the idea of starting firms are more likely to exit or "cash out" once their firms are established than are entrepreneurs whose languages do not plant the idea that the core function of the entrepreneur is merely to start a firm.

We conclude affirmed that the approach taken in this paper, which links linguistic relativity theory and the conceptual history methodology, could be useful to a wide range of management academics rather than just scholars in Entrepreneurship. Research on the history of key words in management that would help researchers and practitioners to develop a better understanding of the origins of the conceptual tools they use. Management academics and practitioners use a wide variety of keywords from "accountability" to "values" without ever

pausing to reflect on the etymology of these words and the process by which these became such prominent part of discourse. Conceptual histories such as our study of the history of the word “entrepreneur” can help management researchers and practitioners to become more self-reflexive and thus more effective at what they do.

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