

“I think it is a wonderful job”

On the solidity of the translation profession

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ABSTRACT

The literature tends to draw a rather negative picture of the translation profession. It is widely believed to be characterised by low degrees of professionalisation, status and recognition, and the working conditions of practising translators are much lamented. Nevertheless, research indicates that translators are surprisingly satisfied with their jobs. The present article sets out to explore this apparent paradox by looking into the sources of translators' job satisfaction and, ultimately, into the factors that motivate translators to stay in a profession that seems to be offering sub-standard working conditions. These motivators, we argue, may contribute to creating a solid core in a profession that is otherwise believed to be porous and unstable. The study reported on in the article draws on inductive content analysis of the narratives of 15 seasoned translators, and the analysis shows that, just as translators have a shared understanding of the downsides of being a translator, they are also in agreement on the attractions of the job. The findings are discussed in the light of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital(s).

KEYWORDS

The translation profession, translators, occupational status, job satisfaction, habitus, symbolic capital, cultural capital.

1. Introduction

Though still emerging topics, there are numerous references in the literature to translation as a profession and to translators as a social and professional group. Much of this literature draws a rather negative picture of the state of the profession and the working conditions of translators. Translation has, for example, been described as a peripheral, low-status, unskilled and poorly paid occupation, whereas translators have been characterised as invisible, isolated, unappreciated and powerless (for an overview of the literature, see Dam and Zethsen 2008).

As described in section 2 below, recent empirical studies seem to corroborate this negative picture of the translation profession. On the other hand, surveys on translators' job satisfaction indicate that translators are generally quite happy with their jobs. The present article sets out to explore this apparent paradox by examining what seasoned translators appreciate about their jobs: what are the sources of satisfaction to them, what do they like about their jobs and, ultimately, what makes them stay in a profession that seems to be offering sub-standard working conditions?

These questions link with the issue of the solidity of the translation profession and, hence, with one of the questions put forward in the call

issued for the present volume, namely “[h]ow solid is the center of the translation profession?” (Dam and Koskinen 2012). As mentioned in the call and as described in more detail in section 3 below, there is evidence to indicate that translation is mainly a part-time, freelance and transitory occupation, i.e. that the profession is porous and lacks a solid core. In this article, we shall look into the stories of translators who are everything but part-timers, freelancers or transitory workers, namely staff translators who have worked in the field for many years. These translators, we would suggest, are at the very centre of the translation profession and contribute to creating a solid core; it is their motivation to stay translators that we shall look into in this article.

2. Translator status and job satisfaction

This article is set against the background of research we have conducted over the past years on translators’ occupational status. In four different but closely related studies, a total of 307 Danish business (non-literary) translators — 47 company translators, 66 agency translators, 131 freelance translators, and 63 staff translators working at the European Union — assessed their job status through questionnaire-based surveys (Dam and Zethsen 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012). The questionnaires contained both direct questions regarding job status and prestige and questions that revolved around four status parameters, i.e. (1) income, (2) education/expertise, (3) visibility, and (4) power/influence. In the selection of respondents, every effort was made to ensure a sample of translators with a strong professional profile, thus presumably at the high end of the translator-status continuum. Nevertheless, the results of the studies consistently indicated that even these translators have a relatively low occupational status. With respect to the individual status parameters, our main findings were as follows:

- Income: with the exception of the EU translators, all the translators studied have lower average levels of income than comparable professional groups¹.
- Education/expertise: all four groups of translators have a high level of education and tend to see translation as an expert function requiring a high level of knowledge, skills and expertise. However, when asked to assess the degree of skills and expertise *others*, i.e. non-translators, attribute to translation, the translators’ responses were consistently negative. A qualitative analysis of the comments written by the translators in response to the open-ended survey questions showed that there is a huge gap between the translators’ image of themselves as experts and the way they feel clients and society in general recognise and value their expertise.
- Visibility: most of the translators ranked their social and professional visibility — i.e. their visibility in society in general and with respect to

important stakeholders such as clients and commissioners — as low; in some cases as extremely low (i.e. below an average of 2 on a scale from 1 to 5).

- Power/influence: all four groups of respondents reported that their jobs as translators are connected with low degrees of influence; in some cases with extremely low influence.

Studies conducted by other scholars have yielded converging evidence. Based on interviews with Finnish translators, Abdallah (2010) reports that the translators complain about lack of appreciation, low remuneration, feelings of powerlessness and invisibility in connection with clients. Similar issues are taken to the fore in a large-scale study by Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger (e.g. 2008), who report on the marginalisation and lack of power and visibility of Israeli translators, in spite of the importance of their work.

There is thus much evidence to attest to the lamentable state of the translation profession — and the deplorable conditions of translators. At the same time, a number of surveys, quite surprisingly, show that translators are generally quite satisfied with their jobs. Most surveys on job satisfaction can be found in the field of interpreting, rather than in (written) translation (e.g. Ozolins 2004; AIIC 2005; Choi 2007; Tryuk 2007). The general picture that emerges from these surveys is one of interpreters as a happy lot: interpreters by and large seem to be satisfied with their occupation (though far from always with their working conditions). A few recent surveys have addressed the job satisfaction of both translators and interpreters, and the findings suggest that also (written) translators are rather satisfied with their jobs. For example, most of the 890 translator and interpreter respondents in Katan's global survey of the profession stated they were "pretty" (50%) or "extremely" (21%) satisfied with their job, with interpreters being slightly more satisfied than translators (Katan 2009: 148–149). Similarly, based on a survey of 62 interpreters and translators, Setton and Guo Liangliang report that respondents were largely satisfied with their jobs as translators and interpreters (2009: 222), even if interpreters were "clearly happier with their jobs overall" (2009: 223).

The job satisfaction of (written) translators has also been investigated by Liu (2011 and 2013), but only as a dependent variable in the context of a study that focuses on translators' visibility (as the independent variable). Hence, in Liu's work the main question is how visibility affects job satisfaction, or "job-related happiness," and though she develops a detailed metric to assess job-related happiness, she presents very few data on the actual job satisfaction of the 193 translators studied, and on what constitutes happiness for them.

We are therefore faced with what seems to be a paradox: a profession that is held in low esteem and that offers sub-standard working conditions, on the one hand, and many happy professionals, on the other. As indicated above, the present article sets out to explore this paradox by focusing in on the positive sides of translation. In addition, the article attempts to contribute to shedding light on the question of the solidity of the centre of the translation profession, as put forward in the call issued for the present volume and developed in the following section.

3. On the solidity of the translation profession: the profile of translators

As suggested by Dam and Koskinen (2012), there is much evidence to indicate that the translation profession is mainly made up of part-time workers, freelancers - and women. Based on a review of available surveys in the field, Pym *et al.* estimate that the level of part-time remunerated translation activity is about 60% in general, with variations depending on the market segment surveyed or the kinds of questions asked (2012: 88); that the proportion of freelancers ranges from 50% to 89%, depending on the country and the sector (Pym *et al.* 2012: 89); and that the proportion of translators who are women generally seems to be about 70% or above, again with variations depending on the sector (Pym *et al.* 2012: 85). It is difficult to assess the implications of these numbers, but it is probably safe to say that at least the widespread part-time character of translation work is a sign of an occupation that is either still professionalising or whose professionalisation has been suspended, as full-time employment is generally thought to be one of the first steps towards professionalisation (e.g. Wilensky 1964: 142). In other words, the part-time, secondary or occasional character of much translation work is likely to reflect negatively on the solidity of the translation profession.

In fact, judging from the literature, it may seem questionable whether the profession has a solid centre, a core, at all. On top of all the above-mentioned characteristics — low status, part-time, freelance, female occupation — it is sometimes suggested that translation is a transitory occupation — that translators tend to leave the profession when and if they can. Drawing on information economics, Chan (2005, 2008) thus argues that, due to asymmetric information and lack of efficient quality signals on the translation market, 'good translators' tend to be underpaid and, hence, may leave the translation profession for other professions as a result of a process referred to as adverse selection. Some empirical evidence has been obtained in support of this argument, though not specifically for 'good translators'. In Setton and Guo Liangliang's survey, over half the translators stated they had plans to change jobs; among the freelancers, this percentage reached almost 70 (2009: 222-223). Abdallah conducted interviews with eight translators between 2005 and 2011, and by 2011, five of them had left the translation industry (Abdallah 2012: 42). While this evidence remains anecdotal, it is a first indication that

translation may in fact be a transitory occupation at least for some and, combined with the characteristics described above, that the profession is porous and lacks a solid core.

It is, however, a fact that *some* translators have full-time employment as translators, have been in the business for many years and have no plans to leave. Some of them are even men. To give just one example, our sample of EU-employed translators (Dam and Zethsen 2012 and 2013) consisted solely of full-time staff translators who had been in the translation business for between 2 and 36 years — 20.3 years on average. 44% were men and 56% women.

In this article, we shall examine the narratives of such translators — staff translators who have been in the profession for many years and intend to remain translators. These translators, we would suggest, are at the very centre of the translation profession and may contribute to creating a solid core. By looking at the narratives of such men and women, we wish to explore what motivates them, what makes them happy, what kinds of benefits life as a translator offers to them; in sum, what makes them stay translators in spite of the drawbacks that seem to be linked with such a choice.

4. Data and method

The present study is based on qualitative analyses of fifteen narratives produced by Danish agency translators. The data were collected in 2010 by Inger Askehave and Karen Korning Zethsen in connection with a project on gender and translation (Askehave and Zethsen 2013), but they fit the purpose of the present study, as well.

The translators writing the narratives were originally selected according to the following criteria: (1) Danish as their mother tongue, (2) an educational background as cand. ling. merc. (MA in translation for specialised purposes), (3) staff employment at a translation agency, (4) their main job function in the agency had to be translation or translation-related activities, and (5) a minimum work experience of 5 years and a maximum of 20 years (to exclude any extremes from a fairly small corpus)². A total of eighteen narratives were collected based on these criteria. Due to the focus of the present research, a more restrictive minimum work-experience requirement was introduced, namely at least 8 years. This meant that we had to discard three of the original narratives; the sample analysed for the present study thus comprises a total of fifteen narratives, seven of these male and eight female. The average age of the translators in the sample is 40 years, and the youngest respondent was 34 years and the oldest 49 years at the time of data collection. Their work experience averaged 13 years, with a minimum of 8 years and a maximum of 20 years of experience.

The data were collected by contacting ten major Danish translation agencies (from a number of different geographical locations) by letter and asking each of them for four participants – two men and two women who met the above requirements. The agencies were not informed about the specific nature of the research project and potential respondents were of course assured anonymity. The result of the initial contact to the ten agencies was that one agency did not answer, one was not interested in participating in the research and two agencies answered that they did not meet the criteria for participation as they did not have any staff translators. Thus, the fifteen translators in the sample were employed in six different translation agencies.

The respondents were contacted by e-mail and asked to answer a few factual questions (age, education, year of graduation, etc.) and to write about being a translator on the basis of their personal opinions and experiences. They were asked to write between one and two pages, and were told that they should spend between half an hour and an hour (without any major breaks) on the task. The only guidance they received on the nature of their narratives was:

- Write whatever comes into your mind about the overall question: What is it like to be a translator?
- There is no need for any specific structure, but the following questions are for your inspiration:
 - What is it like to be a translator?
 - Which talents do you use in your job as a translator?
 - How do you feel about being a translator?
 - Would you recommend others to become translators?

In order to answer the research questions of the present study, the analysis consisted in identifying all the positive statements in the narratives and dividing them into main themes by means of inductive content analysis.

5. Results

The narratives quickly confirmed the negative side of being a translator which had been exposed by our previous research, as mentioned in section 2 and, in relation to the data at hand, by Askehave and Zethsen (2013: 127-128). The translators in the present sample wrote about low status, unrecognised expertise, low pay, etc. However, it soon became equally evident that the data showed something which had not appeared clearly from our previous research, namely a rather widespread enthusiasm about being a translator and a wealth of comments to that effect: in long passages of the narratives, the translators dwelled on the

positive side of being a translator. In the analyses reported on here, we solely focus on the parts of the narratives which may help explain why translators stay translators in spite of the acknowledged low status, i.e. on positive statements about being a translator. By means of the inductive content analysis, the following, partly overlapping, themes were identified:

- Translation is exciting and satisfying
- Translation is varied, stimulating and never boring
- Translation is an intellectual and creative challenge
- Translation is important and therefore meaningful

'Translation is exciting and satisfying'

Although the narratives include numerous complaints about the well-known negative sides of being a translator, they all, without exception, express joy in the act of translating. "Exciting," "satisfying" and "interesting" are some of the most frequent adjectives applied, as in the following quotes from the narratives:

"I enjoy working as a translator" (13)³

"I think it is exciting and interesting to be a translator" (4)

"To be a translator is, for me, an exciting and satisfying job" (15)

"Working as a translator is exciting, instructive and challenging" (7)

Some comments do not specify the source of joy, but simply label translation as "a fascinating profession", "a privilege", "a dream-occupation", as in the following quotes:

"I think it is a fascinating profession" (6)

"It is a privilege to be able to work with your 'dream occupation' and I wish I could do it forever" (13)

'Translation is varied, stimulating and never boring'

The narratives constantly emphasise that being a translator is a varied job due to the many different companies, genres, target groups, topics and task sizes involved. This job variation and the stimulation and insights it brings is highly appreciated by the translators:

"No days are alike" (6)

"I think my job is very varied. I translate many different genres using many different tools, and this means that my work is (almost) never boring" (14)

"The unpredictability of the fact that you never know what the next job brings makes every day a bit more exciting" (15)

The subject-matter variation, in particular, provides the translators with a wealth of knowledge and insights, and this is highly valued:

“I gain knowledge within areas that I would never otherwise come into touch with, which gives me a very broad reference framework in everyday debates in society. I think it is a wonderful job where every day you have the possibility to learn something new and get wiser” (9)

It is also pointed out that being a translator forces you to keep abreast of general news and new developments.

‘Translation is an intellectual and creative challenge’

The narratives reveal that these translators see translation as a constant intellectual challenge, where they draw heavily on their linguistic skills and long university training. The narratives frequently mention the long and extensive education required to be a good translator (in Denmark an MA in translation is required to become a state-authorized translator). They write about their formal education as being long, complex, sound, at the highest level (leading to authorisation), extremely good and fantastic, and they enjoy the fact that their training is directly applicable to their jobs (incidentally, they also frequently mention that translator training has surely deteriorated as new graduates are far from being as good as they were themselves upon graduation, but we attribute this to a general human trait and not to anything particular to translation).

In addition to their formal training, the translators state that they rely on many different skills such as: analytical and creative abilities, a good memory, being good at decision-making, having attention to detail, being independent, fast, thorough, methodical and consistent. They also foreground a list of more indefinable competences such as a sense of quality, an ability to read behind the text and, first and foremost, a “sense of language”⁴:

“In other words the job requires a sense of language” (8)

“It is important to read behind the text and ensure that the entire message and content are transferred” (9)

These translators find the constant intellectual and creative challenge highly satisfactory and are proud of their many competences and the complexity of translating to a high standard:

“An incredible number of processes take place in the brain while you work” (8)

“It is exciting to work with language and with many different kinds of texts, some require a very close translation, while others make it possible to play with the words and use one’s creative side” (13)

“I am constantly challenged and faced with tasks that really require creative thinking” (6)

A more indefinable source of satisfaction is the “feeling of translating”:

“I like the ‘feeling’ of translating – when it just flows” (10)

This supports Katan's observation that translators and interpreters appear to be able to find "immense satisfaction, as linguists, looking for and finding *le mot juste*" (Katan 2009: 149).

The translators list very many qualities required to be a good translator, as mentioned above, and they are not shy about the fact that they consider themselves to possess these qualities. They describe themselves as "language nerds" (clearly a positive term to them) with a great sense of detail and a strong belief in quality. The narratives leave no doubt that the translators regard themselves as highly trained and skilled specialists, and that they are extremely proud of this.

Finally, the translators are very satisfied indeed with their experience, on which they frequently rely:

"My 10 years of experience mean that I often get some of the most difficult and most exciting tasks" (6)

Their appreciation of experience is clearly connected to their love of continuous development of their skills and knowledge.

'Translation is important and therefore meaningful'

The translators furthermore express joy in the importance and meaningfulness of their work as mediators, as shown in the following extracts from the narratives:

"To be able to function as a 'mediator' between two cultures is in fact incredibly satisfying" (5)

"To be a translator is a crucial job as most people come into touch with translated texts on a daily basis" (9)

In addition to the themes identified above, the translators mention other positive features such as good colleagues, sparring with colleagues who have the same high linguistic standards as themselves ("an inspiring environment"), flexible working hours, independence and the enjoyment of working with state-of-the-art translation tools.

6. Conclusion and discussion

As accounted for in section 2, a general picture has emerged from our previous empirical studies of various groups of business translators: they see themselves as having relatively low status, they consider themselves to be experts to a very large degree, but they do not feel recognised as such. There is a huge gap between the translators' image of themselves as experts and the way they feel clients and society at large recognise and value their expertise. This gap creates high levels of frustration. Still, there is a group of translators who stay within the profession for most of

their lives and it may be that these translators can, in fact, be considered the core of the profession.

The above analyses make it clear that aside from a 'discourse of lamentation', an alternative discourse exists among the translators, which provides insight into the habitus (or "socialized subjectivity", Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 126) of these translators. Just as translators have a shared understanding of the downsides of being a translator and the problems of the field, the translators who wrote the narratives analysed here quite evidently agree on the symbolic capital of translation, namely the cultural capital of which they have plenty within the narrow field of translation (see Dam and Zethsen 2014). They are exceedingly pleased with, and proud of, the intellectual and creative challenge of translating and the insights the subject variation provides. All narratives list a very large number of competences a translator needs, and the translators clearly see themselves as possessing these skills. They are proud of their long training, their experience and the slightly mysterious quality of having a "sense of language." Even if society at large does not recognise the complexity of translating and thus the cultural capital required, the translators themselves are highly aware of the competences needed, and they work in an environment where their cultural capital is appreciated. The translators furthermore value the importance of translation, i.e. again, even if society in general does not appreciate this importance, the translators are aware of it and it provides them with satisfaction. Quite surprisingly, most of the narratives also describe translation as "exciting", to our minds not normally the most common adjective associated with translation.

Sela-Sheffy writes about the value categories which translators "mobilize to make sense of their job and create their occupational dignity" (2010: 135). Following this line of thought, our analyses show that the translators who wrote these narratives have a high level of agreement as regards the symbolic capital of their field and that they mobilise this capital to construct their occupational identity and, perhaps, dignity.

In Dam and Zethsen (2014: 274), we concluded that "business translators seem to have a habitus of proud, but unappreciated and unrecognised, experts". The present analyses have shown that, for a group of experienced agency translators, the skills they are proud of and the expertise they have compensate for what is unappreciated and unrecognised. These longstanding translators may well have a habitus which does indeed help create a solid centre of the profession in spite of the lack of symbolic capital outside the field of translation practice.

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Notes

¹ The translators' income was by no means extremely low, and most of them did in fact enjoy a reasonably high income. Still, their average level of income turned out to be lower than that of comparable professionals as explained in Dam and Zethsen (2008: 84).

² In our data, we take number of years after graduation to equal work experience. Evidently this is not necessarily so, but it is our clear impression when reading the narratives that the two come very close. There is no mention in the narratives of any translators having worked in anything else other than translation or translation-related activities since their graduation, the majority clearly having spent most of their working years with the same agency.

³ All quotes are translated from Danish by the authors. The translator whose statement we quote at a given point is indicated by a number, between 1 and 15, in brackets following the quote.

⁴ Incidentally, these 'indefinable competences' belong to the reign of what Sela-Sheffy (2010) refers to as *vocational discourse*, as opposed to *professional(ising) discourse*, in her study of elite and non-elite translators in Israel. The discourse of vocation foregrounds hostility towards material and economic considerations, personal excellence, inborn exceptional gift and indefinable obscure competence (which cannot be acquired by training) and a higher value code manifested as perfection, integrity, devotion and self-sacrifice. By contrast, professional(ising) discourse embraces work as a means of earning a living, formal competences acquired through training and a series of other formal and objective parameters. While the translators whose narratives we study here lean towards the professional(ising) discourse by foregrounding pay, formal competences, etc., they also present traits of a discourse of vocation through their references to obscure competences such as a sense of quality, a sense of language and creativity.