

What does it take to be a good in-house translator? Constructs of expertise in the workplace

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore constructs of translation expertise and experts held by practitioners working in the translation sector. Practitioner perspectives are often overlooked in the translation studies debate around expertise yet they can yield valuable insights and enrich the academic discourse. In our analysis, we draw on data from a qualitative interview study that focuses on the selecting and hiring process for in-house translators. The interviews were conducted with employers and translation professionals in Austria and reveal their understandings of what it takes to be a good translator. Aside from a relevant educational background as well as language and translation skills, these practitioners place particular emphasis on soft skills and the willingness of applicants to learn and adapt to diverse teams, tasks, and work situations. The emerging picture of translation expertise in the workplace is highly dynamic and context-dependent, calling for a more nuanced understanding of expertise in translation studies which highlights its social constructedness and encompasses situative and performative factors.

KEYWORDS

Expertise, competence, professionalism, social construction, hiring criteria, hiring process, in-house translator, professional translator, adaptability.

1. Introduction

Most – if not all – people working with translation, be they practitioners, teachers or researchers, have been confronted at some time or other with the age-old debate about what it takes to be a good translator. Many have fought against the seemingly widespread belief that it does not take much to translate other than language skills, stressing that other abilities, competencies or a certain expertise in translation are also needed. In translation studies (TS), this has been discussed using terms such as ‘professionalism’, ‘competence’ and ‘expertise’, often interchangeably (for differentiations of these concepts, see, e.g., Jääskeläinen, 2010; Shreve et al., 2018; da Silva, 2021).

In this paper, we do not aim to provide a thorough discussion of these terms and the concepts and approaches behind them, which, in essence, all revolve around the same question: What makes a translator a good translator? Instead, we seek to highlight corresponding perspectives that have so far not featured prominently in the scholarly debate, namely those of practitioners working in the translation sector. Central to this endeavour is the claim that expertise or competence are not objective, universal categories, but rather socially constructed, situationally dependent and subject to diverse interpretations, thus making it worthwhile to explore understandings held outside academia and see how they might enrich the discussion (see also Angelone & Marín García, 2017; En & En, 2019; Risku & Schlager, 2022). For our analysis, we will draw on data from a qualitative interview study on the selecting and hiring process for in-house translators in Austria, in which employers’ and practitioners’ ideas about what it takes to be a good translator become visible.

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2. Translation research on competence and expertise

In translation studies, and particularly its cognitive and pedagogical strands, a large body of research has centred on the topic of ‘competence’ and, more recently, on ‘expertise’. A popular approach thereby is to create multicomponent competence models listing different subcompetencies that are assumed to be necessary for a person to be able to translate well, such as cultural knowledge, subject knowledge or language skills, and relating them to each other (for an overview, see, e.g., Hurtado Albir, 2017, 2021; Massey, 2017; Yang & Li, 2021). Other scholars have attempted to develop minimal definitions of translation competence, aimed at narrowing it down to *the* decisive skill that makes the difference, such as “transfer competence” (Malmkjær, 2009) or “the ability to generate a series of more than one viable target text [...] for a pertinent source text” and “to select only one viable TT from this series, quickly and with justified confidence” (Pym 2003, p. 489). While such competence models and definitions play an important role in pedagogical approaches, they have also been criticised for their weak empirical foundations (Pym, 2003; Shreve et al., 2018).

Other recent studies conducted by Liu (2023), Hao and Pym (2021) and Horbačauskienė et al. (2017) examine notions of ‘competence’ in the field. With their use of survey methods to study the concept of ‘competence’, their approaches are mostly quantitative and rather deductive, assessing the participants’ ratings of predetermined competencies and skills. Nevertheless, they do take important steps in when it comes to shifting the focus towards the perspectives of people (1) outside academia and (2) in regions of the world that are usually underrepresented in translation research. These include the perspectives of employers in Lithuania (Horbačauskienė et al., 2017), graduates in the Asia-Pacific region (Hao & Pym, 2021) and clients, or more specifically “middlemen between readers and authors [working] in translation agencies or [...] responsible for hiring translators in a company” (Liu, 2023, p. 2), in different Asian countries (Liu, 2023).

As an alternative to translation competence research, empirical translation research draws increasingly on the study of ‘expertise’ in the field of cognitive psychology. One approach used in such research has proved particularly dominant in translation studies, namely the ‘expert performance approach’ (EPA) proposed by Ericsson and Smith (1991) and introduced to interpreting studies by Ericsson (2000). In this framework, an expert is defined as someone who displays “consistently superior performance on a specified set of representative tasks for the domain” (Ericsson and Charness 1994, p. 731). Expertise, i.e., the “entire set of cognitive resources and abilities that allows consistently reproducible expert performance” (Shreve, 2002, p. 151), is described as something that is acquired over time as opposed to being an innate characteristic, thereby emphasising the learning process, characterised as ‘deliberate practice’ (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Shreve, 2006). ‘Deliberate practice’ is the key concept in EPA that describes expertise acquisition, including well-defined tasks with appropriate and increasing levels of difficulty, informative feedback and the possibility for repetition and error correction.

However, a survey of translators and project managers by Angelone and Marín García (2017) suggests clear gaps between the established expertise research rationale in translation studies and the realities in the translation sector. The workplace settings of the respondents do not meet the conditions for ‘deliberate practice’ (see also Tiselius,

2013 on deliberate practice in interpreting). Furthermore, ‘superior performance’ seems to mean something different to practitioners than it does in translation expertise research: The respondents focus more strongly on handling matters relating to the “contextual environment and interaction” (Angelone & Marín García, 2017, p. 134) than on the quality of the translation product. And whereas expertise in EPA-oriented and translation research is often understood in terms of specialisation, the respondents talk of a broad variety of tasks, which hints at the importance of adaptability or adaptive expertise. Both translators and project managers are required to “wear different hats”, which, in turn, makes “switching hats” (2017, p. 136) – or adaptability – indispensable (see also Muñoz Martín, 2014).

Alongside these attempts to find an adequate framework for the understanding of translation expertise, experiment-based comparative studies in translation process research (TPR) have served to identify indicators that illustrate the differences between novices and experienced professional translators (e.g., the processing of larger sections of text, the use of reference material, the degrees of automation, task awareness, target-text and context orientation, self-monitoring and self-evaluation; for an overview, see, e.g., da Silva 2021, pp. 468–470). However, these aspects offer merely a limited selection of what translation expertise can mean, and it has been argued that it should be seen as more situated and context-bound, depending on the social and material environment (Muñoz Martín, 2014; Angelone & Marín García, 2017; Alves & da Silva, 2021; Schlager & Risku, 2023). This strengthens our assumption that research into translation expertise would benefit from investigating it as “expertise in context” (Feltovich et al., 1997) and calls for additional research in authentic work contexts, whose manifold dynamics and nuances can hardly be reproduced and measured in laboratory settings. Doing so entails a shift in focus from micro-process and product-centred approaches to their macro-process and person-centred counterparts. Within a cognitive perspective, 4EA (embodied, embedded, enacted, extended and affective) approaches to cognition provide a suitable framework, as they stress that cognitive processes are not confined to an individual’s brain but arise from interactions between brain, body, social and physical environments in ways specific to each situation (see Risku & Rogl, 2021). Combining them with a qualitative and contextualised methodological approach like (ethnographic) field research allows us to dive deeply into the complexities of messy authentic contexts (see also Risku, 2017). The focus shift, situated theoretical approach and contextualised empirical orientation all bring social aspects (e.g., interaction with other people and organisational or ideological expectations) into the forefront of empirical research. From there, it is only a small step to the integration of sociological and anthropological perspectives into research on translation expertise (see Risku & Rogl, 2022; Schlager & Risku, 2023), which can add new layers to expertise research in translation studies.

3. The social dimension of translation expertise

In disciplines like sociology or anthropology, expertise is often conceptualised as something that relates to identity, status, social role and function. Expertise and expert status are socially and discursively constructed and ascribed to certain people and practices (Evetts et al., 2006; Mieg, 2006; Mieg & Evetts, 2018). Seen in this light, expertise is dynamic, relative and relational. It is something that people do rather than possess (“enactment of expertise”, “doing expertise”; see Carr, 2010), something that emerges in social interaction. It depends strongly on its embeddedness in a social

context with its power relations, is ascribed “in counterdistinction to non-experts” and is “relative to the performance criteria applied in a particular context” (Mieg, 2006, p. 746).

While a considerable amount of sociological research on the identity, status and role of translators has been carried out in translation studies in the past decades (see, e.g., Dam & Zethsen, 2009; for an overview, see Katan, 2011), it has rarely been explicitly linked to the expertise discussion, which has primarily been led by TPR. One rare example that does actually do so is the study by En and En (2019), who approach the topic of translation expertise by “distinguish[ing] between individual *roles/identities* and specific, situated knowledge *practices*” (En & En, 2019, pp. 226–227, original emphasis). To analyse the construction (and deconstruction) of expert roles and identities, they draw on the notion of “boundary work” (Gieryn, 1983) found in sociology of science, a concept that describes the delineation of knowledge fields and the separation of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ or ‘experts’ and ‘non-experts’. Expertise in this view is not a “self-evident or objective category but produced interactively by ‘experts’ and ‘laypeople’ alike as they engage in boundary work around who counts as an expert and who does not” (En & En, 2019, p. 218). The discursive construction of expertise serves to build identity and status and is thus a cornerstone of professionalisation processes (see also Grbić, 2010; Koskinen & Dam, 2016; Grbić & Kujamäki, 2019). Its relevance is not, however, limited to professional translators (who earn their living by translating, see Jääskeläinen, 2010, p. 215): expertise can also be ascribed to non-professional translators. Indeed, En and En (2019) conducted interviews with volunteer translators in an LGBTIQ* migrant community project and examined whether and on what grounds they considered themselves to be translation experts. It transpired that while some of them did indeed think of themselves as experts, others did not, attributing this to aspects such as education, professional experience or subject knowledge. Interestingly, the accounts of their approaches towards translating (e.g., their translation concepts or methods) reveal similarities and differences regardless of whether they consider themselves to be an expert or not.

Questioning the established distinction between ‘professional’ (or trained) translators and ‘amateur’ (or untrained) translators in TS is a step that seems overdue. As both En and En (2019) and Grbić and Kujamäki (2019) argue, TS has itself long engaged in boundary work by focusing mainly on translation in professional contexts and excluding thereby the vast majority of translatorial activities, which are done outside a professional context (primarily, of course, by machines but also by people who would not be called ‘translators’ let alone ‘professional’ translators). The same can also be said about expertise research in the translation context, which has so far centred on professional translators and often uses professional working experience as the main criterion for expertise. Since equating being a ‘professional’ with being an ‘expert’ has already been criticised by Jääskeläinen (2010), it seems more than justified to extend the scope of translation expertise research to include non-professional translators as well.

In short, we argue that expertise should be seen as more situated and context-bound, something that is not absolute or quantifiable but relative and dynamically (co-)constructed in interaction. This refers both to the practices in which translators engage and to their expert status. Seeing expertise as socially and discursively constructed allows for a plurality of conceptualisations of expertise. As the studies by

Angelone and Marín García (2017) and En and En (2019) suggest, there are a variety of expertise concepts out in the field. These ‘emic’ (insider) perspectives of practitioners do not necessarily correspond to the ‘etic’ (outsider) views held by translation scholars, i.e., to the bulk of expertise research that has been conducted in TS so far. Thus, investigating emic notions of translation expertise promises to provide new insights and enrich the expertise discussion in this field.

In the interview study discussed below, we aim to shed light on some of these emic conceptualisations of expertise. We are currently conducting further research within the framework of the project *Rethinking Translation Expertise: A Workplace Study* (Socotrans 2023), in which we explore different sociocognitive facets of translators’ lived expertise (as it is lived in authentic work contexts; see Schlager & Risku, 2023), foregrounding thereby situative, performative and social factors. By using an ethnographically inspired approach that involves a combination of participant observations, interviews, focus groups and document analysis, we seek to trace how expertise emerges from interaction between social actors and with their environment, how it is rationalised and how it manifests itself in day-to-day working life. This includes giving the participants a voice to express their own conceptualisations of expertise, inquiring into their links with identity and status, detecting specific discourses and their functions or ideological backgrounds and locating contradictions and conflicts. Central to this is a move away from the question of “What is expertise?” to the questions of “Who is considered an expert (by whom) and why?” or “What does expertise mean for different people?”.

4. Interview study

In the analysis below, we draw on eleven guideline-based interviews with translators or heads of translation departments. The interview questions focus on the employers’ hiring processes and selection criteria for new translators – topics that inevitably trigger expertise constructions. In this regard, Shreve (2020, p. 153) poses the question “at hiring, how does the organization determine whether or not an individual is capable of practicing a particular activity [...] at the desired level?”. Thus, in statements about selecting and hiring, different conceptualisations of expertise applied in work contexts become especially visible and explicit.

The use of semi-structured interviews gives the participants room to express their own perspectives. The interviews took place in 2022 in Austria, partly in person and partly by phone (video or voice calls). Each interview lasted 30 to 60 minutes. With the exception of interview 10, which was conducted in English, and the many English expressions used by interviewee 5, the interviews were carried out in German. Any statements originally made in German have been translated into English by the authors. Nine women and two men participated in the study (see Table 1). They were all between 35 and 65 years of age at the time of the interviews, which makes them a relatively senior group of experienced translation professionals, many of whom serve as the heads of their departments. Each of them has been working for their respective company or organisation for between 7 and 30 years. Seven of them work in public institutions (representing both Austrian and international organisations), while four are employed by private, internationally active technology companies. The majority of the participants are themselves responsible for hiring new employees and explained their own hiring principles. Those who do not hold such a position commented on the hiring

policy in their respective company or department and described their own expectations of new colleagues.

Code	Gender	Type of organisation	Age	Working experience in the organisation	Personally responsible for hiring	University education
I 01	Female	Private (technology)	36–40	11–15 years	Yes	Translation/ Interpreting
I 02	Female	Public (finance)	56–60	21–25 years	Yes	Translation/ Interpreting
I 03	Female	Private (technology)	36–40	6–10 years	Yes	Translation/ Interpreting
I 04	Female	Public (security)	56–60	21–25 years	Yes	Translation/ Interpreting
I 05	Female	Public (international)	51–55	21–25 years	Yes	Translation/ Interpreting
I 06	Female	Private (technology)	46–50	6–10 years	No	Languages, Teaching
I 07	Female	Private (technology)	41–45	11–15 years	Yes	Translation/ Interpreting
I 08	Female	Public (governmental)	56–60	26–30 years	No	Translation/ Interpreting
I 09	Female	Public (regional)	46–50	21–25 years	No	Translation/ Interpreting
I 10	Male	Public (international)	56–60	31–35 years	Yes	Translation/ Interpreting
I 11	Male	Public (security)	61–65	26–30 years	Yes	Translation/ Interpreting

Table 1. Description of interviewees

We analysed the data in line with the qualitative content analysis method proposed by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022) and with the help of the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. Kuckartz and Rädiker's (2022) analysis method is designed for the integration of Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software, emphasising a systematic, yet flexible approach to handling qualitative data. It focuses on achieving consistency and transparency in data structuring and coding, while also accommodating interpretive nuances and allowing for context-sensitive adjustments in a multi-level, iterative analysis process. Categories were developed both deductively and inductively, and in

cooperation with the members of our research group to increase reliability. The analysis focused on the following aspects:

- What does translation expertise/competence/professionalism mean for the employers? Which aspects are considered most important? Which criteria are used for assessing future employees?
- On what basis are arguments formed? Is it possible to identify specific discourses or interests that lie behind the constructions of expertise?

Based on the initial studies of expertise in the language industry discussed above, we assumed that employers focus on skills in handling matters relating to the work context and parameters (e.g., punctuality, interaction, dialogue), (quantitative) productivity and adaptability on a variety of levels (e.g., translating texts in different areas of specialisation, non-translation tasks such as proofreading and editing, using different media, adapting to clients and their particular expectations). We also assumed that the employers would have different notions of expertise – expertise can, after all, mean something different to each individual.

5. Results

Despite the different perspectives, some patterns clearly emerge from the data. The most striking similarities concern: (1) the structure of the selecting and hiring process, which is similar in most settings, (2) the importance of an educational background in TS, (3) the importance of soft skills and personal qualities, and (4) the importance of adaptability and ‘learning on the job’. While these therefore set the focus for our analysis and provide the structure for the presentation of our findings, we would also like to note that it does not mean that there are no differences or that the assessments are uniform in detail.

5.1. Selecting and hiring process, assessment of capability

The interviewees reported very similar selecting and hiring processes across the different organisations and companies. Usually, candidates with convincing CVs are asked to complete a test translation to provide an initial insight into their approach towards language, texts and new tasks. Those who complete this test successfully are then invited to a personal interview to obtain an impression of whether they fit the team or not. This interview is decisive in whether they are ultimately hired or not. However, the assessment of their capability does not stop there. Much, if not most of it, relates to their actual performance in the job. It is thus an ongoing process which concentrates after hiring on the adaptability, flexibility and learning skills of the (new) employee.

These different stages or methods of assessing capability not only provide us with information on the employers’ assessment criteria, they also correspond more or less to the bundles of skills that are expected from (future) employees. Hence, they provide a useful basis for structuring the notions of expertise encountered in the data (see Table 2).

Stage in the assessment process	Assessment criteria
1. application	‘hard facts’ (e.g., language/translation skills, cultural knowledge)
2. translation test	

3. interview	'soft skills' (e.g., interaction, openness, reliability, appearance)
4. monitoring of job performance	adaptability and 'lived expertise'

Table 2. The stages in the assessment process and corresponding main categories of assessment criteria

We will now dive deeper into these assessment criteria as well as the other statements and explanations provided by our interviewees as indicators of employers' constructs of translation expertise in the workplace.

5.2. 'Hard facts', translation skills and the importance of translation studies

Many of the skills, competencies or fields of knowledge mentioned at the beginning of the interviews were not very surprising. The interviewees listed skills in language, culture, 'translation', terminology, subject and general knowledge, technology and research as relevant. Particular emphasis was often placed on language skills (including the first language) and the 'translation' skill, aspects which largely reflect the contents of TS programmes in universities (and, similarly, competence models in TS). This might be due to the fact that most of the interviewees themselves had degrees in TS. The only participant with a different educational background (I06, language degree) had a slightly different perspective. She used other words and phrases (e.g., "it has a lot to do with terminology, idiomatically correct language know-how") to describe the 'classical' translation-specific sub-competencies listed above. All those who had studied TS framed them very similarly to each other and to translation-didactic discourse. This might have been reinforced by the fact that they had been told the interviewer was collecting data for a university project and thus acting as a representative of the university and its Centre for Translation Studies. The TS discourse was particularly present at the beginning of the interviews, when interviewees tend to be unsure about what is expected from them, and when the roles of interviewer and interviewee are largely negotiated (Helfferich, 2022, p. 880). Thus, by starting with lists of the typical contents of TS programmes, the interviewees kept 'on the safe side' and established a connection to the interviewer by referring to their common knowledge base.

Most of the above-mentioned skills were not discussed in any detail, except for the 'translation skill', which was alternatively referred to as "translatorial competence", "translatorial ability", "translation studies knowledge" or "translation studies competence". Its overarching importance was emphasised by most interviewees. "[A] translator should have a basic skill. And that basic skill is translation. What you are translating, the topic, or the kind of translation, as it were, is secondary" (I10). The way the interviewees described the 'translation skill' reveals a lot about their conception of translation and is closely connected to an educational background in TS (an important hiring criterion in most cases):

Because at university you learn more than just [...] the language. That what's important for translating. [...] You don't just transfer a text from one language into the other. The transcultural element is also important. The background knowledge to be able to say, "well, this will not work in that language" or "it's just not expressed like that". (I04)

They rejected approaches to translating like "sticking to the text" (I09) or "simply going ahead and translating" (I01), which they feel tend to be used by translators with no

formal education in translation. Instead, they argued that TS students “are optimally prepared for translating” (I01) and are taught the “tools of the translation trade” (I11) and the “awareness for translation technique” (I04) that is necessary for the job. In their opinion, translators with a degree in TS work in a more purpose-oriented manner. One interviewee explicitly mentioned the importance of “always keeping an eye on the skopos” (I01). Another said that translators with a TS background accept targeted criticism, while those without formal training may see it as a slight on their language skills.

With the exception of the interviewee with a different educational background, who expected “a relevant degree [...] something related to an affinity for language in the broader sense” (I06), all the participants emphasised the importance of a TS degree. These “hard facts” (I04), as one participant called them, need to fit before applicants are invited to a translation test and an interview. In some settings, this policy is executed almost ideologically:

INT (= interviewer): So is a degree [...] in translation a prerequisite?

I07: Yes.

INT: Okay, should they have completed a Master's degree?

I07: Yes.

INT: Would you also hire people who have not studied translation?

I07: No.

INT: Not at all?

I07: No.

INT: Not even any...?

I07: No, no, no. I have to categorically exclude that.

One interviewee stated that a Master's degree (in TS) is a prerequisite “to be able to work as a ‘fully fledged’ translator” (I03). Others used it more for pragmatic reasons: “We get lots of applications when we advertise a job and we can't do 40 or 60 translation tests. So we need a criterion to narrow down the applicant pool” (I02). This does, of course, also depend on the organisation's actual working languages. When it comes to those of lesser diffusion, it is not reasonable to expect an educational background in TS: “I won't find anyone with a translation degree for Mongolian” (I09). In this regard, one participant describes how closely their hiring policy is connected to the languages offered in the TS degree programme in Vienna:

We've never actually hired anyone who didn't have a degree. [...] Then again, we work with commonly used languages. [...] If we worked with very exotic languages – ones you couldn't study in Vienna – then I guess our hiring policy would be different. (I04)

Overall, the hiring criteria and notions of expertise held by the study participants seem to be significantly shaped by the existing educational landscape, which, in this case, has a relatively long history of TS programmes at universities (see the discussion section below).

5.3. Soft skills, personal qualities and the importance of chemistry

The emphasis on TS education does not mean, however, that it alone is a sufficient criterion for being hired. On the contrary, soft skills and personal qualities also feature strongly in the interviewees' responses. Indeed, they seem to be at least as important as the ‘hard facts’ or skills and are, in the end, usually the decisive factor in a hiring

decision. As a consequence, the importance of a personal interview in the selection process was emphasised: it provides an opportunity to get to know the person a little and see “if the new translator fits into the team. Because no matter how good they are, there is no point in hiring them if they don’t get on with the rest of the team” (I07).

Communication, cooperation and interaction are likewise strongly emphasised. In the hiring interviews, communication skills, appearance and the ability to “establish a connection and rapport” play a central role, because “we work with words and with people” (I02). “If you work in the language sector and can’t actually communicate with people, then, if you ask me, that’s a problem” (I01). Like other activities, translation is a cooperative process and requires the ability to work in a team, prioritise team over individual needs and respect corporate values and processes. The interviewees referred to this as “the social component” (I04), “the spirit” (I05), “the ability to work in a team, those key social skills required in any profession” (I04) or “the being able to ‘pull together’ and share the same goals yet still question things and remain innovative” (I02).

Another major point is the ability to handle feedback and criticism and respect other people’s approaches. The interviewees talked about the importance of being aware of your own skills and limits, knowing when and how to research and being able to successfully solve problems. (New) colleagues are expected to be open, willing to learn, inquisitive, motivated and interested. They should work efficiently and conscientiously and be stress resistant. One interviewee said that it is important to have a specific “mindset”, e.g., a “dedication to service”. While this “cannot be changed easily”, “everything else can be trained and taught” (I02).

All in all, it is clear that the applicant as a person and their personal qualities or “character” (I01) are of utmost importance to the interviewees. In this context, their assessments are clearly emotional, intuitive and non-rational. They pointed out that they have to have a good “gut feeling” (I03) and that the “chemistry” has to work (I02). It is, of course, difficult to determine in the selection process how good a fit a person will actually be in this regard. But as one participant put it: “You can’t really tell that well from one or two interviews. But first impressions do matter, and so far they have usually proven to be correct” (I04).

5.4. Lived expertise, learning on the job and the importance of adaptability

The assessment of capability during the recruitment process thus only provides an initial impression – a snapshot of the situation. Most of the capability assessment ultimately takes place after the person has been hired, i.e., in everyday work processes.

Sometimes people bring good things, sometimes they bring... well... some bad things, but then they have to adapt, so to say, to the new culture of the new organisation and yes... This is the process of monitoring, so to say, the performance of the person and if something does not fit into this culture, into these values, then the person is, so to say, notified about that and has to adapt. (I10)

This sort of adaptive expertise that is reflected in actual performance on the job is crucial for most of the interviewees and can be decisive for a continuation or termination of a work contract. It was mentioned in the interviews in reference to

different aspects of work such as the ability to adapt to different subjects, texts, translation tasks, organisational requirements and time constraints as well as to working with different people, both co-workers and clients alike.

At the level of the different texts to be translated, one interviewee said that “the translator [...] is like a chameleon. They have to really identify with the text and really pick out the exact style” (I05). She went on to explain that translators have to be able to adapt to a broad range of texts: “one day you’re translating a technical text, the next day it might be something different” (I05).

But the dynamics are not restricted solely to the types of texts or translation assignments, they also extend to organisational aspects: “that they [the person] are also able to prioritise their work correctly, i.e., know what is important, what has to be put on hold, what has to be given top priority now” (I01). In some cases, translators also have to be flexible, i.e., willing and able to work outside normal working hours. If “very urgent texts” have to be translated, they may be required “to work extra hours, sometimes in the evening [...] or at the weekend” because “people need our translations by those deadlines” (I05).

Indeed, time management and productivity seem to be of overarching importance, as is reflected in a statement by one interviewee: “I would describe a professional translator as someone who is so competent from a linguistic, cultural and translation perspective that he or she can always deliver a translation in the appropriate form at the right time in the required quality and in the correct format” (I01).

The work tasks can extend well beyond the actual production of translations. One interviewee referred in this regard to the “multifunctionality” of the role – translators are both translators, interpreters and teachers alike (I11).

Adapting to constantly changing situations also requires a great deal of learning and openness.

Openness ... the urge to constantly educate yourself. Because the language is alive and constantly changing. Knowledge of this and simply flexibility. Yes, the knowledge that everything is in a state of flux and that you have to constantly keep up with the times, constantly educate yourself and also always be curious... Curiosity, actually. Curiosity about everything. (I04)

This dynamic nature of expertise was strongly emphasised. Most of the interviewees also considered interest and willingness to learn to be more important than experience. Professional experience or specialised subject knowledge were not considered necessary preconditions for future employees in any of the companies or organisations, although most did see it as an advantage. This does, however, appear to be the area where compromises are most likely to be made – in the sense of “experience is good but not always the deciding factor” (I04). Emphasis is placed instead on “learning on the job” (I02, I06), “because there is no alternative. There are some things you simply cannot learn outside an organisation and thus also cannot know” (I06). Accordingly, it is often assumed “that people qualify for the job on the job” (I06). This is also the case for people with professional experience: “Even if someone does have experience, our field is so complex that you still have to work your way in to it from scratch” (I02). As a result, organisations are also quite willing to hire people “straight from university” (I02, I08, I09) because “we all have to start somewhere” (I09).

It was even mentioned that “experience can also be a disadvantage” (I05). “If, for example, the methods are totally different, working by those methods is also totally different and doesn’t fit our needs or expectations” (I05). Another interviewee explicitly raised the issue of the mere existence of personal ideas and perceptions:

Well, you can still train translators who have come straight from university to some extent and mould them into shape. That’s more difficult with translators who have already worked somewhere else. Because they already have more of a mind of their own. (I07)

This ‘training’ could be seen as an extreme form of the desire for adaptability in which the power imbalance is evident. The employees should be moulded in such a way that they meet the organisation’s expectations of them and are thus not conflicted by their own perceptions and ideas. As this example shows, power is extremely relevant in constructions of expertise, and we will reflect on this topic further in the discussion below.

6. Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we draw on data from qualitative interviews with employers and practitioners to analyse their ideas and notions of what it takes to be a good translator. The interviews unearthed opinions that often remain subliminal and that might indeed only have become evident through the actual interview itself. The data can be seen as rationalisations of daily work praxis, constructed in the interview situation for us as researchers. We chose the interview topic – processes and criteria for hiring translators – but the interviewees were given the opportunity to express their insider views on the topic.

Beyond the core features of a relevant educational background, language and translation skills and general knowledge, the interviewees have a very dynamic notion of expertise which involves: (1) a general interest in the company/organisation and its subject area, (2) inquisitiveness and eagerness to learn, and (3) the flexibility and ability to adapt to the subject and team as well as to different work situations, texts and translation tasks. The notions of ‘adaptability’ or ‘adaptive expertise’, which have already been discussed by Muñoz Martín (2014), Angelone and Marín García (2017) and Angelone (2022), seem to be the key factors here. The fact that the interviewees did not consider prior work experience to be necessary, and some of them even emphasised negative consequences of prior experience, would seem to allude to the ‘functional fixedness’ phenomenon, the rigid adherence to familiar strategies that do not function optimally in changed situations (Muñoz Martín, 2014, p. 9). Furthermore, the emphasis on time management and the importance of meeting deadlines reminds us of the results of the study by Angelone and Marín García (2017), where timeliness was found to be the most important factor. They thus conclude that expectations regarding productivity might outweigh those of translation quality and that translation expertise from an emic perspective “might involve a capacity to cater to different levels of quality demands based on task awareness, while remaining optimally productive in the process” (2017, p. 133).

It would be tempting to visualise the main findings of our own study in a three-layer or onion model with the classic translation-specific subcompetencies at the core, the soft skills, personal and macro-process aspects in the middle, and adaptability and

efficiency on the outside as a malleable layer in every respect and direction – provocatively put: the employer’s play dough. However, we do not feel that an inside to outside model is entirely appropriate in our case because the adaptability is ultimately *the* decisive factor that makes the rest relevant in the first place. The results of our study suggest that the learning process plays a major role for expertise in in-house translation praxis – not, however, in the deliberate practice sense (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; see above) but rather as the continuous adaption of the translators to the work (rather than the work to the translators). While their work reality does not seem to mirror the conceptualisations of the expert performance approach, the elements of various established translation competence models are indeed considered relevant and frequently even explicitly mentioned.

The three aspects of the main results of our study – the importance of a TS degree, soft skills and adaptability – also merit further discussion. We were surprised by the extent to which the participants in our study emphasised the relevance of TS education. Like many scholars in the fields of translation or TS, we are accustomed to a discourse that is characterised by complaints about the low societal awareness and status of TS or translation education. Yet our data shows how the TS discourse is successfully reproduced and made relevant in the workplace. This can most probably be attributed to the comparably long history of TS programmes in Austrian universities. All three TS institutes (at the Universities of Vienna, Graz and Innsbruck) were founded in the 1940s (for more on the history of the Centre for Translation Studies in Vienna, see, e.g., Snell-Hornby & Budin, 2015; Ahamer, 2007). At the end of the 1980s, the first professorships (one for each institute) were installed. Prior to that, 13 languages were already being offered at the institute in Vienna in the 1970s, and the course had become a mass degree course with 1,000 to 2,000 students. In recent years, the number of students enrolled in the TS programmes at the University of Vienna at Bachelor and Master levels has fluctuated at around the 2,000 mark.

The TS and didactic discourse in Austria has thus had several decades to become established. As a result, people with an educational background in TS now hold positions in which they are responsible for hiring new translators – and they prefer to hire candidates who have also studied TS. Some of them even seek new staff directly at the Centre for Translation Studies in Vienna or contact university lecturers for recommendations (I09, I11).

When we look at the identity-shaping, boundary-drawing dimension of the expertise discourse, it is safe to say that there is a lot of ‘boundary work’ going on in regard to TS and the status of the profession. Much is contrasted (language vs. translation, degree vs. no degree). Some instances even remind us of Pym’s (1996) notion of “boomerang expertise”, a self-referential, self-legitimising circular argument without grounding in robust theoretical arguments or empirical evidence: “Translation does not mean that I master two languages. There is so much more to it than that. It really is something different. Otherwise it wouldn’t be offered as a degree course” (I09).

When considering the importance of soft skills, we have to ask ourselves whether and to what extent these apply specifically to translation or indeed to jobs in general. Such requirements are, after all, encountered in most job descriptions across the board. Hjort (2023), who analysed a body of job descriptions for in-house translators in Finland, asks the same question. The relevance of ‘soft skills’ also stands out in her

findings – the impressions gained from her quantitative study fit well with those from our qualitative data – but a comparison with a non-translation-specific body could also prove interesting. The relevance of soft skills and emphasis on the person and their personal qualities speaks for the fact that it makes sense not to concentrate just on micro processes but to take a step in the direction of macro process and the interaction between people and their social and material environments.

The statements by our interviewees regarding the adaptability of applicants and colleagues represent in part a veritable desire for “malleability”. The demand for lifelong learning, flexibility and adaptability can thus be understood as a neoliberal discourse mechanism that reproduces the exploitative structures of knowledge capitalism (Olssen, 2006; Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2018):

If it [learning] is [...] concerned narrowly with cognitive and metacognitive skills in the interests of adaptability to the world of work and the constantly changing demands of capital, then it becomes a means of enabling business to minimise or avoid its social responsibilities by offloading the social and educational costs of production in a constantly changing technological environment. (Olssen 2006, p. 225)

In TS, capitalist market structures and their impact on translation work have not yet been widely debated. However, Firat’s (2021) discussion of “the uberization of translation” and its consequences for working conditions hint at the potential of research in this area. Baumgarten and Cornellà-Detrell (2019) likewise call for a greater consideration of economic structures, which they see as essential for “an approach on translation that is more firmly grounded in the material and technologically mediated dynamics of everyday life” (2019, p. 11). Such an approach also requires (self-)reflexion on the “creeping internalisation of hegemonic market values” (2019, p. 22) with both translators and translation researchers, including “discourses that, above all, propagate market ideals such as employability, productivity and skills development” (2019, p. 22). Since discourses on translation expertise can certainly be seen in that light, it would seem that a closer investigation of this economic-political dimension will be unavoidable in the long run.

Shreve (2020, p. 173) acknowledges the language industry’s market logic as a factor that is also related to translation expertise, albeit a contradictory one. He holds that “the ideal of becoming ‘consistently superior in the task domain’” is incompatible with “the goals of profit-driven organizations” (2020, p. 173) and consequently wonders whether it is even useful to apply the established notion of expertise to language industry contexts. We agree that an adoption of the expertise performance approach (EPA) to the study of authentic working contexts seems rather contradictory. However, taking a closer look at the emic perspective might reveal a different understanding of ‘superior performance’ within the industry altogether, e.g., that of being “optimally productive in the process” (Angelone & Marín García, 2017, p. 133). This, in turn, makes economic-political sensitivity in expertise research all the more important. It would certainly be useful to look more closely at the notion of ‘adaptability’ from a power-sensitive perspective in a further study.

We hope that our study will inspire people studying translation expertise within the TPR and cognitive translation and interpreting studies (CTIS) frameworks to include the dimension of the social and discursive constructedness of expertise in their research designs. This might mean expanding the focus to incorporate contextual factors and

emic views on expertise. We are convinced that giving the community we study a voice will be enriching for our scholarly debates. At the same time, taking a situated perspective exculpates researchers from the search for the – almost mythical – ‘superior performance’, enabling them to study translation performance as manifested in daily work and as the social enactment and discursive construction of expertise. From this perspective, expertise is not something we have or do not have, it is something we do and construct.

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Data availability statement

The project behind this publication, “Rethinking Translation Expertise”, includes a Data Management Plan as part of the funding agreement with the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), required for ethical approval. The Data Management Plan stipulates that the raw data will not be made publicly available due to privacy concerns. The data are protected through non-disclosure agreements between the researchers and the participants.