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The translation profession: centres and peripheries

Introduction

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a special issue on the translation profession. Its point of departure is that translation constitutes an entity of practice that is sufficiently stable to be identified, defined and delimited from other entities of practice, but also that its boundaries are porous and unstable and that the people and artefacts that inhabit it, its agents, are in constant movement between its centre and peripheries. Against this backdrop and departing from various vantage points, the contributors and editors of the special issue explore the topology of this entity, here referred to as *the translation profession* following current usage in the field, focusing on its centre-periphery relations and the way these relations have developed over time and currently seem to be developing. The introduction gives an overview of the articles in the special issue and identifies and discusses key topics and concepts foregrounded by the authors in response to the call for papers. Key topics include professionalisation, assumed threats to professional status, professional boundaries, and insiders and outsiders.

KEYWORDS

The translation profession, the sociology of translation, professionalisation, translation technologies, non-professional translation.

In recent years, attempts to transform translation into a full-fledged profession have been manifold and persistent. Many efforts have been put into establishing training programmes at university level, accreditation systems, professional organisations, codified professional and ethical standards, and many resources have been dedicated to creating a distinctive knowledge base and a research community with its own journals, conferences, associations and networks. Despite these efforts, translation has not yet reached full professional status, and the boundaries of the field remain fuzzy.

The point of departure for this special issue is that translation constitutes an entity of practice that is sufficiently stable to be identified, defined and delimited from other entities of practice; this entity may be, and indeed is, variously referred to as an 'occupation,' a 'semi-occupation' or a(n) '(emerging) profession,' but here we choose to label it *the translation profession* following current usage in translation (studies) while acknowledging that translation does not (yet) possess all the traits necessary to qualify formally as a profession (see discussions below and in Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger 2008, Dam and Zethsen 2010, Katan 2011, Pym *et al.* 2013, Tyulenev 2015). At the same time, we take it that the boundaries of the profession are porous and unstable and that the people and artefacts that inhabit it, its agents, are in constant movement between its centre and peripheries: some agents may be central at

certain points in time, more peripheral at others, and eventually they may disappear from the configuration altogether, while new ones appear on the scene. Traditionally, for example, literary translators were located at the very centre of the profession — they used to be the prototypical translators, the professionals that most scholars studied and those who most immediately came to mind when the word ‘translator’ was mentioned. In recent years, business translators seem to have come to occupy centre stage. They are responsible for the bulk of translation in today’s globalised business world, and though they may still not enjoy the same recognition — and therefore central position in terms of status — as literary translators, focus in Translation Studies has been shifting from literary to business translation over the last decades (see also Rogers 2015). As another example, translation technologies have moved from playing a marginal role to occupying centre stage, and in some domains this change has been seen to push human translators towards the periphery. Voluntary translation is another case in point. Volunteer translators have been seen as players operating in the periphery of the translation field but are likely to become increasingly central in the future.

The collection of articles in this special issue of *Jostrans* is essentially the outcome of a panel session held at the 7th EST Congress in Germersheim in 2013 (Dam and Koskinen 2012), though some panel presentations have not been included in the issue and some papers have been added subsequently. Based on the reflections above, contributors were invited to explore the topology of the translation profession, focusing on its centre-periphery relations and the way these relations develop over time and currently seem to be developing. The speakers and authors were further given the following sub-themes and questions to consider:

- The location of different translation agents on the profession’s centre-periphery continuum: which agents are more central/peripheral: freelance vs. in-house translators, (written) translators vs. interpreters, literary vs. business translators? And what about localisers, pre- and post-editors, revisers, terminologists, information retrievers, documentation/ project/ translation managers, technical writers, multilingual specialists and similar translation(-related) professionals: where do we place them on the centre-periphery continuum, and are they translators at all? How important are these groups in the field of translation today, and what developments are we currently witnessing? Are they becoming more or less numerous, more or less central? Do translators and translator-related professionals call themselves translators or not? Why (not)? What are the developments in translators’ naming conventions and why?
- How solid is the centre of the translation profession, and is it becoming more or less solid with time? This question is also linked

with the profile of practicing translators and how it is developing: is the profession consolidating as a female, part-time, freelance and transitory occupation or is it developing towards a more gender-balanced, full-time, salaried (in-house), life-long occupation? What is the relationship between untrained practicing translators and trained professionals (who are more numerous, more central?) and how is it developing? Why, and what are the consequences?

- What is the relationship between machines and humans in the field of translation? Are machines becoming more central and humans more peripheral? Will translation technologies eventually substitute human translators altogether in some or even in all areas? Or could it possibly be that translation technology — by taking over all the routine tasks and leaving only the skilled ones for the humans — will eventually empower human translators and put them in a more central position than they are today?
- In recent years, voluntary, pro-bono translation has been spreading, and networks of volunteer translators and interpreters such as *Babels* and *Translation for Progress* have been formed. What is the role of these presumably peripheral players on the translation scene? Are they threatening the livelihood of professional translators? Are there any signs that voluntary translation is moving from the periphery towards the centre of the field? Why, and what are the consequences for the profession and for professional translators?

Evidently, one special issue cannot give full coverage to such a plethora of questions, but most of them are addressed, exhaustively or more briefly, in the articles selected for the present volume.

Translators before the professional project

The first article, “Translating and translators before the professional project” by Outi Paloposki, takes a close look at the attribution of translatorship in the late 19th-century Finland and hence addresses the question of naming translation and translators. The article provides a historical background to the rest of the issue, addressing as it does the situation before “the professional project” — before anyone even considered translation as material for a profession. Paloposki’s multiple data show that, historically, translator was a role that those who translated would step into and out of, rather than a stable identity. Translation was not a profession but a task performed by a heterogeneous group of people variously occupied with translating, writing, teaching and editing. The people we now call translators were non-professional in many meanings of the word: not trained as translators, often not salaried, not institutionalised as a socially coherent

group. In many cases, they not even referred to themselves, or were referred to by others, as translators. The question is whether the situation today is entirely different. As Paloposki points out, there are in fact many parallels: occupational insecurity, multitasking, individual entrepreneurship, and what we would now call crowdsourcing: joint translation efforts and networking, work carried out for altruistic reasons and sometimes without remuneration.

Professionalisation — and threats to professional status

The thread laid out by Paloposki is picked up by a number of authors in this volume, who delve into the topic of professionalisation. The study of professionalisation, i.e. the process that turns an activity, task or occupation (such as translation) into a profession, can be and has been approached in many different ways, but two main approaches emerge from the sociological literature: the so-called “attribute or traits approach” (e.g. Greenwood 1957) and the “power approach” (e.g. Freidson 1970) (for an overview, see Weiss-Gal and Welbourne 2008). The attribute approach relies on core traits which define a profession, such as recognised training programmes, codified ethical standards, efficient certification systems and professional associations. The power approach, on the other hand, focuses on how occupations establish and maintain dominance, and defines professions as occupations which have a dominant position of power in their area of practice — and are able to effectively police it. Especially the attribute model holds the assumption that a profession develops in a linear manner, essentially by accumulating more and more traits of professionalism and thus progressing from occupation over semi-profession to full profession. The power model rather focuses on how professions maintain their dominant position when exposed to threats and thus allows for temporary set-backs in professionalisation, or “market disorder” as it is referred to by Pym *et al.* (see below), as long as the professionals are in possession of efficient means to restore order. A number of articles in this volume are concerned with factors or incidents that challenge or off-set the progress (sometimes assumed to be linear, sometimes not) towards professionalisation in the field of translation — in other words with *threats* to professional status — and how the community of practitioners deals with these threats in order to maintain their own dominant position. The second article in the special issue is a case in point:

Through three case studies of online translation forums and websites, the article by Antony Pym, David Orrego-Carmona and Esther Torres-Simón — “Status and technology in the professionalisation of translators. Market disorder and the return of hierarchy” — shows how new technology has allowed for some degree of market disorder in the field of translation as a result of the ensuing globalisation of translator-client contacts, growth of volunteer translation, access to free online machine translation and the

corresponding motivation to steal the identities of professional translators. The three cases thus offer evidence of instances where the (relatively professionalised) translation market has relapsed into degrees of disorder, or temporary states of de-professionalisation, because of threats made possible by new technology. Interestingly, in the cases analysed this disorder was challenged and corrected. It would therefore seem that these translators were able to effectively sanction and police their position of power, which is a sign of a relatively high degree of professionalism according to the power model of professionalisation. Paradoxically, some of the translator networks studied by Pym *et al.* were in fact communities of (non-professional) volunteers (in casu, fansubbers). These amateur forums thus seemed to apply mechanisms of control and hierarchisation similar to those enforced in the context of professional networks.

Threats from within

The third article — “Elite and non-elite translator manpower: The non-professionalised culture in the translation field in Israel” — by Rakefet Sela-Sheffy also addresses threats to professionalisation focusing on the situation in Israel, which, the author argues, represents an extreme case of suspended professionalisation. Based on a comprehensive interview study among Israeli translators and interpreters of all kinds, Sela-Sheffy shows how threats to professional status come not from the outside but from inside the field of practice itself. Especially a group of top literary translators possesses and promotes an ethos of *artists* and remains hostile to attempts toward professionalising their trade (or art, as it were). Interestingly, the artisation and anti-professionalisation ethos promoted by acclaimed literary translators seems to permeate the translation field at large and thus prevent the large majority of non-elite translators and interpreters (business translators, community interpreters, etc.) from promoting measures of professionalisation even if it would seem to be in their own good interest. A further anti-professionalising feature identified in Sela-Sheffy’s study is the *ad hoc* nature of much translation work. Especially those who work as community interpreters in Israel do it mostly by virtue of being relatives of people in need of interpreting or as employees of the institutions where interpreting is used (health clinics, banks, social welfare services, etc.), and they typically aspire to careers in other fields. For these practitioners, interpreting remains a temporary and secondary activity rather than a profession, and Sela-Sheffy’s data show that they are either indifferent or directly hostile towards professionalising as interpreters.

Also the fourth article in the special issue is concerned with mechanisms of internal hierarchisation and, hence, threats or pressure originating from within the translation field itself. Andrea Hunziker Heeb, in “Professional translators’ self-concepts and directionality: indications from translation

process research,” looks at a specific sub-group of translators, namely L2 translators (professionals who translate not into but out of their mother tongue, as opposed to L1 translators), who are reported to struggle to gain recognition and thus centrality in their field of practice. In Central Europe, the author argues, these translators are considered lower ranking practitioners and producers of low-quality translations by other stakeholders in the field (L1 translators, teachers, researchers, translation service providers, etc.), and in Switzerland they are denied access to professional associations. By means of retrospective verbal protocols elicited in laboratory settings, Hunziker Heeb investigates if the so-called self-concepts of professional L2 translators differ from those of professional L1 translators. Self-concept is defined as translators’ perception of their own professional role and responsibilities, and is used as an indicator of translation competence in the study. Results suggest that there are no substantial differences in the self-concepts, and hence translation competence, of the two groups of translators. In fact, both groups seem to possess well-developed translation competence and be “proficient jugglers of multiple concerns and responsibilities.” The marginalisation experienced by L2 translators in Central Europe, we may add, is probably real enough.

Translation technology – a threat to human translators?

Three articles in the special issue address translation technology, an increasingly central agent in many translation configurations, as a potential threat to the translation profession, that is, to human translators. The first of these articles is “Computer-aided translation tools – the uptake and use by Danish translation service providers” by Tina Paulsen Christensen and Anne Schjoldager. Based on a survey, the authors present statistics on the implementation of CAT tools (especially translation memory systems and machine translation technology) in the Danish translation industry and discuss how these tools are perceived to have impacted on translation and translators in that national context. Not surprisingly, the survey statistics show that CAT technology in general is widespread in Denmark, though the industry representatives are still hesitant towards using machine translation technology because of the low quality output it allegedly produces into and from Danish; most of the respondents, however, plan to implement also this technology once quality has improved. In other words, there is little doubt that translation technology is here to stay. When asked how the introduction of technology has impacted translation and translators, the respondents mention that prices and rates have gone down, competition and pressure on delivery deadlines have increased, whereas quality has decreased. More interestingly, the Danish industry representatives agree that CAT tools have changed the contents of translators’ jobs. As expressed by Christensen and Schjoldager, “translators nowadays work more like fixers of machine-generated texts than the skilled, creative professionals that

they used to be.” In the light of this situation, the authors suggest that the future lies in new business activities, such as localisation and technical writing, i.e. “creative and specialised jobs, in which [competent translators] remain in charge of the translation process.”

The following article, *Translator-computer interaction in action — an observational process study of computer-aided translation (CAT)* by Kristine Bundgaard, Tina Paulsen Christensen and Anne Schjoldager, takes us away from the desk and into the real world. It reports on an observational study of translator-computer interaction processes in a translation task where machine translation technology was integrated into a translation memory suite. Results show that the translator’s work was both aided and restrained by the tool. On the one hand, the tool helped the translator conform to project and customer requirements. On the other hand, it forced the translator to follow a segment-by-segment method. Interestingly, however, the translator was observed to resist the influence of the tool for example by interrupting the linear procedure encouraged by the technology. Based on their observations, Bundgaard *et al.* conclude that the technology played a central role, but also that the translator remained in charge of the translation process and, consequently, that “though in constant interaction with the technology, [the translator] remains at the centre stage.” Perhaps, the editors would add, translation technology is not that marginalising for human translators after all? Once we leave the desk and delve into actual work processes, the picture seems to change.

The third technology article, “Is machine translation post-editing worth the effort? A survey of research into post-editing effort” by Maarit Koponen, takes us from computer-assisted translation technology to machine translation complemented with human post-editing — and back to the desk. Based on a literature review, Koponen concludes that machine translation-cum-post-editing is indeed “worth the effort” as it increases productivity while retaining and even improving quality — at least in some contexts, for some genres and for some language pairs. Moreover, machine translation technology is likely to continue improving and, hence, moving from the periphery of the translation profession closer to the centre. Do we need to be concerned that machine translation technology will eventually push human translators out of the field, then? With the exception of a few specific scenarios (standardised text types or situations where an imperfect translation conveying the basic content suffices), the author argues, machine translation fully replacing the human translator continues to appear unlikely: many translation scenarios will probably remain where “the human is essential and the machine only a potential tool.” On the other hand, Koponen argues, post-editing tasks are likely to become increasingly central in the future. With this development, we assume, the demand for competent professionals to carry out these tasks is likely to increase as well.

Translation crowdsourcing – a threat to professional translators?

The following article, "Cause for concern? Attitudes towards translation crowdsourcing in professional translators' blogs" by Marian Flanagan, maintains focus on potential threats to the translation profession and professional translators but shifts from one commonly perceived threat, translation technology, to another, that of translation crowdsourcing – a translation model that used to be "located on the periphery of the translation profession" but is now "occupying a more central position." Based on a thematic analysis of a sample of professional translators' weblogs, Flanagan examines their attitudes towards translation crowdsourcing. Some blog posts reveal positive attitudes towards this translation practice, which is believed by some to enhance the visibility of translation and translators and demonstrate the value of translation to society; especially voluntary translation work within non-profit, humanitarian initiatives (such as the Haiti Relief Effort, Translators Without Borders, The Rosetta Foundation, etc.) are taken to the fore and described as worthwhile in the translators' weblogs. By far the largest share of blog post on crowdsourcing was, however, found to be negative and show that this translation model is indeed considered a cause for concern among the blogging translators. The negative comments are mainly directed at for-profit companies' crowdsourcing initiatives (e.g. the reputed LinkedIn case), and the bloggers clearly see it as a threat to their professional status that some companies expect to have, and that some people are willing to do, for free what they themselves do for a living. They are also worried about the potential damage to the profession's reputation deriving from the assumption underlying the use of amateur translators in some crowdsourced projects, namely that translation can be done by anyone who has knowledge of two languages and requires no formal training. This, they feel, undermines their professional competence and authority. The concerns expressed by the bloggers are thus related to attributes generally believed to constitute professional status: pay, training, authority, recognition. While crowdsourcing does not necessarily involve unpaid or non-professional labour, the fact that some initiatives do is seen by the majority of translators studied as a potential source of de-professionalisation.

Hope for a profession with a solid core?

While several of the articles in the special issue are concerned with threats to the translation profession and the professional translator, some take the opposite perspective and look at positive features: what makes translators stay translators, and what makes young people want to become translators? Through questions such as these, the issue of the solidity of the translation profession is addressed. The article by Helle V. Dam and Karen Korning Zethsen, "I think it is a wonderful job.' On the

solidity of the translation profession,” zooms in on a group of seasoned translators and their motivation to stay in a profession that is generally believed to be characterised by low degrees of professionalisation, status and recognition, and which more often than not offers sub-standard working conditions. Dam and Zethsen’s analysis of experienced in-house translators’ narratives shows that, just as these professionals have a shared understanding of the downsides of being a translator, they are also in agreement on the attractions of the job, which they describe as exciting, satisfying, varied, stimulating, never boring, creative, intellectually challenging, important and meaningful. The immense satisfaction these translators derive from their jobs, the pleasure and pride they take in being translators, the authors argue, may be what motivates them to stay translators despite the well-known and often lamented drawbacks of translation as a profession. By staying translators, the authors further argue, these translators contribute to creating a solid core in a profession that is otherwise characterised by a large share of part-time, freelance and transitory manpower, that is, by being porous and unstable.

The article by Minna Ruokonen, “Realistic but not pessimistic: Finnish translation students’ perceptions of translator status,” analyses Finnish translation students’ perceptions of translator status based on a large-scale survey. The methodology is modelled on existing studies aimed at eliciting status perceptions among professional translators, and hence allows for comparison between students and professionals. Studying students makes sense since, as the author points out, they are future professionals, and their perceptions will contribute to determining what translation as a profession will look like in the 21st century. Ruokonen’s analyses indicate that the students’ perceptions are very similar to those of professional translators on crucial aspects: they rank translator status as middling or low and believe that translators’ expertise is insufficiently recognised outside the profession — features that the author interprets as realism. On the other hand, the students perceive translators’ influence as higher than professionals do. While this may be a sign of lack of realism, it can also be interpreted as confidence, as does the author. Interestingly, the respondents were also found to be highly committed to their field of study and future profession. On the whole, the high degree of insight, confidence and commitment found among the students allows for a small dose of optimism for the future. As the author concludes, “as long as the students continue to believe that translators and translator associations can change translator status and influence their working conditions, and act accordingly when they become professional translators themselves, the profession should be at less risk of losing its solidity and devolving into a transitory occupation.”

Centrality in specific work contexts

With the next two articles, we shall turn to looking at centre-periphery relations in specific translation settings. Anna Kuznik's article, *Work content of in-house translators in small and medium-sized industrial enterprises. Observing real work situations*, studies the impact of organisational contexts on translators' work. Specifically, the author reports on an observation-based case study of the work content of an in-house translator in a medium-sized industrial company not specialised in translation services. The analysis shows that a translation job in this context is characterised by a high degree of hybridity and complexity and goes far beyond what we would normally refer to as translation. Apart from translation *per se*, the translator carries out a wide variety of job functions, acting also as a writer, reviewer, interpreter, organiser, secretary, manager, coordinator, assistant and administrator, with all activities being mixed and inseparable. The translator was also found to be an integrated part of the core business and to have a strategic function in the company. These findings link to the issue of naming. While the translator in this particular context was actually referred to as 'in-house translator', Kuznik suggests that names such as 'multilingual personal assistant' or 'expert in multilingual communication' would be better suited to describe the actual job content. In fact, after Kuznik's case study was concluded, the company changed the name of the post to 'expert in international trade and exports'. Naming issues apart, it seems that it was precisely the heterogeneity of activities and embeddedness of the translation function that gave this particular translator a very central position both in the work processes and in the company as a whole. In Kuznik's study, therefore, a high degree of centrality combines with naming practices that are moving away from the classic label of 'translator'. Food for thought.

Based on a qualitative multi-case field study, Hanna Risku, Regina Rogl and Christina Pein-Weber's article, "Mutual dependencies: centrality in translation networks," investigates different dimensions of the concept of centrality in the networks underlying three different translation settings: a freelancer translating directly for clients, the translation department of a technology company and an online amateur translation network. The analyses demonstrate that all three translation networks are highly complex; even those networks that could be presumed to include only two or three actors (e.g. the freelancer's network) actually include a large number of actors. Furthermore, all the actors involved in a translation network, translators included, appear to be highly interconnected and mutually dependent on each other. The image of the lone translators thus once more turns out to be deceptive. Also the shapes of the networks and the positions translators assume in them turned out differently than expected. While the authors assumed that the people involved in a translation network would relate merely to one central figure (e.g. the

client), with a more powerful position than the others, this turned out not to be the case. In fact, the networks were characterised by such a high degree of structural polymorphy that the authors were unable to define stable positions within them. Rather, the actors seemed to negotiate their positions actively and dynamically based on individual priorities and capacities. As the authors point out, this calls into question our assumptions on the advantages of centrality. Whereas it could be assumed (as did indeed the editors of this special issue in our call for papers) that high centrality is a desired position, some of the translators studied by Risku *et al.* did not use all the opportunities available to them to maximise their centrality. Rather, they chose to occupy more peripheral positions in order to, for example, concentrate on working for regular clients or give preference to translating over administrative and organisational tasks. This should remind us that centrality and, by analogy, visibility is not necessarily considered attractive by translators.

Boundaries and boundary work — revisiting our assumptions

As will have become apparent, both the authors of the contributions to this special issue and the editors, in our call for papers, make a lot of assumptions. We seem to share the assumption, for example, that professionalisation and centrality are characteristics to aspire for. As we have also seen, these assumptions are not necessarily shared by translation practitioners: some of them prefer not to professionalise, and some prefer a peripheral to a central position; some even prefer not to be called translators. In the concluding article, *Academic boundary work and the translation profession: insiders, outsiders and (assumed) boundaries*, we — Kaisa Koskinen and Helle V. Dam — address and question some of our assumptions, both our own and those prevailing in the field of Translation Studies. Drawing on the concepts of boundaries and boundary work and taking all the contributions of the special issue as its data set, our article provides an overview of how academics participate in boundary work in the field of translation practice. Boundary work, i.e. creating and policing boundaries, is analysed from three angles: we look at definitions of professional translation (i.e. who are considered insiders), internal differentiations and border disputes inside the field, and border disputes between insiders and outsiders. The results emphasise the necessity to recognise researchers' and trainers' role in boundary work and to pay attention to assumed boundaries academics may unintentionally reinforce.

We wish our readers a pleasant journey through this special issue of *JoSTrans*. We hope you will enjoy your read and learn as much from this collection of thought-provoking articles as we editors have.

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Biographies

Helle V. Dam is professor of interpreting and translation at Aarhus University (Denmark). Most of her publications are in the field of interpreting, but her current research focuses on the translation profession and on translators and interpreters as a social and professional group. In recent years, she has been engaged in a major project on translators' and interpreters' occupational status (with Karen Korning Zethsen) and has published numerous articles on this and other topics within the sociology of translation. In 2009, she co-edited *Translation Studies: Focus on the translator* (special issue of *Hermes*).

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Kaisa Koskinen is professor of Translation Studies at the University of Eastern Finland. The question of the translator's social role has been a constant motivator of her research, leading to, e.g., a PhD on translators' ethics (2000), a monograph on the Finnish translators in the European Commission (2008), an edited volume on translators' agency (with Tuija Kinnunen, 2010) and numerous related articles. In her present research, she explores the explanatory power of the concept of translatorial action beyond the contemporary understanding of professional translation.

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