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Academic boundary work and the translation profession: insiders, outsiders and (assumed) boundaries

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ABSTRACT

This article concludes a special issue on the translating profession. Taking all contributions as its data set, it provides an overview of how academic articles on translation practice participate in boundary work in the field of translation. 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 the researchers' and trainers' role in boundary work and to pay attention to assumed boundaries researchers may unintentionally reinforce. The findings also highlight that researchers and practitioners may have different views and conflicting interests.

KEYWORDS

Boundaries, boundary work, professionalisation, training.

1. Introduction

The unquestioned point of departure for this special issue was that translation constitutes an entity of practice that is sufficiently stable to be identified, defined and delimited from other entities (Dam and Koskinen, this volume). In other words, we built on the premise that a translation profession exists, and that our authors and readers would, at least to some extent, have a shared understanding of its boundaries. At the same time, we recognised that translation has not reached full professional status, that it is not always practiced in professional settings, and that the boundaries of the field remain unstable, fuzzy and contestable. Translation practice is also undergoing significant restructuring as new technological tools are reshaping translators' work in ways that are not fully in our sight yet.

In this concluding article, we question the very premise that we started with: the existence of a relatively coherent field that we call translation. Our aim is to increase our disciplinary understanding of our object of study by making visible the boundary work that we scholars engage in through our definitions, methodologies, descriptions and interpretations. Boundary work typically refers to practitioners' own negotiations between those claimed to inhabit the inside and those assumed to remain outside (Gieryn 1983). One often observed group of practitioners are academics, and the boundary work of defining and maintaining disciplinary boundaries as well as the demarcation of science and non-science has been extensively researched (*ibid.*). Here, we cut across these two fields and

look at the processes of boundary work by translation scholars but related not to their own academic boundaries but to the professional practice they are observing and researching. Our interest lies in finding out how researchers studying a particular field of practice contribute to the boundary work involved in defining that same practice (see also Grbić 2010: 111).

The authors in this special issue were invited to explore the topology of the translation profession and how it currently seems to be developing, with particular emphasis on central and peripheral elements. The emerging picture is varied. In this issue, the contemporary professional world is analysed from the point of view of translators' agency and constraints, the effects of translation technology, the networks translators belong to, and the ones they are contrasted and compared to, the micro tasks their day-to-day life consists of and their motivations, perceptions and self-concepts. A general pattern is repeated in the texts: all articles are written from the point of view of the professionals, creating an inside where the professionals already reside and an outside where potential incomers and unwanted or unknown foreigners, human and non-human, at least potentially, pose threats to the translators.

This focus on the professional translator is a natural outcome of the thematic framework of this special issue, and it can be argued that the authors have simply adopted the approach we forced on them in the call for papers. At the time of preparing the call, we did not strategically plan to use the issue for our own research purposes, but during the editing process we realised that we had created a small experiment designed to answer a particular research question: if one pushes a number of reputable TS scholars to adopt positions where they are encouraged to think about translation and translators in terms of centres and peripheries, what kinds of definitions do they employ, who do they see as central or as insiders, where do they identify boundaries (if any) and what kinds of boundary crossings or border disputes come to the fore? This focus on the professional translator, as well as the typology of insiders and outsiders (non-professionals and/or non-translators), and the boundaries between them, has a dual origin: it is partially a description of the data, and of the informants' understanding of the state of affairs, but it is also, and significantly, a construct created by us researcher to gauge these typologies.

For this concluding editorial article, we have reread and analysed the articles collected in this special issue from the viewpoint of boundaries and boundary work. We shall pay particular attention to authors' definitions of their object of study, their research questions and findings, and the in-groups and out-groups that they posit. Boundary work can take many shapes, and many kinds of boundary objects can be used to demarcate the divisions. Although these more concrete forms are discussed in some of the articles, our data here consists of meta-level written documents

that we subject to a discourse analysis, observing both the content and the rhetorical styles (Gieryn 1983) that are used to forward particular understandings of the translating profession and to include or exclude particular elements or agents.

We wish to emphasise, however, that our intention is not to put into question these authors' approaches, or to pinpoint to any shortcomings on their part. We rather use this small set of thematically linked texts as our laboratory to study a phenomenon that we believe is both wide-ranging in Translation Studies and unavoidable in any discipline directly linked to a profession. As scholars we may often be oblivious of the roles we play in professional boundary work. Making this work visible in the context of this special issue allows for a reflection and discussion of views and understandings we often take for granted.

2. Boundaries and boundary work

Boundaries define who is 'us' and who is 'them', who belongs in the in-group and who does not. In order to make sense and understand our surroundings and to maintain and support our identities, we daily participate in numerous boundary creations and reinforcements as well as boundary crossings and boundary disputes. As most categories and their boundaries are man-made and social rather than natural, boundary work, i.e. "creating and policing boundaries" (Evans and Collins 2008: 610), is effectively ideological by nature. This ideological aspect was emphasised in Thomas F. Gieryn's (1983) ground-breaking article on boundary work and the demarcation of science and non-science. In our current data, the ideological nature of boundary work is not directly guided by self-interest, but it is in a more roundabout manner directed at a professional practice whose definition has a direct bearing on its academic study. It is thus interesting to see not only which aspects of translating are brought up because of their alleged peripheral or contested nature but also which aspects are tacitly *assumed* or expected to be commonly held and central (see Gieryn 1983: 783). In the following, we treat our set of academic articles as a particular type of boundary objects: as "things that exist at junctures where varied social worlds meet in an arena of mutual concern" (Clarke and Star 2008: 121). Our case is, however, somewhat unorthodox in the sense that boundary objects are typically seen to be located at the juncture of the two social worlds themselves, but in this case the boundary of interest is not only that between theory and practice of translation, but also between professional translation practice and a number of potentially neighbouring practices. The contributions reside in the academic field of Translation Studies, but they are also situated on the border of the professional practice in the sense of providing a prism of understandings of what and how that practice is and also contributing to the discussions of what and how it should be.

Although the concept of boundary work has been developed in science and technology studies (STS), science is only one example of a professional area where boundary work is to be found. Maintenance, institutionalisation and other efforts indicate that most if not all professional boundaries are porous and unstable, and that the people and artefacts that make up the profession — its agents — are in constant movement. There is a movement from the outside to the inside, as agents attempt to gain access to the confines of the profession, resulting in boundary negotiations and disputes. Simultaneously, the internal developments shift and shape the configurations. This is particularly true for less established and contested professions such as translation: its contours are under constant renegotiation both internally and externally. The boundaries of the translation profession are also in contact both with other professional fields and with activities beyond professional practice. In this contested context, academic allies are valuable assets for practitioners, and academics may, willingly or less so, be drawn into professional boundary disputes.

In Translation Studies, Nadja Grbić (2010, 2014) has done some pioneering work on professional boundaries, looking at boundary work in the emergent Austrian sign language interpreters' profession and, in the 2014 article, combining boundary work with the concept of *habitus*. Her published findings so far are preliminary, and the focus is on the theoretical apparatus rather than on empirical data, but the approach is promising indeed, and we look forward to a more full-length analysis of her case.

Establishing a new field, as in Grbić's case, requires significant visible investments in boundary work, and these provide material for research. In a similar manner, conflicts and crises offer fruitful data, as different understandings are verbalised and debated (see, e.g., Vuolanto 2013). However, much boundary work is actually routine, and it also occurs during harmonious and conflict-free periods. "In fact", as a text book on STS points out, "little does not participate in some sort of boundary work, since every particular statement contributes to a picture of the shape of allowable statements" (Sismondo 2013: 34). Accordingly, few Translation Studies publications, if any, do not participate in some sort of boundary work.

3. Boundary work in Translation Studies

The role of the academics may often remain rather invisible: in a recent survey of Finnish translation students' perceptions (Ruokonen, in this volume), the respondents assigned a minimal role to teachers and researchers in influencing translator status. Contrary to students' perceptions, we argue that researchers do in fact exert some influence on how their object of study is understood, and that their definitions and arguments can be analysed as a particular form of boundary work. At the

same time, researchers report and describe boundary work that is taking place in their object of study, resulting in two interlinked but different layers of work. In the following we will address both: boundary work as both exercised and reported by the authors of this volume. We proceed as follows: in 3.1 we discuss definitions of professional translation (i.e. who are considered insiders), in 3.2 we zoom into internal differentiations and border disputes inside the field, and in 3.3 we focus on border disputes between insiders and outsiders.

3.1. Defining professional translators, drawing boundaries

Definitions are a core element of academic work, and definitions are fundamentally about boundaries: about deciding what a particular concept entails and what it does not. This definition work is thus an area where researchers clearly are actively involved in boundary work. The core concepts of 'translation' and, consequently, 'translator', have been notoriously resistant to categorical definitions, causing agony for researchers in favour of rigorous conceptualisations (see e.g. House 2014), but also allowing for flexibility in research programmes and interpretations. This special issue was explicitly designed to explore the present and future of the translation profession, thus inviting our authors, at least implicitly, to focus on *professional* translation practice. It is thus interesting to analyse the authors' definitions, implicit and explicit, of both who are to be considered professional translators (and who are not) and how professional translators are considered to differ from others. One article in the issue (Paloposki) also directly addresses the question of defining and naming translation and translators, providing a historical background to the rest of the issue where the discussion is more contemporaneous.

3.1.1. Training

Is translator training a necessary element of being a professional translator? The jury is still out. A number of articles explicitly eschew this criterium. In their articles, Andrea Hunziker Heeb and Tina Christensen and Anne Schjoldager equate being professional with translating for a living, without referring to any particular qualifications as additional criteria. In Hanna Risku, Regina Rogl and Christina Pein-Weber's article neither training nor earning a living is considered relevant. In their network approach, anyone who functions as a translating partner in a translation network is seen as a 'translator'. At the other end of the continuum, Minna Ruokonen's study is located inside translator training institutions, and it follows that in her contribution training is tacitly assumed as a portal to profession. Similarly, Helle V. Dam and Karen Zethsen include translator training as one of the three elements which allow them to identify core members of the profession (the other two are staff status and 5 years of experience), and Kristine Bundgaard *et al.* report state authorisation (based on training) as a signal of

professionalism. Rakefet Sela-Sheffy, then, reports lack of training as a significant hindrance to professionalisation.

We find it interesting that the articles cannot be seen to forward a uniform approach to the role of translator training in professional practice. It may have its origin the fuzziness of the field, and the varied availability of specialised training for different sectors of practice, in different societies and in different times. However, the difference between those who disregard training as a relevant criterion and those who uphold it may also be between realists and idealists. Sela-Sheffy's interviewees may not have had access to formalised training, but that does not seem to prevent them from earning their living by translating, thus getting years of experience under their belt. In their review of the translation market, Anthony Pym, David Orrego-Carmona and Esther Torres-Simón suggest that the market value of academic qualifications is lower than that of professional experience. They also point to another issue that is directly relevant with respect to us researcher-trainers: in matters of translator training we are most decisively not only reporting on boundary work, we are active participants of it, as any emphasis on the relevance of formal translator training in professional practice will also emphasise the relevance of us trainers.

3.1.2. Long-term, full-time, in-house employment

Precarious work conditions have become increasingly common in contemporary working life (see, e.g., Kalleberg 2009), and in many fields, including translation, different forms of self-employment have increasingly begun to replace full-time, in-house positions. This development has contributed to disputes of inter-field hierarchies and brought to light conflicting interests in conditioning and regulating the organisation of work (e.g. Helfen 2015). Whereas full-time positions have traditionally been seen as a first step towards professionalisation (e.g. Wilensky 1964), many fields no longer operate in this manner.

In this issue, articles which place in-house translation at the centre can thus be seen to participate in the internal boundary work that promotes a particular form of employment, although that form may present a minority in the sector (Pym *et al.* report that 74 % of European translators work as freelancers, and 60% are part-timers). In this special issue, a number of contributions (Sela-Sheffy and Dam and Zethsen in particular) provide lists of unwanted features in the field of professional translation. It is seen to be too fragmentary, part-time, freelance, secondary, occasional and transitory. In other words, the implicit or explicit argument runs, the field would be healthier if it was more coherent and offered more full-time, in-house and permanent employment.

This kind of promotion activity is quite common in translation research, where criteria for translator expertise often contain elements linked to

translator training and full-time employment. Naturally, the research community can and arguably even should take an active role like this, but it is also necessary to realise that we are then working against the dominant models actually prevalent in the field. Among our articles, Pym *et al.* present a dissident voice and argue that this precarious modality is unlikely to change. The uniformity of a professional title is and will remain fictional, they argue, and they foresee translation practice maintaining its predominantly transitory and occasional character.

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy's interviewees for the most part represent precisely this group of occasional and accidental translators who do not have a clear vision of their qualifications, nor are they consciously in control of their career trajectories, and they do not express any strong translator identity either. The counter image to Sela-Sheffy's "inspired amateurs" are the 15 "seasoned translators," trained and experienced and very articulate about their profession, studied by Helle V. Dam and Karen Zethsen. There is no doubt which of these is the preferred image for translation scholars, and one at least tacitly assumed in a number of other papers. The most extensive and explicit case for in-house translators is made by Anna Kuznik. Her detailed case study of an in-house translator in a small company presents the translator as a multi-tasking expert directly involved in adding value to the company.

3.1.3. Professional or not?

One way of understanding a professional practice is to look at its complete opposite, practice that is seen as not being professional. Among our contributions, two distinct pathways emerge: some authors describe or define what is considered *unprofessional* conduct, and some others discuss *non-professional* practice. Hunziker Heeb addresses the issue of L2 translation, a practice that is considered unprofessional by some professionals and professional institutions, particularly in central Europe, while seen as normal and also widely practiced in many other, more peripheral areas. Her research indicates that some arguments against translation out of your L1 language may not hold, and suggests that the field might need to reconsider the stigma of non-native translation (or the glorification of the native speaker).

The focus of Sela-Sheffy's research is on "non-elite" translation professionals who, similarly to the L2 translators discussed above, can be considered peripheral. The centre, in her case, is placed with an elite group of literary translators. Interestingly, neither of these groups seems too concerned about professionalisation. Whereas the elite multitasking literary translators want to be recognised as artists, the non-elite has landed on a translation job accidentally and without a career plan or professional identity. The researcher problematises this state of affairs as an indication of unsatisfactorily unprofessional practice, but for the

participants themselves translation seems to offer a lucrative temporary or part-time employment.

While some practices and some practitioners may be considered *unprofessional*, recent research has also shown a growing interest in practices that are *non-professional*, i.e. unpaid and volunteered. While this phenomenon is not new, digitalisation has enabled it to become more widespread and more visible, and it was one of the topics we asked the authors to consider in the call for papers. In Marian Flanagan's article, the boundary of volunteer and professional practice is drawn firmly. Looking at professional translators' attitudes towards the volunteers as expressed in their blog texts, she builds her research question and research design on the difference between these two groups. Furthermore, in focusing on professionals' expressed views, her perspective is clearly integrated with theirs, uniting the researcher with the professionals. In contrast, both Pym *et al.* and Risku *et al.* discuss volunteer translation in a design where they also have two other cases, indicating a wide spectrum of translation practices without any preconceived hierarchy between the cases. This contrast signals a potential conflict area where researchers and members of the translation profession may be developing a different understanding of who are to be considered as in-group and who are not, and whose activities belong to the scope of Translation Studies and whose do not (see also Tuylenev 2015: 21).

3.2. Boundaries within: Internal hierarchies

It is common knowledge in Translation Studies that the field of translation is not uniform but a cluster of interlinked but distinct practices. It is thus no wonder that some of these differences and internal hierarchies are reflected in the articles. One dividing line is fiction vs. non-fiction, a traditional touchstone in Translation Studies. This special issue seems to confirm, for its part, the contemporary claims of literary translation's reduced centrality, as *all* of the twelve articles collected here focus more on issues related to business translation (i.e., non-fiction), tacitly equating it with professional translation. In two articles this division is explicitly discussed. In her historical overview of the (limited) professionalisation of translators in 19th-century Finland, Outi Paloposki tries to locate the named and assumed translators in all walks of life. It may be considered rather surprising that government translators are found to be professionally more organised and better documented and thus more easily identifiable than literary translators, who were often multitasking in various roles linked to cultural production. This finding unsettles the received view, common in Translation Studies, that literary translation has traditionally held a more central role, and that the centrality of business translation is a recent phenomenon (e.g., Hermans and Lambert 1998: 114; see also Rogers 2015).

As discussed above, Sela-Sheffy addresses the dominant role of a small subset of literary translators in Israel, contrasting them to a set of non-elite translators. Her concern is that elite literary translators' deliberate non-professionalisation discourse may be harmful for other areas of the occupation. Sela-Sheffy's interview data consists of commercial translators, non-elite literary translators, subtitlers, and conference and community interpreters, but among early results in the project was that nearly half of the interviewees had been engaged in more than one type of translation at the same time, making the categorisation somewhat redundant. Risku *et al.* base their research design on another established categorisation that works on employment status. Their comparison of a freelance translator, an in-house translation department and volunteer translation community revealed similarities in actors' attitudes and behaviours in all three, a finding also corroborated by Pym *et al.* These findings indicate that the boundaries within the field of translation are often more porous than they might first appear, and labels may indicate transitory positions as well as stable professional identities.

One crucial contemporary question revolves around the issue of man versus machine: how much longer will 'translator' still be understood to primarily refer to humans? Or, to frame the question differently: are human translators still and will they remain central to translation? All articles in this issue still tacitly assume that translators are human, but in some of them the issue is open to debate. For example, while reporting on the workplace activities of a professional (human) translator, Bundgaard *et al.* discuss the "dance of agency" between the translator and the machine translation tool, thus assuming agency for both parties. They also define translation as "interaction between machines and humans", thus effectively granting equal status to both.

Similarly, in her article on post-editing Maarit Koponen sees human-machine interaction as a growing element of professional translators' work. Although she does not foresee machine translation completely replacing human translation, the new activity she describes, and the naming practice it has introduced (when did we actually start needing to explicitate *human* translation?), implies that the machine is in fact the translating partner in this interaction, and the human has been accorded a new, quality management role as a 'post-editor'. Instead of focusing on professional *translators'* competencies and future prospects, Koponen's article comments on the need to define professional *post-editors'* competences and qualities. Whether or not post-editing will, in the future, be considered a specialised translation task or "job function that most people would not [for the time being] regard as translation", as Christensen and Schjoldager argue, remains to be seen. But it is clear that the authors of this special issue are still hesitant to let go of the vision of the human translator in charge of the machine, and humans and machines are mainly seen as two separate elements rather than one, cyborg-like translating entity.

3.3. Crossing boundaries: Insiders out, outsiders in

3.3.1. Getting in

An in-group with no revitalising influx of new members will eventually stagnate and finally disintegrate, and thus accepted inroads to membership need to be established. At the same time, those who have already established their position will have incentives to control and restrict entry. Since translation is (also) a commercial activity, each new entry to the sector affects the market balance. Boundary crossing therefore often involves border control, thus making boundary work visible.

The legitimate route to established professions is via training. In the case of the translation profession, the role and status of training is more fragile and also other routes are frequently taken, but as entry points to the professions translator training institutions are rather uncontested. None of the articles presents training as unwanted or fully irrelevant, although the authors are not unanimous as to its significance (see also 3.1.1 above).

Two papers (Bundgaard *et al.*, Koponen) discuss the new practice of post-editing. In periods of rapid developments, training may fall behind the actual developments. Post-editing is a case in point as training efforts are only gradually beginning to match the demand of such skills. In terms of entry into the profession, the case of post-editing machine translation is complex: is it a sub-competence for existing translators, an emerging new profession or a threat to human translators' creative work? Its on-going entry to the professional playing field unsettles earlier hierarchies and professional identities.

Three of the articles that form our data focus on controversial situations. The scammers and impostors described by Pym *et al.* unsettle the field by taking advantage of the new digitalised opportunities for deceit, but the members of the field have found ways of using those same opportunities to bust them. Flanagan's overview of blogs kept by professional translators shows that the new practice of crowdsourcing translations is seen as suspect by many of them. Bloggers raise concerns about quality issues, relying on a readily acceptable discourse that can also be read as boundary work intended for safeguarding the in-group's position and legitimacy. While Flanagan focuses on translators' fears of potential market disturbance through the availability of unpaid translation, Sela-Sheffy is more concerned by the oversupply of paid workforce with no formal training as she reports that the Israeli translation market is "flooded by non-qualified manpower".

The desire to keep unwanted incomers out gives rise to a number of policing practices. Training institutions have a role to play, as their

admission and graduation criteria can be used to block access to the profession from those not considered suited for the task. Translators' associations are another such institution. Their role is conspicuously absent from the articles. Hunziker Heeb mentions the gate-keeping role of their membership criteria, Pym *et al.* report the value of these memberships as signals of professionalism, and Bundgaard *et al.* mention the related feature of state authorisation in passing, but generally one can argue that the role of professional organisations and certification bodies is a blind spot in this issue, and their role — central or peripheral — remains uncharted here. Instead, some contributions address more organic forms of self-regulation and policing in various translator communities. For example, Risku *et al.* and Pym *et al.* report online collaborative translation communities' strategies of distributing agency and signalling status among members.

The most extreme example of collective policing discussed in this issue is the scammers directory (Pym *et al.*). It responds to the new digitalised impostor possibilities by digitalised and crowd-sourced means, as anyone can bust outsiders imposing as insiders under false pretences. As Pym *et al.* report, academic qualifications are less highly valued than previous professional experience, which, by definition, a newcomer does not have. This creates an interesting set-up, as those who originally came to the field without any generally accepted qualifications but have managed to stay in the business long enough to gain credible references can block the entry of those only trying to get in. This in-built preference for endurance is also validated by research designs where experience is valued over academic qualifications (see 3.1.1 above).

3.3.2. Getting out

Unwanted outsiders blocked at the border or busted while inside and exiled from the community present only one subgroup of those leaving the group. Others may wish to leave voluntarily, and boundaries need to allow for not only entry but also for exit. Studying those who left the field, for whatever reason, can help us better understand the nature of the field in question. The movement away from the profession is covered implicitly in Dam and Zethsen while they focus on the opposite phenomenon as they look for answers to why some do *not* leave the profession. It is also mentioned in passing in Ruokonen's discussion of students' plans to either stay on their chosen career path or to change their main subject. Rather expectedly for translation scholars, exit is not seen in a positive light. In terms of explicit address, exit gets little attention in these articles, but its potentially significant role is implied in repeated concerned comments on the related transitory nature of the occupation (see also 3.1.2).

This concern may not be shared by all of those who participate in this unstable, transitory occupation with limited professionalisation. Sela-Sheffy's interviewees are reported as not having an interest in

professionalising, and they seem to accept translation as a short-time occupation, ready to move on to something else eventually. In a similar vein, Risku *et al.* find that translators may well prefer to stay peripheral in the translation networks they operate in. What seems desirable from a research perspective may not always be seen as lucrative by the practitioners.

4. Conclusions: assumed boundaries

In preparing for this concluding article we were forced to reflect back on both ourselves and the contributing authors. The revelation was simple: we do a lot of assuming. Taking a number of basic elements for granted may be a necessity in all research, to get anything done, but it is equally important to sometimes pause to reflect on these assumptions. As Gieryn (1983: 871) states, “[a]ssumption of a demarcation between science and non-science is a poor heuristic”. We concur, and we continue that it is also a poor heuristic in terms of defining, understanding and observing our object of study.

In writing these articles we researchers collectively tended to assume, among other things, that there is a translation profession; that increased professionalisation is good; that having specialised training is good; that staying in the profession is good and exercising it temporarily or part-time is bad. An analysis of the boundaries, either tacitly assumed or explicitly drawn, in the articles collected for this special issue allows us to contemplate historically shifting contexts of translation work, to identify field-internal boundary work and to appreciate the fact that researchers and practitioners may have different views and conflicting interests.

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