

Studying Translator Status: Three Points of View

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Kääntäjän ammatin statusta eli arvostusta on alettu tutkia vasta viime vuosina. Tämä artikkeli on kriittinen katsaus empirisiin statustutkimuksiin, jotka jaottelen Chestermanin (2000, 2007) pohjalta muokkaa-mieni vertailu-, kausaali- ja toimijuusnäkökulmien mukaan. Varsinaista statustutkimusta on melko vähän, mutta statusta käsitellään myös ammatti-identiteettiä tai ammatin tilaa tarkastelevissa tutkimuksissa. Tutkimuksissa yhdistetään usein eri näkökulmia ja menetelmiä. Kääntäjien arvostus on tutkitustikin keskitasoa tai sen alle. Statukseen vaikuttavat monet tekijät, mutta sitä näyttäisivät parantavan näkyvyys ja toimijoiden yhteistyö. Lisää tutkimusta tarvittaisiin etenkin alihankkijoiden statuksesta, statukseen vaikuttavista tekijöistä ja toimijoiden strategioista statuksen muuttamiseksi.

Keywords: translator status, translation sociology, comparativeness, causality, agency

1 Introduction

Translator status, as central as it is to translation, has been grievously neglected in translation research. Scholarly literature has repeated assumptions about translators' invisibility and subservient role (for an overview, see Dam & Zethsen 2008: 73) without defining the concept of status or attempting to discover if translators' status really is low. It is only within the past decade that researchers have begun to study translator status by empirical methods. The paucity of research is reflected in the fact that translator status only recently received an entry in a handbook of translation research (Katan 2011). Even this entry, while highlighting relevant aspects of translator status in the academic context and the labor market, includes no discussion of scholarly definitions of the concept nor a systematic overview of research methods or findings. The present article thus aims, firstly, to examine definitions of professional status and, secondly, to survey empirical research on translator status from three perspectives modified from Chesterman (2000, 2007) that indicate gaps for further research.

2 Defining status and delimiting the scope of this article

The term ‘status’ has two distinct but related meanings. On the one hand, status can refer to an occupation’s *professionalization*, or attainment of the status of a profession that is believed to require specialized knowledge and that is granted societal recognition and protection (Volti 2008: 101–102). On the other hand, status may denote *social ranking*: the perceptions of prestige and value attached to a profession or an occupation (Treiman 2001: 299). That the two meanings are linked is illustrated by the fact that value is traditionally considered a defining criterion of a profession (Volti 2008: 99).

The two meanings are also present in translation research, often simultaneously. Some studies do make it explicit which meaning they focus on, such as translators’ perceived prestige (e.g. Dam & Zethsen 2011) or their struggle for professionalization (e.g. Monzó 2011). However, Katan’s (2011: 146) overview merges the two meanings, defining status as “translation [being] *valued* as an important *specialist field requiring unique translating skills*” (italics MR).¹ Similarly, aspects of both prestige and professionalization are explored by, for example, Choi and Lim (2002) and Sela-Sheffy (2006, 2010). Some researchers even use the term ‘status’ in the sense of social ranking without an explicit definition (e.g. Choi & Lim 2002; Setton & Guo Liangliang 2011). To complicate matters further, quite a few studies partly explore translator status through related concepts, such as professional *role* and *identity* (Koskinen 2009; Setton & Guo Liangliang 2011), (*self-*)*image* (Sela-Sheffy 2008, 2010) or *habitus* (Sela-Sheffy & Shlesinger 2008). In principle, any of these concepts can be valid tools for studying the state of translation and the status of translators. However, the range of concepts and notably the lack of definitions in some studies suggest that a conceptual analysis could often help clarify research focus and determine the concept(s) best suited for each study.

The present article reviews research on *status as social ranking*, i.e. perceptions of prestige attached to translation as a profession. Studies on professionalization or role/identity are only covered if they have bearing on prestige. This delimitation is

¹ In contrast, Wadensjö’s overview of interpreters’ status (2011) distinguishes status as group membership (professionalization) from social ranking. Wadensjö also includes a third aspect, the status of an individual interpreter as negotiated in a particular context, but this falls beyond the scope of my study.

motivated partly by my research interests but also by the fact that research into translators' prestige seems even more scattered than that into professionalization. The fields covered include business (non-fiction) and literary translation; Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger's project (2008), possibly the only one to consider subtitlers' status, is still in progress. Studies on interpreters' status are only included if they also address translator status. The discussion is complemented with findings from occupational sociology when relevant. The next section explains how the review is organized.

3 Framework for status review: comparative, causal and agency perspectives

Chesterman (2000, 2007) distinguishes three kinds of models in translation research: comparative, process and causal. The first two are descriptive: the comparative model relates translations either to their source texts or to non-translated texts to discover differences, similarities and correlations; the process model describes either the translator's decision-making or the observable stages of the translation process (Chesterman 2000: 16–18; Chesterman 2007: 174). The causal model, in contrast, seeks to establish cause-effect relationships (Chesterman 2000: 19–21; Chesterman 2007:174).

Modifying Chesterman's framework, I propose that empirical studies on translator status can be grouped under three perspectives: comparative, causal and agency. *Comparative* studies compare status perceptions by different agents or at different times or relate translator status to that of other occupations; *causal* studies explore the links between various factors and status perceptions; and *agency* perspective covers the actions taken by translators or other agents to change translator status.² Chesterman's process model has been replaced with the agency perspective for two reasons. Firstly, hardly any studies focus on the process of changing translator status (another gap in research). Some studies that could represent this perspective actually describe the situation at different times (e.g. Choi & Lim 2002), which brings them closer to the comparative perspective. Others focus on the status-changing actions taken by different

² In this article, 'agency' refers to the willingness and ability of translators, employers and authorities to act in order to change translator status, as well as the actions they take to that effect. Translation research typically defines agency as translators' willingness and ability to act and studies translators' decision-making and interaction with other agents (see Koskinen 2010 and other articles in the same volume).

agents (e.g. Koskinen 2009; Sela-Sheffy 2010), which call for a perspective of their own. While causality is often agency-based (see Koskinen 2010: 178–179), subsuming agents' actions under causality would downplay their role.

Even Chesterman's models were not entirely distinct (Chesterman 2007: 174). Similarly, studies on translator status often involve two or more perspectives. Dam and Zethsen, for example, *compare* translators' status perceptions (2011, 2012) and study parameters correlating with these perceptions (2009, 2011, 2012), suggesting possible *causes*. Thus, in the following survey, a particular study may be considered from more than one perspective when relevant. The survey begins with an overview of the studies and research methods, followed by a more detailed discussion of the three perspectives.

4 Survey of existing empirical research on translator status

Studies on translator status were identified through databases such as the Benjamins Translation Studies Bibliography by using a variety of search terms ('status', 'role', 'state', etc.). Promising studies were located and perused for further references. The studies covered in this article include:

- Twelve articles or monographs where translator status is the focus of or a major component in an empirical study (Choi & Lim 2002; Dam & Zethsen 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012; Katan 2009; Koskinen 2009; Sela-Sheffy 2006, 2008, 2010; Setton & Guo Liangliang 2011)
- Four empirical studies (Bowker 2004; Chan 2011; Monzó 2011; Thomson-Wohlgemuth 2004) and one survey (Pym *et al.* 2012) on the state of the profession, with implications for translator status.

Some articles could not be located and thus had to be excluded, such as Rodríguez and Schnell's (2010) overview of metaphors for translators, which may influence the image of the profession and its status (cf. Sela-Sheffy 2008: 610). Nevertheless, the articles studied should provide a representative basis for a critical survey of empirical research.

Major projects on translator status remain scarce, although they include impressive efforts such as Dam and Zethsen's studies on the status of Danish business translators working in different positions (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012), and Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger's (2008) research on Israeli translators and interpreters, based on

contemporary documents (Sela-Sheffy 2006; 2008; 2010) and 95 interviews yet to be analyzed.

As observed in Section 3 above, the studies often approach translator status from more than one perspective. Furthermore, even individual studies often rely on a variety of methods. As there are only a few correlations between a perspective and the methods used, the methods will be summarized here. The *comparative* perspective, such as comparing status perceptions by different agents, often relies on questionnaires and quantitative analysis (e.g. Dam & Zethsen 2008, 2012; Katan 2009; Setton & Guo Liangliang 2011), although there are also qualitative analyses of interview data (Sela-Sheffy & Shlesinger 2008) and of open questions (Katan 2009; Dam & Zethsen 2010). In contrast, the *causal* and *agency* perspectives mainly apply qualitative methods, notably interviews (Koskinen 2009; Sela-Sheffy 2010) and analyses of documents ranging from newspaper articles and surveys (Sela-Sheffy 2006, 2008) to institutional texts (Koskinen 2009). The variety of methods is impressive and encouraging, as different methods provide complementary data and results. On the other hand, the variety can also mean that the results from different studies are not directly comparable, which should be borne in mind as we turn to the three perspectives.

4.1 The comparative perspective

Comparative research on translator status includes studies comparing

- perceptions of translator status as opposed to the status of interpreters or other occupations (Katan 2009; Setton & Guo Liangliang 2011);
- perceptions of translator status by different agents:
 - translators vs. *core employees* (e.g. lawyers at law firms; Dam & Zethsen 2008, 2009);
 - translators in different positions: *company translators* (in-house translators at banks, law firms, etc.), *agency translators* (in-house translators at translation agencies), *freelance translators* working partly for agencies, partly for direct clients (Dam & Zethsen 2011) and in-house translators in the EU (Dam & Zethsen 2012);
- changes in translator status over time (Choi & Lim 2002; Thomson-Wohlgemuth 2004; Koskinen 2009).

The results so far strongly indicate that the overall status of translators is indeed seen as middling or lower by translators/interpreters themselves (Katan 2009: 126; see also Dam & Zethsen 2011: 984; 2012: 219–220) and by people outside the profession such

as core employees (Dam & Zethsen 2008: 82–83) and graduate students (Sela-Sheffy 2008: 610–611). Studies on occupational status conducted among the general populace tend to rank translators slightly above the middle point (Ganzeboom & Treiman 1996: 224), but the difference probably reflects the scales used.

There is hardly any comparative research on the different fields of translation, such as business vs. literary translation, although Sela-Sheffy's study (2010) supports the notion that literary translators enjoy more prestige than business translators. With regard to other professions, translators' status is seen as lower than that of interpreters (Katan 2009: 126; Setton & Guo Liangliang 2011:104–105). All in all, translators status is often likened to that of secretaries', not only by core employees (Dam & Zethsen 2008: 86–87) but also by translators and interpreters themselves (Katan 2009: 127). Teachers were another common comparison (Katan 2009: 127; Sela-Sheffy 2006: 245; Setton & Guo Liangliang 2011: 104–105; cf. Ganzeboom & Treiman 1996: 223–224).

With regard to status perceptions by translators in different positions, Dam and Zethsen (2011: 984; 2012: 220) found that Danish company translators on average ranked their status higher (2.87, on a scale from 1 to 5) than agency translators (2.55), freelance translators (2.53) or even the supposedly prestigious EU translators (2.56). The EU in-house translators fall surprisingly far behind the company translators; the difference would probably be statistically significant.³ The difference between company and freelance translators was also statistically significant, as expected. A major factor behind the differences seems to be visibility, to which I return in Section 4.2 below.

Contrary to expectations, there were no statistically significant differences between EU translators and national-market translators or between agency and freelance translators. This may partly depend on the number of respondents (N = 307 translators, with subgroups from 47 to 131). While certainly representative of the Danish translation market, the subgroups are rather small for a statistical analysis. Moreover, *subcontractors* working for agencies were not analyzed separately, although their working conditions can be

³ Dam and Zethsen (2012) only compared EU translators' status perceptions to those of national-market in-house translators; these included both company and agency translators.

problematic (cf. Dam & Zethsen 2010: 204). Subcontractors' status could thus be significantly lower than other translators'.

Studies on changes in translator status include Choi and Lim (2002), Thomson-Wohlgemuth (2004) and Koskinen (2009), but the latter two studies are closer to the other perspectives and will be covered below. Choi and Lim's historical study (2002: 629–630) shows that the status of Korean translators greatly improved in the 1990s due to a dramatic increase in foreign trade and intercultural contacts but still remains low. Their conclusion is based on historical developments and contemporary documents rather than translators' perceptions, a complementary method to questionnaires.

4.2 The causal perspective

The causes behind professional prestige have been extensively studied within occupational sociology. Education and income were linked to prestige as early as in the 1960s (Treiman 2001: 300). While the *respondents'* race, gender and nationality seem to have little impact on status (Volti 2008: 172), the *professionals'* gender in the case of a predominantly female profession such as translation may have some effect (cf. Pym *et al.* 2012: 85–87). The role of foreign languages in society may also be a factor (cf. Choi & Lim 2002: 629). Ultimately, prestige perhaps depends on the image of the profession (Sela-Sheffy 2008: 610) and thus on image-making strategies (see Section 4.3 below).

Empirically, factors affecting translator status have mainly been studied by Dam and Zethsen (2009, 2011, 2012), who analyze correlations between status rankings and four parameters: the above-mentioned income level and education/expertise, as well as visibility and power/influence.⁴ Here, I focus on income, visibility and education /expertise, which have so far yielded the most promising results.

First of all, a certain level of *income* seems to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for a high status ranking. While Danish company translators with high incomes were

⁴ Correlations should not be mistaken for causality. However, isolating watertight cause-effect relations is often an exhausting task and none of the studies on translator status claim to do that; yet the results do suggest potential causes that a survey of the topic cannot ignore.

less likely to perceive their status as low (Dam & Zethsen 2009: 15), the high incomes of freelance translators and EU translators did not convert into higher status (Dam & Zethsen 2011: 985–986; 2012: 221–222; cf. Section 4.1 above).

Secondly, *visibility* counts, in terms of both physical location and professional contacts. Danish company translators' high status rankings clearly correlated with their contacts with other employees (Dam & Zethsen 2009: 22; 2011: 991–992). Conversely, freelance translators, who work physically removed from their clients, viewed their visibility and status as the lowest (Dam & Zethsen 2011: 991–992). Danish EU translators' low status perceptions can also be linked to their sense of distance from the center of decision-making (Dam & Zethsen 2012: 226; for similar findings, see Koskinen 2009: 95–96).

Finally, the parameter of *education/expertise* was approached through questions about the length of translator training and the expertise required to translate. The results indicate that translators' specialized skills are recognized by translators themselves (Dam & Zethsen 2008: 85–86; 2011: 987; 2012: 223; for similar findings, see Katan 2009: 123) but not by 'outsiders': core employees underestimated the length of translator training and, as pointed out in Section 4.1 above, partly viewed translation as a secretarial function (Dam & Zethsen 2008: 86–88; see also Katan 2009: 128).

The lack of outside recognition also becomes apparent through the example of qualifications. While translator recruiters value a university degree (Bowker 2004: 967; Chan 2011: 40–41), work experience or company-specific tests can be given priority (Pym *et al.* 2012: 91–92). The mistrust may stem from recruiters' unfamiliarity with the qualifications (Chan 2011: 41–42) or from an over-abundance of accreditation systems, none of which are considered reliable (cf. Pym *et al.* 2012: 115, 120–121). On the other hand, comments by Danish translators, who have had access to a protected title since 1966, suggest that the title has accumulated some prestige (Dam & Zethsen 2010: 201). A closer analysis of the impact of a protected title on status should thus be of interest.

On the whole, translator status seems to be the sum of many causes, which leaves plenty of room for further research into the factors and their interaction in different contexts, as well as actions taken by translators and other agents to influence translator status.

4.3 The agency perspective

The studies under this perspective describe what kinds of actions or strategies individual translators, translator associations or authorities have used to change translator status. The strategies can be quite varied – and sometimes counterproductive. As an example of the latter, Sela-Sheffy found that while the Israeli Translators' Association advocated explicit professional ethics and working methods (Sela-Sheffy 2006: 246), individual non-fiction translators tended to mystify their skills, echoing the rhetoric of the more prestigious literary translators (Sela-Sheffy 2010: 145). Mystification seems to work for individuals, but undermines the efforts of the association (Sela-Sheffy 2010: 136).

On a more encouraging note, agents have also found ways of working together, as shown by the case of East Germany, where literary translators were members of the powerful Writers' Association (Thomson-Wohlgemuth 2004: 504). Through standard contracts and legislation, the association, publishers and authorities created secure working conditions for translators (*ibid.* 504–506), who felt that their work was valued by publishers and the reading public (*ibid.* 508). Translators' working conditions and status can thus be improved by concerted political action. A similar struggle is taking place in Spain, where a new professional association strives to work with the authorities to improve the position of court translators and interpreters (Monzó 2011: 24–25).

Even without changes in legislation, the employer's support and translators' actions can produce impressive results. The Finnish EU translators studied by Koskinen at first felt isolated and unappreciated at work (Koskinen 2009: 95–96, 104; cf. Section 4.2 above). However, in 2006, their tasks were redefined to emphasize links with the press and national institutions (*ibid.* 102–103). The translators also actively sought contacts and feedback (*ibid.* 105). As a result, the translators felt that their role became more central and that their professional autonomy and contacts (or visibility) increased

(ibid. 105–106); that their status perceptions must have improved as well becomes very evident.

To summarize, the most successful strategies so far entail 1) translators taking action and making themselves more visible outside the profession, and/or 2) cooperation with the employer or authorities (Koskinen 2009; Thomson-Wohlgemuth 2004). This highlights the role of visibility (cf. Section 4.2 above), but also of power. Both individual translators and associations thus need to continue to make their work and expertise visible and to strive for closer cooperation with clients, employers and relevant authorities. The trends of outsourcing and subcontracting (cf. Pym *et al.* 2012: 57–58, 61–62, 93) may make these aims difficult to achieve, but that also underlines that more efforts – and research into such efforts – are needed.

5 Conclusion

This survey of empirical research into translator status has shown that the existing studies, though not many in number, represent an inspiring variety of research methods and already offer insight into the causes behind status perceptions and into translators' actions for changing their status. There is convincing empirical evidence that translator status is, indeed, rather low; moreover, there are indications that it can be improved by means of increased visibility and cooperation among translators and other agents. Many gaps in research nevertheless remain. From the comparative perspective, the status perceptions of audiovisual translators and subcontractors have been neglected. More research is also needed on the interaction of the causes behind translator status, the impact of a protected title, and the agents' strategies for changing translator status. The author hopes to fill some of these gaps in her post-doctoral project that compares Finnish business translators' status perceptions with those of Danish ones.

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