

O Translator, Where Art Thou? In-House Translators’ Physical Location and Organisational Position

Minna Ruokonen

*English Language and Translation
University of Eastern Finland*

Minna Hjort

*School of Languages and Translation Studies
University of Turku*

This article analyses Finnish in-house translators’ experiences regarding physical location and organisational position. We examine how translators are positioned in the organisational structure of their workplace; where they are physically situated; and how satisfied they are in these respects. We also study whether the statutory status of Swedish as an official language is reflected in the results as compared to other languages translated in-house. The data come from a 2018 survey with 185 respondents. The analysis combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The results indicate that organisational position and physical location are intertwined. The respondents mostly work in the same location as their organisational unit and find their position optimal. Satisfaction with position was particularly high with translators placed within a communication related unit. The results show variety in whether the respondents prefer working close to other translators or to internal commissioners or other experts. The degree of telecommuting varies, with some in-house translators working entirely from home. The results for Swedish are in line with overall results for government translators. Lastly, we suggest further enquiry into topics such as office plans vs. job satisfaction, the motivations behind telecommuting, and links between translator status and agency and organisational position.

Keywords: in-house translation, in-house translator, job placement, organisational structure, staff translator

1 Background and Aims

Since the 1990s, translations have increasingly been outsourced to freelancer translators not employed by the client (Pym, Grin, Sfreddo & Chan 2012: 88). Based on various surveys, the average proportion of freelancers in Europe has been estimated at around 78%, leaving the proportion of in-house translators at 22% (ibid.: 88–89). A similar figure (21%) is suggested by a more recent international survey (Ehrensberger-Dow, Hunziker Heeb, Massey, Meidert, Neumann & Becker 2016: 5).

While their number may be decreasing, studying in-house translators is relevant because whether translators work as employees or freelancers has a major impact on virtually all aspects of their work: physical place of work, job description and tasks, degree and nature of social contacts, tools and resources available, workflow and workload, etc. Translation research has typically investigated these themes by means of workplace studies of institutions (see examples in Koskinen 2011); they have also been touched upon within the research on translator status, which suggests, for example, that the location of in-house

translators' work station (central or peripheral) may have a bearing on translator status (Dam & Zethsen 2012: 226).

In recent years, aspects of translators' work have been brought to the fore by research into the *ergonomics of translation*, which involves not only physical but also cognitive ergonomics (such as software usability) and organisational ergonomics, or “sociotechnical systems, including their organisational structures, policies and processes” (definition by the International Ergonomics Association [IEA], quoted in Ehrensberger-Dow et al. 2016: 2).

A 2014 survey on translator ergonomics (Ehrensberger-Dow et al. 2016), with 1850 respondents from almost 50 countries, including Finland, indicates that in-house translators tend to have more frequent social contacts in person but less control over their working environment (e.g. temperature, airflow) or the timing of their work (Ehrensberger-Dow et al. 2016: 7, 11–12, 14). Further differences emerged between in-house translators working for institutions and for commercial enterprises: the former enjoyed better organisational ergonomics, such as access to work management software and resources such as parallel texts and style guides (Ehrensberger-Dow et al. 2016: 11). However, while Ehrensberger-Dow et al. (2016: 2; 2018: 133) refer to IEA's inclusion of organisational structure in the definition of translator ergonomics, the survey only addresses organisation in terms of the organisation of individual translators' workflow, such as feedback, autonomy and time pressure (Ehrensberger-Dow et al. 2016: 4). The study does shed more light, however, on physical location: for example, shared office spaces were found to be more common among commercial in-house translators, and while the number of colleagues in the same space was mostly 2 to 4, almost 20% of commercial in-house translators shared their working space with ten or more people (Ehrensberger-Dow et al. 2016: 6). These are overall trends but Ehrensberger-Dow and Jääskeläinen (2018) does analyse the Finnish responses separately (n=95). However, there the focus is on comparing Finland and Switzerland, not on different types of Finnish translators.

There are also a number of studies on Finnish in-house translators' experiences of their work. Jannika Lassus' 2012 survey among Finnish-into-Swedish translators suggests that public sector employees on the one hand had access to a wide variety of translation aids; on the other hand, they also felt that they had the least time for their commissions (Lassus 2017: 118, 128). Minna Ruokonen's 2014 survey on Finnish translators' status perceptions and working conditions suggests that in-house translators believe themselves to have slightly less influence on some aspects of their working conditions (deadlines and expectations about translation quality) than freelancers (Ruokonen 2019: 116). These results bear some similarity to Ehrensberger-Dow et al.'s overall survey.

While there are thus some indications of Finnish in-house translators' experiences of their work, further investigation appears relevant. In spring 2018, we therefore conducted a survey among translators who currently worked or who had previously worked as in-

house translators and had Finnish as a working language. ‘In-house translator’ was defined as someone who is employed by a business, institution or organisation with a minimum of five employees and for whom translation is a central part of their job.¹ We received responses from 223 respondents, 83% of whom were currently employed as in-house translators; altogether, the respondents reported on 185 current positions and 168 earlier positions.

In the present paper, we focus on the 185 responses concerning positions held at the time of the survey, analysing

- Where the translators are situated **physically**;
- Where the translators are located within the **organisational** structure;
- How **satisfied** the translators are with their physical and organisational placement;
- Possible connections between physical and organisational placement vis-à-vis factors such as **unit type** and **working language**.

Working language here refers to our interest in whether the statutory status of Swedish, the second most spoken language in Finland, as a national (official) language (Language Act 423/2013) sets its translators apart from those of other languages translated in in-house units.

2 Material and Method

The responses were gathered by means of an online survey distributed through social media channels (through three Facebook groups for translators and personal Facebook and LinkedIn profiles) and three professional mailing lists (The Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters, Translation Industry Professionals KAJ, and a mailing list for government translators). Furthermore, the link to the survey was sent directly to a number of translators at ca. 80 institutions and companies whose contact details the researchers were able to find online.

We invited responses from any professionals whose main tasks involved translation, who worked with the Finnish language and whose organisation had a minimum of five employees. Thus the survey was open to employees with any job title and description. The respondents did in fact list a large variety of job titles ranging from *translator*, *translation service manager* and *language specialist* to *service coordinator*, *clinical trial administrator* and *storyteller*. However, almost 70% (69.3%) of respondents held the job title *translator* (*kääntäjä* or *kielenkääntäjä* in Finnish). This is in line with Lassus’ findings (2017: 116): 73% of her respondents were also titled *translator*. We must note, however, that the translator-oriented distribution channels may have impacted the make-up of the

¹ As we wished to study the translators’ position within their organisational structure, we excluded employers with less than five staff members.

respondents, causing a potential bias towards those whose title is translator or similar or who identify themselves as translators.

Based on the data, a typical respondent is a 44-year-old woman who holds a university degree and works in a company or for the state in a team of three translators, translating Swedish and/or English. Almost half (n=89) of the respondents worked for a company (23 for a translation company, 66 for others), while 54 (approximately a third) were employed by the state and 21 by a municipality. A further 14 respondents worked for a Finnish third-sector employer and 5 for an international third-sector employer. In the analysis, we applied two classifications of employers: a) commercial and institutional (as in Ehrensberger-Dow et al.'s study); and b) 'government' (the state and municipalities), Finnish businesses and organisations, and international businesses and organisations. The latter more specific classification was created as we suspected that multinational businesses and organisations could involve more complex organisational and physical arrangements.

The survey contained 19 multiple choice and open-ended questions concerning tasks, physical location and organisational position, as well as background questions. In order to facilitate filling in the questionnaire, none of the items could be set as obligatory. As a result, the number of responses in some items is lower than the total of respondents with current in-house positions (n=185).

In this paper, we focus on examining the following aspects:

- The respondent's position within the **organisational** structure:
 - Does the employer have a dedicated translation unit? Does the respondent belong to the translation unit?
 - To which larger organisational unit does the respondent's unit belong?
 - Is the respondent satisfied with the organisational position? Is there a link between satisfaction and the type of the larger organisational unit (communications or administration)?
- The respondent's **physical** location:
 - Is the respondent's desk or office physically located in the same place as the organisational unit to which the respondent belongs?
 - How frequent is telecommuting?
 - Does physical location have any bearing on satisfaction with organisational position?²
- Possible connections between physical and organisational placement vis-à-vis unit type (communications or administration) and Swedish as a working language.

The analysis method is partly qualitative, partly quantitative. The responses are mostly described by means of quantitative distributions, but open comments are discussed for

² As our survey focused on the organisational placement, there was no item explicitly inquiring into satisfaction with physical location. This matter needs to be remedied in possible follow-up surveys.

purposes of further insight and illustration. The type of organisational unit is based on a data-driven, qualitative division (see section 3.1 below). Where relevant, a Chi Square test has been used to discover whether there are statistical differences between different groups of respondents; the threshold for statistical significance is .05.

3 Analysis

3.1 Translators' Organisational Position

Out of the respondents currently employed as in-house translators, 71.4% reported that their employer had a dedicated translation unit or team, and out of them, 97.0% reported that they were part of that translation unit or team. A closer look at the additional comments indicates that even some of those who indicated not being part of a dedicated translation unit actually did belong to a department dedicated to translation but were misled by the phrase "unit or team"; this calls for a rephrasing of the item in possible future surveys. At any rate, the responses strongly indicate that dedicated translation units or teams are a typical organisational location for these respondents.

When asked to fill in the name of the larger organisational unit to which their unit belongs, there were a total of 162 open responses³. Based on a qualitative classification of unit titles, the biggest group (n=34) belonged to a communications unit of some kind, while the second largest group (n=25) was part of an administrative unit. Another 23 respondents belonged to an internal service unit (including office, secretarial, legislative and other general or specialist services), while 14 respondents were part of a sales or marketing organisation. A total of 24 respondents mentioned a translation services unit (13 respondents) or language services unit (11 respondents). The remaining respondent groups (of 1 to 5 respondents each) were part of a variety of units ranging from publishing and documentation to projects and production, or did not specify a unit.

We next examined how satisfied the respondents were with their organisational position. First, the respondents were asked whether they regarded their position within the organisation as optimal, either in terms of their position as an individual translator or, if they were part of a translation unit, the organisational position of that unit. The responses are shown in Figure 1 below.

³ The units analysed are based solely on the respondents' reports and have not been checked against organisational charts.

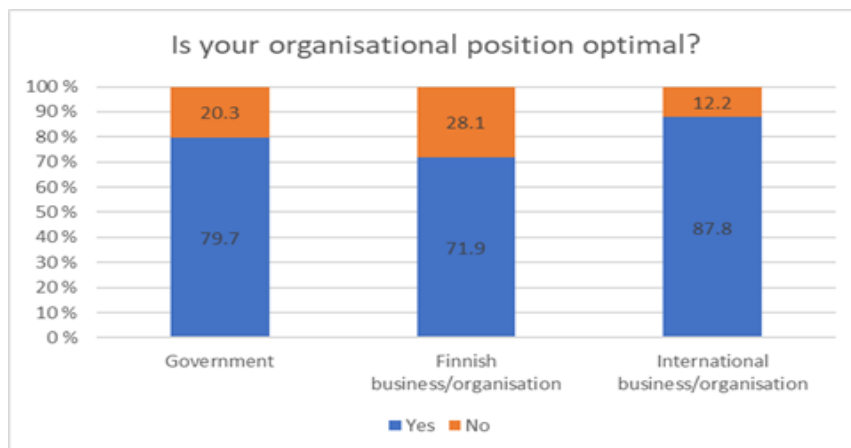


Figure 1. Optimality of organisational position

As illustrated in Figure 1, there was some variation among the respondents, but it was not statistically significant, although the comparison between Finnish and international businesses/organisations comes very close ($p=.054$). A comparison between commercial and institutional translators also remained statistically non-significant ($p=.658$). In other words, the majority of the respondents were satisfied with the organisational position of their task or unit regardless of their type of employer.

We next classified the respondents' organisational positions under two larger categories, "Communications" ($n=64$) and "Administration" ($n=63$), as follows:

- Communications: Communications, translation or language services, international matters;
- Administration: Administration, internal services, sales and marketing.

Our initial assumption was that the respondents would feel more comfortable with the former organisational position as the titles of the units under "Communications" are more closely linked to translators' core competences: language and translation and (intra- or intercultural) communication. This did indeed turn out to be the case, as illustrated in Figure 2⁴:

⁴ Three respondents within "Communications" and one within "Administration" did not respond to this item.

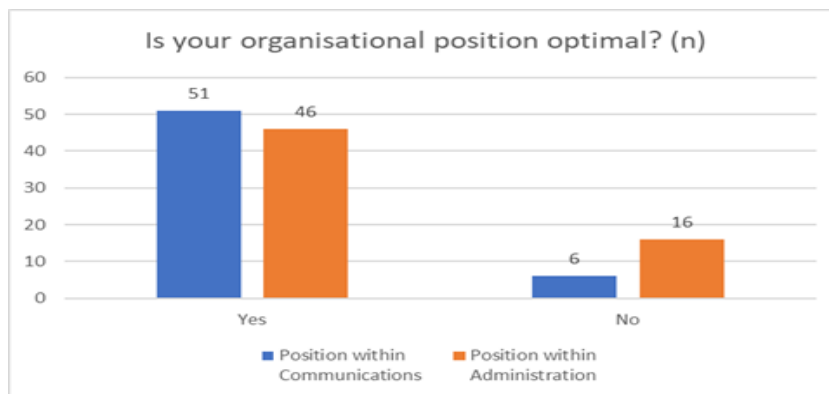


Figure 2. Organisational position as viewed by the respondents working within “Communications” or within “Administration”

The difference was also statistically significant ($p=.012$), although it should be noted that the number of respondents who answered in the negative is rather small. Nevertheless, the result is supported by the open comments: Out of all the 23 respondents less than satisfied with their organisational position who answered the question, seven wrote in the comment field that was provided after the multiple-choice question that “Communications” would be a more optimal setting and two noted that all translators should be working close to each other, while four stated they wanted to work in a closer proximity to the commissioners. Furthermore, six respondents who were part of a communications division stated that they felt that it was optimal for them in view of the nature of their work:

- (1) Translation is multilingual communication and in order to translate in-house material and external press releases, we need to be close to the sources of information. (Respondent #131)⁵
- (2) Translation is communication, and we work in close cooperation with communications and information officers. (Respondent #54)

In total, 57 respondents added further comments on the optimality of their organisational position. Their views were related to organisational structure or physical location or both, which indicates that the question was more open to interpretation than what we were originally aiming at. However, this may be a blessing in disguise, as the comments indicate that physical and organisational structure are closely linked and cannot necessarily be discussed separately. For example, physical proximity to colleagues belonging to the same organisational division/organisation may increase a sense of belongingness to the organisation and contribute to factors such as translators’ perceived status within the organisation (see also Dam&Zethsen 2012: 226). As one respondent comments:

- (3) Of course in such a small organisation as this, it would be better if I worked at least part of the time at the office where the others are: As a full-time telecommuter, I easily

⁵ All quotes from survey data have been translated into English by the authors.

remain an unattached agent who is not considered as integral to the organisation as others. (Respondent #218)

Another recurring point in the open-ended comments was organisational and physical vicinity to internal clients, i.e. the commissioners of the translations, and to the subject-matter experts of the organisation, who are sometimes but not always also the commissioners. A total of 13 respondents mentioned the vicinity of clients or experts in a positive light, including two respondents who write that “It’s good to be near the experts so that we can easily ask them questions if some needs clarification” (Respondent #8) and “We are situated close to the people we actively work with” (Respondent #158).

Proximity to clients and experts may also have been implied in answers that specified a (non-translation related) location in the organisational structure but did not elaborate on the motivation for the choice. There were, however, dissenting views, too: one respondent states that the physical location does not matter, while another says that organisational position was not important because they served the entire organisation.

Vicinity to translator colleagues was explicitly mentioned four times, with three respondents stating that they would prefer if there was a special translation unit and one respondent stating that they are content with being part of a translation unit. Two respondents, however, comment that a translation unit would not serve the purposes of their work. One of them works at an organisation that has a translation unit which the respondent does not wish to be a part of, because their work does not involve cooperating with the unit. They would, however, prefer to belong to a communications unit.

The respondents of our survey include a large number of translators working for the state (29.2%), and a specific case was referenced several times in the comments: in 2015, the translators of the Finnish ministries and the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) were brought under one roof organisationally and, largely, also physically with the establishment of the Translation and Language Division of the Prime Minister's Office. Opinions of the restructuring in our data varied: one respondent felt that damaged the agency of translators by restricting their involvement to the final stage of the process:

- (4) It made more sense to me when we were part of [Ministry’s] communications process. Now we are simply a “support unit” with no responsibility over the content. (Respondent #64)

Another respondent was happy with the move, but acknowledged that not everyone agrees and that translators’ views might depend on their previous organisational position:

- (5) I cannot think of a better position in the organisation. For me, it also makes sense that all the governmental translators now belong to the same division, instead of being spread across the ministries. But I hear former ministry translators also see disadvantages in this. (Respondent #112)

Next, we look more closely at the respondents' physical location, including telecommuting.

3.2 Translators' Physical Location and Telecommuting

When asked whether the respondents' workstation (desk or office) was physically located in the same place as the organisational unit to which they belonged, the majority of the respondents answered in the positive, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

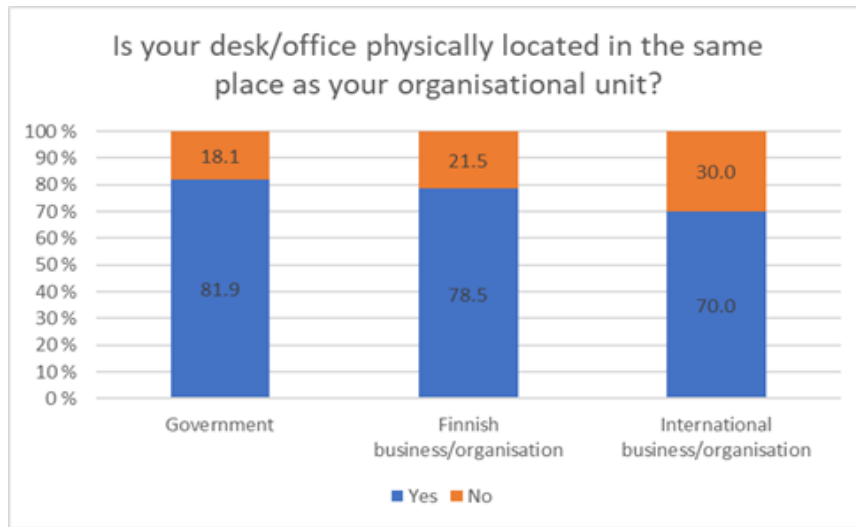


Figure 3. Translators' physical location

There were some differences among the respondents working for the government, Finnish businesses or organisations and international businesses or organisations, but the differences were not statistically significant (lowest p value: .146). This also remained the case when comparing institutional and commercial translators ($p=.086$). Overall, most respondents thus work in the same physical location as their organisational unit, which supports our observation on the open comments: that physical location and organisational position are intertwined.

We also investigated whether the respondents' physical location played any role vis-à-vis their satisfaction with their organisational position. The results are illustrated in Figure 4 below.

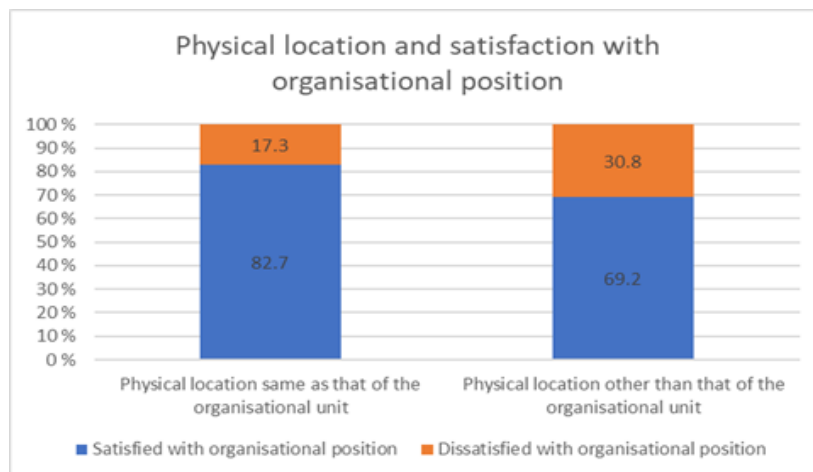


Figure 4. Physical location and satisfaction with organisational position

When we asked our respondents to specify where they were located if they were not physically in the same location as their organisational unit, the answers varied from working from home to being located in another building or on the premises of other divisions within the organisation. As can be seen in Figure 4 above, those respondents who were physically located in the same place as their organisational unit were more frequently satisfied with their organisational position. However, the difference falls short of being statistically significant ($p=.066$). This may be explained by the open comments discussed in Section 3.1 above: some of the respondents appreciated working in the same physical location as other translators and in a unit dedicated to translation, while others found benefits in working close to their internal commissioners, source-text authors or subject-field specialists. Some also mentioned appreciating their employer being flexible about location-related requests or requirements.

A question that could warrant further examination in the Finnish context is where the translators' workstations are located in relation to the general office plan: are they part of an open office plan or do they work in a dedicated walled office, for example. Two respondents in our survey addressed office plans in their open comments:

- (6) We work in a multi-purpose space. Disturbances cause interruptions. (Respondent #159)
- (7) [...] Also, being physically located in an open office of almost 300 people makes it almost impossible for us to create high-quality translations. (Respondent #197)

As our survey was aimed at in-house translators, we assumed that the respondents would mostly work on their employers' premises. This indeed was the case, but the responses concerning telecommuting nevertheless showed a great deal of variation, as shown in Figure 5 below.

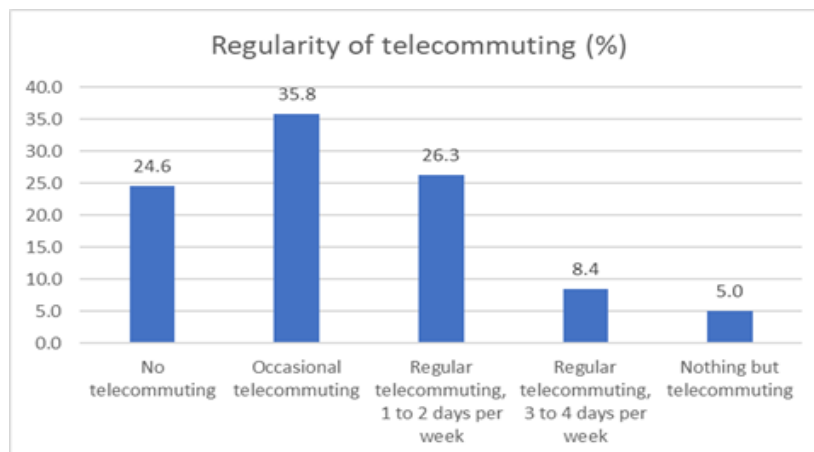


Figure 5. Telecommuting (%) among the respondents

As Figure 5 shows, out of the 179 respondents in this item, roughly 60% did not telecommute at all or only occasionally. Still, regular telecommuting was also frequent: a fourth of the respondents commuted 1 or 2 days per week, some (n=15) telecommuted three or four days a week, and there were even some respondents (n=9) whose work consisted *entirely* of telecommuting. This variety illustrates that the term “in-house translator” can, in some cases, be somewhat misleading.

It would be of further interest to investigate on whose initiative such arrangements have emerged and how satisfied translators are with their degree of telecommuting. Based on open comments in the material (such as example 3 above) and our experiences and discussions with in-house translators, we suspect that such arrangements can either demonstrate an employer’s flexibility and understanding of employees’ individual life situations (where they live, etc.) or be an arrangement imposed on the translator for, e.g., financial reasons.

3.3 Swedish as a Working Language

The status of Swedish as the second national language of Finland entails, e.g., that certain translations into Swedish are prescribed by law. Therefore, we wanted to examine whether those respondents (n=80) with Swedish as one of their main working languages provided different answers than the other respondents.

In our data, these respondents were more frequently employed by the government (n=49; 61.3% out of the Swedish translators, as opposed to 39.3% in the entire population of current in-house translators). The prevalence of government employees among the Swedish translators in our data is reflected in the items on organisational position and physical location, where the responses of the Swedish translators are very similar to those of government translators overall. Table 1 below illustrates the responses on organisational position and physical location:

Table 1. Swedish and government translators' responses on organisational position and physical location

	Swedish translators		Government translators	
Organisational position optimal?	n	%	N	%
• Yes	61	78.2	57	80.3
• No	17	21.8	14	19.7
Total	78	100.0	71	100.0
Physical location same as that of the organisational unit?	n	%	N	%
• Yes	64	81.0	59	81.9
• No	15	19.0	13	18.1
Total	79	100.0	72	100.0

A similar trend was apparent in the item on telecommuting, where the most frequent responses for both the government translators overall and for the Swedish translators included not telecommuting at all, telecommuting occasionally and telecommuting once or twice a week. Overall, the responses of the Swedish translators in our data were thus very similar to those of the government in-house translators, and if the Swedish in-house translators enjoy a special position, it mainly shows in their being more frequently employed by the government.

4 Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

This paper set out to examine the physical location and organisational position of in-house translators with Finnish as a working language based on data gathered in a survey with 185 respondents currently working as in-house translators.

The results indicate that organisational position and physical location are intertwined: this shows both in the respondents' open comments and in the fact that they mostly worked in the same physical location as their organisational unit. While the respondents were more frequently satisfied with their organisational position if their unit was placed within a division in the "Communications" category and if their physical location was the same as that of the organisational unit to which they belonged, the latter difference was not statistically significant, and several respondents emphasised the benefits of working in close proximity to one's internal clients and/or subject-matter specialists.

It was of interest to note that comparisons based on employer type produced no statistically significant differences in the items that we studied, even though some differences had been observed in previous research with regard other items (Ehrensberger-Dow et al. 2016). This may simply be due to the fact that we were looking at different aspects of translators' work.

The regularity of telecommuting varied among the respondents. While most respondents telecommuted occasionally or had a regular telecommuting schedule of 1 or 2 days a week, it was interesting to find that there were 24 in-house translator respondents who telecommuted on most or all of their working days.

In terms of the role of Swedish as a main working language, we found that Swedish in-house translators most often held governmental positions, which is explained by the status of the language in Finland: Swedish is the second national language of the country and the provision of public (governmental, municipal, etc.) information in both of the national languages is prescribed by law. In other respects, the results concerning translators working with Swedish were in line with the overall tendencies.

The survey gave rise to a number of questions on which more light could be shed in future research involving translators working with Finnish (and in general):

- Physical location in relation to the general office plan
- Satisfaction with physical location
- Satisfaction with telecommuting arrangements and on whose initiative they have emerged
- Connections between physical and organisational placement, translator status and translator agency

In recent years, much research has been conducted on the benefits and disadvantages of different office plans, such as “closed offices”, open offices and so-called multi-purpose or activity-based workspaces. Given recent trends in office planning that favour open or multi-purpose spaces (Rolfö, Eklund & Jahncke 2018: 644), it would be of interest to investigate more closely how different working environments impact translators’ job satisfaction and even efficiency, as suggested by examples 6 and 7 in our data). So far, Ehrensberger-Dow et al.’s research indicates that shared offices in general contribute to a higher degree of distractions (Ehrensberger-Dow et al. 2016: 6–8; Ehrensberger-Dow & Jääskeläinen 2018: 140).

Some comments by respondents in the survey and in our informal discussions with in-house translators suggest that there is likely a variety of reasons behind telecommuting arrangements where the translator works remotely on most or all of their workdays, ranging from employee-initiated arrangements due to individual life situations to employer-imposed, financially motivated reasons.

As regards the latter, our hypothesis is that there is a link between organisational position and the perceived status of the translator profession. Both translation research and working in-house translators would benefit from an enquiry into whether a peripheral and/or isolated position of a translator or translation unit in the organisational structure or association with a particular higher-level organisational structure has an impact on, firstly, the

status of translators (as perceived by translators themselves and/or by non-translator colleagues) and secondly, on the agency of translators. Agency refers here to, for example, a translator's ability to contribute professionally to entire communications processes (as in example 4 above) as opposed to only stepping in at the very end of the process. Perceptions of value, appreciation and prestige attached to the profession can be significant in terms of, for example, translators' motivation and well-being (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018: 1), and implications of the connections between status perceptions and translators' visibility and location have become apparent in previous status research (Dam & Zethsen e.g. 2011; 2012). An enquiry into the connection between physical visibility and status within the Finnish context could be of further interest. Overall, studying translators' organisational position and physical location and related questions thus has the potential to become a major theme within contemporary Translation – or Translator – Studies.

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