

## **Translators and (lack of) power - a study of Danish company translators' occupational status - By: HELLE V. DAM & KAREN KORNING ZETHSEN**

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# **Translators and (lack of) power**

## **- a study of Danish company translators' occupational status**

Translators' occupational status has received very little attention as a research topic in its own right. However, when we go through the translation literature, we frequently come across references to translation as a low-status profession. The following examples of statements taken from the professional and scholarly literature speak for themselves:

Translation is i.a. described as a *reproductive, mechanical or non-creative process best over and done with quickly and cheaply*. It is also referred to as *inferior to original writing* or even as *derivative, fake, potentially a false copy*. Translation has further been described as a *peripheral, insignificant, low status* and even *servile, modest* and *humble* occupation. To add to the misery it is also believed to be *thankless* as well as *poorly paid*. The translator him-/herself has been referred to as a *shadowy presence, invisible, seldom recognized, anonymous, isolated, unappreciated* and – not least – *powerless*. The italicized passages are direct quotations from the literature, and the full references can be found in a previous article of ours (Dam & Zethsen 2008: 73), which also serves as the general basis of the present paper, and to which the reader is referred for full details.

The italicized statements are not exactly what one would associate with a powerful, high-status profession. Can we not simply conclude, then, that translation is a low-status profession characterized by lack of power? From a research perspective, the answer is no. We may conclude that there seems to be a widespread consensus – both within and outside the profession – that translation is a low-status occupation, but we have no systematically collected and analyzed empirical data to document that this is in fact a correct description of the actual state-of-affairs.

And without this kind of empirical evidence, we have no solid platform for action.

### **A large-scale empirical study**

In an attempt to provide the necessary knowledge and platform for action, we – the authors of this article – have over the past years been engaged in a comprehensive empirical project aimed at investigating the occupational status of different groups of professional translators in various occupational, national and cultural contexts. The project is accumulative and develops slowly but steadily through predefined phases, moving from quantitative, questionnaire-based surveys aimed at charting out the actual state-of-affairs (describing) to more qualitative investigations aimed at explaining the patterns we find. It also moves from one national and cultural context to another and from one group of translators to another.

So far, we have carried out three questionnaire-based investigations aimed at charting out the occupational status of the three groups of professional business translators which we have been able to identify in relatively large numbers on the Danish translation market: company, agency and freelance translators. In this paper we shall zoom in on the study focusing on the first group – the company translators – which we assumed would be, and also turned out to be, the group with the highest occupational status among those studied so far.

### **The study on Danish company translators – a high-profile group**

The criteria for participating in the study were strict: only translators with a strong professional profile and therefore presumably at the high end of the translator-status continuum were asked to fill in questionnaires. This means that only translators with an MA-degree in specialized translation and with full-time employment on permanent contracts in major Danish companies with a visible translation function and a clear translation profile could participate. A further requirement was that translation was the participants' main occupation. Thus, we are dealing with professionals in a double sense: they have a certain set of qualifications, but they also translate to make a living – it is their main source of income.

Selecting only translators working on the Danish market was also a deliberate strategy aimed at securing participation of only the highest-profile translators: in contrast with many other countries, Denmark has for more than 40 years offered a system of state-authorization (accreditation) and an MA in specialized translation. Translation is thus a recognized academic discipline and profession in Denmark, and the Danish translation market is probably among the most well-organized and Danish translators among the most well-educated in the world, though unqualified 'translators' certainly do exist here as elsewhere and we cannot claim that full professionalization has been achieved yet.

The reason why we chose to work with a group of translators with a particularly strong professional profile from the outset was methodological: if it turned out that even this group of translators had a low occupational status, this would strongly support the claims about translation being a low-status profession found in the literature.

### **Parameters of occupational status – method and analyses**

The translators' occupational status was studied through their responses to questions evolving around four well-established parameters of occupational prestige: (1) salary, (2) education/expertise, (3) visibility, and (4) power/influence. Furthermore, some questions geared to inquiring more generally and directly into the issue of translator status and prestige were included in the questionnaires. Most of the questions focused on opinions, not facts, and were designed to be answered by ticking one of five statements representing different degrees of agreement with the questions (e.g. Question: *do you, as a translator, have influence in the company?*; Response possibilities: (1) *to a very high degree*, (2) *to a high degree*, (3) *to a certain degree*, (4) *to a low degree*, (5) *to a very low degree or none at all*). In the analyses of the responses, the five statements were converted into numerical values between 1 and 5, as this allowed the calculation of mean values. Thus, a mean rating of 3 would represent the middle ground, whereas means below 3 would be on the low side, and means above 3 would be on the high side.

## Results

### *Prestige and status in general*

When asked to rate their occupational *prestige* in the company, the mean value of the translators' answers was 2.57, whereas their mean rating of their *status* – a near-synonym to 'prestige', but somewhat less strong – was 2.87. None of these ratings are dramatically low, but both are below middle and therefore on the low side and certainly lower than might be expected considering the strong professional profile of these particular translators.

### *Salary*

The analyses of the translators' salaries showed that, although their pay was generally not extremely low, as many as 94% of them actually had a monthly income below average, average referring to the average salary for professionals with a level of education, work experience and a job context comparable to that of the translators in our study, i.e. holders of an MA degree who graduated in 1997 (the translators' mean graduation year) and who had full-time employment in the private labour market in Denmark (cf. Dam & Zethsen forthcoming). Only 3% of the translators turned out to have a monthly income which could be characterized as above average.

### *Education/expertise*

Not surprisingly, the company translators massively agreed that translation is a high-expertise job. When asked about the degree of *specialized knowledge* they found was required to translate, the mean value of the translators' answers turned out to be 4.47, whereas it was 4.09 in response to a question about the degree of *expertise* required to translate.

We also asked the translators' colleagues in the companies a series of questions about translator expertise, and their responses were interesting and revealing. Their response patterns to direct questions about translator expertise and specialized knowledge were almost identical to those of the translators, but when we scratched the surface a bit, their apparently high evaluation of translators' expertise and knowledge became less convincing. For example, we asked them how many years of *education* after high school they thought it takes to become an authorized translator.

Most of them (57%) assessed the length of translator education to be between 3-4 years, which corresponds to a BA in Denmark, and another 2% believed the duration to be between 1 and 2 years. Less than half (41%) thought or knew that an MA (5-6 years) was required. The fact that a majority of people outside the translation profession seem to think that translation requires a lower level degree than is actually the case clearly indicates a lack of awareness of the nature and level of specialized knowledge, training and expertise that is required. The problem thus seems to be not so much the translators' own perception of their professional expertise as that of people outside the profession.

### *Visibility*

The analyses of the company translators' visibility showed that they had a reasonably, though not overwhelmingly, high degree of visibility. We shall not go further into the visibility analyses here, as the translators who participated in this particular study were selected for their supposedly high visibility in the companies, which means that the findings simply corresponded to what could be expected in this case. Still, lack of visibility is generally considered part and parcel of the translation trade and one of the most serious obstacles to recognition and status.

### *Power/influence*

The last status parameter we looked into is probably the one that is most central to the theme of the present issue of 'Language at Work': power and influence. We asked the translators a general question about their *influence in the company*, and the mean value of their responses was 2.57, i.e. not extremely low, but still below the middle value of 3. As to actual management positions and possibilities of promotion, only 4% of the participating translators turned out to hold an *executive office or managerial position* in the company (i.e. 96% did not), whereas on average they assessed their *possibilities of promotion*, i.e. of obtaining such an office/position, as low as 1.96 on the 1-5 scale. Thus, the parameter of power/influence received a very low rating indeed even among relatively well-placed translators, and its significance in a status context should not be underestimated.

## Conclusion and future work

The findings summarized above show that even high-profile members of the translation profession face serious challenges in terms of occupational prestige and status: their salaries are generally lower than they should be, their level of expertise is not sufficiently recognized and their influence is limited to the point of being virtually non-existent. Empowerment is clearly needed, and action is called for. But what kind of action?

As explained, our research efforts so far have largely been aimed at *describing* the situation (what?). In the next phases of the project, we shall focus on *explaining* (why?). Through in-depth analyses of e.g. interviews and other discourses produced by and about translators and translation, we shall inquire more deeply into the reasons for the profession's low status. Only when we know more about the *whys*, will we know what kind of action is needed.

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