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Habitus of the Future Translator – A T-shaped Expert

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Abstract

This article reports on interviews with six in-house LSP translators working in two non-translation companies. The interview analysis employs the tools of Pierre Bourdieus's concepts of habitus, field and capital. The interviewees' interactions and educational needs of future translators are further explained by applying the concept of T-shaped expertise.
Among the findings of this study is how these translators use interaction to build and maintain their status as translation experts. They accomplish this in relation to the subject matter experts of their companies, and their own desire to be accepted as professionals. Further analysis explains how the forms of interaction affect the quality of information the translators receive from the experts and how this in turn may affect the quality of their translations.
The conclusion suggests pedagogical methods for preparing future translators for similar interaction.

1. Introduction

Translation competence models (e.g. Göpferich 2009, Pacte 2009, EMT 2017), textbooks on translation (e.g. Byrne 2006, Robinson 2012) and research articles on translator training and translation routines (e.g. Chesterman 2005, Rogers 2006, Walczyński 2015, Gambier 2016) list consultation with experts as an information source on LSP translation. However the sources do not elaborate further how this interaction is performed, i.e. how to select and approach an expert, how to formulate questions or decide the amount of contextual information to be given in order to receive accurate information beneficial in solving of the problem that motivated the consultation.

Translators are the initiators of this interaction, they choose the experts and the communication channels and engage the experts in

interaction with questions, contextual information and other communicative actions. The experts whom the translators approach seldom have formal training or expertise in linguistics or translation. They view the source texts from the viewpoint of their own training and expertise as, for example, descriptions of legal or technical processes and objects, not as functions, concepts or terms that need to be translated into another language.

The material reported and analyzed here is comprised of interviews with six translators. The translators are professionals who work in in-house translation teams in two different companies translating complex LSP texts dealing mainly with legal and technical topics. The term "expert" in this article refers to subject matter experts who have academic degrees and/or extensive professional experience in the domain of the LSP texts and who either work in the same company as the interviewed translators or who are external specialists consulting in company projects. Due to constraints of space their description is very limited.

Bourdieus's concepts of habitus, field and capital (Bourdieu 1984; 1986) are used in the analysis of information the interviews yielded. The concepts are used to explain the motives and interactions of the translators who act as linguistic experts inside companies where the primary nature of the industry is not that of translation and where the translators are in a supporting or hierarchically subordinate role vis-à-vis the experts in the primary field.

The article then links the concept of T-shaped expertise (Guest 1991, Gardner and Estry 2017, Conley *et al.* 2017) to successful communication within problem-solving scenarios between experts from different fields.

The article concludes with suggestions on how to improve translator training by including cross-disciplinary interaction in authentic or simulated translation tasks in the curriculum.

2. Habitus, Field and Capital in LSP Translation

Simeoni (1998: 2), echoing Toury's notion that "there is little point in a process-oriented study of whatever type, unless the cultural-semiotic conditions under which it occurs are incorporated into it." (Toury 1995: 13), was among the first to introduce Bourdieu's theories and the concept of habitus into translation studies (cf. Bourdieu 1984;

Simeoni 1998; Inghilleri 2005; Sakamoto 2019). He defines habitus as "a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are 'regular' without being consciously coordinated or governed by any 'rule'[…]" (Simeoni 1998: 16).

Simeoni further describes habitus as both "structured", i.e. something that is formed in contact with social structures in everyday life and education, and "structuring" or "a bundle of dispositions thus acquired contribute directly to the elaboration of norms and conventions" (ibid 1998: 22). Simeoni views translators' habitus as "characterized by conformity to a greater extent than is the competence of other agents active in the cultural field" (ibid. 1998: 8). Sela-Sheffy challenges this notion of subservience Simeoni proposed by focusing on the struggles of translators to "establishing their profession as an autonomous source of symbolic capital" and to acquire cultural capital themselves (Sela-Sheffy 2005: 20). We will return to the concept of cultural capital later in this article.

According to Robinson the ability to translate LSP texts is tied to the habitus or else the translator projecting himself or herself in the habitus of an expert (Robinson 2012: 110). By this Robinson refers to a situation where translators try to assume the viewpoints of an expert and use this as a guide to solve translation problems they encounter.

Three other important Bourdieu concepts that need discussing here are, firstly **field** which refers to the social space where individuals or agents take part in a struggle or a game – a social action that has a set of rules pertinent to that field. Secondly the agents need **capital** which can refer to cultural capital, that is skills or knowledges learned through education or experience, and social capital, e.g. networks (Bourdieu 1986: 291). For a translator cultural capital may include language skills and "specialized training in an adjacent field" (Simeoni 1998: 14). Some fields require capital to enter and the more restricted the field, the more capital is needed (Simeoni 1998: 17). From the viewpoint of a professional translator the fields open to them are restricted by the cultural or social capital they have, either by not being able to receive translation assignments in LSP domains or language pairs they have no skills with or the inability to produce translations of a quality that satisfies the initiator or the customer or lack of networks and contact to translation agencies. Thirdly in relation to the struggle or the game there exists the **feel for the game** or an "individual's sense of how to operate within the established norms of the field" (ibid. 2005: 2).

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For the purpose of this article the most important form of capital is that of symbolic. Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as "a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability" (1984: 291).

Robinson elaborates on the significance of status:

> for the translator or interpreter a higher consideration than money or continued employability is professional pride, professional integrity, professional self-esteem. We all want to feel that the job we are doing is important, that we do it well, and that the people we do it for appreciate our work (Robinson 2012: 26).

2.1 The Expert as an Information Source in LSP Translation

Toury (2011: 173) describes translation problems in expert to expert communication from the viewpoint of three separate discourses that seek to define the nature of translation problems as source, process and target oriented problems. He further states that, despite attempts to define the term, its "terminological status is far from clear" in translation studies (ibid). In this paper the translation problem is defined from the viewpoint of the translators interviewed as a word, term, phrase or other passage of text that can't be translated satisfactorily (subjective to the translator or to the initiator of the translation) without access to advanced subject matter knowledge.

Chesterman (2005: 82) divides problem-solving strategies used by professional translators into three categories: search, creativity and textual strategies. He describes these strategies as tools translators use in order to solve problems with understanding the source text or producing the target text (these often include terminological difficulties). The search strategies include "use of the Internet, brainstorming a colleague, phoning that friend in the Ministry, checking through parallel texts, and so on". He does not elaborate on these strategies further "although they might warrant considerable discussion in the classroom" (ibid.).

Robinson (2012: 111) describes access to subject matter knowledge through four scenarios that are based on level of exposure to subject matter or "job-related experience":

1. having worked as an expert in the field earlier,

2. working on the peripheries of the field in some position not involving expertise (e.g. secretary of a law firm),
3. contacting someone working in the field,
4. using materials that describe the field or the LSP used (terminologies, dictionaries, parallel texts) (ibid. 111).

Here Robinson uses field in the sense of being employed in the field or profession, but this can also be interpreted as Bourdieu's field, i.e. a social space that has its governing rules and includes individuals who possess suitable habitus and feel for the game for the field.

Research on the interactions between translators and experts in LSP translation is not abundant. Rogers (2006) reports on interviews conducted with two freelance translators of technical texts. She summarizes that freelancer translators felt that such interaction "needed to be handled carefully, balancing diminishing returns with judgements about the accuracy of the proposed solutions" (ibid. 2006: 336). The freelancers also listed skills that must be developed for the interaction: "how to formulate questions to obtain the required information, adopting different perspectives, asking what-if questions, clarifying, requesting examples, recognizing dead-ends and so on." (Rogers 2006: 336). Rogers does not elaborate on the mode of contact or any other details of the interaction(s) nor the interactions between in-house translator and in-house experts that were also studied in the same research project.

2.2 T-shaped Expertise and Feel for the Game

> T-shaped expertise integrates depth, defined in terms of disciplinary knowledge and the ability to understand how individuals with that knowledge function and interact to accomplish a desired outcome within or across a system(s), and breadth, defined as the professional abilities that allow someone with profound disciplinary knowledge to interact meaningfully with others who possess different disciplinary knowledge in order to affect an outcome that might not otherwise be possible. (Gardner and Estry 2017).

The concept of T-shaped expertise is related to Bourdieu's concept of feel for the game, or the knowledge or skill-set a translator would need in order to work in close interaction with experts such as a translator

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working inside a non-translation company or freelancer with direct customers of different special fields (e.g. technical, business).

Depth of understanding in one field (e.g. translation) is required to be a competent professional. However, in order to co-operate and "seamlessly exchange knowledge between fields of study" (Conley *et al.* 2016: 166) - essential in complex translation problem solving tasks - the participants need communicative or "interactional expertise". With this, Gorman (2010) refers "to learning the 'language' of another expertise without having to master all the disciplinary methods and practices". In a pilot study (Conley *et al* 2016: 169) technology students were introduced to "social aspect of technology, social science methods and related philosophical and ethical analyses". The results suggested that undergraduate students can "refine their understanding of their own core expertise and demonstrate an awareness and aptitude for making connections to how other expertise can contribute to addressing complex problems" (ibid. 173). According to this author's knowledge similar studies have not been completed with translation students, although there have been cross-curricular training programs (e.g. technical writer training FAST-program at University of Tampere, Finland).

3. Methodology

Six translators from two different companies were interviewed using a qualitative semi-structured interview protocol (Kvale 1996, Brinkmann and Kvale 2015) with three main themes that were divided into several sub-themes:

> 1) background (7 sub-themes) that included questions on educational background, work experience, professional identity and attitudes to group work,
> 2) personal working methods (5 sub-themes) that included questions on tools, work routines and information searching methods and
> 3) co-operation with experts (6 sub-themes).
> Some of the sub-themes (e.g. tools, translation routines, outsourcing practices etc.) fell outside the scope of this paper and are not reported here.

The average length of an interview was 85 minutes with variation between 61 minutes (B2) and 143 minutes (A3). The interviews were conducted face to face in Finnish, recorded and transcribed by the author and reported here in English, all translations are by the author.

The interviews were analyzed qualitatively using a data-driven content analysis method where categories and themes were identified from the transcriptions. This was done solely by the author and it is recognized that this may cause problems with analysis reliability.

Information about the structure of the companies and translation units was also collected from the company webpages to support the interviews.

3.1 The Interviewees and the Companies They Work for

The interviewees are translators who work as in-house translators in two companies (A and B). All translators use translation memory tools, document archival and process management systems and refined work flows. The translators are native Finns, some have bilingual backgrounds and all have a graduate degree in translation or linguistics. All have several years of work experience at the companies and some previous careers as freelance translators.

Company A is a medium sized consultancy firm that mainly deals with international legal and business cases. The translation team is an independent unit that offers translation and linguistic services to other units of the company. Four of the in-house translators (A1, A2, A3, A4) were interviewed, A1 and A3 were female, A2 and A4 male.

Company B is a medium sized NGO that deals in creation of, and translation of, documents that establish specifications and procedures and their terminology in special fields. The translation projects vary from half a page to several dozens of pages. Two of the in-house translators (B1, B2) were interviewed. Both were male.

Both companies employ internal experts and also use external experts in some of their projects when needed. Both companies have other divisions that support the primary division (sales, human resources, communication, knowledge management etc.). In company A the experts have degrees in law, business or accounting. In company B both the experts are generally from scientific and technical backgrounds.

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4. Analysis of Interviews

The information yielded by the interviews are reported below, but due to space constraints several sub-themes not directly relevant to this article have been left out. Bourdieu's concepts are used as the framework of this analysis.

4.1 Translators' Motivations to Contact Experts

The interviewees list the following types of situations for contacting an expert. They all described a process where they first use all the other available information sources they have, and only as the last resort contact the expert:

- Inability to select the best equivalent one among several possible terms, inability to find any term, and apparent terminological gap in the target language [interviewees A1-A4, B1-B2].
- Domain or project specific review of decisions (term, emphasis, omission etc.) made in a situation where there are several apparently equal or synonymous alternatives [A1-A4, B1-B2].
- Clarification of the meaning of the source text (complex or poor quality of language or vague meaning) [A1-A4, B1-B2].
- Need for more information on the project or customer [A1, A2, A3, B1].
- Help with the differences in the source and target language special domains (e.g. different accounting principles or stock market rules) [A1-A4, B1-B2].
- Need for co-operation to re-create the perspective of the customer in target language using domain terminology or phrases or spinning a certain viewpoint in the text (e.g. a defense in a court case or creating advertising texts) [A1-A3].
- Creation of new target language term in a special field [B1, B2].

Three out of the six also commented on the differences in the interaction between an in-house translator and a freelance translator based on their own experiences of both. They did not see the freelancer to expert relationship as any way interactive at all. This is

analogous to the findings Rogers reported in similar interactions (see chapter 2.1).

4.2 Initiation of the Interaction and the Channels Used

All of the interviewees used email as a primary communication tool – even in company B, where the physical distance between translators and experts is only a few meters. In some cases the translators initiated the interaction by phone, text chat or by visiting the office of the expert [especially A2 and B1] to ask confirmation for a choice of term. Generally, the interviewees sent a longer email with the context in the message or attached as a Word document, with the problematic parts clearly marked. Usually the email was sent at the end of the translation project with all the questions included. All interviewees stressed the importance of keeping the message clear and concise in order to save the expert's and their own time.

"I prefer contacting experts in writing since it makes explaining the problem so that they understand my [linguistic] viewpoint faster and easier." [A3, B2]

Five of the interviewees always include their own translation suggestions to the messages if they have them. They cite three reasons for this:

1) helping in contextualizing the problem;
2) expediting the process by signaling to the expert what they already know about the problem;
3) maintaining an image of a linguistic professional capable of understanding the source text and also the concept in the target language.

"I don't like to send just the question without first trying thoroughly to find an answer and then presenting this research to the expert to validate my suggestions." [A4]
"I never leave the source language term [even if I am not sure of my choice] in the translation, because I don't trust the translation skills of the experts', I fear they would come up with a translation worse than my suggestions. They are experts of the substance, not of language nor translation." [B2]

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This approach can be seen as an evidence of having 'a feel for the game': in company A, translators support the experts, who are often also the translation project leaders. These interviewees try to provide the translations with minimal workload for the experts. Yet, at the same time, they maintain their own habitus as an expert, a professional among other professionals, which carries social capital in the company and in the field of translation.

One interviewee [B1] seldom provided their own suggestions when they contacted an external expert for the first time. The main reason he gave was not to restrict experts' thinking when they were answering B1's question. B1 also noted that in some cases some external expert, new to the role may adopt an overtly strong objection to some of the suggestions B1 presents by email. This opposition B1 credits to mistrust of translators as professionals or to misunderstanding of the role of the expert (a validator of terminology, not the language) and also the experts' adherence to foreign language terminology, which is wide-spread in some technical domains in Finnish: "Some engineers have difficulties in understanding why there must be a Finnish term in the translation, when 'nobody' uses it." B1 prefers to move discussion of such items to translation review meetings company B organizes at the end of translation projects. In these meetings, B1 is usually successful in explaining why target language terminology is preferable and in convincing the external expert new to the role that B1 is a linguistic professional capable of translating domain specific texts. With internal experts and external experts familiar with B1 he usually provides the suggestions during the first contact.

According to B1, this approach seeks to avoid any negative consequences stemming from a struggle between a translator, who is responsible for the translation quality, and experts who do not understand their own role in the project or do not trust the expertise of the translator. The negative consequences were feedback sent to the project leader and the extra time that was needed to discuss the issues and feedback in the review meetings.

Risku *et al*. (2016: 244) have described similar situations from the viewpoint of centrality in translation networks where some of the in-house linguists studied are socially more active with the experts, while some interact with the experts only when they require information and have voluntarily remained in peripheral roles.

Active interaction may increase the social capital the translator has at the company in the form of personal networks and knowledge of current and possible future translation projects gained during the

interactions. A1 and A2 state this as a major reason for contacting experts face-to-face during and outside of translation projects.

4.3 Problems in Translator – Expert Interaction

> "An in-house translator should be a person who can in their mind assume the role of the project lead expert, understand their situation and what they need [from the translator], the pressures they are working under." [A2]

This seems to reflect Robinson's idea quoted earlier (see chapter 2) of translators projecting themselves into the habitus of an expert. Several of the interviewees who have experience with experts from various backgrounds describe differences between experts in regard to abilities to co-operate in problem solving. For example, those with a legal background are seen by the interviewees [A3, B1] as more able to grasp the validity of, and motives behind, questions regarding linguistic or translation problems in a text and are more able to take part in an interaction that advances problem solving; whereas experts with "technical" backgrounds often advise the translator "just read the text and translate it" [A3, B1].

> "When I was working as a freelancer, engineers might brush my questions aside and tell me to just translate the words that are there." [A3]

Interviewees speculate that this is due to the way language is employed in the legal profession, as a tool that is used to perform actions [A1, A3], whereas experts from engineering backgrounds "deal more with numbers" [A3]. This research sample is too small to draw any conclusions, but this may merit more research into co-operative situations between translators and experts to gain knowledge for the training of translators to better understand how to co-operate with experts from different backgrounds.

> "It may be because in the legal profession splitting hairs or defining concepts carefully is just as important as in translation. They value the nuances and how concepts are expressed, just as much as translators do". [A3]

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The difficulties in interaction can be interpreted as lack of 'feel for the game' on both sides, the translators' or the experts', depending on what is considered 'the field', whether it is a translator creating a target language document with the help of an expert (field is co-operative) or exhibiting domain expertise with the language used by the professionals (linguist or non-linguist) among themselves (field is restricted to either of the parties).

4.4 Quality of the Interaction Between Translators and Experts

The interviewees reported only very few cases where information they received from an internal expert was not usable either directly as text in the translation, or indirectly in helping to solve the problem. They brought up one of the issues also reported by Rogers (2006) in chapter 2.1, namely the importance of learning how to phrase questions in order to receive information quickly.

> "Sometimes they understand right away, sometimes you need to explain, especially if the question is not closely tied to the context." [A2]
> "Often when they don't understand the question, they start explaining the situation from their viewpoint, that of a viewpoint of a legal expert, which is significantly different to mine when I'm looking for an answer to a situation where the languages don't match one-for-one." [A3]
> "To a legal expert the target document is sort of an artefact that is used to perform things, they look at the whole thing" [A1]
> "Sometimes expert's replies are not about the subject matter or terminology that I asked about, but about linguistic aspects, often about phrases that must be used because the document type of the translation requires them." [B1]

According to interviewees, the experts approach the translation problems and translated texts from their own specialist subject field and habitus, not a translator or linguistic. Especially in situations where the translator is not the dominant actor, the translators must adapt their requests for information in such a way that the expert is able to understand the request and provide the information needed accurately. This also usually makes the interaction quicker, which is valued in both companies where time pressures are present.

"There have been a few cases where I didn't end up using the term I got [from an expert], this was because the source language concept for which I was looking for a translation for became clearer only later in the text." [B2]

In some cases, the request for information might be made prematurely, in which case the question or suggested translation might be formulated in a way that does not succeed in eliciting information that is helpful. If the information cannot be adapted later, this means that the translator will have wasted his or her own and the expert's time (this is also reflected in Roger's remarks in chapter 2.1).

5. Conclusion

Although this paper did not examine translator education in itself, its implications are certainly significant for translator training. In order to acquire the skills and ability to interact with subject domain experts with different habitus, students could benefit from authentic (or simulated) interaction with experts in their fields and the games played on them. The goal of such training should be to foster a translator, whose habitus is a combination of linguistic expert and a professional capable of interaction with experts in other domains, i.e. a T-shaped expert. Since such skills take time to develop, and it is not feasible to integrate cross-disciplinary interaction with subject matter experts of all specialised fields included in the training curriculum. At Finnish universities, for instance, these often include translation of technical, legal, business and medical LSP texts (Pakkala-Weckström and Eskelinen forthcoming). A step in the right direction would be to build contacts with those fields that are most likely to be relevant to students once they graduate and identify the types of projects and exercises where the learning outcomes are easily transferable to other fields. This could benefit all stakeholders, be they students of all fields, teachers, university departments, and so forth. Developing this approach clearly warrants further research and pilot project studies.

Throughout the interviews there were also indications that the experts in different domains approached the translators' contacts in various ways. Although the population sample of this study does not allow for generalized conclusions, this finding does merit research into co-operative situations between translators and experts in order to gain

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insight into translator training in order to better understand how to interact with experts from different backgrounds.

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