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Changes in the Field of Translation Project Management: Findings of a Longitudinal Ethnographic Study

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Introduction

This working paper presents a longitudinal field study focused on changes in the field of translation project management. The study was carried out in an Austrian translation agency where we observed the translation processes and interviewed the employees and management staff in 2001, 2007 and 2014. In the following, we describe the theoretical background, the methods and the results of the comparison of the data from the three data collection points relating to the observed translation processes and challenges in the translation workplace, and the way the study participants thought and felt about these challenges.

Traditionally, the focus of Translation Studies has been placed on translations, i.e. the products of translating. Instead, our research is concentrated on translators and translating, i.e. the actors/agents and processes involved in translation. In Andrew Chesterman's terms (2009), our research would fall under the sub-branch of Translation Studies known as *Translator Studies* where translation is examined from a sociological, cognitive and cultural perspective.

1. Extended Translation

This study is part of the research project "Extended Translation – Socio-cognitive translation processes in the workplace", which was financed by the Austrian Science Fund FWF (P26332-G23) and which uses ethnographic methods to analyse processes in the workplace in the field of translation.

The project's theoretical point of view is not merely a cognitive, but a *sociocognitive* one. We call it *Extended Translation* for the following reasons:

- The project aimed to broaden the concept of a cognitive translation process: translating is not only a mental process inside the translator's brain. The body is an integral part of translation, as are social and physical interactions, and the use of various tools as cognitive support.
- Over the last few decades, translation process research has focused on the strategies translators use when producing target language texts. The importance of translation project management has been emphasised, yet there are few empirical studies on this topic.
- Similarly, the dynamics of changes have rarely been studied as the detection of changes requires extensive longitudinal studies, spanning several years.

The study is based on the conceptions of situated cognition and distributed cognition from cognitive science and the sociological concept of social interactions as a dynamic of networks (actor-network theory). From this sociocognitive point of view, we think, we learn, and we solve problems not only by using our sensory memory, but also by moving our bodies and monitoring our surroundings to help us understand better. We also modify our surroundings to support problem solving: we arrange our workspaces in a certain way and we use tools to solve problems. Likewise, our surroundings and tools influence how we act, resulting in mutual interaction. Thus, if we wish to understand human actions and problem solving, we need to pay attention to the human body and its surroundings. It is not insignificant where, when and with what tools a translator, project manager (PM) or client works. Likewise, the people with or for whom the translation is done play an important role since their decisions regarding the translation processes (e.g. choice of translator), ideas of what the processes should look like and expectations of the final product can influence the translators' actions and decision-making processes.

Edwin Hutchins, developer of the distributed cognition theory, examined and portrayed an airline cockpit as a single cognitive unit that consists of the pilots and various technological devices (see Hutchins 1995). The information and actions of the cockpit system are thus both in its technological environment and in the minds and bodies of the individuals. We base our own study on this representation and ask: are PMs also similarly piloting translation processes? Are they likewise dependent on technology and other actors?

Our theoretical basis also draws on network theory, especially Schweizer's (1996) dynamic network model and Latour's (1987) actor-network theory (see also Risku, Windhager & Apfelthaler 2013). Both Schweizer and Latour emphasise that in empirical research, in addition to cognition and behaviour, one must also take into consideration the tools, surroundings and social networks involved, as well as the timeline, i.e. the changes in all these factors.

2. Social aspects in Translation Studies: Networks and Agency

In Translation Studies, the importance of action networks was already emphasised in the 1980s by Holz-Mänttari (1984). In Translation Studies, networks have been studied from the beginning of the 21st century. Buzelin (2005) states that translations are "collective constructions", due to the various different factors that influence and are involved in their completion. Prunč (2012) describes translation agencies as new power holders in the networks of the translation industry. Abdallah & Koskinen (2007) and Olohan & Davitti (2015) emphasise the importance of trust in the increasingly long production chains involved in translation projects.

In today's translation production networks, *agency*, or the "willingness and ability to act" (Kinnunen & Koskinen 2010), is shifting from the individual (the translator) to the network. An ever-increasing number of different factors influence what the end product – the translation – looks like. Agency is also shifting from the individual to technology, for technology has a similarly significant influence on what a translation looks like once completed. No doubt, this transition of agency or influence has significant consequences for the translation industry, e.g. what the working processes are, what the work itself consists of and who does the work and why.

In 2001, Austermühl wrote: “Perhaps more than other professionals, translators are feeling the long-term changes brought about by the information age. The snowballing acceleration of available information, the increase in intercultural encounters, and the continuing virtualization of private and business life have resulted in drastic and lasting changes in the way translators work.” How has this changed since 2001? Our research project aims specifically to find out what has happened in translation project management since 2001.

3. Methodological approach

A common methodological approach in contemporary translation process research is empirical laboratory observation using such methods as thinking aloud, interviews, keylogging, screen recording, eye-tracking and EEGs. This research project, however, uses field research methods – participatory observation and interviews. The leading assumption behind this choice of methods is that many of the factors affecting translation processes can only be detected and identified by studying translation in an authentic work environment. By taking an ethnographic stance, we also wish to emphasise the participant’s (translator’s or translation PM’s) view of their own work and actions.

The study focuses on how the processes, challenges, networks and tools of the work have changed over the years. The data was gathered using participatory observation in 2001 (four weeks), 2007 (one week) and 2014 (four weeks), and in-depth interviews, which each lasted for about one hour. The field notes and audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed in their entirety for the analysis.

4. Empirical setting

The agency investigated in this case study manages translation projects involving predominantly technical texts for businesses. Their clients are primarily small and medium-sized enterprises.

As could be observed, this translation agency works on the one hand with the customers and their various departments and actors and, on the other hand, with translators and other translation agencies. The agency thus works as an intermediary between customers and the (sub-)contractors who deliver translation products. The agency also works in cooperation with a language technology company. This abstract description is, however, an oversimplification of the agency’s overall operations; it neither represents the actual complexity of the projects nor of the network the agency is part of.

5. Results of the first follow-up study: Changes between 2001 and 2007

The results of our study suggest that the most significant changes in the organisation between 2001 and 2007 were the growth of the company, increased focus on its core operations (i.e. translation project management), the use of a project management software, and new requirements for recruiting translators (Risku et al. 2013). These changes are briefly described below.

1. While in 2001 there were only 4 people employed in the agency, in 2007 the team comprised of 9 employees. This growth of the company had brought with it a new level of hierarchy. In addition to the managing director and PMs, some employees worked as team leaders or specialised in certain tasks. The office spaces also grew. Moving from an open-plan office into a larger office with four

individual rooms had an effect on internal communication, resulting in more internal emails and phone calls.

2. In contrast to what could be observed in 2001, in 2007, the employees no longer did translations themselves. All translation had been outsourced. This increased the importance of freelancers, external proofreaders and other translation agencies. In addition, the PMs could not use their knowledge of language and culture as much as they had done previously. Instead, they were more focused on project management tasks, which are less dependent on language and culture skills.

3. The implementation of a new project management system increased digital communication and reduced the number of languages used in communication as correspondence was handled solely in English and German. In addition, paper copies of texts were printed out far less frequently and the use of translation technology, including translation memories and terminology management tools, had increased. In 2001, many physical and electronic tools were still being used in the office. In 2007, the use of physical tools had predictably declined and the use of electronic equipment had become more focused on certain core tools. The only significant new tool was the project management software.

4. The increased use and importance of technology brought a new challenge: how to make sure that new translators are able to use the technology or learn how to use it quickly? The agency decided to give commissions only to translators who have their own web pages and participate in translators' online communities in the hope of finding translators with strong media literacy skills.

These changes led to the unification and digitalization of the company's processes, the specialisation of the actors and an increase in the importance of external networks, and can be seen as typical characteristics of a computer-aided network society.

6. Results of the second follow-up study: Changes between 2007 and 2014

Between 2007 and 2014, the following changes were observed: the company had grown and expanded their operations, their processes had diversified, the use of tools had become more fragmented, the employees had become more specialised, and the customer base had become more differentiated. The clients, external proofreaders and proofreading processes were constantly monitored. The changes can be described as follows.

1. *Growth and diversification*: Company management staff told us that at a certain point in this period (2007-2014) they had decided that they did not want the company to grow any further. However, they noticed that growth was unavoidable, and the timing of the 3rd observation period expansion was a conscious and established strategy.

- The number of PMs had increased to 13 and the language of the company meetings had changed to English – at least whenever there was a non-German speaking information and communication technology (ICT) expert present.
- The ICT expert was one of the new specialised jobs. Similarly, the management of contractors (i.e. the recruitment and evaluation of external translators and translation agencies) had been made the sole responsibility of one specific employee. For the first time, the company also now had an employee focused specifically on sales and purchasing who made contact with potential customers.

- In many interviews the participants mentioned an external recruiter who, for a number of years now, had been responsible for the recruitment and evaluation of new employees.
- In quantitative terms, the company had grown in many ways. Their turnover, customer base, market share and office spaces had all increased between 2007 and 2014.
- The scope of the services offered by the company had also expanded. Previously, they could be seen to work in specialised fields of translation but in 2014 they were offering a variety of services, covering various different forms of translation and interpreting. Specific examples include localization of software and advertisements, audiovisual translation (subtitles, voice-overs), translation of legal documents and offering training in intercultural communication.

2. *Flexibilisation of processes*: Between 2007 and 2014, in line with the diversification in the customer base and the team of the employed PMs, the company processes had become more flexible to suit the different customers and employees' work preferences. This is different from the period between 2001 and 2007 where the work processes had become centred around a single standard. The projects were now carried out, for instance, using different file storages, websites and proofreading/spell-checking methods with specific PMs managing the projects of certain clients. These changes were reflected on and justified in comments made by the PMs such as, "I think with the customer's mind", "I am not just a mover of texts" and "abnormal projects are typical". And, "this customer wants it that way", "we are not allowed to do this and that in these projects". Different PMs also partially used different software, according to their personal preferences. This is connected to the next change.

3. *Fragmentation in the use of tools*: a remarkable number of individual software packages were now used at different stages of a single translation project (depending on the client, language, text, PM). There were various specialised software possibilities for different tasks, such as terminology management, translator queries management and quality checks. The company also had an intranet ("our Wikipedia"), various different databases (for clients, contractors, passwords etc.), and a software programme for recording working hours. The different tasks, both of administrative and project management nature, and the single sub-processes required the use of various software. To give an example, quality management and control – the measures a PM takes to check a text after receiving it from a translator and before they send it to a proofreader – required a combination of various different programmes, which each check only one part of the text, e.g. the terminology. There are various proofreading methods too, ranging from tracked changes in a MS Word file to a web-based platform, where the changes are made according to a specific automated workflow procedure.

Yet, even in 2014, not all tools were digital. Each PM had a variety of different notepads, calendars and papers at their disposal. Occasionally, PMs also used printouts, such as agendas for meetings, so there were still certain actions that were not digitalised, such as issuing reminders, prioritizing tasks and achieving and maintaining an overall view of the projects.

It is worth pointing out how company management staff reacted when we told them about our initial observations regarding the diversification of their processes. We had observed that the increase in the number of different ways to carry out the process and in the use of tools had also increased flexibility and context-specificity. Management staff was surprised by this observation and stressed

that their processes were standardised (they stated that everything had to be done in accordance with the standard process) and that every PM used the same software packages, which were installed on all their computers. They doubted the possibility of flexibility. To them, it was clearly a negative and undesirable feature.

4. *Specialisation of employees*: In 2014, the employees had become more specialised in certain customers' projects and in particular special fields. Every employee had thus 1) their own customer group to whom they paid regular customer visits, and 2) their own special fields and topics on which they attended conferences and received further training. In addition, two employees and the two managing directors formed the company's strategic team, which met on a regular basis.

5. *Differentiation of customers*: There had also been changes in the customer base. Between 2001 and 2007, the PMs' views and experiences regarding the client base were relatively uniform: you could not expect much from the customers; neither did they wish or have time to play any significant role in the management of translation projects. The customers needed to be constantly and tactfully informed e.g. why translators required more information in order to carry out their tasks. By now, the client base had become differentiated meaning that different clients' customer maturity could be evaluated on a scale from 0 to 100 per cent. According to the PMs, clients have very different expectations, they reacted to questions differently, and it was difficult to decide how much information a specific customer required.

Some customers, for example, were "highly mature" and had "the most highly developed processes". They demanded very specific, closely regulated practices and tools tailored to their needs. They might also ask for the company's language technology partners to develop specific software solutions for them. This type of customer also wanted to audit the translation agency on site before agreeing to work together.

Meanwhile, there were still also customers who saw translation and the use of different languages in general to be an impractical burden. Many customers were not familiar with the technology of the field, and could still be impressed by a translation memory discount. These customers usually did not respond to queries, they were surprised if the translation agency asked them for something (such as suggestions for terms), they did not send source texts when agreed, or would change the translation without any noticeable reason. Since working with such clients was often difficult and time consuming, the translation agency often attempted to meet them on-site at the customer's location so that the PM would have a chance to inform them how translation projects can be carried out smoothly. This is the opposite of how the previously described highly mature customers operate: instead of the client coming to audit the translation agency on site, the agency had to go and visit the client.

6. There were also *changes in the translators' roles*. Much – even more than before – was expected of the translators before they were even given a test translation. The translator had to provide references from their customers, they had to be native speakers of the target language, live in the target country, have knowledge of certain CAT tools and have an academic degree in languages. In addition, the translator had to have work experience and be able to secure an external revision of their translation complete by a colleague. All this information, as well as feedback on the translator's work, was stored in a contractor database.

Yet the situation was the same as in 2001 and 2007. The PMs were very loyal to the translators and strived to negotiate the best possible terms with the customers. They worked to maintain a good, close relationship with their regular translators and discuss more than just work and projects. As one PM put it, "I address the person behind it all". The PMs were appreciative if a translator had noticed something important they might have missed and they gave the translators a lot of positive feedback.

However, the translators had become more invisible and faceless than before. Previously, there was equal focus on the customers and the contractors. Communication was similar between both groups and the agency, there were shared moments of joy and occasional friction and disagreements. Now the focus had clearly shifted to the customers and the customers' proofreaders, in both positive and negative ways.

This may be due to two changes:

1. The regular translators and translation agencies were operating based on a familiar routine so there was no need for additional communication. Both the contractors and the agency had more experience in the field so possible problems did not occur quite so often. The agency was also able to give the contractors a more comprehensive package for each translation project, complete with required texts, translation memories and software.
2. Previously, every PM was responsible for all communication with the translators and translation agencies within a project, including problem solving and giving feedback. Only in special cases were problems referred to the managing director. Now if problems came up, the PM contacted a specific colleague who was responsible for managing the contractors (translators and agencies). Thus, crisis communication with the translators was the responsibility of one specific employee and no longer part of the PMs' work.

7. Work challenges in 2001 vs. in 2014

In this section, we shall first observe what kind of challenges PMs faced in 2001 and then look at the situation in 2014:

- *Cooperation* with the customers was already an important and difficult challenge in 2001. The managing director told us that, for instance, terminological consistency was important, but that depended on the client. In the end, it was the customer who decided.
- *Research skills* were also considered important. The PMs emphasised that they believe that translators are able to search for information and find answers to questions.
- The greatest challenge was the *quality and inaccuracy of the source texts*. One PM sometimes felt like telling the customer that their reference material was garbage. Of course, this never happened as the PM attempted to keep communication friendly and diplomatic.
- The *lack of context* was seen in shortcomings such as missing pictures. For instance, when translating underwear advertisements, it was important to know what the product actually looked like.
- The quality of the texts was *dependent*, among other things, on *other texts and translations*; the customers often sent re-edited versions of the source texts, which resulted in an increased workload in terms of project management.

- Finally, the continuous *transfer of files* from one software to another and handling of files in different formats required time-consuming crosschecking. This happened even in cases where the software should have been able to convert the text flawlessly from one format to another. Even with the available technology, the texts still had to be gone through manually.

What had changed in 15 years? The company growth and changes in the technological environment had made *strategic management* and *development of the company* the most evident challenges. The management was currently expanding the agency's operations abroad, but at the same time they were aware that the future of the translation industry might be in the platform economy, i.e. web-based automation due to, for example, further digitalisation of translation management processes. "Then the three of us will just sit here and wait for the computer to beep," as the other managing director said, with mixed feelings.

The PMs emphasised how challenging the *transition from being in training as a student to working in project management* was. They could not have predicted how diverse the work was and how much it was dependent on technology.

One question which concerned both the company managers and employees was the extent to which *working methods and practices could be standardised*, and conversely how much can be left to the discretion of the employees.

Establishing new processes was often a challenge that requires patience, both within the agency and also in customers' working environments.

Cooperation was both a pleasure and a burden in the office. On one hand, it was a great source of job motivation. On the other hand, it was a source of conflict, especially during the internal handover of projects between PMs. These challenges also included the PMs' constant negotiations with clients and proofreaders, their role as mediators between the translators and proofreaders, and finding suitable ways to synchronise work with the clients.

For some clients, the *translation agency was an undesirable obligation*. They would rather have translated their own texts, but their companies had decided that all translation projects should be managed by this agency. The agency could observe this in the reluctance on the part of the client.

Communication with clients was one of the biggest challenges. We observed entire hours and days during which the PMs concentrated on thinking about what to write to the customer. They drafted emails, rewrote them, and consulted their colleagues to find the clearest, most correct and diplomatic expressions.

Sometimes *translation quality and the flow of translation processes* caused problems.

Software did not always work as expected. Performing one step with a specific program often required modifying the file format, which the PMs found frustrating, especially when it did not work smoothly.

On the one hand, *tight schedules* resulted in a positive surge in activities with everyone pulling together to finish a project in time. On the other hand, the schedules caused nervousness, stress and fatigue, especially since the PMs' success also depended on the customers, the translators/agencies,

as well as the technology. Software incompatibilities, crashes and slow performance were noticeable causes of stress. As so many factors had to be borne in mind at the same time, it was a great challenge to achieve and maintain an overall view of the situation.

Summary

As a simplified summary, we would argue that in 2007 the translation agency offered one service and worked according to one standardised process. The agency had one common task, which required one area of expertise. Most customers were of a certain profile, as were the translators. One specific translation management software package was used. In contrast, in 2014 the agency offered different services and carried out various processes. There were various different tasks and different areas of expertise. The clients and their requests were also highly diverse. Perhaps the (external) translators, too, had diverged into various distinct categories. This is, however, difficult to ascertain since our analysis is based on observations in the agency and interviews with the PMs only and the PMs now devoted more attention to the customers and proofreaders than to the translators. In any case, the increase in the number and use of software programmes and applications had grown almost exponentially. Consequently, the PMs' work had become more customer specific, time sensitive, complex and multifaceted.

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