

Hot Topic in Translation Studies: Workplace Studies

But what about the emic perspective? An ethnographic approach to investigating translation expertise



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The notion of translation expertise has been discussed in Translation Studies since at least the 1980s when Holz-Mänttari (1984) described translation as an action realised by an expert (*‘Expertenhandeln’*). Since then, a significant amount of research, particularly within Translation Process Research (TPR) and Cognitive Translation and Interpreting Studies (CTIS), has been conducted to determine what kinds of ‘expertise’, ‘competence’ or ‘skills’ are required in the field of translation.

To date, the majority of research on translation expertise has been carried out in controlled, experimental settings using methods such as think-aloud protocols, eye-tracking, keystroke logging, or screen logging. Although this approach provides valuable insights into, for example, some of the indicators that differentiate novices from experienced translators, it only tells half the story. It takes on an etic perspective, examining translation expertise mainly from the researchers’ view. But what does translation expertise actually mean to translators themselves? How is it perceived and conceptualised by working professionals in the language industry? And how is it practised in the authentic context of their workplaces? In order to approach such emic perspectives, we need ethnographic research methods that encompass social, performative, and situative aspects, thereby broadening the limited notion of expertise as merely a system of individual mental processes (Risku and Schlager 2022; Schlager and Risku, forthcoming).

The predominant benefits of this approach lie in its high authenticity, data contextualisation, and expansion of the research scope to include the social, material, and institutional elements that influence translators and their translation processes in the workplace (Ehrensberger-Dow 2014: 366; see also Risku et al. 2022). These influences, along with the

myriad tasks typically undertaken by translators, can be illuminated through workplace research.

Our current project, Rethinking Translation Expertise (RETREX; funded by the Austrian Science Fund FWF) aims at exploring expertise in authentic workplace contexts. The methodologies employed are mainly rooted in ethnographic approaches, particularly cognitive ethnography. Cognitive ethnography deals with the distribution of cognition across individuals and objects, examining how it adapts to facilitate real-world activities as they unfold in natural environments (Hollan, Hutchins, and Kirsh 2000: 179).

Translation workplace research emphasises translation as an activity that surpasses the mere transfer of text from one language to another. Since translators cooperate with others and utilise various tools, it becomes imperative to investigate aspects such as the situated, collaborative, and artefact-mediated dimensions inherent in translation work. The dynamics of interaction and collaboration among diverse stakeholders emerge as pivotal factors within ethnographic approaches (see also Risku et al. 2022). Thus, a central aspect of translation workplace research is the replacement of single texts or isolated processes with real-life workplace environments as the primary analytical units. In our case, these include settings such as language service agencies, in-house translation departments within companies or public service institutions, and virtual translation networks. This shift in focus allows us to explore the day-to-day, context-dependent, and situational work of translators, including their diverse tasks, interactions, and working conditions.

In our current work on the RETREX project, we aim to capture different dimensions of lived expertise through a combination of participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. We have employed an ethnographic, multi-case research design, delving deeply into a few selected translation workplaces. To date, we have collected a range of data, including observation protocols, interview transcripts, websites, and biographical data of participants. In total, we have spent 34 days observing (134.5 hours in total) and 13.5 hours conducting 12 interviews in four different cases. We are currently preparing our focus group interviews, which will be held in winter 2023/24.

So far, we have experienced keen interest and even enthusiasm from practitioners when it comes to reflecting on their experience. The translation and interpreting (T&I) professionals we have observed and interviewed wholeheartedly welcomed us to their offices and other operational sites and were eager to demonstrate how they tackle challenges, including those posed by current societal, economic, and technological disruptions. Approaching their emic

perspective enriches scholarly debates and contributes to the relevance of academic research for the life and work of translators, interpreters, and other involved parties, including clients and readers.

While it is true that qualitative field research can sometimes feel like a lonely endeavour amidst TPR/CTIS conferences and workshops that focus predominantly on experimental laboratory research, it is also important to acknowledge the diversity of approaches in our field. Each such approach contributes its own unique insights and advances our collective understanding of T&I practices and processes. Embracing a variety of research methodologies ensures a more comprehensive view of the socio-cognitive complexities and environmental interdependencies in T&I, ultimately benefitting the field as a whole.

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- N.B.* This research was funded in whole by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) [P 33132-G]. For the purpose of open access, the authors have applied a CC BY public copyright licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.