

# Working paper

## What is a good translator in organizations? – A prescriptive perspective.

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### Abstract

Even though the concept of translation has been widely used in organization theory and the agency of the translator has been acknowledged, there haven't been studies that focus on the prescriptive aspects such as what is a good translator? Nevertheless, the concepts of translation quality and competences indicate that a translator can be more or less competent. In order to explore what is a good translator in organizations, this paper draws on translation studies as the theoretical frame and uses the concepts of translation quality and competences to analyze 64 interviews about their organizational strategy. The interviews were conducted with middle managers and employees from three public organizations. As expected from the theory, a good translator has certain translation competences but the empirical findings also show that the working conditions play a crucial role in order to create a good translation. The results show that a good translator can identify the basic idea in the strategy, is able to translate the abstract concepts in the strategy document to concrete concepts in their own context and can handle the ambiguity in these abstract

concepts. Since an organization has many texts, the translator also has to be able to distinguish the source text from other texts in the organizations that are similar to the source text. The individual competences cannot stand-alone since the working conditions can constrain or support the ability to use these competences. The translator can affect these working conditions by facilitating a process that creates a common language. This paper contributes to translation theory by adding the prescriptive aspects to the existing descriptions of how actors translate in organisations.

## **Introduction**

Translation as a concept has widely been used within organization science. Czarniawska and Sevón used it to describe how an idea is translation into an object, which is translated into actions (1996, 2005). Actor Network Theory uses translation to explain the outcome of a negotiation process (Callon, 1986, 2004; Latour, 1987). Scandinavian institutional theory uses it to explain how ideas spread and change in this process (Røvik, 1998, 2007, 2016; Boxenbaum, 2006; Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009; Mueller & Whittle, 2011). Røvik (2007) has also described translation competences and even though the literature agrees upon the agency of the translator, there haven't been a lot of studies in this area. It might be because the sociological use of the concept translation is used as synonyms for transformation or negotiations. It means that the studies focus more on describing these translations than investigate the prescriptive understanding of translation as we know it from translation studies (Pym, 1990; Nord, 1991, 2002; Munday, 2008) that have concepts like translation errors and translation quality. From this perspective, it is possible to make poor

translations as well as translation errors. Following Røvik's call for developing translation theory (20016), this paper draws on translation studies, which has a prescriptive understanding of translation, since it focus on how translators should translate a texts. However, the sociological parts of translation theory assume that managers translate per se in the social settings and the linguistic parts describe the normative aspects of translation. By drawing on both mind-sets in an empirical setting, we can explore what is a good translator in an organization, because the social settings, the texts and the normative perspective are including. This is done through a case study from three public organizations.

### **The good translator in organizations in theory**

Within organization studies there are several uses of the concept translation. Wæraas & Nielsen (2016) have three theoretical perspectives: actor network theory, knowledge-based perspective, Scandinavian institutionalism. Scheuer, (2006) identifies eight different uses of the concept of translation: actor network, translation of ideas, editing, imitation, diffusion, action networks, communication and association. Actor network theory uses it as the result of a negotiation process within a network (Callon, 1980, 1986; Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005). Røvik uses translation to describe how an idea travels from organization to organization. Czarniawska and Sevón used it to describe how an idea is translation into an object, which is translated into actions (1996, 2005). These studies are descriptive. However, Røvik draws on translation studies, which traditional was research within literature science, but now is considered to be cross-disciplinary because it is applied within philosophy, discourse theory, history and organizational theory (Munday, 2009).

Translation studies can be divided into four schools that focus on different aspects of translation (Pym, 2010): the words, the culture, the function and the power. The main problem of describing the good translator is who is able to define the good translator and the good translation. Overall, a good translation is one who creates good translations, which don't have translation errors. The four perspectives within translation studies have on-going discussions regarding this, because the four schools stress different aspects that are important when a source text has to be translated to a target text. The main discussion is concentrated about the theme fidelity or as Nord later address it, loyalty (2002). The linguistic perspective wants the translator to be loyal towards the original text and translate word by word because they assume that it is possible to find equivalent words between the source language and the target language (Munday, 2008). On the other hand, the cultural perspective focuses on the differences between languages and cultures (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990; Lefevere, 1992; Katan 2004). In that sense they add to the linguistic perspective by showing that it is not always possible to find equivalent words between languages because the same words can have different meaning depending of the language or the culture. The functional perspective argues that the loyalty must be about the function of the text, which can be defined as the author's intention but also that the translator has to take the client, author and target receivers into account (Vermeer, 1989; Nord, 1997, 2002, 2012; Reiss, 2000) The ideological perspective differs from the three others because this perspective includes the social by studying power related to translations and translators (Niranjana, 1992; Venuti, 1995; Maier, 2007; Hermans, 2014). This perspective reminds us that no text, translation or translator is neutral but has an inherent ideology.

Loyalty is still the focus, but where the other three perspectives study what to be loyal towards, this perspective studies the consequences of loyalty or lack of thereof.

Translation studies have a prescriptive understanding of translation, because it is possible to make faulty translations of texts which most have experienced if they have used translation tools like Google translator. Translation studies point to three factors, which contribute to a good translation (House, 1997, 2001; Reiss, 2000; Gile, 2009; Gamier & Doorslaer, 2010; Drugan, 2013) The first is the text, the second is the translator and the third is the working condition for the translator. All three affects the quality of the translation. The text can be easy or hard to translate depending on the relationship between the original text and the context it has to be translated to. The difficulties can be caused by language and context. Languages change over time but also that some languages have words that don't exist in other languages. Secondly, to be able to understand a text, you also have to be able understand the context where the text was produced. Some contexts are so different so it is hard to produce a good translation because a translator cannot just translate the words, but also have to translate the meaning of the words, which can differ depending on the context. The second factor is the translator, which has to have certain translation competences. The competences are knowledge about languages and cultures. Røvik (2007) adds four translation virtues; patience, bravery, creativity and strength to these competences, since translation in organization differ from a pure literal translation. The third source for translation quality is the working conditions. The pace, deadlines, the possibility for feedback, access to the author and translation tools such as other

texts also affect the quality of the translation. These are the conditions for making a good or poor translation, but what about the translation itself?

Even though there are discussions about the loyalty in translations, there is a standard to assess a translation. The quality of the translation is identified by the quantity and quality of the translation errors and can be divided into three groups: a good translation, an acceptable translation and a faulty translation (House, 1997). A translation error is defined according to the perspective where the linguistic and the functional are most explicit about this (Hansen, 2010). The linguistic perspective defines an error as lack of equivalence between the original and the translation. The functional perspective would define it as an error if the translation didn't fulfil its function or didn't live up to the receiver's expectations. This way to evaluate translations leaves room for the many correct way to translate. This changes the discussion to what is wrong instead of what is right, because depending on where the loyalty lies, the emphasis on different parts can be different. This is further complicated by the social settings, where the client, who pays for the translation, the author, critics and receivers also have opinions about how to translate. The translator has to balance these different demands while staying legitimate. This is not an easy task, which is the reason for the Italian proverb with translator and traitor (*Traduttore, traditore*)(Eco, 2003) because the translator can easily be suspected for treason from one party that doesn't agree on the translation.

## **Method**

In order to explore what is a good translator in an organization, I did 64 interviews in two municipalities and one university college. The authors of the strategy documents were included in the 64 interviews. All three organizations have more than 2.000 employees. 34 of the interviews were conducted with middle managers and 30 of them were with employees in two areas of each organization. The areas were chosen based on the criteria of max variation. The areas had to be different according to professions and responsibility to ensure that we studied the most extreme parts of the organization. I then interviewed the managers and their employees, which in translation terms would be the translators and the receivers. The interviewees were semi-structured focusing on a strategy and divided into three themes. Their own role in the organization, the content of the strategy and how they use it. The focus was on their own experiences of what is a good strategy and the good strategy processes. They were asked to give examples of their strategy practices in order to explore possible mechanism of what constitutes a good translator, a good translation and good working conditions. The authors of the strategies were also interviewed about their intentions with the text and how the text should be understood. Even though translation studies describe the different aspects, it was assumed that translations of organizational texts such as strategy documents differed from translating literal texts such as Harry Potter because there exist translation tools such as dictionaries but it is unclear which tools translators in organization use in order to produce a translation. To be able to analyze this, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed in Nvivo using mixed coding (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, I coded theoretical to analyze what is a good

translation and translator. Second, I used grounding coding, to analyze the parts that the theoretical coding couldn't capture such as the organizational settings. I used this to analyze the three factors that have an impact on the translation quality, the text, the translator and the working conditions but also could include the organization settings that the theory doesn't address. The main challenge was to identify what is a good translation, and who could assess it as so. In the coding, I divided the managers up in two groups: those who found it easy to translate and those who found it difficult. I then analysed what the two groups' employees had said and compared this with the statements from the authors in order to find any patterns. So the definition of a good translator emerged from combining the statements from the authors, the receivers and comparing them to what the authors had said.

### **The strategy documents**

The strategies in questions were both similar and different. In organization A it was the organizational strategy called "Make an impact on the world" where the organization want to impact its surroundings. In organization B it was a horizontal strategy called "Citizenship and co-management" that wants to include the citizens in problem solving. In organization C it was as professional strategy relevant for schools, kindergartens and after-school care called "The inclusion strategy". They were all similar in that way that they indicated a new way of doing things and redefining the role of the involved organization.

### **Analysis: translation in practise**

The baseline was made by the authors, who described the intention with the text, and how they think it should be understood. In organization A the intention was to change the whole strategy framework. They went from a very detailed and KPIs driven thinking that forced everyone to deliver on specific targets to a concept what allowed local flexibility in order to achieve the four targets that were in the spirit of the organization's values. In organization B the purpose was to change the mindset of the organization and find new ways to solve old problems. Because the municipality needs to collaborate with citizens to solve these problems and empower the citizens, instead of ruling them. In organization C the inclusion strategy was made because there was too many bad experiences of putting children and young ones in special care. It was both expensive and was counter-productive. They made some experiments where they put children in normal classes instead of special classes and compared the results. The children got a better quality of life and the municipality saved money. So, they decided to make an inclusion strategy to expand the scope of this thinking. It was also in line with the governmental strategy that said that 96 percent of all kids should be included in normal classes.

### **The texts and their translatability**

The translatability of the strategies affects the quality of the translation since some texts are harder to translate than others. In the university college, the strategy consists of four targets: New learning methods, focus on the private sector as a partner, engagement with the community and to become a more flexible organization. The managers agree that the strategy is a good match for

the organization. They compare it to the former strategy and agree it is better match because it gives more freedom to local solutions, since the former had a lot of KPIs, which was considered to limit the local autonomy. Here we see the first way to assess the translatability of the text: by comparing it to a similar text, they evaluate the functionality. In this case they find it functional. The second way to assess the translatability is by looking at the four targets. Here the managers have different views on how easy it is to translate. Both managers and employees find it easy to translate new learning methods and engagement with the community, while most of them find the focus on the private sector as a partner and a flexible organization hard to translate. Their explanation is that since it hasn't anything to do with their part of the organization, they don't know what to do about it. Apparently, most of the managers can't see how it can be translated when they don't have anything to do with the private sector or find that their organization is everything else than flexible.

In organization B the strategy document describes citizenships as a new way of for the municipality to collaborate with their citizens, but the title is citizenship and co-management. Apparently, the concepts of co-management are untranslatable because when they are asked, no one knows what it is, so they don't focus on this part. The strategy document describes seven principles for the strategy, but no one mentions these during the interviews and when asked, they can't remember them. There are three ways of understanding citizenship. The first is as a synonym for voluntaries, which is classified as negative since it is free labour and could be a threat to the employees. The second translation is a radical one, where citizenship redefines the relation between the municipality

and the citizens. The third version is citizenship as something that depends on the citizens' resources so either it is possible or either it is impossible.

In organization C the inclusion strategy is for the teachers and social workers. It has four targets: 1. All children and young ones have to experience that they are important participants in a community. 2. All children and young ones are in engaged in a group where they can develop their health, learning and wellbeing. 3. More children and young ones can develop social and professional skills in the public schools. 4. Despite different preconditions the teachers and the social workers will prepare the children to become competent and active citizens. As it was the case in organization B, the managers and employees only focus on the title, which is inclusion. They also have three translations of what it means. The first is that it is a value. This translation is seen among social workers. The second is that it is cost savings. This translation is seen among teachers. The third translation is that it is a mean to achieve cost savings and give children a better life.

### **The translator**

According to theory, the translator has to have certain translation competences and virtues. However, besides this, the data shows that translators who consider it easy to translate do four things. They understand their own relation to the organizational context, are able to create a common language, can separate the strategy from other documents that are similar to the strategy and can make the abstract specific. They also have a virtue where they are able to disconnect their own values from the strategy document.

## **Understanding the organization context**

The organizations are big, heterogeneous and cover large geographic areas. The good translators see their organization as three different units: the whole organization, which they call the corporation or by its official name, own area and their own office or institution. The organizations are divided into a large one, a medium and a small one. This enables them to have three translations of the same strategy: One for the corporation, one for their own areas such as schools, health area or certain types of education and one for their own office or institution.

The translators who say they find the strategy irrelevant or hard to work with seem to only look at their own office or institution. This goes both for the manager at the kindergarten as well as the manager from a central office from organization C. A manager from a kindergarten says, *“Those from the municipality have made this strategy. I don’t know any more about it. I think it is a stupid strategy”* Even though, the manager works in the municipality, she doesn’t identify herself with it.

## **Creating a common language**

The second thing that the good translators do, in order to make it easier to translate, is that they create a common language. The development of a strategy also leads to a certain language where main concepts are defined in a certain way. Some translators are aware that employees, who are not involved in developing the strategy, don’t develop this language, so they take care of it. One way is through a course, which is the case in organization C. All social workers

have been on a course in inclusion. On the other hand, it is only two teachers from each school who have also been attending this course. One could call it a language course in inclusion. It makes it easier for the social workers to work with inclusion because they understand each other. For the teachers it is harder, since only two at each school speak the language. So, while they think about inclusion as a mean, their colleagues consider it to be cost savings. This makes it hard to talk together and work with inclusion. The second way is through meetings at the local organisation – either at the office or institution, where the translator has the strategy on the agenda. The translator facilitates a process, where the employees learn the concepts.

### **Separating the strategy from similar texts**

The organizations have many different strategy documents and political texts. It seems like some managers are able to separate the texts from each other, while others replaces the strategy with other documents that are similar to the strategy. In organization C, inclusion is the topic in two strategy documents: the local one and a governmental strategy. Some managers consider them to be similar and since the governmental strategy came first, they only relate to that one. Other managers separate the two documents and translate them differently. The governmental strategy is about how many percent, that has to be included and the local strategy is about what it means to be included and how you can do it. Managers who confuse the two documents speak about inclusion as quantity while managers who separate the two speaks about the quality of the inclusion. This also happens in organization A and B. In A the strategy is sometimes

replaced by the educational regulation and in B it is replaced by the previous strategy of volunteerism.

### **Making the abstract specific**

Many of the targets in the strategies are abstract, and some managers are able to make them specific by translating them into their own context. They do so in several ways. The first way to do it is to dissolve the dichotomy that potential is in the main concepts of the strategy. Inclusion is an example of how they do this. Some consider inclusion to be cost savings while other consider it to be a value. The good translators dissolve the conflict by saying that it can be both. This enables them to translate the strategy to concepts that are already accepted in the local practise. The second way is that they focus on the essence of the strategy and assign a function to the strategy. By doing this they take on the translation task, instead of saying that it someone else's strategy. The third way is that they draw parallels from the past to the main concepts of the strategies. They don't talk about the strategy as something new, but as a going back to what worked in the past. The fourth way is that they invent new concepts that take care of the barriers of implementing the strategy. One example is from organization C, where the concept of citizenship is in conflict with the duty of confidentiality, which can't be imposed on a citizen that cooperate with the municipality on a delicate matter. Some managers then invented the concept of moral confidentiality, which is not a legal term, but citizens have to sign when they work with employees who have duty of confidentiality. The fifth way is to not focus on the concepts in the strategy documents but on the preconditions for working with the concepts. When concepts are introduced, they are in conflict

with others. By taking care of the preconditions, the good translators are able to actually translate the strategy documents because the barriers are minimized or gone.

### **Disconnecting oneself from the strategy**

The managers, who find it easy to translate, seem to disconnect their own values from the strategy. They are loyal towards the strategy. They don't pass a certain judgment to it but treat it as something that has to be taken seriously.

### **The working conditions**

The working conditions enable or restrict the opportunities that the translator has to translate the strategy. Some of the conditions are given while the good translator creates some of them. An example of the latter is managers that create what I would call a translation space, where they facilitate the process of creating a common language by playing with the concepts of the strategy and asking what could this mean? By doing this, they give the employees a sense of the complexity of the concepts but also that there are many ways to translate it. They are even able to do this without introducing some of the main concepts, if they know that they main concepts are considered to be negative. A common language makes it easier to translate. This also goes for areas with the same professions or homogeneous employees.

The authors of the strategy can also improve the working conditions by talking to the employees about the strategy. It seems that this raises the status of the strategy and creates attention from the employees. This can create a demand to hear more about the strategy. Managers who have many forums in the

organization seem to find it easier to translate. They have a better understanding of the organization and can discuss the strategy and its translations with a wide range of people.

### **The poor translator**

Initially, it was stated that there are many ways to make a good translation, so it is easier to identify the poor ones. This isn't the case when it comes to distinguish the good translators from the poor ones. In some ways it is the reverse description of a good translator. But there is more to it. Foremost, they don't act like a translator. They expect that the strategy document works in their context, and refuse to translate it. They either ignore the strategy or ridicule it. An example is the goal to become a flexible organization, where a manager uses this to point out that the organization is not flexible and therefore the strategy is wrong. But she forgets that the strategy describes the desired future and not the current state. They also prevent their employees from working with the strategy by replacing it with another document. Instead of working with multiple texts at the same time, they insist of only working with one at a time. Another characteristic seems to be that they define the central concepts black or white. In the case of citizenship, they believe that either a person can be a citizen or not – it depends of the person's resources. This is most clearly with citizens who have a background as an addict. The poor translator doesn't regard these persons as citizens. The good translator brings nuance to the concepts and speaks about citizens with or without a background as an addict. The poor translator doesn't understand the organization context and sees other parts of the organization as potential enemies. The consequences are that they are only loyal towards their

own office and misread the strategy documents as attempts of reducing their autonomy. A manager puts it this way: *"If only the municipality would leave us alone and not sending strategies to us, everything would be fine."* The manager works in a kindergarten in the municipality and apparently doesn't consider herself as a part of the municipality.

## **Conclusion**

By using concepts from translation studies as the analytical frame to study translations in three organizations, this paper has analysed what is a good translator in organization. The purpose was to add a prescriptive perspective to existing translation theory. The findings show four competences that translator should have in order to be able to create good translations in organization: 1. A good translator understands the organization context. They divide the organization into three parts, the large, which is whole organization, the medium, which is the areas and the small one, which is the local office or institution. This enables them to have three translations of the same strategy. 2. They are also able to separate the strategy document from similar document, while poor translators substitute the original document with another one. 3. They create a common language. This relates to the working conditions, because some managers create a translation space, which improves their working conditions for translating. 4. They are able to make the abstract specific. The findings also show that there can be added a fifth virtue to Røvik's existing four, namely the virtue of disconnect oneself from the document. The second factor that affects the translator's opportunities to create a good translation is the working conditions. Some of the working conditions are given, but the good

translator can improve them by moving between many forums in the organization and creating a translation space. The authors of the strategy can also improve the working conditions by talking to the employees about the strategy. The third factor is the text, which doesn't seem so important for the translation quality, if the manager has the right competences and working conditions.

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