

# The Translator Approach in Translation Studies

## – reflections based on a study of translators’ weblogs

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*Denne artikel sætter fokus på et nyt perspektiv inden for oversættelsesforskning, som placerer oversættere og ikke som hidtil fx oversatte tekster eller oversættelsesprocessen i centrum – et perspektiv, der i artiklen betegnes som oversættertilgangen. I artiklen beskrives et igangværende forskningsprojekt, som afspejler dette nye perspektiv, nemlig en undersøgelse af, hvordan oversættere, der også er bloggere, præsenterer og udtrykker sig på deres weblogs. Gennem en kvalitativ analyse baseret på fire gængse statusindikatorer – indtægt, kvalifikationer/ekspertise, synlighed/berømmelse og magt/indflydelse – vises det, hvordan 21 freelance-oversættere bruger deres weblogs til at styrke deres egen og deres fags status. På baggrund heraf diskuteres styrker og svagheder ved den såkaldte oversættertilgang inden for oversættelsesforskningen.*

*This article illustrates and discusses a new research perspective in translation studies that posits translators, rather than for example translations or translating, as the primary and explicit focus of research – here referred to as the translator approach. The article describes an on-going research project that represents this new perspective, namely a study of how blogging translators present and express themselves on their weblogs. Through a qualitative analysis centred on four indicators of occupational status – income, skills/expertise, visibility/fame and power/influence – it is shown how 21 freelance translators use their weblogs to enhance their own and their profession’s status and, ultimately, seek empowerment. Against this background, the strengths and weaknesses of the translator approach in translation studies is discussed.*

**Keywords:** Translation studies, the translator approach, translators’ weblogs, blogging, translator empowerment

### 1 Introduction

Translation studies has gradually established itself as an independent field of study over the past four decades or so, and in this relatively short period of time we have witnessed an increasing number of publications on translation. So far, the bulk of translation literature has mainly been concerned with *translations* (the products) or *translating* (the process), whereas the *translators* themselves – the people who produce translated texts and engage in translation processes – have attracted considerably less attention.

However, the recent sociological turn in translation studies (e.g. Chesterman 2006; Snell-Hornby 2006; Wolf & Fukari (Eds) 2007) has been accompanied by growing attention to translators as a social and professional group – a new tendency that focuses on the people behind the texts and treats them as social agents in their own right. A number of recent studies are thus concerned with translators in society and address such issues as the status of translators, their working conditions, identity, public image and self-image, translators' networks, role perceptions, power relations, etc. (For examples of studies with such a focus, see the contributions to the thematic section of *Hermes* 42 – *Translation Studies: Focus on the translator* – edited by Dam & Zethsen (2009) and to the special issues of *Translation and Interpreting Studies* 4:2 and 5:1 – *Profession, Identity and Status: Translators and interpreters as an occupational group* part I (2009) and II (2010) – edited by Sela-Sheffy & Shlesinger).

Translation studies has thus seen a new trend or research perspective which posits translators as the primary and explicit focus of research, as the very object of study. Andrew Chesterman (2009), ambitiously, has proposed to name this new line of research *translator studies*, suggesting that it forms a field of study or discipline of its own. I see it more as a sub-field of translation studies, or rather a particular approach within translation studies, as it is informed by and feeds into this wider disciplinary field. I therefore simply suggest labelling it the *translator approach* in translation studies.

In line with the theme of the 2013 VAKKI symposium – perspective as challenge – this article describes an on-going research project that represents this new perspective in translation studies, namely a study on how blogging translators present and express themselves on their weblogs. Against this background, the strengths and weaknesses of the translator approach is discussed.

## **2 Background of the weblog study: research on translator status**

The background to this weblog study is a series of studies on translators' occupational status conducted over the past five years by the present author and a colleague (Dam & Zethsen 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012). In four different but closely related studies,

four groups of Danish business (non-literary) translators – 47 in-house company translators, 66 in-house agency translators, 131 freelance translators, and 63 staff translators working at the European Union – assessed their job status through questionnaire-based surveys which elicited mainly quantitative but also some qualitative data. The questionnaires contained both direct questions regarding job status and prestige and questions that revolved around four well-established status parameters, i.e. parameters that are generally accepted as indicating high or low occupational status. These parameters were: (1) income, (2) education/expertise, (3) visibility/fame and (4) power/influence.

In the selection of respondents, every effort was made to ensure a sample of translators with a strong professional profile, thus presumably at the high end of the translator-status continuum. Notwithstanding, the results of the studies consistently indicate that even these translators have relatively low occupational status. With respect to the individual status parameters, the following are our main findings:

- Income: with the exception of the EU translators, all the translators studied have lower average levels of income than comparable professional groups.
- Education/expertise: all four groups of translators have a high level of education and tend to see translation as an expert function requiring a high level of knowledge, skills and expertise. However, when asked to assess the degree of skills and expertise *others*, i.e. non-translators, attribute to translation, the translators' responses were consistently negative. A qualitative analysis of the respondents' comments (Dam & Zethsen 2010) revealed that the translators were particularly concerned about the lack of acknowledgement by non-translators of the skills and expertise it takes to translate. There seems to be a widespread 'anyone-can-do-it' attitude towards translation, which translators find is a serious threat to their occupational status.
- Visibility/fame: most of the translators ranked their social and professional visibility – i.e. their visibility in society in general and with respect to important stakeholders such as clients and commissioners – as low; especially freelance translators perceive their visibility as extremely low. (We did not inquire into the concept of 'fame' as such, as we deemed it irrelevant in the context of business translation.)

- Power/influence: all four groups of respondents reported that their jobs as translators are connected with very low degrees of influence; agency and freelance translators in particular ranked their job influence as extremely low. (We did not inquire into 'power' as such as we feared this concept could carry negative connotations in the eyes of the respondents.)

These studies and findings constitute the background to the weblog study that is reported on below: they both identify a problem and provide a conceptual and analytical framework for the weblog study.

### **3 Aim and methodology: from description to action – via description**

The studies on translator status described above are descriptive in nature and mainly situated within a post-positivist paradigm. As such, they provide insight into the translation profession and the situation of its members but without ascribing a way forward: they identify a problem but not a solution. An important aim of the weblog study, then, was to look for ways of changing the current low-status situation for translators.

An obvious choice of methodology for projects with a change agenda would be action research conducted within the advocacy approach to science (following e.g. Creswell 2009). However, I suggest we continue our inquiries within a more descriptive approach and take a look at what translators themselves say and do to raise their status in society and possibly learn from their example. One particularly widespread and apparently powerful means of expression for translators in the present Web 2.0 age is *weblogs* (McDonough Dolmaya 2011). Translators blog, they blog extensively and enthusiastically, and as we shall see, they quite clearly blog for empowerment. They also blog to boost their businesses (cf. Dam in progress), but the focus and aim of the present study is to investigate what blogging translators say to enhance their own and their profession's status.

The paradigm, or worldview assumption, underlying the descriptive approach applied here should thus not be mistaken for post-positivism. Rather, the position taken is social

constructivism: it is assumed that language and discourse not only *reflect* the social world, but also *construct* it. It is assumed, in other words, that our perceptions of the world are shaped by the way we talk about things and concepts in it, and that we are thus able to perpetuate or change things through language and discourse. Applied to the present study, I assume that blogging translators contribute to changing (or perpetuating) existing perceptions of themselves and their profession – including their occupational status – by talking or writing about these issues in a certain way.

From this point of departure, we can now take a look at what translators say about themselves and their profession when they blog. But first we shall have a look at the data analysed with this aim in mind.

#### **4 Data**

The sample of blogs that serves as data for this study consists of 20 weblogs about translation written by 21 freelance or self-employed translators (one blog has two authors). The sample is drawn from the blog trekker page of the American Translators Association, ATA's website ([http://www.atanet.org/careers/blog\\_trekker.php](http://www.atanet.org/careers/blog_trekker.php)) on 8 October 2012.

The blogosphere is made up of literally millions of blogs, and a very large number apparently bear some relation to translation and translators. Some of the most commonly used blog search engines – such as Technorati.com or Google's blog search engine – generate vast numbers of hits when 'translation' or 'translator' are entered as search words. When I entered the word 'translation' in the Google blog search engine on 8 October 2012, a list of around 47.9 million blogs was created; when the keyword 'translator' was entered, the search engine came up with 26.1 million blogs. Upon closer scrutiny, it turned out that many of these blogs did not deal with translation at all, and that most were not written by translators. In my search for more refined lists, I came across the ATA blog trekker page. Many translators associations maintain lists of translation blogs, but the ATA list is one of the most comprehensive ones.

On the day the sample was selected, the ATA list included 168 blogs. Upon closer examination, it turned out that even some of these blogs were not about translation, but focused exclusively on linguistics, language learning, translation studies – or even entirely different subjects (for example, the blog named *My Life in Translation* turned out to be “a website to help with career discovery”, and its first post on 8 October 2012 was about becoming a physical therapy assistant!). Moreover, several of the blogs were not written by translators but maintained by institutions (notably universities), translation companies, teachers, researchers, students, etc. Among the 168 ATA-listed blogs, I selected those whose authors present themselves as practising freelance or self-employed translators (including interpreters, subtitlers, etc.)<sup>1</sup>. Freelance translators were selected in order to focus on the type of translators who seem to dominate the translation market globally (Pym *et al.* 2012: 88–90) and who appear to suffer from the lowest status on several accounts, at least in Denmark (cf. section 2 above), despite their presumably high levels of professional autonomy (cf. Fraser & Gold 2001 and section 5.4 below). A further selection criterion was that the blog be at least partially about translation. Most blogs in the sample also contain posts about topics not (directly) related to translation, but no blog deals exclusively with matters unrelated to translation. A more detailed description of the selection criteria can be found in Dam (in progress).

From the 20 blogs in the sample, the posts appearing on the blogs' front pages were selected as data for the analyses, in keeping with a procedure commonly used in blog research (Trammell & Keshelashvili 2005: 973). The front page of a blog consists of the most recent blog posts – usually accompanied by links, comments and a presentation of the author. The front pages of the selected blogs contain between 2 and 16 posts, varying highly in length – from one sentence to several pages of text. The sample comprises a total of 150 blog posts containing material of a highly multimodal nature, which includes texts, photos, videos, soundtracks and even cartoons. Some blogs include a separate page in which the author presents him-/herself, and these self-presentation

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<sup>1</sup> Following Gideon Toury's definition of a translation as “any target language text which is presented [...] as such [...], on whatever grounds” (Toury 1982: 27), a freelance or self-employed translator is defined here as any blog author who presents him-/herself as a freelance or self-employed translator, on whatever grounds.

pages also form part of the sample. The material was downloaded between 9 and 31 October 2012. The 20 blogs in the sample are listed in the appendix.

## 5 Analyses and results

All the blog posts and self-presentation pages or parts thereof were categorized manually by the author of this article using the conceptual and analytical framework developed for the studies on translators' occupational status described above, i.e. they were analysed as commenting on or related to, whenever relevant, the four status parameters of income, education/expertise, visibility/fame or power/influence. As it turned out, it was in fact possible to categorize large parts of the sample material as – directly or indirectly – linked to one or several of the four status parameters. Below we shall examine each category in turn.

The analyses are qualitative. In keeping with the underlying worldview assumption (constructivism) and aim of the study – to identify what translators say to enhance their own and the profession's status – numbers and frequencies are considered less relevant than illustrative examples. Hence, the analyses below are accompanied by a large number of extracts from the sampled blogs, whereas quantitative considerations are cited only as very general indications, if at all.

### 5.1 Income/pay rates

Pay rates are a recurrent theme in the freelance translators' blogs. As stated by one translator-cum-blogger: "Rates are always an issue among translators" (10, 6<sup>2</sup>). Eight of the twenty blogs address the issue of pay rates directly, and several blog posts in the sample are dedicated exclusively to translation pricing and translators' earnings (for example, 3, 3; 7, 2; 10, 6).

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<sup>2</sup> References to the data contain two figures separated by a comma: the first figure refers to the number assigned to the blog in the appendix, whereas the second figure refers to the number of the post within the blog in question. The blog posts are numbered in ascending order, i.e. the first and most recent post in a blog is referred to as number 1, the second most recent as number 2, and so on. "10, 6" thus refers to post No. 6 in blog No. 10 in the appendix - *Translating is an art*.

There is a general awareness among the blogging translators that translation can be and often is a low-income profession, but the bloggers invariably stress that there is a large income disparity and that a translator's earnings depend entirely on his or her skills, expertise and professionalism. A clear distinction is made between unskilled de facto translators (sometimes referred to as "(mere) bilinguals", cf. 3, 1 and 16, 7) and highly skilled professional translators, the former group being associated with low(er) income and the latter with high(er) (or at least "good" or "fair") income. Not surprisingly, the blogging translators describe themselves as belonging to the latter category. As expressed by the blogger behind *The Translator's Teacup* in a passage entitled "Professional income": "I charge a fair rate [...] that rewards my skills and experience" (14, 7). And in a later passage in the same blog post, the translator makes the following comment with regard to the average rates that can be found in various surveys: "Many good translators will charge rates above these stated averages. (I do)". In these examples, the link between skills and income comes across clearly, as does the assumed segmentation, or even polarization, of the translation market. The latter feature is also evidenced in a blog post that carries the title "How Much Do Translators Make? It Depends ..." (7, 2) and which continues: "Some make very little money, and some make quite a bit in a good year".

The freelancers in the sample tend to associate low-income translation with a certain type of translation agency and with some translation technologies. Labels such as "unscrupulous agencies" (1, 7) or "bottom-feeders (the lovely name for agencies that pay the lowest rates to their translators, competing on price and not quality)" (14, 7) are not uncommon, whereas e.g. machine translation (MT) is described as a technology that "turn[s] workers who used to consider themselves specialized translators, who usually need to have quite a high level of education and skills [...] into mere post-processors of MT output" (7, 6). On the whole, agencies and some translation technologies, especially Trados, are not popular with the translators in the sample, and the combination of the two is presented as problematic for freelancers in many respects, not least in so far as their earning potential is concerned. As expressed by the author of *Patenttranslator's Blog*:



“Many translation agencies have of course already successfully used a relatively new software model to squeeze more profit from freelance translators. If you want to work for a translation agency these days, big or small, you are often expected to agree to be paid only a fraction of the usual rate for what is called ‘matches’ and ‘fuzzy matches’, namely instances of the same words or same or similar sentences detected by a CAT (Computer-Assisted-Translation) software tool such as Trados, which translators have to purchase on their own for hundreds of dollars if they want to be able to receive work from these agencies.” (7, 6)

In spite of their awareness of the many pitfalls of the profession and the low-income status of many translators, the blogging translators generally present *themselves* as adequately or highly paid professionals, as shown earlier. Moreover, they do not hesitate to draw attention to their successes in terms of earnings. In a review of the past year posted at the end of 2011, one blogger states: “all of my clients are now paying higher prices” (16, 3). Another blogger says: “I just had [...] one of the best months ever from the point of view of revenue” (3, 4).

The mere fact that the bloggers *say* that good translators enjoy a good income and present themselves as highly or adequately remunerated professionals contributes to changing the current low-pay discourse on translators. From a social constructivist perspective, this in itself is a way of bringing about change. But the bloggers also make comments with an even clearer change agenda. Several of them appeal directly to other translators to set their rates at a reasonable level and warn them against offering or accepting low rates. One blogger has written an entire post dedicated to such a call to action. The post carries the title: “Worst excuses to keep your rates low” (10, 6), and it contains statements such as: “you are in charge of your business, so you set your rates” and “by underselling yourself and your work, you are damaging the profession’s reputation and you are ruining the market for others”. Other bloggers make similar statements, for example: “set professional rates; refuse to work for less than you are worth; never offer volume discounts” (14, 6) and “Don’t work for peanuts” (17, 2).

## 5.2 Skills and expertise

All the bloggers in the sample blog about the special competences of translators in general, and their own education, skills and expertise in particular. These issues are addressed not only in a large number of blog posts but also in a large number of ways,

both directly and indirectly. The many ways in which the blogging translators demonstrate their skills and competence are described in a separate article (Dam in progress). Here we shall focus on those features in the blogs that can be analysed as responses to the seemingly widespread 'anyone-can-do-it' attitude towards translation, which previous studies have singled out as a particularly serious threat to translators' occupational status (cf. section 2).

The blogging translators respond to translation skills being unacknowledged i.a. by directly addressing what they take to be a common misconception about translation – and then refuting it. A clear example of this can be found in the blog *Translating is an Art*, which contains a full post entitled "Common misconceptions about translation" (10, 10). The post opens as follows: "Over the years, I've heard a lot of misconceptions about translation, most of which basically imply that translation can't be that difficult and that anyone can translate. Here are some of them, with my response to them:". The author then lists common misconceptions such as: "I speak a foreign language, so that makes me a translator"; "Modern translation tools are so advanced, they can easily replace human translators"; "I have a text of around 2500 words. Can you get the translation back to me in an hour?"; "What do they teach you at a translation course, do you have to learn all the dictionaries by heart?". All these misconceptions, and many more, are then refuted by the author through explanations of the complexities of translation.

Other blog posts explain the intricacies of translation and the skills needed to perform it without responding explicitly to common misperceptions. However, these are often addressed implicitly in the blogs as evidenced by the many explanations of what translation is *not* or what it is *more than*. For example, one self-presentation page reads like this:

"Translating is *more than* simply looking up a few words in a dictionary or entering a text in a free online translation program. A quality translation requires a thorough knowledge of both the source language and the target language, plus knowledge of the cultural backgrounds of both languages and of the subject matter." (10, self-presentation page; my emphasis)

The bloggers also address the general 'anyone-can-translate' postulate more indirectly, not by *saying* that translation is not trivial, but by *showing* that it is a complex matter. In

particular, the blog authors give numerous examples of translation difficulties, most of which show that translation is not a question of mindlessly substituting one word for another, but a complex process that requires special skills and knowledge. One example is the following extract:

“I think I can trace back my love of translation to one particular passage [in a novel] [...] during a conversation, one of the characters moved from using ‘vous’ to using ‘tu’ to address a troubled young man in need of comforting [...]:

‘Mais êtes-vous certain de vouloir nous quitter?’  
‘J’ai bien peur de ne pas avoir le choix.’  
‘Tu vas me manquer.’

The switch from ‘vous’ to ‘tu’ indicated a shift in the relationship from formal to something more intimate and personal. This is how the English translator dealt with it:

‘But are you sure you want to leave us?’  
‘I’m afraid I have no choice.’  
‘I’m going to miss you,’ she said, taking his hand in hers.

The increasing closeness, which was expressed through language in the French text, was thus translated by a physical gesture in English. I remember thinking that this was just wonderful, and being quite taken by the cleverness of it all” (5, 5).

In this example, the blogger comments on a translation made by another translator, but very often the bloggers talk about the difficulties they themselves have encountered in their work and show how they have solved them (for example, 1, 8; 7, 5; 16, 6). Such a tactic has the double benefit of illustrating that translation is difficult, not trivial, while also demonstrating the blogger’s own competence.

By means of the various tactics described above, the blogging translators both educate the general public and contribute to changing the existing discourse on translation as a low-skill activity into a discourse emphasizing translator expertise.

### 5.3 Visibility/fame

Among the bloggers in the sample, there is clearly an awareness that translators are relatively invisible in society and that fame is generally not within reach of translators. As one blogging translator puts it: “If you crave recognition in your lifetime, this might not be the metier for you” (13, 5). However, it is equally clear that blogging helps the

translators gain or increase their visibility, cf. the following quote: “Most of my (and probably your) work will never be immortalized (except maybe this blog)” (4, 2). That blogging is an effective means of creating visibility is also evidenced by the top-text of the blog *Fidus Interpres*, which reads as follows: “Fidus Interpres. Translation Blog. Over 1.5 million visitors” (15).

The translators use their weblogs to bring visibility not only to themselves, but also to other translators and to translation as such. Despite growing evidence to the contrary (e.g. Risku & Dickinson 2009), one of the most persistent ideas about translation is that it is a solitary occupation – with each individual translator working in isolation, not in contact with others. The translators in the sample, however, are clearly networkers and use their blogs to create an authentic community of blogging translators. They link to each other's blogs, they comment on each other's blog posts, they write guest posts on each other's blogs, they share jokes, experiences and knowledge, and they also refer very explicitly to each other in their blog posts, cf. the following example:

“Today I thought I would share my contribution to a humorous must for any translator: MOX: Illustrated Guide to Freelance Translation. It is filled with Alejandro Moreno-Ramos' hilarious translation-related cartoons, interspersed with excellent contributions from Sarah M. Dillon, Alex Eames, Céline Graciet, Judy Jenner, Laurent Laget, Benny Lewis, Kevin Lossner, Corinne McKay, Pablo Muñoz, Jill Sommer, Ramón Somoza, Steve Vitek, and of course, this very contribution from myself. If you enjoy this post, I highly recommend you take a look at the book for more from some of the best in translation blogging.” (14, 2)

As many as nine of the bloggers mentioned in the above blog post (including MOX, who is the author behind blog 18, *Mox's blog*, and the blog-post author herself) are included in the analysed sample (see appendix). These and other translators-cum-bloggers repeatedly refer to each other, usually in highly positive terms. This kind of positive cross-referencing is often used for self-promotion, as is the case in the above example where it allows the blogger to draw attention to her own “excellent contribution” to the book. Nevertheless, it also serves to increase the visibility of, and even promote, other (blogging) translators and the translation community as a whole.

The bloggers in the sample also mention and promote translators outside the blog community. For example, in a report from an ATA conference, one blog author refers to a

non-blogging translator as follows: “star translator and international speaker Chris Durban” (15, 3). This leads us to a different, but related, feature of the blogs: the construction of professional ‘stars’.

Translators are usually never associated with fame. As noted by Christina Schäffner (2004: 1), “there are no widely known ‘stars’ in the profession”. It is therefore interesting to note that the translators studied here construct and promote professional stars on their weblogs. Not only do they emphasize the star qualities of some translators, such as the “star translator” Chris Durban in the above quote, they also cite interviews with translators whom they consider important and write glowing, obituary-like blog posts in which fellow translators are raised to stardom. In one such post about the dying Peter Less – one of the interpreters at the Nuremberg trials after World War II and, hence, one of the first simultaneous interpreters ever – the blogger says: “the *legendary* interpreter Peter Less [...] a true *hero* of translation and interpreting” (8, 3; my emphasis). Another blogger describes Peter Less like this: “a source of inspiration to interpreters and translators, and to the world [...] he shaped the course of history” (11, 5). Michael Henry Heim, a literary translator who recently passed away, is also frequently described in obituary-like blog posts: “The translation industry lost another *great* recently. Michael Henry Heim was [...]” (4, 2; my emphasis).

The translation community thus has heroes, legends and stars of its own, and the blogging translators contribute to constructing and promoting them, thus suggesting that translators can be, and indeed sometimes are, famous. Not surprisingly, the bloggers not only promote other translators as stars, they also draw on these translators’ stardom to foreground themselves whenever possible<sup>3</sup>. One example is the following, again about Peter Less: “He truly was one of the forerunners of our industry [...] I had the honour of escorting him to one of the events he was attending [at an ATA conference], leading him on my arm and struggling not to start crying simply due to the overwhelming honour of being in his presence” (4, 10). In another example, which stems from

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<sup>3</sup> The tendency to share in the glory of successful others is well-documented in the social psychological literature on impression management, where it is studied as an indirect self-presentation tactic and commonly referred to as *basking in reflected glory* - or simply *BIRGing* (Richardson & Cialdini 1981).

an interview with one of the authors of a new book (Kelly & Zetzsche 2012; see also section 5.4 below), the (absent) co-author is described by the interviewing blogger as follows: “our mutual friend and translation technology guru Jost Zetzsche” (11, 4).

In sum, the translators-cum-bloggers increase the visibility of other translators, themselves, and translation as such through their weblogs. They use their blogs to build authentic translator communities capable of further enhancing the visibility of the profession and its members, and they even construct and promote professional stars thus suggesting that, contrary to common beliefs, fame is within reach even for translators.

#### 5.4 Power/influence

The issue of power and influence is dealt with, directly or indirectly, in around half of the analysed blogs. Again, the blogging translators seem to be aware that translators are generally not (considered) influential or powerful (e.g. 7, 6), but they tend to present *themselves* as such. Notably, they self-present as professionals with a large share of professional autonomy of action, especially in their capacity as freelancers. The concept of professional autonomy is a key element in the so-called ‘power’ approach to professionalization (e.g. Freidson 1970; Johnson 1972) and is explained by Idit Weiss-Gal & Penelope Welbourne as follows: “A key aspect of professional autonomy is the right of workers to make work-related decisions on the basis of their professional knowledge and values, without being subject to the directives of those outside the profession or to constraints that are inconsistent with that knowledge and those values” (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne 2008: 284).

One aspect of freelance life that the bloggers foreground is their power to say ‘no’ – to turn down work if conditions are not right or if they are not the right persons for the job. In the following example, the blogger comments on translation jobs involving post-editing of machine-translated output, which many of the translators in the sample feel is incompatible with their professional knowledge and values:

“So far I have been asked to perform this task [post-editing MT] twice: once about 12 years ago when MT was still kind of new, by a patent lawyer who spoke with authority and had a deep voice. He must have been a partner. [...] The second time was a couple of months ago. Some guy, a private individual who found my website, asked me for a quote for translating a long Japanese patent. When I sent him my quote for over two thousand dollars, he replied that he already had in his possession a machine translation of the document and that he would be willing to pay me 400 dollars for post-editing. I declined both job offers, the first one politely, and the second one rather rudely. I don't like people who try to play the bait-and-switch con game with me.” (7, 8)

Along the same lines, another blogger states about Trados: “I refuse to use it” (14, 2). Other bloggers are more diplomatic, but no less assertive when describing cases in which they decline projects with reference to their professional standards: “I [a US translator] am sometimes asked to translate into UK English and I generally decline” (6, 2).

The bloggers also foreground the blessings of freelance life with reference to the high degree of control over their working conditions that it entails. They stress the freedom of flexible hours and of having no one telling them how and when to do their work, as in the following example: “My office hours are 10AM to 7PM and then 11PM to whenever the heck I feel like going to bed (usually 1 or 2 AM), with liberal breaks scattered in between for water aerobics, dinner out with friends, running errands, or Law & Order marathons” (4, self-presentation page). In much the same vein, the blog-post extract below comments on the unconstrained working conditions of freelance translators vs. those of many employees in the service sector, as exemplified by the flight attendants on a particular Delta flight:

“I am so glad that I don't need to have a permanent smile plastered on my face when I am translating patents [...] because nobody sees me when I am working. I can even drink coffee, or listen to music sometime [sic] when I work depending on what it is that I am translating, and of course I don't have to stand the whole time when I am working [...] Unlike the bilingual flight attendants on that particular Delta flight, I can also take a nap or walk my dog whenever I want to.” (7, 1)

These examples illustrate how the blogging translators present themselves as autonomous freelancers in charge of their own professional (and personal) lives<sup>4</sup> – a pattern that is consistent with previous research on freelance translators, who have been found

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<sup>4</sup> The extract from blog post No. 7, 1 also points to the blessings of being *invisible* at work, which in fact seems to be considered an asset by some of the translators in the sample.

to possess even higher levels of autonomy and control over their working conditions than other self-employed groups (Fraser & Gold 2001: 682). But the translators-cum-bloggers not only construct themselves as professionals with high degrees of freedom and autonomy of action; they also make direct calls to other translators to take power over their professional lives. For example, one translator advises other translators as follows: “only work for good clients, turn down rush jobs, complicated jobs, uninteresting jobs” (14, 7) and like this: “We should use technology to assist us. We should not allow technology to assist others in using us” (14, 2) – ‘technology’ referring to Trados here and ‘others’ to (certain) agencies – the two most unpopular players in the field of freelance translation judging from the blogs studied here.

Apart from foregrounding their autonomy of action and, hence, the power they have, or should take, over their own professional and personal lives, the translators blog about the influence they have through the importance of their work and its impact on others and society at large. The following example refers to the importance of the translations produced by the blogger himself:

“The thing is, the patents that I translate are kind of important. A lot of money is often at stake [...] Patent lawyers use my translations to file new patent applications for their clients, or to argue about fine (and sometimes nonexistent) technical differences and details for months or years before one or the other corporation finally loses a lawsuit and has to pay royalties.” (7, 8)

The wider societal impact of translation is also often commented on. For example, several of the translators-cum-bloggers devote entire blog posts to describing a recently published book with the suggestive title *Found in Translation. How Language Shapes our Lives and Transforms the World* (Kelly & Zetsche 2012). As one blogger says:

“It's absolutely delightful that we finally have a mainstream book about our profession that's accessible and interesting to those who are not in the profession. Ultimately, as a profession, we want the general public to know that what we do matters, and this book will leave little doubt that what we do matters a great deal.” (11, 2)

All in all, the blogging translators contribute to changing the low-influence and low-power image of the profession by foregrounding the importance of their work and presenting themselves as powerful professionals with a high degree of autonomy



and control over their working conditions. The bloggers' appeals to other translators to seize the power over their professional lives carry additional change potential.

## **6 Conclusion of the weblog study: translator empowerment**

Through their weblogs, the blogging translators in the sample employ various tactics that may serve to enhance their own and the translation profession's status. Most fundamentally, the translators make themselves visible simply by being present in the blogosphere, which gives them a voice in the crowd. But as we have seen, the translators also use their weblogs to network, build communities and bring visibility to other translators and to translation as such.

Another essential feature of the weblogs is that they contribute to changing the current low-status discourse on translation by adding translators' voices to the pool of existing discourses on translation. The translators-cum-bloggers address – and refute – common myths and misconceptions about translation and translators, they say that translators can, indeed, make good money, that translation is a highly skilled activity, that translators are competent experts in their own right and that (freelance) translators are or can become powerful, influential and even famous. From a constructivist perspective, changing the discourse is paramount to changing the situation. But the translators also engage in tactics with a more explicit change agenda through their direct appeals to fellow translators, urging them to take power over their own professional lives and not work for less than they are worth.

In all these ways, the translators use their blogs to change their low-status image and as such to empower both themselves and translators in general. As one blogger puts it: “Be proud, interpreters and translators!” (11, 2).

## **7 Reflection: strengths and weaknesses of the translator approach**

The value of research that focuses attention on translators – rather than for example translated texts or translation processes – is readily apparent. The translator-status

research described in section 2 identifies a problem in the field of translation practice that needs to be addressed and solved. The potential impact of translator status is vast: it influences the circumstances under which translations are produced and thereby their quality, it affects the working conditions of practising translators, and it has an impact on the potential of attracting young talents to a career in translation (Dam & Zethsen 2008: 94). The weblog study, on the other hand, may contribute to bringing about change. Translation scholars who study how competent translators seek to increase their status in society and empower themselves can spread the message to other translators, who might then wish to join in and start working on improving the situation for themselves and their fellow translators, discursively or otherwise. A further contribution of the weblog study lies in its own discursive power: by presenting translators as (potentially) high-income, influential and highly-skilled professionals, the study in itself contributes to changing the current discourse on translation and, from a constructivist perspective, ultimately the situation of translators.

A discipline that studies its own practitioners is, however, neither very common nor unproblematic. Law scholars, for example, do not study lawyers but stick to studying the law. The reasons are obvious. By studying the law, legal scholars increase the body of knowledge in their discipline and thus enable its practitioners, and their own students, to become increasingly skilled and knowledgeable. Should translation scholars not be doing the same, studying translation (including translation tools, the development of translation competence, etc.) rather than translators? Are translation scholars not letting down translation students and practitioners if they study translators rather than increase the existing knowledge about translation? As we have seen, translators suffer from a low-skill image even as it is; if translation scholars do not focus on increasing the knowledge base of translation, they may in fact do more harm than good to the profession.

On this note of doubt, I invite my readers to reflect and judge.

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### Appendix: Blogs in the sample

<b>Blog</b>	<b>Author/blogger</b>	<b>Downloaded on (date)</b>	<b>Number of posts</b>
1. About Translation	Riccardo Schiaffino	9/10/12	10
2. Catherine Translates	Catherine Jan	9/10/12	4
3. Financial Translation Blog	Miguel Llorens	9/10/12	5
4. Musings from an overworked translator	Jill R. Sommer	9/10/12	10
5. Naked Translations	Céline Graciet	9/10/12	6
6. On Language and Translation	Barabara Jungwirth	9/10/12	7
7. Patenttranslator's Blog	Steve Vitek	9/10/12	10
8. Thoughts On Translation	Corinne McKay	9/10/12	7
9. TranslateThis	Michael Wahlster	9/10/12	7
10. Translating is an Art	Percy Balemans	9/10/12	10
11. Translation Times	Judy and Dagmar Jenner	10/10/12	5
12. Translation Tribulations	Kevin Lossner	10/10/12	2
13. Translationista	Susan Bernofsky	10/10/12	7
14. The Translator's Teacup	Rose Newell	10/10/12	8
15. Fidus Interpres	Fabio Said	31/10/12	12
16. The Greener Word	Abigail Dahlberg	31/10/12	7
17. The Interpreter Diaries	Michelle Hof	31/10/12	3
18. Mox's Blog	Alejandro Moreno-Ramos	31/10/12	6
19. Say What?	Alexander C. Totz	31/10/12	10
20. Words to good effect	Marian Dougan	31/10/12	14