

Contemporary Finnish Literary Translators and Symbolic Capital

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Vaikka kääntämisen sosiologian tutkimus on viime vuosina saanut kansainvälisesti runsaastikin huomiota, Suomessa nimenomaan kirjallisuuden kääntäjiä ei ole vielä juurikaan tutkittu tästä näkökulmasta. Tässä artikkelissa tarkastellaan kirjallisuuden kääntäjien symbolista pääomaa sekä sitä minkälaisista pääomaa kirjallisuuden kääntämisen kentällä tarvitaan, kuinka kääntäjät ovat sen hankkineet ja minkälaisia toimintamahdollisuuksia pääoma heille kentällä antaa. Lisäksi artikkelissa sivutaan tutkimukseen osallistuneiden kääntäjien habitusta. Aineisto kerättiin marraskuussa 2016 Suomen kääntäjien ja tulkkien liiton kirjallisuuden kääntäjien jaoston ja Kääntäjien ammattiosasto KAOS ry:n kautta lähetetyn verkkokyselyn avulla, johon saatiin 87 vastausta. Kyselyllä selvitettiin kirjallisuuden kääntäjien taustoja, koulutusta, alalle päätymistä ja tämän hetkistä työtilannetta. Johtopäätöksenä voidaan sanoa, että kyselyyn vastanneiden ammattikäntäjien habitus ja toimiminen kentällä rakentuu vahvasti akateemisen koulutuksen ja sekä pääosin sen kautta saavutetun kielitaidon sekä ajan myötä työkokemuksen kautta saavutetulle kulttuuriselle ja sosiaaliselle pääomalle.

Keywords: Bourdieu, field, Finnish literary translators, habitus, symbolic capital

1 Introduction

In recent years a new interest of study has emerged within the field of Translation Studies, namely the Sociology of Translation. There is an understanding that translation is an activity that does not take place in a vacuum but that there are a number of factors that affect both translation and those performing it, specifically the translators, therefore, the need for examining both how the social world works and those who have agency in it has been recognized also in the field of Translation Studies. In the Sociology of Translation, one of the focuses of research is on the “agents involved in the translation process” (ibid. 4). (Wolf 2007: 1–4.) Consequently, the foremost objective of this article is to concentrate on the agents, that is, people who translate literature, both fiction and non-fiction, into Finnish today.

Previous research in the field of Sociology of Translation has concentrated on, for example, translators’ subservience (Simeoni 1998; Prunč 2007), the field of translation and translators’ place in it (Sela-Sheffy 2005; Wolf 2007), translators’ occupational status (Dam & Zethsen 2010), translators’ agency in production networks (Abdallah 2012; Siponkoski 2014) and translators’ identity and habitus (Gouanvic 2014; Vorderobermeier 2014; Sela-Sheffy 2016). This article places contemporary Finnish literary translators in this area of research and its main purpose is to characterize those 87 literary translators who participated in this study through their symbolic capital. Symbolic capital refers to

different resources that give individuals “social and cultural advantage or disadvantage” in the social arenas of their everyday lives (Moore 2014:101). Moreover, I will make tentative conclusions about their “translational habitus” (Simeoni 1998: 14) as well, thus this study also acts as the first step in my doctoral research which aims at conceptualizing Finnish literary translators’ habitus. According to Simeoni (1998: 32), the translational habitus is a concoction of a translator’s embodied cultural and social past, everything they have ever experienced in their life, and which inevitably has an effect on both their personality and how they perform their work and on the end result – the translation. Therefore, to be able to investigate translators’ agency and professional trajectories, it is also necessary to examine their symbolic capital.

2 Key Concepts

Especially the works of Pierre Bourdieu and his central concepts, *habitus*, *capital* and *field*, have been widely applied in sociologically oriented research on translation (Inghilleri 2009: 281) and these concepts will form the conceptual framework of this article as well. None of the three concepts is primary to one another, none of the three could be separated from each another and the influence they have on each other explains how the social world functions (Thomson 2014: 67). Here, the translators’ habitus is discussed through their symbolic capital, that is, what kind of symbolic capital they have gained through education and work experience that has eventually led to a specific translational habitus. Moreover, the field is investigated from the following aspects: what kind of symbolic capital the field of literary translation requires from these translators, how they have acquired the capital and how the capital has helped them to operate in the field.

In this article the most important concept of the three is *capital*. What Bourdieu (1986: 241) refers to by capital are individuals’ means and abilities to act in different social surroundings and contexts. Moreover, capital defines our place in the social world. Bourdieu divides capital into two main types: *economic capital* and *symbolic capital*. Economic capital refers to money whereas symbolic capital can be divided into multiple subcategories of which cultural and social capital are the most important ones. (Bourdieu 1986: 241–242.) Although some of the translators in this study made a reference to money – economic capital – in their answers, the main interest in this article is in their symbolic capital.

The main categories of symbolic capital are cultural and social capital. *Cultural capital* can be “embodied” (Bourdieu 1986: 242) meaning that it is manifested in our habitus, in other words, in the way we speak and in our conduct. Cultural capital can also be “objectified” (ibid. 242), that is, materialized in the objects we own and consume, for example, books, art, food and music. Moreover, cultural capital can become visible in its “institutionalized state” (ibid. 242), that is, through education and degrees obtained through for-

mal education. (Bourdieu 1986: 241–246.) In this article I will concentrate on these translators' institutionalized cultural capital and how it has contributed to the development of their habitus and possibility to act in the field of literary translation. *Social capital*, on the other hand, is more abstract and refers to an individual's "network of connections" (Bourdieu 1986: 247) and "social membership in a group" (ibid. 246). In this article, social capital will be discussed from the point-of-view of the translators' work life and identity. More specifically, attention is paid on what kind of symbolic capital these translators utilize in their work life and how the capital has helped them to identify themselves as literary translators.

Another important concept in my study is *habitus*. Habitus is a system which is never fixed but something that constantly and actively changes, adapts and modifies itself according to our experiences of the social world and situations in which we find ourselves (Bourdieu 1994: 170). Habitus comprises the whole socialized individual, all the learnt individual inner models that guide human behaviour and thinking. These models are not automatic or inherited but culturally and socially learned, acquired and created unconsciously through the adaptation of surrounding social structures, in everyday life and throughout our lives. Habitus embodies all our individual tastes, interests, skills, habits, actions, thinking and lifestyles, hence capital. (Meylaerts 2010: 1–2.) Habitus and capital go hand in hand because capital helps to shape habitus and capital is put into operation through habitus.

The third most important concept in this article, and which Bourdieu (1994: 101) closely associates with the study of the social world and its practices, is *field*. Field is a place where habitus and capital are put into action. Bourdieu himself often used the analogy of a football game to explain these three concepts and how they come together and interact. (Maton 2014: 51–53.) A field, for example a football field, is the actual place where the game is played, that is, the social reality of everyday life and the players are the individuals who inhabit and act in the social world. Firstly, in order to be able to enter the field one has to have at least the minimum amount of the capital required in that particular field. Capital also determines the social agents' position in the field; those who have the most of the highly sought-after capital of that particular field rule the game. The type of capital and the amount of it that is needed in order to be able to play the game depends on the field; novices may have a certain level of capital to enter the field but they must try to accumulate either more capital or different kind of capital to be able to succeed in the game. This is why a field is always characterized by struggle and competition; those who have the most of the essential capital of the given field are those who master the game and are in charge of the field and those who possess less capital try to gain more in order to advance their position in the field. (Bourdieu 1987: 105–107, 170–175; Thomson 2014: 65–69.) Here, the field of literary translation will be approached from the point-of-view of symbolic capital. I seek answers to these questions in the research material: based

on the data what is the field's relevant symbolic capital like, how these translators have acquired that capital and how it has helped them to operate in the field.

In the following section I will give an account of the material and method of this paper. In section four I will discuss the findings of the data and give a detailed account about the translators' cultural and social capital. Section five is dedicated to conclusions.

3 Material and Method

The data for this article were collected in November 2016 by using an online questionnaire with both open-ended and close-ended questions. The questionnaire had 48 questions in total and it was divided into three sections: background information (13 questions), education (7 questions) and work (28 questions). The questionnaire was available only in Finnish.

The informants were contacted through the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters (henceforth SKTL, according to the acronym of the association's name in Finnish, 'Suomen kääntäjien ja tulkkien liitto') and its literary translators' section and KAOS, a literary translators' member association of the Union of Journalists in Finland. At the moment SKTL has approximately 1 800 members (SKTL 2016a), of which more than 400 are literary translators (SKTL 2016b), whereas KAOS has approximately 50 members (Kankaanpää 2016). In total 431 people received a link to the questionnaire by email, 380 through SKTL and 51 through KAOS. The response rate is approximately 21 % as 87 completed questionnaires were returned.

The questionnaire was drafted with E-forms software and part of its structure and some of the questions were modified from a questionnaire compiled by Johanna Kouva¹ (2008) which she used in her Master's Thesis titled "Kirjallisuuden kääntäjät uuden työn sosiologian valossa" [Literary Translators and the New Sociology of Work]. It is important to keep in mind that the questionnaire was not designed solely for the purpose of this one article but to provide material also about these translators' agency in the field of literary translation and which will be dealt with in the future, hence nearly thirty questions regarding work in the questionnaire. Therefore, as the goal of this article is to characterize these translators solely through their symbolic capital, here only those questions are discussed which most clearly emphasize the nature of the required capital in the given field. Special attention was paid to those questions which the translators themselves stressed as the most significant factors that have affected the formation of their translational habitus: education, language skills and work experience. However, it should be noted that the questionnaire was distributed through two professional translators' organizations, whose

¹ In her Master's Thesis, Kouva concentrates specifically on how the literary translators' react to changes in their working culture, whereas in my study the focus is more on their character and professional identity.

members have already established a position in the field, thus the results are only applicable to a limited group of translators. The outcomes of this study are a result of analysing quantitative data provided by the informants.

4 Contemporary Finnish Literary Translators and Symbolic Capital

What follows in this section is a discussion about the symbolic capital of those 87 literary translators who completed the questionnaire. Their cultural and social capital and habitus will be examined in relation to the field of translation.

4.1. Background information

Out of the eighty-seven informants sixty-seven (77 %) are female whereas twenty (23 %) are male. These numbers follow rather closely that of SKTL's members' gender distribution as well; approximately 80 % of SKLT's members are women and 20 % men (Kavén 2017). This would confirm the general notion that translation is a female-dominated occupation and reinforce the stereotype that women are more interested in literature, better at communicating and more linguistically talented than men. Gender can also be a significant factor in the formation of the translatorial habitus in general as female-dominated professions are often traditionally considered less prestigious occupations and in contrast to male-dominated fields, often also suffer from low income as is the case in the translation industry as well. Often female-dominated professions, such as translation, are viewed as something that requires less education and skills and not to be taken too seriously. The symbolic capital that comes with these stereotypes and which female translators bring with them into the field and incorporate in their habitus can further reinforce translators' alleged subservient habitus (e.g. Simeoni 1998).

The informants' age range is quite consistent; the two largest age groups are 40 to 59 years and 60 to 75 years of age, and therefore nearly 92 % of the informants are 40 years old or older. The questionnaire also revealed that the members of the two largest age groups have been working as translators between 21 to 30 years, (the average of working years is 21 years). In fact, it seems that many of these translators work well to their retirement and above. In their answers several translators stressed the fact that they consider literary translation as a calling and a passion, thus working beyond retirement is possibly a personal choice and a way of life for them as well. On the other hand, it is also possible that the translators simply cannot afford to retire; many of them complain that the pay they receive from translating is unreasonably low considering the amount of work they do, therefore, they possibly have not been able to accrue such pension, hence economic capital, during their career that they could give up working. Be it as may, it can nevertheless be concluded that due to such long careers these translators have managed to accumulate a great deal of symbolic capital in the form of expertise and networks that has helped them to establish a firm position in the field.

4.2. Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is acquired mostly unconsciously and over a long period of time. According to Bourdieu, accumulation of cultural capital begins during childhood and the nature of cultural capital individuals adopt over the years depends highly on the social surroundings where they spend their first, formative years. (Bourdieu 1986: 243–244.) This section concentrates on the translators' embodied and institutionalized cultural capital.

According to Gouanvic (2014: 32), one of the key factors defining both translators' social and professional trajectories is "the acquisition of bilingualism and biculturalism" (ibid. 32) and especially during childhood the everyday surroundings are a natural place where this can take place (ibid. 32). Learning a language and adopting a culture that goes with it can also be understood as embodiment of cultural capital. According to my data, the majority of the translators in question have Finnish as their mother tongue (99 %), were born in Finland (97 %) and still reside in Finland (91 %). Moreover, in total 95 % of the translators have a monolingual Finnish childhood family and only 5 % have a bilingual background. As a result, the majority of these translators have similar cultural capital in the form of shared cultural and linguistic background. Therefore, in order to be able to enter the field of translation in the first place, those with a monolingual background have had to accumulate the embodied cultural capital of second language skills and knowledge of other, foreign culture(s) – the minimum requirement to be able to perform translation – some other way than through immersion in their everyday surroundings. In practice this would refer to formal education and conscious study. Learning a new language is hard work, it requires motivation and determination, not to mention talent to a certain degree at least. Therefore, the data suggest that a significant component of these translators' symbolic capital and translatorial habitus is linguistic talent and interest in foreign languages and cultures.

Consequently, 65 % of the informants also give their strong language skills as one of the main reasons why they have chosen this profession. Moreover, as has been mentioned before, this type of capital can be accumulated in various ways, education being one of them. According to the data, among this group of translators English is the most popular first foreign language acquired outside home, for example at school; more than half (65 %) have begun their second language studies with English. There is a simple reason for the hegemony of English language; for decades English has been the first – and often the only – choice for the first foreign language offered at Finnish schools where pupils usually start their second language studies at the age of eight or nine (Kangasvieri, Miettinen, Kukkohovi & Härmälä 2011: 9). Therefore, the choice of the first foreign language has not necessarily been the translators' own choice to begin with. However, this early introduction to a foreign language and culture may have acted as an indicator of a natural linguistic talent and a kindling of interest which they have later chosen to cultivate and pursue further through formal education and finally found a profession where they can

make use of these skills and talent. Language skills certainly form a crucial component in the translators' embodied cultural capital and habitus since translation as an activity is characterized by transfer between two languages and cultures.

In the field of translation, working languages at one's disposal can provide a translator many different types of capital – both cultural and social. From the point-of-view of supply and demand language skills can, for example, either grant or prohibit access to the field and determine how much work is available for a particular translator. Among the translators participating in this study, English is the most popular working language; 47 % of the informants give English as their most important source language from which they translate into Finnish. This appears to be a natural continuum to the translators' first foreign language; English is the first foreign language that was introduced to them at school and they have systematically continued to improve and develop their proficiency in this language. Moreover, of those informants whose primary working language is English (in total 41 people), seventeen translate literature into Finnish *only* from English. In Finland, more than 80 % of translated literature is translated from English (Leppihalme 2007: 152), therefore, the results suggest that English is also the language that provides its experts the most cultural capital and work opportunities in the field of literary translation. However, since almost half of the translators have the same primary source language, this can indicate that there is also more competition inside the field. Competition can be realized in a power struggle between different agents in the field, for example, between individual translators or between translators and those who commission the work – the publishers. In conclusion, besides cultural capital in the form of language expertise, translators also need other types of cultural capital to be able to succeed in the field and have a strong translatorial habitus. Thus, besides the embodied cultural capital translators need to have also institutionalized cultural capital at their disposal.

Cultural capital in its institutionalized form refers to education and degrees and 67 % of the informants mention education as the primary reason why they have chosen translation as their profession in the first place. Formal education is not only a means to acquire a set of professional qualifications and skills, but also a chance to adopt a professional identity and habitus suitable for entering and acting in the field. For Bourdieu, education plays a key role in shaping the habitus. (Moore 2014: 103.) In total 81 % of these particular translators have a degree in higher education, that is, either a Bachelor's degree (16.5 %) or a Master's degree (65 %). There are also three translators who have a Licentiate's degree and four who have a PhD, therefore, altogether 89 % of these translators have an academic education. However, it should be noted that an academic degree *per se* does not necessarily guarantee admission into the field of translation. After all, translator training and academic qualifications are not a prerequisite to be able to perform translation and basically anyone can enter the field and call themselves a translator. This indicates that in order to have a strong position in the field, translators should try to accumulate the field relevant cultural capital through various means and formal education certainly is not the

only – nor necessarily the most important – way. Nonetheless, an academic degree can still have a significant effect on translators' habitus as highly educated professionals and it has certainly granted access to the field for those translators who participated in this case study.

An important issue that can further add to those translators' institutionalized cultural capital who have an academic degree is the actual contents of their studies. Regarding majors during their studies at a university, 38 % of the translators in this study have studied linguistics or philology as their major whereas 32 % specified in having Translation Studies as their major. An essential part of any Translation Studies study programme is the acquisition of language expertise in at least one source language and one target language; therefore, altogether 70 % of the informants have majored in such study programme where language studies have had a key role. Moreover, of those informants (30 %) who have majored in something other than linguistics or translation, more than half have nevertheless studied translation at some point; either as a minor subject or they have participated in at least some translation classes. In conclusion, since more than half, that is, 66 % of the informants work as full-time literary translators, it is possible to argue that the embodied and institutionalized cultural capital – language expertise and professional skills – which this group of translators has acquired through academic education has not only acted as an important means to enter the field but it is also sought after capital within the field of translation. However, it is important to remember that besides cultural capital, the translatorial habitus is based on many other factors as well, therefore, it is necessary to take a look at the translators' other forms of symbolic capital, too. Thus, the following section concentrates on their social capital.

4.3. Social Capital

Social capital refers to “membership in a group” (Bourdieu 1986: 246) and how individuals can act and utilize other forms of capital they have in these groups. Social capital can be hereditary by its nature, such as a family name or certain titles, but it can also be either consciously or unconsciously accumulated through the networks which individuals inhabit. (Bourdieu 1986: 246–247.) Here, these translators' social capital will be discussed from the point-of-view of their working life and its networks which can be important venues for both implementation and accumulation of capital.

In Finland, many translators have small one-person businesses of their own (SKTL 2017a) and according to the *Job Description of a Literary Translator* (SKTL 2017b), a literary translator is an artist who works as a freelancer on short term, on a per-job or per-task basis for different employers, usually for publishing houses who commission the work from individual translators according to their own specifications. Consequently, 62 % of the informants work as freelancers, 28 % have a trade name and 7.5 % a limited

company. In other words, 97.5 % are self-employed entrepreneurs whereas a clear minority, that is, 2.5 % (two informants) are employed either by a translation agency or a publishing house. The nature of running your own business usually requires both the existence and access to relevant networks, and also the ability to utilize those networks to your advantage, in other words, such social and cultural capital that is relevant in the field. Since more than half of the translators work as full-time translators, it is evident that they are also in possession of such social capital that allows them to successfully practice their profession. Moreover, since in total 83 % of the informants also identify themselves clearly either as a Translator (17.5 %) or a Translator into Finnish² (65 %) this indicates that having their own business has also provided the translators with such social capital that has helped them to develop a distinct translatorial habitus.

For freelance literary translators, relations with publishing houses form an important and concrete working life network and a venue where they can put their social capital to use. In this setting, publishing houses can also be viewed as gatekeepers in the field; publishers commission the translations from those literary translators they see fit (SKTL2017c). In other words, they have a great deal of power in deciding who can enter the field and operate in it. As nearly half (48 %) of the translators who participated in this study translate solely literary texts and have been in the field on average 21 years, this indicates that they are in possession of such cultural and social capital that has helped them to create and maintain durable networks and relations with the publishing houses that have granted them an opportunity to occupy the field for a long period of time.

Furthermore, the majority of the translators seem quite happy with their present working situation as well; when asked about their job satisfaction, in total 72.5 % can be placed between the range ‘satisfied–very satisfied’, whereas only 1.15 % fall in the other end of the spectrum, that is, find their situation ‘very unsatisfied’. However, even though the translators are pleased and content with their working situation, 77% are not satisfied with the fees they receive and the way the publishing houses often seem to outline the terms and conditions of the work more or less unilaterally. In fact, 50 % have even considered leaving the field because of this at some point. This suggests that even though the translators possess enough cultural and social capital to be able to enter and occupy the field, the capital they have is not necessarily convertible into economic capital. Moreover, it appears that their symbolic capital is not providing most of these translators with enough authority to play the game in the field fully independently and successfully, at least not in the terms of accumulating economic capital. However, regardless of the poor pay and the apparent imbalance in the power relations in the field, the translators are clearly very satisfied with their overall working situation; therefore, the field must offer them something else that they find more important and more rewarding than money. In fact, several

² A Translator into Finnish [‘suomentaja’ in Finnish] refers specifically to a person who translates literature into Finnish

translators stressed how much they love their work and consider it a calling – almost a duty. Thus, it can be argued that these translators consider the accumulation and utilization of cultural and social capital a reward in itself and see monetary gain only secondary. However, the view of literary translation as a vocation and a passion and the way these translators feel that they have limited possibilities to influence their own working conditions makes translation still appear as a peripheral profession. Moreover, these translators show signs of a subservient translatorial habitus (e.g. Simeoni 1998) when they agree that they are not able to negotiate the conditions of their work on a mutually satisfactory level with those who commission the work but still put up with the situation all the same. The reasons behind this situation among these translators are still unclear, thus a further study regarding literary translators' agency in the field is certainly necessary.

5 Conclusions

The foremost aim of this article was to characterize those 87 contemporary Finnish literary translators who participated in this case study through their symbolic capital. The data suggest that their symbolic capital is strongly defined by three factors; their language skills, academic education and long work experience. Language skills certainly are a fundamental prerequisite for performing translation and also for entering the field. Language expertise is also the second most important reason why the translators have chosen this profession. In addition, for this particular group of translators, formal education has acted as one of the most important means to gain both language and professional skills. Moreover, approximately two thirds of the translators chose education as one the most important reasons why they have ended up in this profession. Education endows the translators with such symbolic capital that they can utilize in the field, for instance, in the form of networks, skills, expertise and self-confidence as a highly educated professionals. Both education and language skills also appear to be relevant and sought after capital in the field as nearly half of the translators work as full-time literary translators.

The results also indicate that the more time one spends in a field, the better 'feel for the game' one develops. After all, these translators have spent on average 21 years in this profession and they strongly identify themselves as Translators or Translators into Finnish. Last but not least, even though the apparent unequal power balance in the field between commissioners and translators results in low economic capital among the translators, their job satisfaction is still high. In fact, in spite of the low pay many of the translators nevertheless find the work very satisfying – or rather, a passion and a calling. Therefore, it can be concluded that the translators find utilizing their cultural and social capital more rewarding than accumulating economic capital. Moreover, as the majority of the informants are women (77 %), the fact that many of them consider monetary gain from their work only secondary, would reinforce both the notion of female-dominated occupations' inferior, peripheral status over male-dominated professions and translators' subservient

vient habitus. However, in order to gain a better understanding not only of literary translators' symbolic capital but also of the constituents of their translatorial habitus, it is necessary to take a yet closer look at their background and history. Therefore, the next phase of my research project will be dedicated to in-depth interviews with a selected group of the same translators who participated in this case study.

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