

Investigating Literary Translators’ Translatorship through Narrative Identity

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Introduction

In sociologically oriented Translation Studies and especially in “Translator Studies” (Chesterman 2009), where the focus is on the producers of translations rather than the translated texts, studies applying narrative approaches have been scarce so far (see, however, e.g. Baker 2005, 2006, 2016; Hermans 1996). Moreover, especially in the research on translators’ identity and habitus, which both have gained a great deal of interest in recent years (see e.g. Sela-Sheffy 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2014; 2016; Simeoni 1998; Vorderobermeir 2014; Wolf 2007), studies using narrative approaches for investigating the people behind the translated texts have been rare. In my opinion, however, narrative studies could offer an abundance of new conceptual and analytical tools in investigating who translators are and their agency that extend beyond habitus. After all, individuals use different types of stories and narratives to place themselves into a larger context and make sense of their life, surroundings, actions and identity (Baker 2006:19; Baker 2016:247). Therefore, in this article I will apply the concept of narrative identity to examine how the translatorship and professional identity of ten contemporary Finnish literary translators emerges from their life-story narratives. Here, translatorship refers to “a social role” (Svahn 2016:28), that is,

what it means to be a literary translator in contemporary Finland and how the translators themselves see literary translation as an activity. I focus on the contents of the translators' life-stories and how their translatorship and professional identity have been shaped through various experiences in their lives. Secondly, my goal is to investigate if the narratives and ways to construct their professional identity differ between translators who have a formal translator training and those who have not studied translation.

Over the years the concept of narrativity, what is meant by a narrative and what constitutes a narrative have caused a great deal of debate, and there are almost as many definitions of narrative as there are researchers, depending on the point-of-view and needs of the research (Ryan 2008:344). In this article I adopt a rather general definition by Paul Ricoeur (1991:77) maintaining that first of all, life is a story, and secondly narratives – either written or oral – are stories about life. When referring to identity development, narratives provide individuals with an opportunity to describe and construct their life and identity as a coherent, structured story, in other words, identity is “the outcome of narration” (ibid.). Through narratives individuals can construct and maintain a meaningful, continuous story of their experiences and make sense of who they are as social beings in a given time and space and evaluate the world around them (Singer 2004:438). Therefore, narratives can provide a useful tool to examine also translators' professional identity and their translatorship as well, as, according to McAdams (2001:101), “identity is an internalized life-story”.

The concept of narrative identity is used widely outside narrative studies, especially in psychology (e.g. Freeman 2001; McAdams 2001; Singer 2004; Dunlop 2017), philosophy (e.g. Ricoeur 1991), sociology (e.g. Foster 2012) and cultural studies (e.g. Riquet & Kollmann 2018). I am proposing that especially for Translator Studies this approach could provide a fruitful perspective in analysing and explaining who translators are and what it means to be a member of this profession. The key in examining identity from a narrative perspective is in understanding that an individual's identity is shaped through events and lived experiences rather than by some personal, inherent quality defining the person (Ritivoi 2008:232). Also, it is important to keep in mind that individuals are active agents in shaping their identity and to acknowledge that life-stories are never complete, thus also identity is an evolving construct (ibid.). However, individuals strive for coherence and continuity in how they narrate the events shaping their lives and identity and always try to give “form and meaning to [their] experience[s]” (Freeman 2001:284). According to McAdams (2001:101) identity is created and recreated through narratives of “personal past, perceive[d] present, and anticipate[d] future” (ibid.). These structured life-stories are essential in giving the individual a sense of commitment and purpose in the given time and space (ibid:101).

In this article, I am applying William Dunlop's (2017) "The Narrative Identity Structure Model (NISM)" to explore the professional narrative identity of the aforementioned ten literary translators. According to Dunlop (2017:154) the basic idea of NISM is that there is no single life-story defining a person's identity, instead:

"within each person, there exist numerous life-stories, with each corresponding to a particular (and relevant) social context. These more circumscribed stories rest below, and contribute to, a broader life-story that draws from the experiences occurring within these contexts in the interest of creating an integrative narrative of the self, across domains and through time".

Dunlop¹ (2017) calls the multiple, story-based life-stories "contextualized life-stories" (ibid.158), and the broader one a "generalized life-story" (ibid. 159). The generalized life-story is a kind of a master narrative where all the contextualized life-stories contribute to defining one's narrative identity. Also, the model works both ways, meaning that also the generalized life-story influences the way the contextualized life stories are narrated. Contextualized life-stories consist of significant events and experiences in a person's life and these life-stories are also connected to and influenced by each other. (ibid.158-160.) In other words, each person's narrative identity is unique and encompasses many different aspects of their lives.

In this article, however, I am not investigating the translators' individual, personal narrative identities as a whole but only their professional identities as literary translators, therefore, for the purpose of this study the life-story as a literary translator will be treated as the generalized life story. Firstly, I will examine the contextualized life-stories emerging from the translators' narratives about their past, present and future and identify events and key experiences related to their life as literary translators. Secondly, I will analyse how the different contextualized life-stories contribute to their more generalized life-story as literary translators and their translatorship. It is important to note that the scope of this article will not permit me to investigate the individual professional narrative identities of all my informants, however, I will investigate the most important themes that appear to be common to most of them and make an attempt to outline a shared professional narrative identity for all of them.

¹ For an illustrative example of the structure of an individual's narrative identity, see figure 1. in Dunlop 2017:159

Material and Method

The material for this study was collected by interviewing ten contemporary Finnish literary translators in 2018 and 2019. The informants were originally contacted through the Finnish Association for Translators and Interpreters and its literary translators' section, and KAOS Ry, a literary translators' member association of the Union of Journalists in Finland. Namely, prior to the interviews, in 2016, all the informants had received and returned an online questionnaire which I used in gathering data for contemporary Finnish literary translators' background, education and work-life (Heino 2017; 2020). They had also given their contact information in the questionnaire, thus giving a preliminary consent to participate also in interviews at a later stage of my research.

I contacted fourteen people and in the end was able to conduct an interview with ten of them. All ten informants worked as full-time literary translators² and were well educated; they all have a Master's Degree or an equivalent from a Finnish university. Of the ten informants four have been studying translation as their major, one has majored in something else but has also studied literary translation specifically, whereas five have not studied translation at all. Out of the ten informants seven are women and three are men.

In order to be able to guarantee my informants' anonymity, in the analysis I will refer to the informants as 'F' for females and 'M' for males. Each individual informant has also been given a number, for instance 'F1' or 'M3, but the numbers have been selected randomly and do not have any other meaning than to tell apart the female and male informants. The age range of the informants varies from under the age of 40 (F4), to 40-59 years (F1, F5, F6 and M2), to 60-75 years (M3, F2, F3 and F7) and over 75 years (M1). The length of their professional careers varies from ten years (F4) to 46 years (M1).

The interviews were thematic interviews and their structure resembled McAdams's (2008) life-story interview-model. In McAdams's model the goal is to gather narrative data from the interviewees about their whole life, including the past, the present and the future. The interviewees are encouraged to think and talk about their lives as "life chapters" (McAdams 2008), identify "key scenes in [their] life-story" and reflect on the future, challenges, ideology and recurring themes in their lives (ibid.). The purpose of the interviews was to find out how the informants construct their professional identity as literary translators, thus, instead of prompting the informants to talk generally about their past, present and future as individuals, I asked them to talk about their lives

² Here 'full-time literary translator' means that they get the majority of their income from translating literature

specifically from the perspective of becoming and being a literary translator. However, many of the informants touched upon issues and events regarding their past, present and future quite intuitively as well.

The informants were instructed to speak freely and openly, about any issues that came to their minds, in no precise order. I had a list of questions with me aiding the conversation, but there was no specific order in which the questions were asked, neither were all the questions necessarily asked from all the informants as I wanted to keep the interview itself as informal as possible to encourage the informants to produce narrative accounts that were as free as possible. The questions were designed to touch upon topics on the informants' past (childhood, studies, professional path), their present working conditions and future plans and dreams. Individual interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours and 45 minutes. Altogether I have approximately 11 hours of interview data which has been carefully transcribed. There are approximately 143 pages of transcribed material.

In the analysis I treated the data as self-narratives which can be understood as “integrative narrative[s] of self that provide[s] modern life with some [...] unity and purpose” (McAdams 2001: 101). My aim was to identify key themes in the translators' narratives of becoming and being a literary translator and see what kind of narrative plot the themes would form, which in turn would “create[s] the identity of the protagonist in the story” (Ricoeur 1991:77). After a careful coding and analysis process I was able to detect four key themes that I find essential in constituting the informants' generalized life-story and professional narrative identity as literary translators: love for reading and literature, importance of their native language, being a student, and finally, how they perceive literary translation as an activity.

Translators' contextualized life stories

Life-story as a reader

The most prominent theme emerging from all ten narratives without exception is the life-story as an avid reader and the life-long love for literature. For many informants, the love for reading had started early; books were present in their childhood homes, parents encouraged them to read and even before they could read themselves books and reading were an important part of their lives. Informant F2 recalls a significant event from her childhood related to books and talks about her interest in literature that was kindled very early:

[...] there was this one very memorable experience when I was eight years old [...] I went to the library with my mother, it was a little walk from our house, eventually I learnt the route and could

visit [the library] all by myself, so books are closely connected to my first attempt for independence. Everybody read a lot in my childhood home [...] I am the youngest in my family and I was not a very good sleeper when I was a child, so the others read aloud to me, they were taking turns [...] so I've been read a lot and we had books [...] we had a big bookcase, and I read books from there in secret that weren't really meant for me yet, and I had my own library of books, and we did borrow books from the public library as well [...] and I got books for Christmas and birthdays, and wished for them as presents as well. [...] ³(F2).

Many of the informants also stress that books and reading still are one of the most important things in their life in general; *"books are my whole life [...] I live my life in books"* (F7). Also, books and reading are present in their everyday lives: *"I'm thinking about books all the time; the book I'm reading at the moment, and also the book I'm translating, so quite a lot, most of my days are filled with books."* (F2).

Interest in literature has also led the informants to seek a profession where reading is part of the job: *"Literature has always been the most important thing for me, so it was natural for me to study it as well"* (F3). Naturally, reading is an inseparable part of a literary translator's work process: *"first I read the novel before I start translating it, it would be impossible to start working without knowing [what the book is about]"* (F2), and according to informant F7, in order to be a literary translator *"[y]ou definitely need a passion for reading [...]"*. Informant M2 also talks about reading in relation to translation: *"In my opinion, translating is the most rewarding reading, because it's the most important reading there can be, no one reads the novel as thoroughly as the translator [...] you read and then you write it again in another language, that's it."*

Reading has also introduced informant F4 to another important aspect of this profession, namely writing. It is the medium that she prefers and finds easiest and more natural than other modes of communication:

[...] somehow it [reading] has been a very natural thing for me to do, I learnt to read very early [...] after that it completely took over my life, the world of written text, I couldn't stop reading [...] it [reading] has always felt like a sanctuary, my own safe world, I've always read a lot [...] and I have been writing too [...] writing has always been a way of self-expression for me, it's something that works well for me, it works the best, I mean, I can express myself well in writing, maybe even better than by speaking sometimes. (F4)

³ The interviews were conducted only in Finnish and I have translated all the quotes into English myself.

Reading is such an intrinsic part of many of the informants' lives that it has become like a second nature and something they could not live without: *"The world of literature doesn't go away once you're in it"* (F6) and *" in general books and fiction are a big part of me [...] I would not want to give up books."* (F2). Thus, it would be difficult for them to think about the future without books.

Naturally, not all who are passionate readers and love literature become literary translators, but it seems that both the interest in reading and translation go hand in hand. In other words, in the case of literary translators reading and translating cannot be separated from each other.

Life-story about the love for one's native language

The informants give significant meaning to the Finnish language in their narratives too. Working with their native language is important for many of them: *"I like the Finnish language, it is very important to me, I love it [...] Finnish is my mother tongue and that means it is also the language of emotions, so I always try to write as good Finnish as possible"* (F1). For some Finnish is even more important than translating: *"The most important thing is the Finnish language [...] All I have ever wanted to do is work with [the Finnish] language"* (M1). Mastering their mother tongue is also very important in the work itself: *"The Finnish language is always present"* (F5); *"If you can make the Finnish language work, everything else you can find from dictionaries"* (M3), as is reading in one's native language, too: *"You should read a lot, also in Finnish, and widely, different types of texts"* (F7). Translating is also *about* the language: *"you work with and around the Finnish language and literature in Finnish, you use the tools it gives you"* (F2).

All the informants prefer to be called 'a translator into Finnish' ('Suomentaja' in Finnish) which implicitly refers to a translator who translates literature specifically and only into Finnish, because: *"it ['translator into Finnish'] has the language in it [in the name] already. It's somehow more than just a translator"* (F2). For some the connotation that 'translator into Finnish' also refers specifically to a literary translator is significant: *"'A translator' can be confused with an interpreter or non-literary translator or whatever, but 'translator into Finnish' is more specific"* (M3) and *"it highlights the fact that, in a way, we produce literature in Finnish"* (F6). Evidently, the informants find it important to distinguish themselves from those translators who do not translate literature.

However, the future of translated literature in Finnish worries some of the informants: *"I'm worried [...] [the importance] to be able to read great literature in your own language, what has happened to that [...] I don't know what to do about it, this [literary translation] is such an important field after all"* (F7) and *"So much badly translated literature is published"* (M3).

The mother tongue and the culture that comes with it are something that would be difficult to separate from anyone's identity, however, it seems that for translators their native language is even more important as the work itself is all about working with and between languages. Moreover, the Finnish language has a significant influence on the informants' translatorship as well as they want to highlight that they are, in fact, translating literature into Finnish and do not want to be confused with other types of translators.

Life-story as a student

Regardless of what the informants have studied, they find their studies important for their identity as translators, but in different ways. For those who have majored in translation (F1, F2, F4 and F5) having a formal translation training gives a sense of security and right to work as a translator: "*[studying translation] gives me a feeling that I have the right to do this work because I have studied it, I feel my feet are firmly on the ground, I mean, I feel if I had studied something else, I might feel like I'm not quite sure, or I might feel that I'm missing out on something, that there's something that has been told to everyone else but me*" (F4) and "*It [studying translation] has had a huge effect [on my professional identity] [...] it [competence to translate] has not just appeared from somewhere and it's not only the interest in translation but I have some actual knowledge about it as well*" (F5). Thus, the translation majors put significant emphasis on the actual translation skills and expertise they have received through their studies.

Informants M1, M2, M3, F3 and F6, who had literature as their major, justify their capability to do this job by referring to the importance of the understanding of the text and their literary skills. Informant F3, for instance, describes the influence her studies have had on her ability to work as a literary translator: "*[...] I was a literature major at the university and literature has always been very important to me, and I think, or I think that one of the advantages [in this profession] is that you understand literature, like, you understand what it [literature] is about when you're translating it.*" Also, informant F6, who studied languages and a number of other subjects in different faculties but not translation *per se*, talks about the benefits of having an eclectic mix of studies:

[...] at the time, had I determinedly aimed to become a translator, and studied only translation and languages, maybe a little bit of literature [...] I would have missed out on a lot [...] knowing a little about a lot of different things [...] is a very good thing for a literary translator [...] you have some idea about a lot of things, how they are connected and you know about information retrieval and about how to find about things.

In general, those who have studied other subjects than translation emphasize the vast general knowledge they have gained through their studies. However, informant F7, who has not studied either literature or translation, admits sometimes suffering from “*an impostor syndrome*”: “*I’m always worried when will they find out that I don’t know how to do this because I have not studied [literature, languages or translation]*” but “*literature just took over my life*”.

The translation majors also emphasize the very early desire to become translators in their past whereas the others emphasize a more general ambition to work with literature. However, both groups give significant meaning to their studies in their present, that is, giving them justification to be able to perform this job, although from different perspectives.

Life-story as a writer or a mediator

It is possible to detect two distinct ways how the informants see themselves as literary translators and what literary translation as an activity means for them. The majority of the informants (F2, F3, F4, F6 and M1) like to think of themselves more as authors rather than translators: “*Translator is an author just as the author of the source text is; the translator writes the story again in Finnish, not only translates it*” (M1); “*[t]he author of the source text speaks through my voice [...] I write literature for a living*” (F6). Informant M3, however, is careful not to compare himself to an author: “*we are not authors because we don’t have as much freedom as the author does, this [translation] is another art form*”. Instead, in contrast to writers, he and informant M2 prefer comparing themselves to artists: “*Translation is a performance [...] you read and then you write it again in another language*” (M3); and “[a] *translator is like a musician; they perform someone else’s piece [...] translation is an interpretation or an arrangement of someone else’s work, using a different instrument*” (M2). Being an artist also means you are in possession of a rare talent: “*it is a gift, either you got it or you don’t [...] you cannot teach someone to become a translator but you can teach translators*” (M2); “[n]ot just anybody can become a good translator” (F6).

Informants F1, F5 and F7, on the other hand, regard themselves as mediators between texts, languages and audiences: “*I am a mediator [...] I mediate the story to readers as well as I can [...] I mediate in Finnish what is between the lines [...] also the culture, not only the story*” (F1). Informant F5 also thinks about translation as simply work, not a performance or art: “*I see myself more as a worker who translates literature, not an artist. I try to have regular working hours*”.

Translation as an activity is all-encompassing, as informant F2 describes how the author or their authorship almost becomes part of her own identity: “[...] *I can easily identify with them [the authors] too [...] when you translate many novels from the same author it [the author and their works] becomes part of your identity, although it certainly isn’t the only one [...]*”. Even though being a literary translator is a considerable part of the informants’ identity and present in most aspects of their lives, informants M2 and M3 make a point not to talk about a way of life or a lifestyle: “*it is part of my life but not a way of life*” (M3) and “[...] *translating is not a way of life but a way of living my life*” (M2). By doing so they wish to emphasize that although work is very much part of their lives, being a literary translator is not all their identities are about.

Literary translation is simply “*a pleasure and a passion*” (F7) for many of the informants and something they find important and worthwhile doing. Informants F1, F4 and F5 wish to keep developing their skills and move on in their career: “*of course you always hope that you’d be able to advance [in your career] that you’d have work and the work would always be a little bit different [...] different types of books*” (F5) whereas for some of the more elderly translators (M1, F2, F3) the career aspirations are slightly different: “*I hope I can continue doing this as long as my mind works and I can hold a pen*” (M1). All in all, literary translation is a rewarding and fulfilling activity in itself: “*I’m happy that I can write for a living, and even write books*” (F4). Informant F4 also sums up well the thoughts of her fellow informants: “*I can’t think of anything I’d want to do as much as this*”. Rather than doing something different in the future the informants aspire to maintain their present for the future as well and continue developing their individual life-stories as literary translators as long as they can.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the translatorship and professional narrative identity of contemporary Finnish literary translators. The material was gathered by interviewing ten literary translators in 2018 and 2019, and the interview data was treated as ontological narratives. In the analysis I applied the Narrative Identity Structure Model (NISM) (Dunlop 2017) to investigate what type of contextualized life-stories emerge from the translators’ narratives and how those contribute in the development and construction of their generalized life-story as literary translators. In the analysis I looked for themes the translators highlighted in their life-story narratives of becoming and being a literary translator and how their professional narrative identity is shaped through significant experiences in their lives. Secondly, my intention was to examine if the narratives and ways to

construct their identity differs between translators who have a formal translator training and those who have not studied translation.

The informants' generalized life-story as a literary translator has four prominent building blocks. These life-stories are: the life-story as a reader, the life-story about the love for one's native language, the life-story as a student, and the life-story as a mediator or a writer. These four contextualized life-stories are both overlapping and distinct and together they form the generalized professional life-stories of these ten literary translators which are strikingly similar. The life-story as an avid reader is especially significant as the love for reading and literature has had an overarching effect in all of their lives without exception; from childhood to professional literary translators. The interest for reading and literature has been present in their lives early on and encouraged the informants to seek a profession where they can utilize and cultivate this interest, hence studying either translation or literature. Reading is naturally present in the here and now through their profession and in how they wish to be called a 'translator into Finnish' which contains both the Finnish language and the idea that they work with literature. Reading will continue to be present in their future as well, as none of the informants wish to retire or change into a different career, nor do they see it likely that reading in general would ever cease to be a major part of their lives.

Another significant find was the two different ways how the informants see themselves as literary translators and how they see literary translation as an activity. Six out of ten of them consider themselves as writers and creative artists, almost as authors in their own right, whereas four of them see themselves as mediators between texts and audiences. For the writer-translators translation is a creative performance where they concentrate more on the writing process and put their souls into rewriting the source text in Finnish. The mediator-translators, on the other hand, concentrate more on the target text reader while they are translating and wish to act as mediators between the author and the target reader and between cultures and languages. For both groups their social role – their translatorship – is located in-between; the mediator-translators position themselves between the source text and its author and the target reader, and the writer-translators between being an author/artist and a translator.

There was no striking difference between the life-stories of those informants who had a formal translator training and those who had entered the field in some other way. Although the informants give significant meaning to their studies, albeit from different perspectives, the most important building blocks of their narrative identity are located elsewhere. In conclusion, the professional narrative identity of these literary translators is very much defined by their love for reading and literature and the aspiration to be part of the network where contemporary Finnish

literature is produced. Thus, the way one enters the field has less influence on their professional narrative identity.

I hope the set of conceptual tools borrowed from Narrative Studies in this article have shown the potential of this approach in our field and especially in the Sociology of Translation. Just to name a few, for example ethnographic approaches to narratives and narrative psychology could offer a variety of innovative ways to examine both translators' identity formation and the work itself. Moreover, narrative methods could be applied in investigating public narratives about translation and/or translators, and research on didactic narrative could provide new tools for translator training. In conclusion, I am optimistic that the wealth of methods in Narrative Studies would be a welcome input in Translation Studies which has always welcomed new interdisciplinary approaches.

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