Distributed, collective enaction: Reframing the study of translation and translation expertise

Professor Hanna Risku

Abstract

Since the 1990s, we in TIS have been studying the many roles that translators and interpreters assume, the many challenges they tackle and the revolutions and evolutions they are mastering at any given moment. At the same time, TIS as a scholarly field has also evolved and reinvented itself. In this keynote, I will describe some of the theoretical and methodological developments related to recent extensions of perspectives in translation and interpreting research. In particular, I will reflect on how taking a socio-cognitive view can contribute to recognizing the situational, material and social embeddedness of translation and interpreting.

To illustrate this with a specific research topic, I will show what taking such a perspective implies for the studying of translation expertise. As translation and interpreting scholars and teachers, we often complain that society, e.g., clients, employers and institutions, do not recognize the high level of expertise that is required for translation and interpreting. However, for a long time, TIS did not make the grounded, lived expertise of practitioners the key focus of research either. My colleagues and I address this gap in our current empirical research project "Rethinking translation expertise: A workplace study" (Retrex), where we investigate what being a translation expert can mean today and how translation expertise is perceived and demonstrated by working professionals. To acquire an insider perspective of this expertise, we use a multi-case research design with extensive field observations, interviews and focus group discussions. Our findings indicate that translation expertise is not sufficiently explained by referring to individual skills, rational strategies or absolute process characteristics, but needs to be reframed to account for its distributed and collective dimensions. In our analysis, we identified translation expertise in the ways our participants build and share professional identities, responsibilities and infrastructures, learn as a social unit and adapt workflows to context-specific needs.

Bio

Hanna Risku is professor for translation studies and head of the research group Socio-Cognitive Translation Studies (socotrans) at the University of Vienna, Austria. Her research areas include translation and situated cognition, translation workplace and network research, and translation expertise. She has published on sociological and cognitive approaches in translation studies and the ethnographic study of translation processes. Prior to her work in Vienna, she was professor for translation studies at the University of Graz, professor for applied cognitive science and technical communication, head of the Department for Knowledge and Communication Management and vice rector at the Danube University Krems, guest professor at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, and lecturer at different universities in Austria, Finland and Sweden.

Professor Risku served as co-editor of Fachsprache – International Journal of Specialized Communication and as president of TCeurope – the European umbrella organisation for technical communication. In 2010, she was awarded the TCeurope Award for Services to Technical Communication in Europe. In 2023, she was CETRA Chair Professor at KU Leuven and DOTTSS Guest Professor at Tampere University. She is a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters.