

Idealism or cynicism?

A statistical comparison of Finnish translation students' and professional translators' perceptions of translator status

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Abstract

This article compares how Finnish translation students (n=277) and professional translators (n=450) perceive translator status or prestige and specific factors connected to status (visibility, power/influence and expertise; Dam & Zethsen, e.g. 2008), and whether the perceptions are affected by work experience and translators' specialisation (business, audio-visual or literary translation). The data come from surveys partly replicating Danish translator surveys by Dam and Zethsen (e.g. 2011). A statistical analysis indicates that the students' and translators' views are close to each other and similar to previous research; in some items, there is no difference between the students and those translators with a maximum of five years of work experience. When statistical differences emerge, the translator respondents' perceptions are mostly more positive. Possible explanations for this include the translators' sense of their own work being appreciated (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018). The results also suggest that links between status perceptions and length of work experience could be explored further.

Keywords: status, prestige, translator students, professional translators, statistical analysis

1 Introduction

All translation teachers have probably met their share of idealistic students: young, bright-eyed and excited to start translating, preferably their favourite book or TV series. Indeed, after teaching languages and translation for 25 years, David Katan (2009: 147) suspects that translation students have an “extremely idealised world[view]” of the profession and that “[v]ery few are prepared for the realities of interpreting between on-site engineers at a steel mill or counting the words in the clutch-assembly section of a car instruction manual”.

Learning to enjoy translating “dry” texts such as instruction manuals, sales catalogues or EU directives can probably take some adjustment if you have expected to work with dazzling dialogue or intricacies of style. But is there evidence that translation students are

idealistic? Are there indications of idealism in, for example, students' perceptions of translator status, i.e. the value and appreciation of translators' work? And, conversely, are professional translators' perceptions more negative or even cynical? While such perceptions may seem trivial, feeling undervalued at work can have negative effects on employees' motivation, commitment to their employer and even physical and mental health (APA 2012).

This paper compares how translation students and professional translators surveyed in 2013–2014 perceived translator status and the related factors of visibility, power/influence and expertise. A statistical analysis is used to discover differences between the student and translator respondents' views, taking into account the respondents' working experience and the translator respondents' specialisation (business, audio-visual or literary translation).

In what follows, Section 2 provides an overview of previous surveys of translator status. Section 3 contextualises the study by describing the translational scene in Finland. The analysis method and the data are presented in Section 4, and the results are reported in Section 5, followed by discussion and concluding remarks in Section 6.

2 Previous research

In the context of occupations, **status** can be understood and measured in several different ways (Ruokonen 2013, Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018). Two frequent definitions include 1) status as a socio-economic function of educational level and income and 2) status as subjective perceptions of prestige (Treiman 2001: 299–301). Here, the focus is on the latter: the **perceptions** of value, esteem and appreciation attached to a profession.

Perceptions of translator and interpreter status by the general public have been measured in sociological surveys of occupational prestige. On the international SIOPS scale based on surveys in 60 different countries (not including Finland), translators scored at 54 points, or slightly above the average of 43.4 (Treiman 1977: 172, 241). Interpreters were not scored separately, and the more recent SIOPS only included the larger category of “philologists, translators and interpreters”, which scored at 62 (Ganzeboom & Treiman 2003: 179).

Within translation research, empirical studies have mainly explored translators' own views on their status. There have been three extensive surveys: an international survey by David Katan (2009, 2011[2009]), surveys on Danish translators by Helle Vrønning Dam and Karen Korning Zethsen (2008, 2009, 2011, 2012) and Finnish surveys replicating the Danish questionnaires (Ruokonen 2014, 2016, 2018; Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018).

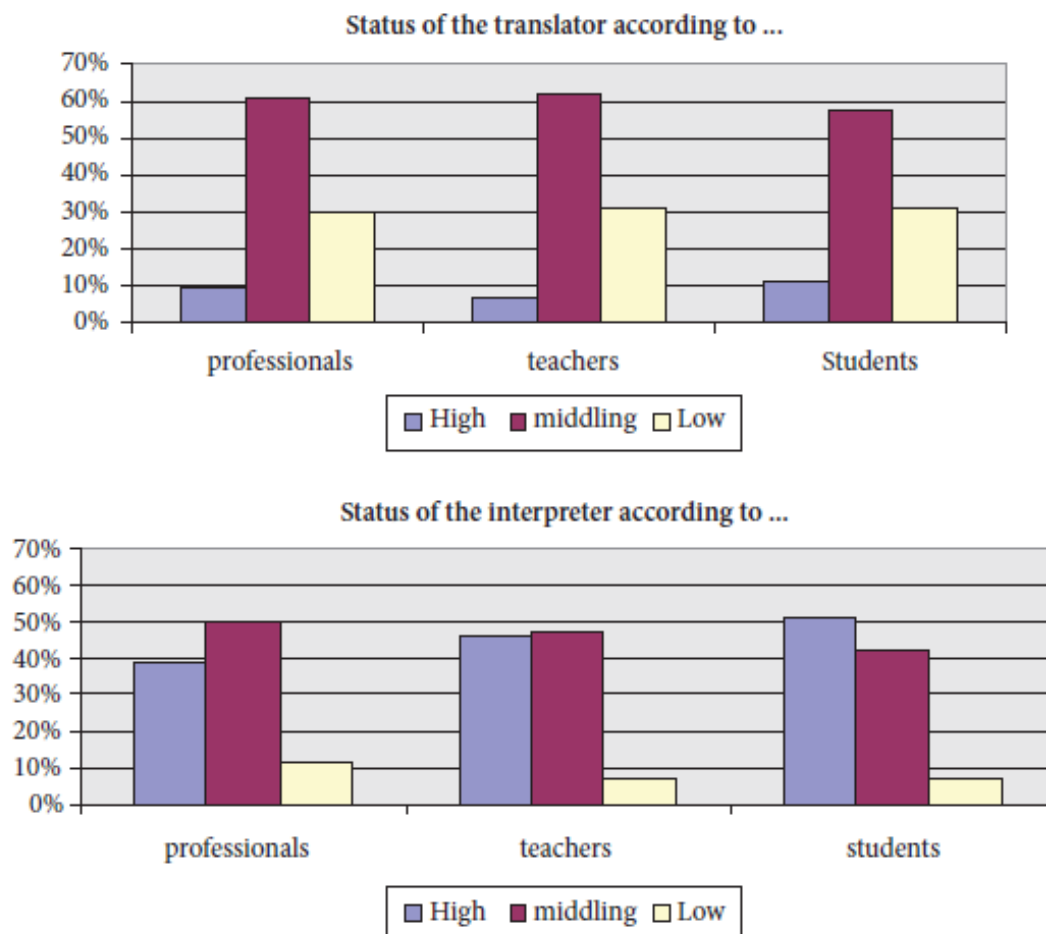
2.1 Katan: worldwide status perceptions middling

David Katan's (2009, 2011[2009]) Internet survey on translation as a profession drew 890 responses from professional translators, interpreters and T/I teachers and students. The respondents included 573 translators, 157 interpreters and almost 300 students; the respondents could choose more than one role (Katan 2009: 116). The responses mainly

came from the western world; Finland was the second most represented country, with ca. 120 responses (Katan 2011[2009]: 68).

The respondents were asked to estimate the “level of social status, regard and esteem” of the translator’s and interpreter’s jobs (Katan 2011[2009]: 76). The responses are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Translator and interpreter status (Katan 2011[2009]: 76)



The responses on translator status are strikingly similar among professional T/Is, teachers and students. “Middling” is the most frequent response, selected by ca. 60% of the professionals, teachers and students alike. The views on interpreter status show more variation, with the student respondents having the most positive perceptions. Katan’s article does not discuss possible reasons for this, but on the whole he believes students to be overly idealistic, as observed in the Introduction.

2.2 Dam and Zethsen: insight into factors related to status

Helle Vrønning Dam and Karen Korning Zethsen have conducted a series of surveys on Danish business translators' status perceptions and four specific status factors (income, education/expertise, visibility and power/influence). The results indicate that translators working in different positions and settings may perceive their status differently. For example, in-house translators at non-translational companies had higher status perceptions than freelancers or in-house translators at translation agencies (Dam & Zethsen 2011: 984).

Status rankings also appeared to correlate with a sense of invisibility or distance from decision-making (Dam & Zethsen 2011: 991–992; 2012: 226). In contrast, there was no straightforward correlation between status and income: while some low-income translators were prone to choose low-status rankings (Dam & Zethsen 2009: 15), high incomes were not accompanied by high status rankings among freelancers or EU translators (Dam & Zethsen 2011: 986; 2012: 221–222). Overall, the translators also expressed a strong sense of the special skills and expertise required to translate although they suspected that people outside the field underestimate the skills and the length of education (Dam & Zethsen 2008: 84–88; 2011: 988; 2012: 222–223).

While Dam and Zethsen's respondents included no translation students, the results may have implications for the present study. Among in-house translators employed at non-translational companies (n=47), high-status rankings of translator status were the most frequent among the respondents under 30 years of age, or recent graduates; low-status rankings were emphasised in the age group of 40 to 49 years (Dam & Zethsen 2009: 7). The recent graduates' higher perceptions could be suggestive of idealism although the respondents aged 50 to 59 years were again more prone to select high-status rankings.

2.3 Ruokonen: status of translators in society vs status of translators' own work

The Finnish surveys based on Dam and Zethsen's questionnaires were conducted in 2013–2014. The respondents included 277 translation students and 450 professional translators. Their backgrounds are described in Section 4.2 below, but the main results from previous analyses are summarised here.

An overview of the translation students' perceptions on translator status (Ruokonen 2016) showed that the student respondents ranked translator status in society below the middle point (mean ranking 2.36 on a scale of 1 to 5), similarly to Katan's and Dam and Zethsen's studies. The responses also showed a similar pattern as in the Danish surveys: while the students themselves considered translation an expert profession that requires special skills, they believed that people outside the field fail to grasp this (Ruokonen 2016: 199–200). Similarly to the findings mentioned in the Introduction where employees feeling undervalued at work were more likely to consider changing jobs (APA 2012), the translation students had considered changing their field of study more frequently than Finnish university students in general (Ruokonen 2016: 206).

Ruokonen and Mäkisalo's statistical analysis (2018) contrasted the translator respondents' perceptions of translator status in society with their perceptions of the status

or value of their own work. While the respondents believed translators to enjoy a middling status in society (mean ranking 2.55 on a scale of 1 to 5), they believed that their own work was valued highly in their professional context (mean ranking 3.94; Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018: 9). Interestingly, no statistically significant differences emerged within these two types of status perceptions on the basis of most of the variables analysed, including the respondents' specialisations (business, audio-visual or literary translation), gender, educational background and working languages. Further analysis (Ruokonen 2018) confirmed that there were no statistically significant differences between the status perceptions of those respondents with the authorised translator's qualification and those without (see Section 3.2 for details about the qualification). However, the respondents' views on the status of their own work did show statistically significant variation vis-à-vis factors such as income (for the freelancer respondents), satisfaction with one's income (for the business and audio-visual respondents) and work-related stress (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018: 10–11, 12–13).

In previous analyses, age produced no statistically significant differences in status perceptions, either among the student respondents (Ruokonen 2016: 198) or among the translators (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018: 12). Among the student respondents, the length of their work experience did not correlate with status rankings, either (Ruokonen 2016: 198). In contrast, those translator respondents with 20+ years of experience ranked the status of their own work higher than those with a maximum of five years of experience (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018: 12). This contrasts with the Danish data where the recent graduates tended to choose higher status rankings. On the whole, previous research thus has mixed implications for differences between translation students' and professional translators' views on translator status.

3 Background: the Finnish context

Translation plays a major role in Finnish society, partly simply due to the fact that Finland has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish, and all official documents and civil services must be made available in both languages. On the whole, studies indicate that at least a third of the texts read by Finns are translations (Salmi 2010), ranging from product information, news and advertisements to TV subtitles. It has been estimated that the amount of subtitles read by an average Finn each year is equivalent to thirty to fifty 300-page novels (estimates by Yves Gambier and Jukka Sorsa in Hietamaa 2014: 8).

As in most countries, the translator's profession is not protected, apart from the authorised translator's qualification, which concerns translation for legal and administrative purposes. Nevertheless, translators' professional organisations and translator training are well established. The first professional organisation, The Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters, was founded in 1955; the second, currently known as *Kieliasiantuntijat ry*, in 1979. The first educational institutions for translators were created in the 1960s and incorporated into universities in the 1980s. In 2013/2014, translator training was offered at five universities: Helsinki, Eastern Finland, Tampere,

Turku and Vaasa.¹ The training was (and is) mostly oriented towards business translation (translating non-fiction texts; in Finnish, *asiatekstien kääntäminen*) although optional modules of varying extent are offered in audio-visual and literary translation and interpreting.

At the time of the surveys, the Finnish translation market had seen less than positive developments. Among audio-visual translators, low fees and mass outsourcings had sparked a protest movement with extensive media coverage (e.g. Tuominen 2018). A qualitative analysis of some of the student data suggests that the students were aware of the situation (Ruokonen 2014). Literary translators' incomes (as low as under €1,000 per month) had also received attention (e.g. Yle 2011). In contrast, business translators' income level was close to the median income in Finland. In 2011, the median salary was €2,700 (Statistics Finland 2013), and over half of the full-time business translators (mostly freelancers) surveyed in the same year reported earning over €2,500 per month (calculated by the author on the basis of Wivolin & Niskanen 2012).

To summarise, at the time of the surveys, Finland was dependent on translations and had well-established translator training and translators' organisations, but there had been recent negative developments. It remains to be seen how translation students and translators perceived translator status in this context.

4 Method and data

This section first provides an overview of the variables and items analysed in the present article and then describes the collection of the data and the respondents' backgrounds.

4.1 Variables and items analysed

The present article compares Finnish professional translators' and students' perceptions of translator status and of three factors linked to status by Dam and Zethsen: visibility, power/influence and expertise. Dam and Zethsen's fourth factor, income, is excluded as the income-related items in the translator and student questionnaires are not similar enough for comparisons. In the present analysis, translator status and these three status factors are all considered **dependent variables**, related to the questionnaire items in Table 1 below.² In the results section, the items are partly grouped differently so as to highlight which items showed statistical differences and which did not.

¹ In 2017, the University of Vaasa's degree programmes in foreign languages and translation were transferred to the University of Jyväskylä, which decided to phase out translator training by the end of 2020.

² The items have been translated from Finnish by the author. The recurring phrase "in your opinion" is not included in the table.

Table 1: Dependent variables in relation to questionnaire items

Variable	Item(s)
Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To what degree is the translator's occupation valued in Finland?³ - What degree of prestige is involved with the translator's job? - To what degree are translators valued in comparison with other occupations with the same level of training?
Visibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are translators visible in society?
Power/influence	<p>A) In society</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do translators have economic, political, social or other kind of influence? - Do people outside the profession think that translators have economic, political, social or other kind of influence? <p>B) In translators' working environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What degree of responsibility does translation involve?⁴ - To what degree can translators influence aspects of their work? (E.g. deadlines, translation quality; see details in Section 5.4 below)
Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does translation require special skills? - Do people outside the profession think that translation requires special skills? - Do you consider that translation requires expertise? - Do you believe that people outside the profession consider translation to require expertise? - Does translation involve creativity?

As in Dam and Zethsen's questionnaires, each item had five Likert-scale alternatives to select from. The verbal alternatives were converted into figures 1 to 5 for the quantitative analysis as follows:

- 1 = To a very low degree or not at all
- 2 = To a low degree
- 3 = To a certain degree

³ The "value" of a profession (*ammatin arvostus*) or a profession "being valued" are the Finnish expressions typically used in surveys on occupational prestige. The word "status" does exist in Finnish, but it would have been unidiomatic and ambiguous.

⁴ Responsibility entails a degree of power. It may also be easier to acknowledge being responsible than holding a position of power (Dam & Zethsen 2009: 27).

4 = To a high degree

5 = To a very high degree

In the analysis, the dependent variables in Table 1 above were cross-tabulated with the following **independent background variables**: 1) the respondent's position (student or translator); 2) length of experience of translation work; and 3) for translators, their specialisation in business, audio-visual or literary translation, which had earlier produced statistically significant differences (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018).

Statistical significance was calculated by using the Chi Square test, with values below .05 considered statistically significant. The results will also be illustrated by means of frequencies and mean scores.

4.2 The respondents

The data were gathered in two surveys during the academic year 2013–2014 (translation students) and in October/November 2014 (translators). The surveys partly replicated Dam and Zethsen's translator questionnaires, provided by Professor Dam for the purposes of this research project. The Danish questionnaires were translated into Finnish and merged into a single questionnaire, which was adapted for the Finnish students (34 items) and the translators (50 to 60 items, depending on each respondent's situation). In addition to Dam and Zethsen's items, the Finnish questionnaires included items on the respondents' views on factors affecting translator status (Ruokonen 2014) and on the translators' working conditions (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018).

The links to the questionnaires were distributed electronically, via the universities' mailing lists for translation students and via Finnish translation organisations' channels, as well as the social media. Once incomplete responses and duplicates were excluded, there were 277 responses from students and 450 responses from professional translators. The majority were women (88% of the students, 80% of the translators).

The student responses were fairly evenly distributed among the different universities and represented approximately a fifth of contemporary translation students (Ruokonen 2016: 196). The translators' specialisations and form of employment are illustrated in Table 2 below. Over half of the translator respondents were freelancers or independent entrepreneurs with no employees, which is consistent with the Finnish translation scene (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018: 7–9).

Table 2: Translator respondents' specialisation and form of employment

	n	%
Specialisation		
Audio-visual translator	57	12.7
Business translator	269	59.8
Literary translator	71	15.8
Other ⁵	53	11.8
Total	450	100.0
Form of employment		
Employed	137	30.4
Freelancer/entrepreneur	260	57.8
Unemployed, studying, working in other field than translation	53	11.8
Total	450	100.0

The numbers of the members in Finnish professional translators' organisations suggest that the survey respondents represent ca. one tenth of Finnish professional translators (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018: 7). Business and literary translators are probably the best represented; the audio-visual translators' response rate may have been negatively affected by the recent developments and by an earlier survey (Hietamaa 2014).

Another relevant background factor is the respondents' work experience, illustrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3: The respondents' work experience

Students	N	%	Translators	N	%
No experience	141	50.9	5 years or less	102	22.7
A week (40 hours) or less	76	27.4	6 to 10 years	83	18.4
2 to 4 weeks	9	3.2	11 to 15 years	82	18.2
1 to 2 months	17	6.1	16 to 20 years	65	14.4
3 to 4 months	9	3.2	21 years or more	118	26.2
5 months or more	25	9.0	Total	450	100.0
Total	277	100			

Almost 80% of the students thus had little or no experience of translating beyond their studies. Nevertheless, in order to ascertain whether work experience played any role in the students' responses, the responses of students with no experience (n=141) or with a maximum of a week's experience (n=217) were at first analysed separately. As no

⁵ The respondents in this group mostly described themselves as "multipurpose translators" (n=18), interpreters (n=10) and languages/communications specialists (n=9).

statistically significant differences were found, the results section reports on the entire student cohort.

Among the translator respondents, five years turned out to be a threshold. In some items, there was no significant difference between the students and those translators with a maximum of 5 years of work experience. In other items, the statistically significant difference already emerged between these subgroups.

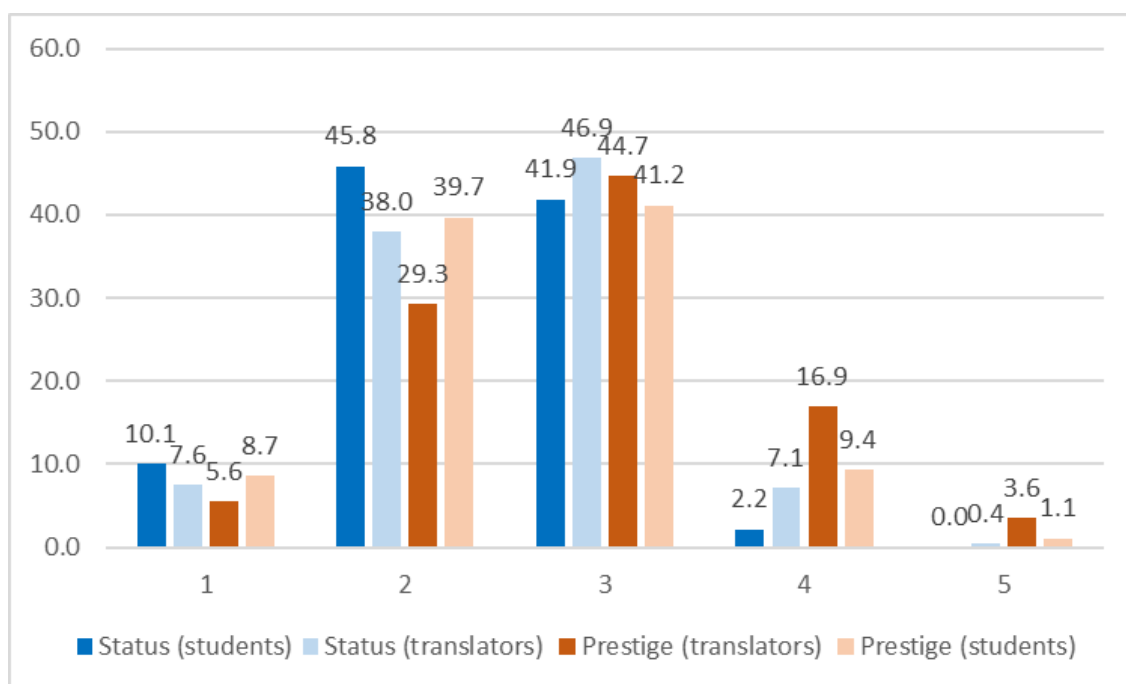
5 Results

This section describes whether the student and translator respondents expressed different views on translator status, visibility, societal power/influence, expertise and translators' power/influence in their working environment. The two different aspects of power/influence are discussed separately so as to highlight which items manifested statistically significant differences and which did not.

5.1 Translator status: significant differences

The three items explicitly related to status all manifest a similar trend: the translator and student respondents' perceptions are similar, but the translators' rankings are slightly higher. The item on the value/status of the translation profession in comparison with occupations with the same level of training failed to produce a statistically significant difference ($p=.772$) and is therefore of no further interest. In contrast, in the items illustrated in Figure 2, the differences are statistically significant: in comparison to the students, the translators believe that the translator's profession is valued more highly or has a higher status ($p=.007$) and involves a greater degree of prestige ($p<.001$).

Figure 2: Students' and translators' views (%) on translator status and prestige



The average status scores are 2.36 for the students and 2.55 for the translators. Both groups rank translator status below the middle point, which is in line with previous studies (Dam & Zethsen 2011; Katan 2009, 2011[2009]). The item on whether translation involves prestige receives slightly higher scores in both groups than the status item, with the average scores of 2.55 for the students and 2.84 for the translators. Again, the difference between the students and the translators is statistically significant ($p < .001$). In the status item, the difference remains statistically significant even between the students and the junior translators ($p = .039$). As for prestige, the difference only emerges between the students and the translators with at least six years of work experience.

5.2 Visibility and societal influence: no significant differences

The translators' and the students' views on translators' visibility and influence in society manifest no statistical differences. Both groups assess translators' visibility to be low, with mean scores of 2.21 (translators) and 2.22 (students) and a p value of .841.

Both the student and translator respondents also believe that people outside the profession perceive translators' economic, political, social and other influence as low (averages 1.74 for the translators and 1.81 for the students; $p = .214$). In contrast, the respondents themselves believe that translators have a certain degree of influence in society (averages 3.35 for the translators, 3.42 for the students; $p = .434$). In these two items, it is the student respondents who express slightly more positive views, but the differences are not statistically significant.

5.3 Expertise: significant differences

The items linked to expertise all manifest a similar trend: the students' and the translators' responses are similar, but the translator respondents' rankings are slightly higher. Both translators and students agree that translating requires a high degree of special skills, with mean scores of 4.35 for the students and 4.64 for the translators ($p < .001$). They also consider that translation requires a high degree of expertise, with mean scores of 4.48 (students) and 4.70 (translators; $p < .001$).

Both the students and the translators also agree that translating involves creativity (students: 4.18; translators 4.36; $p = .010$). Upon a closer look, the students' mean score is identical with that of the business translators' ($p = .835$). In contrast, the audio-visual and literary translators' mean scores are higher: 4.74 and 4.77, respectively ($p < .001$ in both cases). This may suggest that the students were thinking of business translation when responding to this item, as that is the field of translation that their studies focus on.

Both student and translator respondents appear doubtful of whether people outside the profession appreciate the skills required to translate. The translator respondents' rankings are slightly higher than the students', though: while the students assess that in the outsiders' view translating only requires a low degree of special skills (mean 2.18) and a low degree of expertise (mean 2.25), the translator respondents' mean scores are closer to the middle point, with 2.47 for special skills and 2.56 for expertise (p values $< .001$).

The differences mostly remained statistically significant even when comparing the students and the junior translators, except for the items on whether translating requires special skills ($p = .094$) and involves creativity ($p = .684$). In these items, statistically significant differences only emerged between the students and those translators with at least six years of work experience.

5.4 Translators' power/influence in their working environment: significant differences

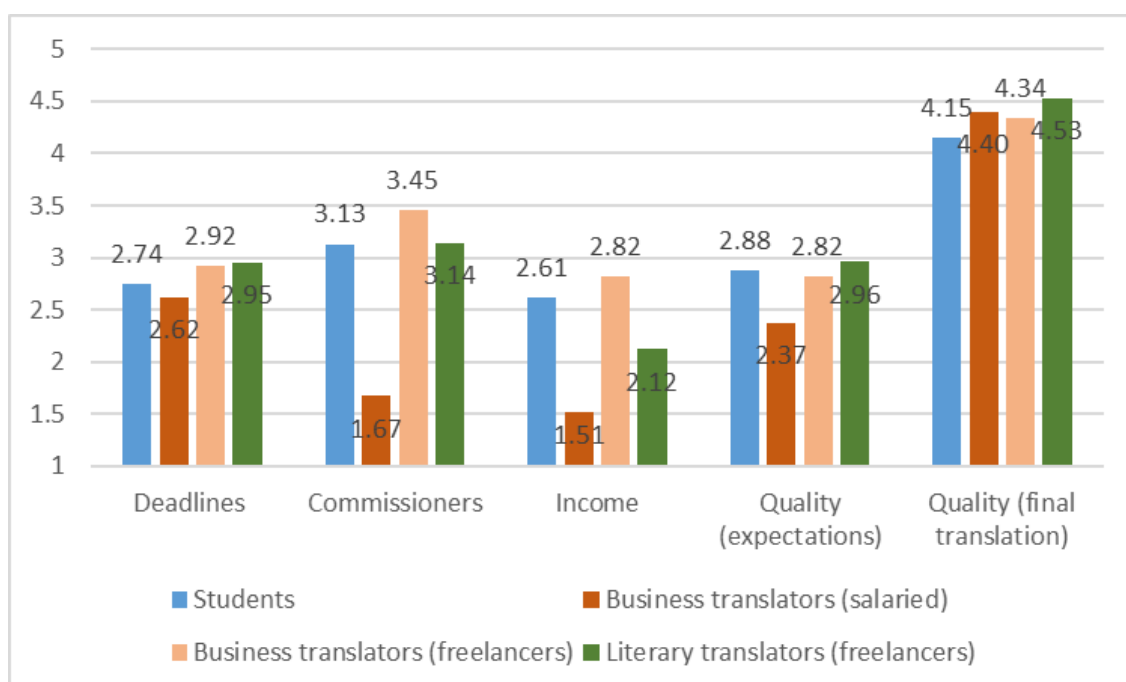
Both students and translators believe translation to involve a high degree of responsibility, with mean scores of 4.32 for the students and 4.46 for the translators. The translators overall perceive this responsibility as higher ($p = .014$), but there is no significant difference between the students and the junior translators ($p = .615$).

The Finnish questionnaires also included items on translators' influence on aspects of their work. The aspects that can be compared in the student and the translator data include the possibilities to influence

- deadlines;
- income;
- choosing which commissioners to work for;
- commissioners' expectations of translation quality; and
- the quality of the final translation.

Of course, the degree to which translators can influence these aspects may vary between, for example, salaried translators and freelancers and among different specialisations. Therefore, the translator data was divided into sub-groups so that the responses by salaried business translators (n=110), freelancer business translators (n=137) and freelancer literary translators (n=57) were analysed separately. The responses by freelancer audio-visual translators (n=37) and salaried audio-visual translators (n=14) were so few in number and probably non-representative that they were excluded. The average scores are shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Average scores of translators' perceived influence on their working environment



All four sub-groups agree that translators have the most influence on the quality of the finished translation. Here, all translator sub-groups also regard their influence as higher than the students do (lowest *p* value .013). Overall, the students' views are the closest to freelancer business translators' and literary translators'. The salaried business translators' low degree of influence on income and commissioners probably reflects stable salaries and a perception of the employer as the single "commissioner". Still, it could be of interest to study why salaried translators regard their possibilities for influencing expectations about quality as the lowest.

In comparisons among the students and the freelancers (Table 4 below), differences mostly point to the translators' seeing their influence as higher.

Table 4: Students’ vs freelancer translators’ views on translators’ influence on their working environment

	Students vs business translators (p value)	Students vs literary translators (p value)
Deadlines	.015 Significant	.427 Not significant
Income	.028 Significant	<.001 Significant
Choosing which commissioners to work for	<.001 Significant	.063 Not significant
Commissioners’ expectations of translation quality	.709 Not significant	.002 Significant
Quality of final translation	.013 Significant	<.001 Significant

Apart from expectations of quality, the business freelancer translators have slightly more positive views on their influence on their working conditions than the students do. The literary translators also have more positive views than the students on influence on expectations of quality and on the quality of the final translation. However, the literary translators believe themselves to have less influence on their income than the students, and there are no differences between these sub-groups in two aspects.

6 Discussion and concluding remarks

Overall, the students’ and the translators’ perceptions on status and status factors such as visibility, power/influence and expertise are quite similar. Both groups consider translation to require a high degree of special skills, expertise and creativity, but rank translators’ status and prestige as middling and visibility as low. This hardly supports the notion of idealistic students, particularly as it is the translator respondents who have the more positive views on translator status and on items concerning expertise, creativity, responsibility, influence on the quality of the final translation and (in the case of the business freelancer translators) influence on deadlines, income and which commissioners to work for.

Some items manifest no significant differences between the students and the junior translators. The items where the more experienced translators’ higher rankings become apparent include prestige, special skills, creativity and responsibility. While it is difficult to see a pattern here, the results are in line with previous analysis (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018), where the translators with 21+ years of experience perceived the status of their

own work as higher than the junior translators. Further comparisons of the junior and senior translators' views thus seem relevant.

Some differences also emerged on the basis of the translator respondents' specialisations. These appear fairly straightforward considering the Finnish context where translators with different specialisations probably do have different possibilities for influencing aspects of their work. As the Finnish translator training is oriented towards business translation, it is also reasonable that the students' perceptions would be closest to the business freelancer translators' in some items.

On the whole, the translation students' views can hardly be described as overly idealistic or the translators' as cynical. The students and the junior translators could understandably be more concerned about the negative developments in the field than established translators. Based on a previous analysis of the translator data (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018), the overall trend of the translators' rankings being slightly higher than the students' could also be linked to the fact that the translator respondents perceived the value of their own work as high, and this sense of being appreciated in their professional context may have influenced their views on the other items. Further analysis of the differences between the students and the translators, and between the junior and the senior translators, therefore appears fruitful to gain a fuller understanding of variables influencing status perceptions.

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