

‘Translations around us’ – the amount of translated text in everyday life

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Abstract

The paper reports on the follow-up of a diary study measuring the proportion of translations read daily (Paloposki 2006, Vihonen & Salmi 2007). Data was collected in the years 2007 to 2010 using a text diary where respondents filled in (electronically or on paper) all texts they read during one single day. They were also asked to specify whether the texts read were translations or not. The diary also contained a column for comments in case there were, for instance, doubts on the nature and origin of the text. The data currently comprises text diaries from 93 translator students and 30 non-students. The results from this group of respondents show that the average time spent daily using different kinds of texts is 5 hours 19 minutes for the students and 5 h 54 min for the non-students. Based on this study, it seems that the proportion of translations in our daily reading is approximately one third (33% for the students, 39% for the non-students). The study also tells us about reading habits: the students, for example, used less time reading newspapers and than the group of non-students.

Keywords: amount of translations, translation of non-fiction, reception of translations, diary studies, reading habits

1 Introduction

In the modern information society, we are surrounded by texts. Especially in a country like Finland where the two official languages, Finnish and Swedish, are languages of limited diffusion, many of these texts are translations. Examples can be found everywhere: we read literature in translation, watch subtitled or dubbed TV series, use a word processor translated from English, search for information using the Google start page in our native language, or figure out how to use our DVD player by browsing a translated manual. Often our newspaper contains translated articles, and perhaps we sometimes read the Finnish version of Reader’s Digest. But to what extent are the texts that we come across in our daily lives translated and to what extent written in the language in which we read them? Are some texts more typically translations than others?

Statistical information is available on translated literature. According to Kohvakka (2007) and Statistics Finland (2009), in recent years, translations have comprised 16 to 17% of all literature published in Finland. Statistics also exist on the number of pages translated in international organisations; for example, in 2008, the Directorate-General for Translation of the European Commission translated 1 805 689 pages, 72.5% of these from English (European Commission 2009: 6). However, little is known of the amount

of other translated texts that surround us everywhere – from the most trivial texts we hardly even notice, like the instructions on the side of a shampoo bottle, to more complex ones, like the subtitles of the film we watch on TV. The aim of this study is to gain information on the **proportion of translated text** encountered in everyday life.

2 Starting point and previous research

The original starting point for this research was a campaign started by the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters for promoting the profession of translators and interpreters in 2005. At the end of 2005, Outi Paloposki, active member of the association and scholar at the University of Helsinki, listed some ideas on how research could contribute to the campaign (Paloposki 2005). One of these ideas was to gain more information on the proportion of translated texts among all texts we come across daily in order to show that we live among translated text and to show the importance of translating in the everyday life. One possible method for collecting such data was a text diary, kept during a period of time.

One diary study related to translations had already been conducted earlier, reported by Jukka Mäkisalo (2006). He had collected weekly reading diaries from translator students (N=19) in the Savonlinna School of International Communication. These diaries contained all the texts read (or come across) by the participants during one week. The participants did not state whether each text was a translation or an original, but the researcher made an estimation and arrived at 43.82% of translated text, with 22.16% of text read in the original language (Finnish) (34.03% of the texts were not estimated). (Mäkisalo 2006: 256)

Diary studies on the use of time, in general, are being also conducted in Finland on a somewhat regular base, approximately every ten years, by Statistics Finland. These studies are interview surveys in which the respondents keep a diary of their time use over a two-day period. The survey also studies the daily and weekly rhythms of time use (Statistics Finland 2008).

The next such Time use study will be published at the end of 2010 (*ibid.*), but according to the most recent results, from data collected in 1999-2000, the respondents spent approximately 46 minutes of their daily time reading (Toivonen 2004: 1). In the Time use survey, however, reading is considered as one **activity** among others, such as household activities, hobbies, or studying. One should also bear in mind that the use of computers and the Internet, as well as the number of texts available there has increased rapidly between 1999 and 2010.

Various other types of diary studies have been organised by the Finnish Literature Society (Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura, SKS) in 1999 and 2009, and by YLE, the national public service broadcasting company in Finland, in 2001. In the first of these studies, anyone was invited, through announcements in the press, to describe what they did on 2 February 1999; the study was repeated on 2 February 2009. A collection of these diaries was published in two books edited by Juha Nirkko (2001) and Marjakaisa Ollaranta (2010). After the first study was published, YLE decided to conduct a similar

study, but asking people to keep a diary on the media they followed during one day, 29 November 2001. A collection of these diaries was also published in 2003 (Kytömäki, Nirkko & Suominen 2003). Whereas the two SKS books (Nirkko 2001 and Ollaranta 2010) contain diaries from different kinds of people doing different kinds of things, the YLE study (Kytömäki et al. 2003) focuses on media – TV, radio, press, etc. – and is therefore closer to our interest. The data, as well as some of the Time use survey data, are also available for researchers on request.

3 Translations around us – phase 1

The first phase of the 'Translations around us' study on the proportion of translated texts started in the spring term of 2006. Outi Paloposki and I then collected, from our students at the Universities of Helsinki and Turku (respectively), diaries that contained all the translated texts the students had come across during one week. There were altogether 107 respondents; these were students of foreign languages or translation students, 82 in Helsinki and 25 in Turku.

Paloposki (2007) reported this first phase in *Kääntäjä*, the periodical of the Finnish Translators' and Interpreters' Association, listing the different categories of translated texts that emerged from the diaries. The main categories included package texts (food, cosmetics, detergents, etc.), instructions and user guides, newspapers and magazines, subtitles on TV, and literature (factual and fiction). Other examples of translated texts included publicity, texts read for studies, brochures, order catalogues, Internet pages, announcements heard in the train or in the subway, and religious texts.

4 Translations around us – phase 2

Paloposki's article listed different categories of texts that typically are translations, but as the diaries did not contain information about non-translated texts (i.e. originally written in the language in question), the study does not tell about the **proportion of translated vs. non-translated or original text**. In a second phase, Inkaliisa Vihonen, then researcher at Kotus, the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland, and I wanted to examine this proportion. We continued the study in the spring of 2007 by collecting 54 diaries. We asked both translator students and a number of 'ordinary people', non-students, to keep a text diary during one day, listing in it all the texts they met (read or browsed) during that day. The students were first-year students in French translation studies who did this as part of a text analysis course (N=24). The group of non-students (N=30) consisted mainly of our relatives and acquaintances, with people in different age categories (from children to elderly people) and social groups. To make the listing easier, we designed a form that the respondents filled in, containing the most typical categories found by Paloposki (2007), as well as an "other, please specify" category. All the respondents were Finnish-speaking, and the form was in Finnish. The 12 text categories listed were the following:

- newspapers
- periodicals

- scientific publications
- literature (factual and fiction)
- Internet pages
- electronic messaging (e-mail, chat, SMS)
- publicity, brochures, announcements
- instructions, user guides, package texts
- subtitles (TV, film)
- administrative texts (written by authorities or administration; bills etc.)
- other work or study-related material (for example, notes from lectures or translation exercises)
- other (please specify)

On the form, the respondents were asked to mark the name or a description of the text, the time they used for reading or browsing it, and whether it was translated, not translated, or unclear regarding original language. There was also room for comments. There was a separate page for background information on the respondents. An example of the form, translated into English, can be seen in Appendix 1 (the original form in Finnish is available from the author). An example of one student's filled-in diary, translated into English, can be found in Appendix 2.

We have reported the findings of these diaries in Vihonen and Salmi (2007 and 2008) (in Finnish); based on the time estimates reported by the respondents, the data showed that the 54 respondents used approximately 5 h 40 min for reading or browsing these texts (5 h 23 min for the students, 5 h 54 min for the non-students). The proportion of time spent reading translations was 39.7% for the students, 39.2% for the non-students.

Spending more than 5 hours 'reading' seems long, especially when compared to data from the Time use survey mentioned above, where the respondents spent approximately 46 minutes of their daily time reading (Toivonen 2004: 1). In the Time use survey, however, reading is considered as one **activity** among other activities, such as employment, studying, household activities, hobbies, or watching television, although all of these activities often involve the use of **texts**: browsing the Internet in order to find information for the paper one is writing at work or for one's studies, glancing at the cooking instructions for pasta on the side of the packaging at home, reading song lyrics at the choir practice, or reading subtitles while relaxing in front of the TV. It is these **encounters with text** and the time spent for them that our study aims to investigate.

5 Translations around us – current data

Since 2007, I have expanded the data by continuing to collect text diaries from my first-year translator students at the University of Turku in the academic years 2008–2010, as part of the same text analysis course. The course has taken place during 7 weeks in the spring term, and the data has been collected during one working day in early February, towards the middle of the course. The respondents have been asked to keep the diary during the Tuesday or the Wednesday of a certain week, but if they have forgotten or been ill, other working days (excluding Saturdays and Sundays) have also been accepted. In 2008, the students were asked to keep the diary both during one working

day and one weekend day, but the weekend day data have not been included in the results reported here. The current data consists of 93 diaries from translator students, i.e. 69 students in addition to the 24 students of the 2007 data. The distribution over the 4 years can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1. Distribution of the number of student respondents by data collection year.

Year	Number of student respondents
2007	24
2008	28
2009	23
2010	18
In total	93

Unfortunately, it has not been possible for me to collect more data from the non-students' group since 2007 (N=30). As the groups are very unequal in size, they will not be compared statistically, but will be considered separately.

5.1 Results: time use

In the following, I will first consider the time the respondents reported spent daily reading or browsing the different types of texts (5.1), and then the proportion of translated text (5.2).

The results from this larger set of student diaries show that the **time** the students reported for **reading or browsing texts** during the day was **5 h 19 min**, slightly shorter than in 2007 (5 h 28 min); the average was shorter than the average for the 30 non-students (5 h 54 min). The average times are discussed here by text category. They can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Average time spent reading or browsing text during a typical working day, in minutes. Data collected from translator students (N=93) in 2007–2010 and from non-students (N=30) in 2007.

Text category	students (N=93)	non-students (N=30)
Newspapers	19	47
Periodicals	11	23
Scientific publications	10	11
Literature (factual and fiction)	29	54
Internet pages	51	47
Electronic messaging (e-mail, chat, SMS)	27	35
Publicity, brochures, announcements	3	4
Instructions, user guides, package texts etc.	5	7
Subtitles (TV, film)	56	64
Administrative texts	3	6
Other work- or study-related material	98	37
Other (please specify)	8	19

In the “other, please specify” category, texts that are mentioned by more than one respondent include song lyrics or notes, post cards, calendar, menus in a (student) restaurant, iPod texts, teletext, and shopping receipts.

The figures in Table 2 tell us about the reading habits and the textual environment of a typical working day of a student translator. The longest time they report spending with one category of text is 98 minutes during a day, time spent reading or browsing work- or study-related material. Many students mentioned here PowerPoint slides shown by the lecturer or other material used during a lecture, so the time mentioned is often the whole duration of the lecture, which might make it slightly longer than the real time used reading. However, there is a large variation in the times reported: 14 students do not mention anything in this category, and 9 students report here 4 hours or more. This does not, however, mean that the 14 students have not been studying, but that the material they used has been recorded in the other categories, especially in scientific publications and Internet pages – e.g. the use of virtual learning environments has been recorded in the latter category.

Subtitles come in second, with 56 minutes daily. It must be reminded here that in Finland, 80% of TV-programs in a foreign language are subtitled, not dubbed (Vertanen 2007: 149), so that with several Finnish channels¹ there is a large amount of subtitling available during a normal evening of a working day. However, when compared to the figures reported by Vihonen and Salmi (2007: 5), the amount of time used for reading subtitles has gone down from 77 minutes (by the 24 students in 2007) to 56 minutes on average (by all the 93 students from 2007 to 2010). One possible explanation for this might be the change in Finnish television from analogical to digital broadcasting

¹ Depending on the geographical area, there are currently up to 14 free-of-charge TV channels that broadcast in Finnish or with Finnish subtitles. Four of these are public-service, and ten are commercial channels (DigiTV 2010). The number of channels has increased since Finnish television converted from analog to digital transmission on 1 September 2007.

technology on 1 September 2007, and the necessities for upgrading TV equipment it implicated for households.

A trend increasingly discussed in the press, the change in the reading habits for printed media, can be seen in the figures concerning the time spent reading newspapers. The students reported 19 minutes per day on average, whereas the non-students in 2007 reported 47 minutes on average. In the non-students' group, the average for respondents aged over 45 (N=16) is even higher, 61 minutes. The same figure for the 24 students in the 2007 data was 12 only minutes (Vihonen & Salmi 2007: 5, 2008: 12). The difference might also be explained by the social status of the students. In Finland, newspapers are usually subscribed to, and the (local) paper is delivered on one's doorstep early in the morning, to be consumed together with breakfast. Students might save money by not subscribing to the newspaper but following the news on TV, radio or the Internet. They might still read the newspapers at the library or at their parents' home, but not on a regular basis. Also, some students mention newspapers within the Internet pages they have been reading or browsing, but these have been recorded within the category of Internet pages.

5.2 Results: the proportion of translated text

The proportion of time spent reading or browsing translated text, on average, by text category, and whether the text has been marked by the respondents as original, translated or not known, can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Time spent, in minutes on average, by text category and by type of text (original, translated or does not know).

Text category	original	translated	does not know
Newspapers	22	4	0.5
Periodicals	12	2	
Scientific publications	10	1	
Literature (factual and fiction)	20	15	
Internet pages	37	11	3
Electronic messaging (e-mail, chat, SMS)	28	1	less than 0.5
Publicity, brochures, announcements	2	1	0.5
Instructions, user guides, package texts etc.	3	3	less than 0.5
Subtitles (TV, film)	1	56	
Administrative texts	3	0,5	less than 0.5
Other work- or study-related material	67	14	2
Other (please specify)	10	1	

The “does not know” category has been in the questionnaire since the beginning, but appears here only in the data from 2009 and 2010, because in 2007 and 2008, all respondents were interviewed by the researcher(s) after the questionnaire was handed in, and the proportion of original vs. translated was then determined together with them for each text category originally marked as “do not know”.

Text categories that can be considered 'typically original' are newspapers, periodicals and scientific literature. However, within periodicals (12 min original, 2 min translated), the respondents mention some magazines that are Finnish versions of internationally published ones, such as *Cosmopolitan*, or women's magazines that contain articles explicitly marked as translated, with the translator's name visible. For newspapers (22 min original, 4 min translated, 0.5 min not known), the respondents sometimes hesitate, commenting, for example, that some pieces of news from abroad mention as their source an international news agent or contain direct citations from foreign politicians in Finnish, which clearly have been translated, but they are not explicitly marked as translations in the newspaper.

A text category typically marked as 'translation' by the great majority of respondents is subtitles, with 56 minutes spent reading translated and only 1 minute original text on average. The 1 min is due to watching intralingual subtitles in a foreign language.

As for literature, the proportion seems to be nearly 50/50: 20 minutes spent reading original texts, 15 minutes translated. The work- or study-related materials are mostly read or browsed as original texts (67 minutes on average), but in different languages; translations mentioned in this category (14 minutes on average) are mainly course books and translation exercises – the respondent's own and other students' translations – worked on during a lecture or at home.

The **proportion of time spent reading or browsing translated text is 32.9%**, and the proportion the texts defined neither as originals nor translations (the "do not know" category) is 6.9% for the 93 students. The proportion of translations is slightly below the average of the 30 non-students from 2007 (39.2%), as mentioned above. The proportion was first counted for each respondent (percentage of time spent with translated texts out of the total time reported) and then by calculating an average of these percentages.

If both groups are combined, the proportion of translated texts amounts to 34.4%. The proportion seems to be slightly smaller than the figures reported before by Vihonen and Salmi (2007, 2008), 39%, and the estimates reported by Mäkisalo (2006: 256), nearly 44 %. This might be explained, on the one hand, by looking at the times the students report spent on reading the different texts categories: translator students can be expected to spend a fairly large amount of their daily time reading texts related to their studies, and these often are written in an original language (their A, B or C languages). On the other hand, the figures given Mäkisalo (*ibid.*) are an estimate given by the researcher, with as much as 34% of texts left uncategorised.

6 Reliability and validity of the study

As the respondents belong to a quite restricted group of people (i.e. university students of translation), this data perhaps tells us more about the kind of texts translator students come across than achieving the goal we set out for ourselves: finding out the proportion of translated texts in our daily lives. Also, translator students are already sensitive to texts and translations. Therefore, a further aim for the study will be to conduct a similar

survey among other groups, such as several different socio-professional groups that might be fairly easily accessible through employers or associations. The most interesting approach, of course, would be to conduct a larger study among people with different social status and belonging to different age groups. In fact, the mere fact of participating in such a survey would probably make the respondent more sensible to text and translation, which would, in itself, bring us closer to the other goal set in the first place, promoting the translator's and interpreter's profession.

As for the diary as a collection method in studies concerning time use, diaries are usually considered more reliable than retrospective interviews, and are used, e.g., by Statistics Finland for their Time use survey. However, when the respondents concentrate on reporting one task only (such as 'reading' or 'texts'), versus reporting their time use in general (out of the 24 h there is in a day), the times may be overestimated (Pääkkönen, personal communication).

The student–teacher relationship present in this study might also have an influence, in that the students might mention only such text categories that they think the teacher considers 'important'. However, it has been clearly emphasised to the students that the diaries are collected for research purposes, and that they should give as realistic information as possible. In addition, the diaries have not been evaluated as such during the course, but only a text analysis task, handed in separately, was subject to evaluation (the students were asked to choose two texts from among the ones they mentioned in the diary and analyse these using the methods discussed during the course). Also, so many students report watching soap operas on TV and reading *Cosmopolitan* that it seems unlikely that the possible 'pleasing the teacher' effect would have been considerable.

7 Conclusions and ideas for further research

In this article, I have discussed the proportion of translated texts among all the text material met during one day. The results from 93 translator students' text diaries seem to indicate that about a third of the text they come across daily is translated. However, previous studies have reported larger proportions, closer to 40% (Vihonen & Salmi 2007, 2008) or even 44% (Mäkisalo 2006). Therefore, more research is needed, both involving larger socio-professional groups and using other methods.

Another path that this data further opens up for analysis is a comparison of the number of occurrences of original vs. translated texts in the diaries (and not the time). For example, of 10 different texts mentioned, how many are originals and how many translations? This is an analysis that is currently being conducted. Other options include comparing this data with other data, such as the time use data from the Time use survey by Statistics Finland, and the set of media diaries collected by the Finnish Broadcasting company YLE in 2001 mentioned in 1 above that are available for research purposes.

Other ideas for achieving the goal mentioned in relation to the promotion of the profession would be the ones mentioned by Paloposki (2005), such as mapping the translation work done in (a large and a small) newspaper, or studying periodicals that are translated into several languages, such as *Reader's Digest* or *Cosmopolitan*. A

further line of inquiry would also be to conduct similar text diary surveys in other countries, for example in the Nordic countries, similar to Finland concerning their population and linguistic situation.

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Appendix 1. The form translated from Finnish into English (my translation)

TEXT DIARY

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Age

under 16 16-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 56-65 over 65

Gender: male female **Marital status:** single married divorced widow(er)

Education:

Profession: _____

- basic education
- upper secondary vocational education
- general upper secondary education
- Polytechnic Bachelor's degree
- university degree

Time I spend reading daily (on average):

more than 6 h 3-6 h 1-3 h less than 1h

TEXT DIARY

Date and day of the week: _____

Name: _____

Type	Name or description	language (if not Finnish)	time	Type of reading		Translated			comments
				concentrated	browsing	Y	N	DNK	
Newspapers									
Periodicals									
Scientific publications									
Literature (factual and fiction)									
Internet									
E-messaging (e-mail, SMS, chat)									
Publicity, brochures, announcements									
Instructions, user guides, package texts etc.									
Subtitles (TV, film)									
Administrative texts									
Other work- or study-related material									
Other (please specify)									

DNK = do not know

Appendix 2. An example of a filled-in student diary translated from Finnish into English (my translation)

Type	Name or description	language (if not Finnish)	time	Translated			comments
				Y	N	DNK	
Newspapers	Kauppalehti		15 min	x			news articles
Periodicals							
Scientific publications							
Literature (factual and fiction)	Simone de Beauvoir: Deuxième sexe	French	40 min		x		original in French
Internet	WorkMates learning environment		10 min				
	University of Turku		20 min		x		
	Facebook	English	15 min		x		The site is supposedly originally in English
	Wikipedia	French				x	
	Google		1 min	x			translated from English
	Wordreference.com	English/ French	3 min	x	x		Dictionary; English is the original language of the site
E-messaging (e-mail, SMS, chat)	SMS-messages		5 min		x		
Publicity, brochures, announcements	University Sports schedule		2 min		x		
	Outdoors publicity for refreshments (Hartwall)		10 sec				Advertising both Finnish products (Jaffa) and imported products (Pepsi)
Instructions, user guides, package texts etc.	Chicken meat package		10 sec		x		Finnish producer

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Subtitles (TV, film)	TV: "Takashi's Castle"	narration in English, subtitled in Finnish	30 min	x			
Administrative texts	A letter from the Finnish Social Insurance Institution		1 min		x		A Finnish institution, letter in Finnish
Other work- or study-related material	"Qué tal?" (Spanish workbook)	Spanish (and Finnish)	90 min	x	x		The book contains both text translated into Finnish from Spanish and text in Spanish
	Course notes		15 min		x		
Other (please specify)							