

'I fulfil my place among the humankind, in the universe' Finnish translators' job satisfaction in three empirical studies

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Abstract

As there are only a handful of empirical studies on translators' job satisfaction, this article re-examines three sets of data on Finnish translators from that perspective. The data were collected in two surveys on the translation profession with 138 and 450 respondents (conducted, respectively, in 2012 and 2014) and in 16 interviews on government translators' job satisfaction (2013). The results indicate that the translators were mostly satisfied with their jobs and felt that their work is valued. Experiences of stress varied; in-house employment did not exclude feeling stressed. Possibilities for influencing aspects of one's work showed some variation, but most translators felt that they could influence at least the tone and quality of the translation. Particularly senior translators were able to 'craft' their job to their liking. Professional contacts were fairly frequent for both in-house and freelance translators, and colleagues were an important resource to many. Further study is needed on differences between translators in different situations and on the resources available to translators to offset the demands of their job.

Keywords: job satisfaction, Translator Studies, sociology of translation, psychology of translation

1 Introduction

Work is a major part of our lives, not simply as a source of livelihood but also of well-being: job satisfaction contributes to overall life satisfaction and vice versa (Bowling et al. 2010). Within psychology, job satisfaction has been studied since the 1930s, but research on translators' job satisfaction is scarce. The present article therefore analyses three sets of data from 2012, 2013 and 2014. Our aim is to discover what these data, partly collected for other purposes, can tell about Finnish translators' job satisfaction.

The article begins with an overview of previous research (Section 2) and then describes the materials and methods (Section 3). Section 4 explores job satisfaction through five themes prominent in our data: 1) job satisfaction in general; 2) value and meaningfulness; 3) stress; 4) influencing one's work; and 5) colleagues. A discussion of the results and implications for further research concludes the article.

2 Previous research

A classic definition by Edwin A. Locke (1976: 1300) describes job satisfaction as 'a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences'. More simply, job satisfaction concerns 'how people feel about their jobs and different aspects of their jobs' (Spector 1997: 2). Job satisfaction thus involves emotions and affects, either in terms of an overall stance towards one's job or in terms of different aspects of the job.

Job satisfaction has been extensively studied within job and organizational psychology and human resources management. While we claim no in-depth knowledge of these fields, we have located meta-analyses and review articles drawing attention to some major aspects.¹ Below, we first summarise findings from psychological research and then from translation research.

2.1 Job satisfaction within psychology

Job satisfaction has been studied particularly in relation to job performance; other major topics include connections of job satisfaction to employee absenteeism, turnover and life satisfaction (Judge et al. 2001; Judge & Klinger 2009; Bowling et al. 2010). Several scales for quantitative surveys have been developed; they frequently measure overall satisfaction with work, as well as satisfaction with supervision, co-workers, pay and promotion (Bowling et al. 2010: 919, Spector 1997: 8–12).

Perceived job satisfaction can simply be related to an individual's dispositional affect, or the tendency to experience positive or negative emotions or moods (Thoresen et al. 2003: 915). A positive affect correlates with job satisfaction, while employees with negative dispositions are more likely to experience exhaustion or consider changing jobs (ibid.: 928).

The job itself also contributes to job satisfaction. According to a meta-analysis (Humphrey et al. 2007: 1333–1345), job satisfaction correlates with several job characteristics, including:

- autonomy;
- variety in skills and tasks;
- complexity (the job is multifaceted and challenging);
- job significance, meaningfulness;
- feedback.

Another approach to job satisfaction focusing on the job itself is the **Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model**, developed by Evangelia Demerouti et al. (2001) to study work stress and burnout. **Job demands** are factors that require sustained physical or psychological effort or skills, such as time pressure or emotionally demanding interaction;

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they have physiological and/or psychological costs and can lead to exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti 2007: 312–313). **Job resources**, in contrast, may reduce the effort from job demands and facilitate the achievement of work goals or personal development. Job resources include autonomy, task significance, feedback, participation in decision-making, support from colleagues and pay and career opportunities (ibid.), which, as observed above, have been found to correlate with job satisfaction in other studies as well.

If we agree that autonomy and job resources affect job satisfaction, it is also worth taking note of job crafting, a term coined by Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane E. Dutton (2001). Job crafting is concerned with employees' autonomy and possibilities to influence their work: it is manifested in changes that employees introduce to their tasks, relationships and perceptions of work to increase the meaningfulness and significance of the job. In short, it 'captures what employees do to redesign their own jobs in ways that can foster job satisfaction, as well as engagement, resilience, and thriving at work' (Berg et al. 2008: 1).

On the whole, psychological research suggests that translation, as a complex and varied job, can be inherently conducive to job satisfaction – at least as long as the job demands are not too high or are offset by job resources and possibilities to influence one's work. We next consider what translation research has to say about the matter.

2.2 Translators' job satisfaction

Translators' job satisfaction has been linked both to translation psychology (Jääskeläinen 2016 [2012]) and sociology: Andrew Chesterman's (2009) outline of the sociology of translation includes translators' attitudes to their work. Some studies on translators' job satisfaction are indeed closer to sociological than psychological investigations.

The first empirical study where translators' job satisfaction plays a major role is probably by Johan Hermans and José Lambert, who interviewed business translators and their employers in Belgium to discover why job satisfaction is 'as low among translators in business environments as it seems to be' (Hermans & Lambert 1998: 117). The interviews included no direct question on job satisfaction, but the translators were unhappy with rates and timetables and felt that their expertise was not appreciated (ibid.: 119–125).

David Katan's international survey on the translator's profession was probably the first study to include an item on job satisfaction. In contrast to Hermans and Lambert's results, these respondents (n=890) were mostly 'pretty' or 'extremely' satisfied with their job (Katan 2011 [2009]: 82–83). Most translators also enjoyed a high (50%) or middling (40%) autonomy over their output (ibid.: 74). The open comments suggest that the sense of job satisfaction was due to the stimulating nature of translating (ibid.: 83).

Similar ideas on the nature of translation were expressed in a study of 15 senior translators in Denmark (Dam & Zethsen 2016), who described translation as a varied, stimulating activity with creative challenges (ibid.: 180–181). They also found translation a meaningful, important job (ibid.: 182).

Kaisa Koskinen's interviews with the Finnish translators in the European Commission also touched on motivation and job satisfaction. Factors motivating the translators included the freedom to use initiative at work (autonomy) and social aspects: feedback, institutional support and face-to-face contacts with stakeholders (Koskinen 2009: 104–106).

The first empirical study dedicated to translators' job satisfaction, by Christy Fung-Ming Liu (2013), approached the concept through Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) symbolic, economic, social and cultural capital. In Liu's survey of Chinese translators (n=193), the respondents' mean satisfaction was slightly below the middle point (Liu 2013: 136). The translators with more interaction with clients and end-users were more satisfied with several types of capital, including economic (salary, job security), social (networking) and cultural (feedback; *ibid.*: 139–140).

Another model for studying translators' job satisfaction, developed by Mónica Rodríguez-Castro (2015, 2016), relies on the psychologist Frederick Herzberg's (1959) theory dividing satisfaction into task and job satisfaction. Task satisfaction is related to performing a specific task, while job satisfaction involves 'job setting and general work environment' (Rodríguez-Castro 2016: 202, 205). A questionnaire based on the model was administered in 2011, with 250 translator respondents from several western countries. Major sources of task satisfaction included challenging, complex tasks and intrinsic pride in one's work (*ibid.*: 212–214). Job satisfaction stemmed mostly from cooperation with professionally skilled colleagues, project managers and clients (*ibid.*: 218–222). However, the data also indicated high levels of stress (*ibid.*: 214). When Rodríguez-Castro (2019: 131–133) compared the responses of senior translators (10+ years of experience) and novices (0 to 2 years of experience), she discovered that the senior translators experienced higher levels of satisfaction in several respects, such as their occupational status, task autonomy and the possibility to choose their clients.

Finally, Jennifer Courtney and Mary Phelan (2019) investigated the relationship between stress and job satisfaction, with 474 translator respondents from the United Kingdom and Ireland. Overall, the respondents were satisfied (37%) or very satisfied (43%) with their job (Courtney & Phelan 2019: 107), although almost half of them often felt stressed and more than half felt they had to work very fast (*ibid.*: 104–105). On the other hand, two thirds of the respondents sometimes enjoyed working under pressure (*ibid.*: 106). The job demands were thus not associated with job dissatisfaction.

To summarise, previous research indicates that many translators are satisfied with their job (Katan 2011 [2009], Courtney & Phelan 2019). Contributing factors include the nature of translation (Katan 2011 [2009], Dam & Zethsen 2016, Rodríguez-Castro 2016), autonomy (Katan 2011 [2009], Koskinen 2009, Rodríguez-Castro 2019) and interaction (Koskinen 2009, Liu 2013, Rodríguez-Castro 2016). Translators can also be stressed but still experience job satisfaction (Courtney & Phelan 2019). We next explore how our materials can complement this picture.

3 Materials and methods

This section begins with a few words on the Finnish context, after which we describe our materials, data and methods.

3.1 The Finnish context

Both Finnish and Swedish are official languages in Finland, which means that all legislation and texts concerning ‘the life, health, safety of the individual and in respect of property and the environment’ must be made available in both languages (Language Act 423/2003, Chapter 7, Section 32). As a result, there is a large, continuous demand for translation from Finnish to Swedish. It has been estimated that the public sector (central and local government and other authorities) employs some 170 Swedish translators (Petrell 2019).

In practice, the most common foreign language that Finns encounter in their daily lives is English. This also shows in translators’ working languages: apart from Finnish, the most common working language is English, followed by Swedish (Wivolin & Vuorinen 2012, Wivolin 2019).

3.2 Materials

The materials of this study were collected in 2012 (Lassus), in 2013 (Virtanen) and in 2014 (Ruokonen). They come from surveys (Lassus, Ruokonen) and interviews (Virtanen).

Lassus’ survey explored the work and working conditions of Finnish-to-Swedish translators. It attracted 138 respondents, out of whom 48 were employed by the public sector (central and local government), 33 were entrepreneurs and 29 were employees at private companies or non-governmental organisations. The majority of the respondents were senior translators, with over ten years of work experience. Lassus’ respondents also included proportionally more public-sector employees and in-house translators than Ruokonen’s, probably due to the official status of the Swedish language. Results from this survey have been previously published in Lassus (2013, 2014, 2017).

Ruokonen’s survey was a similar investigation into translators’ work and working conditions, with an emphasis on the status of the profession. It was aimed at translators in Finland with any working languages and received a total of 450 responses from 269 business (non-fiction) translators, 71 literary translators, 57 audio-visual translators and 53 other language professionals. At the time of the survey, 397 respondents worked as translators; 260 were freelancers or entrepreneurs and 137 were employees. Out of these 137 in-house translators, 58 worked for private companies, 46 for the public sector and 33 for other employers. Results from this survey have been previously published in Ruokonen (2018, 2019) and in Ruokonen and Mäkisalo (2018).

Virtanen’s data come from interviews (n=16) conducted with the English translators employed by the Finnish government ministries. In contrast to Lassus’ and Ruokonen’s

data, Virtanen's aim was to investigate job satisfaction, more specifically the respondents' job resources and possibilities for job crafting (see Virtanen 2019). As in Lassus' survey, Virtanen's interviewees were mostly senior translators, with over ten years of work experience.

There are two major limitations concerning the materials. Firstly, apart from Virtanen's interviews, they were not collected for studying job satisfaction and thus cannot offer a systematic view on the subject. Secondly, the materials overlap to some extent. Lassus' and Ruokonen's data are anonymous, but Ruokonen's data include 203 translators with Swedish as a working language (translating from or into Swedish or both). Ruokonen's data also include seven government English translators interviewed by Virtanen (see Virtanen 2019: 91). These overlaps may reinforce the similarities between the materials.

3.3 Data and methods

We delimited the scope of study by creating a mindmap on the themes of job satisfaction recurring in previous research. On the map, each of us commented on how our materials were connected to these themes. After several discussions, we decided to focus on the following five themes, which were common to all our materials: 1) Job satisfaction in general 2) The value or meaningfulness of work 3) Stress or time pressure 4) Possibilities to influence one's work (autonomy, job crafting) 5) The role of colleagues.

Table 1 below illustrates how these five themes were approached in our studies. As we each originally created our survey and interview items for our own purposes, the items connected to a theme were formulated differently in our different studies.

Table 1: Themes and corresponding items in our studies

Theme	Study	Item(s)
Job satisfaction in general	Lassus	I enjoy my work
	Ruokonen	If you could choose completely freely, would you work as a freelancer/entrepreneur or as an in-house translator?
	Virtanen	If you think about your job satisfaction, how satisfied you are with the current situation?
Value / meaningfulness	Lassus	My work is valuable; Others appreciate my work
	Ruokonen	Is your work valued at work or by the commissioners?
	Virtanen	Open comments on factors contributing to overall job satisfaction; professional pride; most positive work experiences; work being rewarding.

Stress	Lassus	I have enough time for my job; I feel stressed at my job
	Ruokonen	How frequently have you experienced disturbing stress?
	Virtanen	How frequently have you experienced disturbing stress? (from Ruokonen's data)
Influence on one's work	Lassus	I can influence: the tone of the text; words and expressions; terminology
	Ruokonen	To what degree can you influence: deadlines; income; which commissioners to work for; translation quality; expectations concerning translation quality?
	Virtanen	Comparison of official job descriptions with open comments on personal duties and responsibilities
Colleagues	Lassus	How many colleagues working with translation do you have within the same department or organisation? My supervisor/colleagues read my texts; I get feedback
	Ruokonen	Do you share your office with anyone? How frequently are you in contact with: translators; other colleagues; mediators of commissions; clients; source-text producers?
	Virtanen	Open comments on factors contributing to overall job satisfaction; professional pride; most positive work experiences; work being rewarding.

In Lassus' and Ruokonen's surveys, all the items presented in Table 1 were closed. Lassus' typical scale was frequency-based ('always', 'most of the time', 'sometimes', 'never', and 'unable to say'), whereas Ruokonen mostly employed the Likert scale (5='to a very high degree', 4='to a high degree', 3='to a certain degree', 2='to a low degree' and 1='to a very low degree or not at all'). For the present study, Lassus also analysed her respondents' open comments. Virtanen's interview data were collected through individual interviews with mainly open-ended questions. On the one hand, this means that our data are not directly comparable, but, on the other hand, they provide us with complementary views on the themes.

Analysing our data for this study, we chose a descriptive approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The numerical results are illustrated by means of the distributions of responses (percentages), as well as averages and mode (most frequent answer) when relevant. The open comments have been analysed thematically through several close readings.

4 Results

In this section, we present the results of our study, organised according to the themes in Table 1 above. All quotations have been translated from Finnish or Swedish into English by the authors.

4.1 Job satisfaction in general

Most of Lassus' and Virtanen's respondents are satisfied with their job. In Lassus' data on the Finnish-to-Swedish translators, 92% of the respondents were 'always' or 'most of the time' satisfied with their job, with only minor differences among entrepreneurs, public-sector employees and other in-house translators. The satisfaction also shows in the open comments: 'When translating is at its best it is a great joy' and 'I love being a translator and in fact I mostly get positive feedback, which is great!'

Virtanen's interviewees were all 'fairly satisfied', 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their job, and half of them described translation as a calling. The reasons for job satisfaction mostly stemmed from translation itself, or task-related resources: translation was characterised as a varied, challenging and meaningful job that allowed control over one's own work and offered opportunities for personal achievement and growth.

While Ruokonen's survey included no item on overall job satisfaction, it complements this picture by indicating that most business translator respondents, 89% of in-house translators and 73% of freelancer/entrepreneurs, would choose their current form of employment if they could choose freely.

4.2 Value

The majority of our respondents and interviewees felt that their work is valued or important. In Lassus' data, the Finnish-to-Swedish translators strongly perceived their work as valuable, either 'most of the time' (35%) or 'always' (52%). The majority of the entrepreneurs (69%) and public-sector employees (60%) also felt that others appreciate their job, either most of the time or always. As one respondent wrote, 'I feel that my work as a legal translator is important. I have always wanted to work as a translator.'

In Lassus' data, there was a difference between in-house translators in the public and private sectors: in contrast to public-sector translators, less than half (44%) of private-sector in-house translators felt that their job is appreciated by others most of the time or 'always'. Interestingly, a similar trend did not emerge in Ruokonen's data. There, in-house translators in both the private and public sectors felt that their work is valued 'to a high degree' (means 3.84 and 3.85, respectively, on a scale of 1 to 5).

In Virtanen's interviews, the English translators working for the Finnish government felt that their work is valued very highly. This was also reflected in the comments as being a useful 'part of a bigger whole', or even in such tones as in the following quote:

- (1) I fulfil my place among the humankind, in the universe. [...] They [the translations] serve a practical purpose and are not translated just for the sake of it. They genuinely advance matters here and there.

4.3 Stress

In our data, the respondents' experiences of stress varied to some extent. Among Lassus' Finnish-to-Swedish translators, it was the public sector employees and entrepreneurs who felt the most stressed: 23% of the public sector respondents reported being stressed 'most of the time' and 8% 'always', and for the entrepreneurs, the figures were similar. Concerning the statement 'I have enough time for my work', the responses show a somewhat different pattern. Of the public sector workers, only 6% said that they 'never' have enough time for their work. The majority reported that they have enough time 'most of the time'. The entrepreneurs' responses showed a similar pattern. In other words, even if about one third of the respondents felt stressed 'always' or 'most of the time', only a handful never had enough time for their work.

In Ruokonen's data, half of the respondents estimated that they experienced disturbing, negative stress 3 to 4 times per year. Experiences of stress were the least frequent among the literary translators, of whom only a tenth felt stressed on a weekly or daily basis. In contrast, a fifth of the business translators experienced stress every week or every day. In-house and freelancer business translators' responses concerning stress were very similar, with '3 to 4 times per year' being the most frequent answer.

Virtanen's interviews did not address stress, but out of those seven government English translators who responded to Ruokonen's survey, five reported experiencing negative stress 'once a month or more often', while two selected options indicating 'a few times a year or not at all' (Virtanen 2019: 133). Overall, the data thus suggest that steady, fixed employment does not exclude the possibility of stress.

4.4 Influencing one's work

In all three sub-data, the respondents felt able to influence aspects of the translation itself. Lassus' Finnish-to-Swedish translators felt that they could influence the tone (53%), expressions (55%) and terminology (66%) of the translation 'always' or 'most of the time'. Ruokonen's respondents felt that they had a 'high degree' of influence on the quality of the final translation (mean: 4.37).

Ruokonen's data also draw attention to translators' influence on other aspects of their work. Among the business translators, both in-house and freelancer respondents had a 'certain degree' of influence on deadlines (means 2.62 and 2.82, respectively). The freelancers, perhaps naturally, had a 'high degree' of influence on their working hours (mean: 4.26), but in-house translators could also influence their hours to a 'certain degree' (mean: 3.35). Interestingly, Ruokonen's in-house translators felt that they had less influence on clients' expectations concerning quality than freelancers did (means: 2.37 as opposed to 2.82).

While Ruokonen's in-house respondents mainly believed themselves to have a moderate degree of influence on their work, Virtanen's government translators told about

having influenced their work on all levels of job crafting (Virtanen 2019: 157–158, 173). They had adopted or created new tasks, focused more on the tasks they found meaningful, and modified individual tasks. They had also increased cooperation with colleagues and commissioners and networked actively. As a result, they felt that their job was part of a larger whole, personally meaningful and in better harmony with their values. The fact that the translators in Virtanen's data felt so empowered may be at least partly due to their long experience in their current job, mostly over 10 years; similarly to the respondents in Lassus' study.

4.5 Colleagues

In Lassus' data, the in-house translators in the public sector had an average of three colleagues while the entrepreneurs worked alone. The public sector translators also had colleagues reading their translations fairly often (15% 'always', 23% 'most of the time'). Nevertheless, the open responses in Lassus' data often expressed the wish for a translator colleague or a Swedish-speaking colleague in general. Out of the 55 answers to the open question 'What kind of help and support do you lack?', 17 (31%) mentioned a colleague or someone to discuss with or get feedback from, for example: 'A translator colleague in the same organisation' and 'Another Swedish-speaking person as a sounding-board'.

Ruokonen's data showed a similar pattern: while 43% of the in-house translators shared their office or workspace with someone, roughly a tenth (14%) of freelancers did so. Otherwise, both freelancers and in-house respondents had fairly frequent professional contacts: in both groups, the mode was '3 or 4 times a week' for contacts with other translators and mediators of commissions. The in-house translators also had equally frequent contacts with other colleagues and direct clients.

Similarly to the comments in Lassus' data, Virtanen's interviews highlighted the importance of colleagues: social relationships in general emerged as a major job resource encompassing almost a third of all references to resources (Virtanen 2019: 140, 147–149). This is also illustrated in the following quote:

- (2) When someone [in the organisation] first just has a question for you and wants to take care of it electronically and then they realise it's more efficient when we meet like this, face-to-face. That's really satisfying. [...] It's precisely then that your expertise gets valued.

5 Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed three sets of materials on five themes: job satisfaction in general, value and meaningfulness, stress, possibilities of influencing one's work, and colleagues.

Our results show that the Finnish translators in our data were satisfied with their job at the time of the surveys and interviews. The respondents characterised their job as varied and challenging (similarly to Katan 2011 [2009], Dam & Zethsen 2016), characteristics that are connected to job satisfaction (Humphrey et al. 2007). Most were also happy with their form of employment.

The majority of the respondents felt that their work was important and meaningful or perceived their work as valuable (cf. Humphrey et al. 2007). Some differences, however, emerged. One explanation for the fact that the respondents in Ruokonen's large-scale study felt less valued could be the type of employer. In Lassus' study, many Finnish-to-Swedish respondents worked for the public sector, ensuring the rights of the Swedish-speaking minority. In Virtanen's study, all respondents worked for the ministries, thus connected to activities of national and international importance. This issue could be examined further: does working 'for your country' lead to a sense of greater value and meaningfulness than working for private companies?

The respondents' experiences of stress varied, but those feeling stressed still often felt that they had enough time for their job and were satisfied with their job. A possible explanation for this is that job resources, such as challenging and meaningful tasks, moderate the adverse effects of stress (Bakker et al. 2005). Interestingly, a fixed employment did not exclude the possibility of stress, which could be investigated further with more precise tools.

In all our data, the respondents felt that they could influence aspects of their work, similarly to Katan's (2011 [2009]) results. Most respondents stated that they could influence the tone and quality of the translation. As some differences emerged between in-house translators in the public and private sectors, further investigation could examine translators with different forms of employment and their possibilities to influence their work and engage in job crafting. Or is the explanation more simple: do experienced translators feel more confident and empowered and hence perceive that they have more influence on their work? This is suggested by Rodríguez-Castro's (2019) data, but further qualitative research would be needed.

Finally, our results indicate that colleagues and social contacts constitute a major job resource, similarly to Liu's (2013) and Rodríguez-Castro's (2016) results. Many Swedish translators expressed the wish for a colleague, and, in addition, the government English translators placed particular importance on interaction with commissioners. Considering that both freelancers and in-house translators had frequent professional contacts, this is an interesting theme to follow up on.

In further research, it is important to acknowledge how a translator's personality or professional identity and self-esteem could affect job satisfaction and even performance. Both researchers and professional translators also need more information on how to foster resources contributing to job satisfaction, as resources can offset the impact of stress and other job demands. Overall, however, translation already emerges as a job that is characterised by a variety of both demands and resources and that can provide a high degree of job satisfaction.

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