Book review

The Reflexive Translator. Strategies and Affects of Self-directed Professionals
Joanna Albin (2014)

Reviewed by Marcin Walczyński

Introduction

As both a translation/interpreting scholar and trainer and a practising translator/interpreter, I find the book authored by Joanna Albin interesting, informative, motivating, stimulating and inspiring. Relatively little has been done in translation research on translation psychology, especially those aspects which are related to affective factors. It is generally known that every human being is subject to the activity of affective factors. So are translators in their professional activity. Additionally, the studies on what the author calls ‘self-directed learning’ procedures related to the development of translation competence are not common therefore the book fills in this gap well. Finally, the observations that the author makes on the basis of the data gathered among professional translators can contribute to redefining translation competence and to including the so-far neglected components.

Book overview

Chapter 1 presents a thorough review of literature on psychology and related areas. The author provides an outline of the most important concepts, tendencies and theories which are relevant to the study, in particular to the learning processes. Thus, the author concentrates on constructivism, social cognitive theory, affective factors, cognitive aspects of knowledge acquisition and self-direction with reference to learning processes. The selection of the themes
covered in this chapter is well grounded as it is those theoretical frameworks which the exploratory study presented in further chapters is based on.

Chapter 2 provides a review of a variety of approaches to translation competence. The author gives a historical sketch of the scholarly debate on translation competence by presenting linguistic approaches to it and its componential models. Besides, attention is also devoted to the holistic model of translation competence developed by a group of translation scholars belonging to the PACTE group established at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain). Other models of translation competence which are summarized are the ones devised by Anthony Pym (minimalist approach) and Don Kiraly. What is interesting and praiseworthy in the context of the empirical study is the fact that the author also concentrates on those approaches which stress the importance of affective factors. So far, affect-related aspects have been examined mostly with reference to interpreting, with translation and translators’ affectivity being largely left aside. Among others, the author outlines the approach offered by Stewart Campbell which enables to ‘(…) observe personal and affective phenomena behind the translators’ decisions’ (Albin 2014: 44).

Chapter 2 also presents some observations about the contributions that other theories and concepts, especially those from the domains of social sciences, have made to the studies on translation competence.

Chapter 3 offers an insight into the aims of the study and research hypotheses that the author wishes to examine in the course of her work. The study seeks to provide the justification to or refutation of two hypotheses: (1) Self-directed learning plays a vital role in the professional development of translators (i.e. in their prior translation training, professional translators were not given the opportunity to select their specialisation nor were they instructed on such aspects of their professions as technicalities, business- and affect-related issues); (2) translation environment has a great impact on the section of specialization and development of skills (i.e. the traditional models of translation competence are not suitable to be regarded as models in real-life genuine translator’s profession and – as argued by Joanna Albin – ‘[i]nstead a flexible model of competence should be formulated’ (2014: 61).

Chapter 4 presents the methodological foundations of the study: the design of the research, the research instrument (i.e. questionnaire), the group of respondents. What is more, some terminological ambiguity is explained and the author provides a justification for the abandonment of the use of the terms ‘competence’ or ‘self-efficacy’ in the survey. An interesting issue discussed in this chapter is the method of the analysis of the data obtained from translators’ (respondents’) questionnaires. The author has applied cluster analysis, thanks to which it is possible to classify respondents (and their answers) into clusters which demonstrate different properties.
Chapter 5 offers the analysis of the results obtained within the study from the respondents’ questionnaires. In this chapter, the author makes thought-provoking observations concerning the market of bilingual Spanish-Polish translation services and translation industry. What is also interesting is the analysis of the data related to the evaluation of education, self-efficacy and affective factors. Much attention is also devoted to the analysis of learning strategies which translators apply while learning their profession and its diverse aspects.

Chapter 6 presents the discussion of the results of the questionnaire provided by the respondents with reference to the hypothesis the author had put forward prior to the study. As regards the first hypothesis about self-directed learning as a common learning method used by professional translators, the author states that ‘[a] translator is an individual who takes the decision to engage in translation activities, motivated by the prospect of satisfying her economic and affective needs and also by a certain anticipation of success’ (Albin 2014: 97–98). The author provides the self-directed learning strategies which the respondents disclosed in their answers to the survey questions. Thus, self-learning is indeed applied by professional translators. As far as the second hypothesis is concerned (i.e. translation environment has a great impact on the skills or specialization that professional translators decide to develop), the author has found enough evidence in the respondents’ replies to confirm it. This chapter is closed by an interesting subchapter about the paths for further research in the analysed domain.

The book also includes 35 figures and 18 tables which illustrate various aspects of both the theoretical as well as the analytical part of the study.

Evaluation and comments

The general evaluation of the entire book is positive. The author skilfully and with erudition moves around various theories which fall within the domain of translation studies, education and the interface of the two – translator education. Thus, the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study are solid and well grounded. What is also quite important is the fact that the author presents all of the theoretical aspects in a digestible and accessible way, which is not always the case in academic monographs, thus making the book available to non-scholars such as professional translators. Therefore, the reviewed monograph can also be a rich source of theoretical background knowledge for translators who might wish to expand their expertise in the academic aspects of the translation process.

The study itself is thought-provoking and stimulating. Using well-thought research instruments, the author has managed to gather a rich collection of the data related to the market of Spanish translation in Poland. As far as the
study methodology is concerned, the author used the major assumption of constructivism as the main paradigm, claiming that knowledge is a system which undergoes dynamic individual and collective (i.e. social) construction, in which context and perception are quite significant. As Joanna Albin claims, this view indeed had an influence on selecting the ‘introspective method for the elicitation instrument’ and on ‘data treatment and interpretation’ (2014: 63).

In general, the study presented in the book uses mostly qualitative methods (i.e. the analysis of the respondents’ intro- and retrospective opinions related to such aspects as working environments, typical procedures/methods, motivations, self-image, etc.). However, it might be argued that some elements of quantitative/statistical methods are also applied in the study (i.e. the already-mentioned cluster analysis, which is a method of statistical classification of items into groups comprising similar (in one sense or another) objects).

The author also stresses that she realizes the fact that the data obtained within the study are not completely objective (‘I do not seek objective data’ (Albin 2014: 64)) and she is right in claiming that such a study, in which participants are asked about their perceptions of different aspects of their professional activity, is far from being totally objective.

As far as the results obtained within the study, it emerges that the present translation training offered at tertiary education intuitions in Poland is insufficient and translator educators should pay more attention to designing such translation courses which would respond to the market needs better and which would provide those skills which the respondents have had to develop on their own using various self-directed learning strategies. There are several strategies which professional translators apply while expanding their knowledge or acquiring new skills. The results of the study carried out by Joanna Albin show that professional translators continually learn, which results from ‘the prospects of satisfying [their] economic and affective needs and also by a certain anticipation of success’ (2014: 98). The author’s observations concerning the translation environment and its role on the development of skills are attention-grabbing. The author rightly concludes that social factors do play a role in translators’ choices of their specializations and that their skills do depend on their specializations and therefore the respondents expressed their opinions that they believed they did not need all the possible skills.

On the other hand, the study also shows that professional translators belong to those groups of professionals who seek constant development and they indeed develop their skills and competences. As emerges from the study, the aspects of the translation profession badly missed are specific field knowledge (i.e. the knowledge of a given domain), CAT skills and self-promotion (i.e. business and management skills). Those results are thus in line with the reviewer’s observations (who is himself a practising translator/interpreter,
translator/interpreter trainer and curricula designer) about the lacks and needs of professional translators. Moreover, the growing number of crash courses, organized by the most renowned Polish associations of translators (e.g. TEPIS Polish Association of Certified and Specialized Translators [TEPIS Polskie Towarzystwo Tłumaczy Przysięgłych i Specjalistycznych], the Association of Polish Translators [Stowarzyszenie Tłumaczy Polskich], Baltic Society of Translators or Interpreters [Bałtyckie Stowarzyszenie Tłumaczy] for translators in using CAT tools (mostly Trados® and memoQ®), various aspects of the law or running their own translation business and marketing their translation services shows the aptness and correctness of the study author's conclusions.

Moreover, the study carried out by Joanna Albin may contribute to redefining the concept of translation competence since, as it seems, it is quite difficult to speak about one universal and perfect model of competence. The reviewer therefore concurs with Joanna Albin's point on that matter, according to which there should be 'a flexible model of competence' which could be then used in translator education. Apart from the already well-known components of translation competence (i.e. knowledge, skills), such a flexible model should have affect-related and strategic components, as well because those aspects do influence the work of professional translators.

As aforementioned, the book's final pages are filled with figures and tables clarifying diverse facets of the issues covered in the monograph. They certainly contribute to a better understanding of the issues covered in particular chapters.

Nevertheless, a slight objection can be raised as regards the structure of the book. The majority of the chapters are more or less of the same length, with two exceptions – Chapters 3 and 4. Both are rather short and albeit the author’s intentions of creating such two short chapters is clear and justified, in the opinion of the reviewer, both can be combined to constitute a more extensive chapter. This aspect of the book, however, does not have any influence on the reviewer’s positive reception of the quality and contents of the study.

In this place, one remark should be made. In view of the fact that English is the language in which gender bias is quite common, it was a great pleasure to read a book, in which the author consistently referred to a single translator using the feminine pronoun (‘she’/’her’). It might be believed that this practice does not result only from the fact that ‘[f]eminisation of the profession is a striking fact’ (Albin 2014: 71) but from the intention to show equality on all levels.

**Concluding remarks**

To conclude, the study offers an interesting overview of the theoretical and methodological background related to translator education. Additionally, it
provides a wealth of interesting data about the market of Spanish translation in Poland as well as about its major participants—professional translators who constantly develop their skills by means of the so-called self-directed learning. It might be believed that the findings of the study may contribute to taking a fresh approach to translation competence, in which affective, strategic and environmental factors should be included.

The high quality of the study is additionally strengthened by the fact that its author—Joanna Albin—is not only a translation scholar and translator trainer. She has first-hand experience as a certified translator of Spanish. Thus, this book can be recommended to anyone interested in the translation market and in particular, to translation trainers who—while designing their course curricula—may wish to apply a different approach to translation competence, posited in this study. It may also be wished that the study would be expanded to cover the entirety (if it is ever possible) of the translation market in Poland (i.e. with many languages from and into which professional translators translate). This would allow comparison of various language-related sectors of the market (e.g. English, German, French, Russian, etc.) and institutional translator training provided for the future translators of those languages and, perhaps, to make use of the best practices used in one sector to improve the quality of others.

About the reviewer

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