

Responsibility, powerlessness and conflict: An ethnographic case study of boundary management in translation

Hanna Risku

Jelena Milosevic

Regina Rogl

University of Vienna

A growing body of research shows the existence of tensions, frictions and conflicts in translation production networks, pointing to the key role of agency, trust, communication and technology in the collaboration (Abdallah & Koskinen 2007, Abdallah 2012, Alonso 2016). However, there are few empirical investigations that include the different actors in one and the same network and analyze the perspectives and practices of both clients and vendors. This paper draws on an ethnographic field study in which participant observation and qualitative interviews were used to study three translation clients working in a major international corporation as well as the CEO and a project manager of a translation agency with which they collaborate.

The research questions look at conflicts in their areas of contact, how these conflicts are handled and their consequences. The analysis yields rich, emotional narratives on how the different actors perceive each other, deal with power asymmetries and handle the perceived uncertainty of translation solutions. It shows that there are conflicting and ambiguous expectations regarding mutual responsibilities, leading to mistrust, power plays, fear and frustration.

To conceptualize the conflicts, the study applies the boundary spanner concept (Wenger 1998, Williams 2010, Söderberg & Romani 2017) in its analysis of the collaborating partners: The actors are described as boundary spanners trying to maintain sustainable interprofessional, multi-organizational client-supplier relationships in highly complex projects. In its discussion of the conflicts, the study refers to Palus, Chrobot-Mason and Cullen's (2014) model of boundary spanning activities and concludes that only "transactive" modes of collaboration are demonstrated, including *buffering* that clarifies group identities and *reflecting* that sensitizes each group to the other's values. The interdependences do not lead to a perceived community of partners or allies. The study offers a context-sensitive description of the reasons that can force "a loop of constant negotiation and renegotiation" (Alonso 2016) in the client-supplier relationships in translation collaboration.

Literature

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