Studying Translation from the Perspective of Blind Students in Poland

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the experiences of blind and low sighted students of translation in Poland across several decades. The piece is based on in-depth interviews with Polish translators and interpreters conducted by the author. It is argued that modern technologies demand more skills and abilities from blind students of translation than before and, due to their inaccessibility, still do not live up to all the expectations.

1 Introduction

Although there have been many successful blind and low sighted translators and interpreters, virtually no attention has been devoted to the challenges they have to face when studying translation (Kellett Bidoli 2003). This situation has recently been changing, with growing interest from scholars (e.g. Hagemann 2016, Rodriguez Vazquez and Mileto 2016) and blind translators themselves (Barhordari and Yousufi 2015).

The past few decades have witnessed many changes for persons with visual impairments in Poland. Not only has there been an ongoing technological revolution, but also a state system of support for persons with disabilities has been re-organised. Last, but certainly not least, Poland has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) which promotes human rights and social model of disability. The latter concept denotes a relatively new, in Polish conditions, understanding of disability as barriers that the society erects on the pathway to inclusion of persons with disabilities (Bernes and Mercer 2000).

It is in this perspective that I will try to understand the experiences of blind students of translation. In addition, I will use the theory of capitals, as conceived by Pierre Bourdieu (1986).

Bourdieu, in addition to economic capital, distinguishes cultural and social capitals. The cultural form of capital can present itself in embodied, objectivized or institutionalized states. The embodied state is understood in Bourdieusian terms as those dispositions that agents acquire over their lifetime. Thus, the acquisition of cultural capital in its embodied state requires time and effort and cannot be delegated (Bourdieu 1986). The ability to read Braille code is an example of this state of cultural capital. The objectivised state of cultural capital is represented by objects possessed by agents. These may include, in the context of the discussed study, Braille devices, specialised software for the blind, scanners, etc. It is important to stress that without the stocks of embodied cultural capital the volume of its objectivised state will not be effective. In other words, it is not enough to own a Braille note taker. One must know how to write and read Braille code in order to be able to effectively use the note taker. Finally, the institutionalised forms of cultural capital are those recognized titles or degrees that flow from possessing stocks of embodied and objectivised cultural capital.

The social form of capital, in turn, is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 1986). In other words, it is the potential to mobilise a network of contacts for the benefit of the agent. This process acts as a leverage on the agent's volumes of cultural and economic capitals, multiplying their efficacy.

2 Methodology

This study is of exploratory character. Therefore, the decision was taken to use

qualitative methods, and specifically the technique of in-depth interviewing, to collect data. The interviews were conducted in person, according to a detailed guide. The latter included the following sections: introduction, demographic data, education, working conditions, and recommendations. This paper will focus mainly on data related to the education of blind translators.

All the interviewees expressed their informed consent to participate in the study before the start of the interview.

In this paper every quote is followed by the fictitious code name assigned to the respondent, gender, main working language of the respondent, and their age at the time of interview.

3   Sample

Fifteen in-depth interviews were analysed. The respondents were 30 to 71 years old at the time of the interview. Eight were men, and seven were women. Most of them (13) worked with English as either their second or third language. Many respondents worked with two and some even with three foreign languages. Most informants (9 out of 15) graduated from the Institute of Applied Linguistics or its predecessor, Higher School of Foreign Languages at the University of Warsaw. Only two interviewees did not have a degree in languages. Some respondents completed postgraduate courses (e.g. in interpreting or literary translations) or were enrolled in doctoral programmes. All the respondents reported having good or excellent computer skills and seemed to be advanced or very advanced users of assistive technologies.

As for their disability, the interviewees represented a very homogenous group. All had certified severe degree of disability, meaning they were legally blind according to the Polish law. All were congenitally blind or low sighted. Five respondents declared that they were low sighted or had light perception. Although only two out of these were able to access printed materials (in large print). The other three respondents reported only light perception, with no possibility of using printed materials. Therefore, this homogenous group can hint mainly at experiences of congenitally blind persons who had to cope with their disability throughout their educational careers. It is a

matter of course that this set of respondents is by no means representative of persons with visual impairments at large. Therefore, it is impossible to generalise results. However, they can contribute to our knowledge about challenges that language professionals with visual impairments have to face during their education.

4   Results

The working methods of respondents during their university studies have been revolutionised by modern technologies. Thus, three periods have been isolated according to the availability of assistive technologies:

1. Analogue period (until the beginning of 1990s);

2. Transitional period (c.a. 1990-2005);

3. Digital period (from 2005 onwards).

Those interviewees who studied in the 1960s (the analogue period) would use Braille slate and stylus for taking notes. It was indispensable to have sighted peers or paid assistants (the state provided subsidy for this purpose) who could read the necessary materials. This situation started to change with the advent of personal computers at the beginning of 1990s. This not only meant that blind students could write essays (and then take notes) on a computer, but also it transformed the way in which they accessed literature or dictionaries. Further technological progress allowed blind students of translation to use such technologies as portable scanners with optical character recognition (OCR), digital Braille note-takers or digital voice recorders. However, it also meant that they had to have more such devices and had to be more skilful in e.g. touch typing than their sighted peers. Also, the very process of transition from analogue to digital and from DOS to Windows operating system proved to be slow and difficult, as this comment suggests:

"Windows 3.11 was spreading at that time, but it was not accessible. So everybody switched to Windows and we were left with DOS. We were stuck there and we couldn't get out. We were sending documents in RTF. And that was a problem, because they would not accept it. They would say: 'What? We don't need it this way. We need it in Word'" (Aneta, female, English, 43).

As for classes in translation, the respondents faced different types of challenges. The low sighted interviewees who studied translation required materials in large print (both low sighted respondents studied at the end of 1990s). The key support for blind students who studied in the 1960s and 1970s was to have the source text recorded (or transcribed into Braille) in advance. However, this meant that any departure from previously arranged class structure caused considerable problems for blind students, as reported by this respondent:

"He told me he would do this and then he would do something else that I hadn't noted down. It happened sometimes. And then I would do things with a delay" (Franciszek, male, French, 71).

Also, it was impossible for them to use printed textbooks since they could not transcribe them into Braille. Any texts for exam purposes had to be read aloud, written down in Braille and then the outcome had to be read aloud by the student. Another challenge was to obtain dictionaries in Braille, which, even if available, took a lot of space:

"For example, I could borrow from the library, or even purchase, the Grzebieniowski dictionary. It was a tiny dictionary which had six volumes in Braille. It was senseless, I didn't wat it at home, I wouldn't know where to keep it" (Antoni, male, English, 69).

These problems have been somewhat mitigated by the spread of digital technologies. However, it was (and still is) necessary to send any written materials to blind students in advance and in accessible format (such as DOC). The need for assistance did not disappear, as all scanned documents must be proof read, which requires sighted assistance:

""To scan is one thing, but then but then to correct, describe pictures or split tables is quite another thing. This caused major problems and one could not always cope on one's own with it" (Arkadiusz, male, 32).

Additionally, pictures must be described, and tables need to be properly formatted. Thus, the interviewees had to mobilise their peers, teachers or university staff to support them.

Neither did modern technologies allow blind students to work as fast as their sighted peers. They still needed to spend extra time on catching up with classes

"Despite having it [exercises] all on my BrailleSense, that Braille note-taker, they [teachers] would go so quickly that I had to decide if I wanted to take notes or read the contents of an exercise" (Alicja, female, English, 33).

Additionally, even with all the available modern technologies, it was difficult for the respondents to work fast in a multilingual context (e.g. switching from one synthetic voice to another or from one Braille table to another takes time). The interviewees also reported that not all electronic dictionaries were accessible. However, the respondents stressed that they had a proactive attitude and always tried to solve any problems by talking about them directly with their teachers.

None of the respondents has reported any substantial cases of positive discrimination during translation courses. Many interviewees stressed that they strove for equal treatment and that the reason for this was that market conditions in translational professions are equal for all.

5   Discussion

In Bourdieusian terms, the social capital seemed to play a key role during both secondary and tertiary education. Large stocks of social capital enabled the respondents to acquire volumes of the embodied (e.g. fast touch-typing, Braille contractions) and objectivised (e.g. accessible dictionaries, adaptation of printed materials) states of cultural capital related to disability. Thus, the higher volumes of social capital and cultural capital in its embodied state the respondents had, the more chances they had to acquire cultural capital in its objectivised and institutionalised states. It must be noted that the volumes of embodied and objectivised cultural capital that are necessary for persons with visual impairments to study translation are growing in parallel with the growth of digital technologies. It seems that in the future the demand for volumes of objectivised and embodied states of cultural capital related to disability will continue to grow. And the amount of economic capital required to convert it into the objectivised state of cultural capital will probably remain high.

Therefore, if one wants to level the playing field for blind students of translation, a constant collaboration between sighted and blind peers is

required. Teachers should also be collaborative and sensitised to the limitations of the software that blind students use to access computers. Additionally, in order to lower the required volume of social capital, the assistance for blind students of translation should be available on demand. This is especially true due to the complete inaccessibility of all the main CAT tools. Such assistance would enable more thorough participation in classes (and, for that matter, in professional activity) by blind students of translation. These assistants should be the eyes of the blind, meaning that the latter should grasp, for example, how does a CAT tool work and instruct the sighted assistance what to do with it. This would thus give a (real) sense of control over the material to the blind student which would help levelling the inaccessible playing field.

Implementing this set of recommendations, together with forcing software developers to make CAT tools accessible, seems to constitute what the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) describes as "reasonable adjustments" that allow the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the society.

It seems that despite their transformative potential for blind students of translation, at present modern technologies do not live up fully to their potential benefits. On the one hand this is because of inaccessibility of special purpose software for translators (CAT tools. But on the other hand, it is because of those very same expectations. Whereas modern technologies can support blind students of translation, even if these technologies are completely accessible (which some of them are not at present), we will still need support of human assistance. The idea, thus, would be to educate students in accessible modern technologies, but also to give them choice whether they want and are able to use them on their own or would require the support of sighted assistance.

Acknowledgements

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