

Many tracks lead to the goal

A long-term study on individual translation styles

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The knowledge and expertise of professional translators is frequently observed in translation process research and their patterns of behaviour are compared with those of students. It seems to be a common assumption that students are still developing their translation skills whereas professionals have already acquired them and, thus, know how to translate. For this reason, we believe that we can adopt useful methods and strategies employed by these translators for translator training. As part of a long-term study at the Copenhagen Business School, I examined the translation processes of students in 1997 and carried out the same tests again with the same participants in 2007, who were now professionals. Some of the results are presented in this article. The parameters I focus on here include the participants' attention, their use of reflection and their decision-making.

1. Introduction

How can we identify successful translation processes that lead to *good* translations? What traits, abilities, qualifications and skills characterise a successful translator? These were the questions I aimed to address at the beginning of my long-term study when I carried out the first experiments with over 40 students on the study of translation processes at the Copenhagen Business School (CBS) in 1996/1997. The students were all in the final year of their degree programme to qualify as state-certified translators (a protected title in Denmark). The pilot experiments, which were partly carried out using think aloud protocols, were followed by a series of experiments and control experiments using the following methods and tools: questionnaires, interviews, Translog combined with retrospection with replay, and a dialogue with the participants immediately after the translation process. As translation in both language directions, into and out of the foreign language, is weighted equally in Denmark, participants were asked to translate in both directions for each series of tests. Each translation product was

then evaluated. Additionally, as part of each experiment, participants were asked to perform a revision task (Hansen, 2008).

Based on observations I made during translation classes, I assumed that each translator has his/her own *individual competence pattern* (ICP), a combination of individual conditions, which shape both their style of translation during the translation process and the translation product itself (Hansen 1997, 207). Several individual competence patterns were observed in the experiments described in Hansen (2006a, 91f). Some examples: Several of the participants taking part in the experiment in 1997 typically started the sentences by writing a word or a letter, then hesitated briefly, deleted what they had written, only to write the same again. It appears to the observer as if the participants wanted to buy time to think.

Some of the participants simply started writing straight away and changed a lot. Others, in contrast, deliberated first before they wrote anything and made very few changes during the translation process.

I observed in the control experiments described in Hansen (2002) that, as students, some of the participants already exhibited a certain work pattern, i.e. ingrained habits regarding time-management during the translation process. This involved, for example, the length of translation phases and the frequency, position and length of pauses. However, this was not at all influenced by the subject matter of the source text, the text type or the direction of translation. At the time of the experiment, the participants were requested to translate six different texts in both language directions using Translog. The experiment revealed that some participants essentially made use of a long preparation phase before they started to write, whereas other participants started to write straight away. It was interesting to see that the behaviour of each participant was similar for all of the six completely different texts, as well as for both translation directions. As the current and other experiments reveal, this habitual, individual allocation of time was not a determining factor in the quality of the translation product (*ibid.*, 45).

In experiments carried out in 2004 (Hansen 2006b), some of the participants exhibited the habit of repeatedly and unnecessarily reformulating their translations. They regularly reformulated word groups and entire sentences, regardless of whether they were already correct or not. This behaviour revealed for one of the participants that she simply could not decide which solution was best.

My original assumption that translators possess "*individual competence patterns*" has been confirmed over and over again through observations of the control experiments since 1997. As students, the translators exhibited their own personal style of translating as well as of correcting and revising, which represent a significant part of the translation process. This raised the question as to whether the students would still demonstrate these individual competence patterns in their translation processes later on as professionals.

The absence of investigations on *individual profiles* in empirical process research had already been mentioned by Tirkkonen-Condit (2000, 141), who analysed the translator profile of six professional translators and examined how they dealt with insecurities.

Asadi and Séguinot (2005) described a project in which they examined the processes of nine professional translators, all working in the same office. The translators were asked to translate a technical text, which was in keeping with their daily work and their particular know-how. The authors hoped to identify individual strategies to simplify translation processes. They reached the conclusion (ibid., 525) that various styles of translating could not be clearly identified, however, certain patterns were recognisable. They describe primarily two different “cognitive styles of production”, which they label “translating on the screen” and “prospective thinking”. They conclude (ibid., 539) that, “[] each translator’s process is a unique combination of cognitive style, translating experience, technical skills and world knowledge, which cannot be fit into the static categories we hoped to find.” Coincidentally, the two cognitive styles proposed by Asadi and Séguinot also emerge in my long-term study as two extremities of translation styles and between these lies a series of individual types of translating — the individual patterns.

2. Long-term study

What differentiates this project from other projects aiming to compare the processes of students with those of professionals over a period of time is that, in this project, the *same participants* took part in both experiments. Now professionals with ten years’ experience, 28 of the original 47 participants were kind enough to take part in the experiment again.

As I already mentioned, one of the goals of my long-term study was to examine specific characteristics in translation processes, which lead to *good* translation products. To do this, I observed the participants’ translation processes and products with Translog’s replay function and examined how they made changes and corrections. I then compared the results of the experiments from 1997 with my observations from the subsequent experiments in 2007.

2.1 Long-term studies — longitudinal studies

A long-term study examines changes over a specified time period. This is often conducted as a longitudinal study, during which the same experiments are conducted using different time intervals and then compared to each other. However, objections have been raised to the longitudinal use of data. Due to advances in research,

it seems doubtful that the same experiments can be repeated more than once using identical methods. In saying that, with respect to methods, only limited developments had been made in translation process research between 1997 and 2007, and the Translog software used in both experiments had not changed significantly, aside from new combination possibilities (e.g. with Eye-Tracking) and improvements in the analyses. Since I still have all of the material from 1997 with the first version of Translog (Jakobsen 1999), I was able to analyse all the log files according to the same criteria, thus avoiding any bias which could arise from the time lapsed.

Nonetheless, I did have to take into account a new development in relation to the translation. Compared to 1997, it was important in 2007 to ensure that, when choosing the texts, the translation was not available online. This would have significantly influenced the results of the experiment.

3. Attention, reflection, decisions and changes

Changes and movements on the keyboard, which can be recognised in the translation process, reflect a chain of mental processes, including attention to a phenomenon, reflection on it, and decision-making. The result of these mental processes, i.e. the decisions the participants make, can be recognised in translation and revision processes by observing what happens on the keyboard immediately after pauses. This reading is taken from the log file. Furthermore, global behaviour, according to Krings (1986, 178) a three-phase model, can be observed during this process. This model proposes a division of the translation process into the preparation phase, the writing phase and the revision phase. The preparation phase is the phase directly preceding writing, the writing phase represents the actual writing process during the translation and the revision phase is the time after the writing process has been completed (Hansen 2006a, 124).

Since I am particularly interested in those factors that constitute *successful processes*, I first examined the translation processes of the four students/professionals who achieved the best results in all of the product evaluations as well as in the revision tasks during my long-term study. In presenting the results, I first compared the average values of the participants as students and as professionals. I then analysed and compared the individual values of the participants as students and later as professionals.

3.1 Changes

The changes made during the translation process can be divided into different categories: according to the text unit concerned and according to the amount of

attention and reflection required. Based on my previous observations, I have identified the following categories:

- *Changes and corrections at word level*: this means that the participants have not yet finished writing the word before they make a change or a correction. Either they write one or several letters, delete what they have written, and write the same thing again, or they write something, delete it and write a different word, or they make orthographic or morphological changes whilst still writing the word. These changes rarely take more than a second. For example, a participant writes 'sa', deletes it, and then writes 'sagt' (*says*), or some write 'unn' and correct it straight away with 'und' (*and*).
- *Revision in sentences and the context during the writing phase and the revision phase of the translation process*. These include: pragmatic, lexical, semantic, idiomatic, stylistic, syntactic or orthographic corrections that are made, but only *after* the participant has finished writing the individual words. The participant goes back and makes changes when working on the sentence or the subsequent text. For example, the participant writes the phrase 'von Dynastien zu sprechen' (to *speak* of dynasties), and then, at the end of sentence, she changes this to 'von Dynastien zu berichten' (to *report on* dynasties).
- *Reformulations during the writing phase and the revision phase*. Some changes, for example, reformulating entire sentences or complicated phrases, can prove to be particularly demanding. In this analysis, these changes are differentiated and examined separately from the other changes and corrections due to the observations described (Hansen 2006a). A reformulation implies that during the mental process, the participants also concentrate their attention on the consequences of these new formulations (semantic or grammatical, e.g. changing the case). For example, the following would be considered a reformulation: the sentence 'Die meisten Dänen können sich an die Zeit erinnern, als der Tourismus sich plötzlich positiv entwickelte' (the majority of Danish people can remember the time when *tourism suddenly showed an upward trend*) is changed to 'Die meisten Dänen können sich an die Zeit erinnern, als es mit dem Tourismus plötzlich steil bergauf ging' (The majority of Danish people can remember the time when *tourism suddenly began to thrive*).

4. Experimental design 1997 and 2007

All experiments were performed individually, in 1997 with the students in my office at the CBS and, in 2007, at the professional translators' workplace. Participants translated authentic texts from the fields of the media and journalism. All of the

translation assignments included a translation brief and were designed to reflect a realistic translation task. In 1997, participants were asked to translate a text about BASF (255 words) from German into Danish, and in 2007, a text about a visit by the German writer Juli Zeh to Denmark (230 words). In 1997, they were asked to translate a text about the new Danish spelling reform (329 words) from Danish to German and in 2007 a text about a Danish culinary speciality "Smørrebrød" (249 words). The texts in the different translation directions dealt with completely unrelated topics and were not the same length, however they were comparably difficult. The "comparability" of the difficulty level of texts is usually based on a complicated combination of the translation task and the translators' translation skills (including their theoretical background and knowledge) as well as textual, grammatical and stylistic conditions. At the time of the experiment, there were no translations of the texts to be found online.

For the following reasons it was not possible to use the same texts for the experiments in 1997 and 2007:

- Pilot experiments show that, even after ten years, the participants can remember problems, considerations and decisions they made during the translation process as well as feedback from the person conducting the experiment.
- The texts for the experiments with the *professional* translators had to be shorter as the experiment for both translation directions and the revision task were both performed at the participant's workplace, and, in contrast to 1997, had to be conducted in one single sitting.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to use texts from the professional translators' work for the experiments, as this was not permitted by their employers. In addition, in their daily work, the 28 professionals translated texts from completely different fields, e.g. catalogues for plant nurseries, patent specifications, manuals and workshop reports for car manufacturers, and advertisements. For this reason, I decided to use texts that were neutral for them, so that they would be equally different for each of the participants compared to their everyday work. The professionals found this to be a welcome change from their daily routine.

After a short introductory talk, the participants were asked to translate the texts using Translog 2000. I remained in the room out of sight, which did not seem to disturb the participants. As soon as they had completed the translation, the text was played back to them at double speed using the replay function of Translog and they were asked to comment on their translation process. This retrospection with replay, as well as a dialogue and the feedback, was recorded on tape.

4.1 Product evaluation and analysis of the results

The translation products were corrected by two evaluators and myself in accordance with the method of systematic evaluation (Hansen 2007, 127).

As the replay function allows the whole translation process to be played back on the computer screen, the recording and simultaneous qualitative evaluation of the changes *during* the translation process can be best achieved by replaying the processes several times at different speeds. This allows the changes to be characterised precisely. The Log file is supportive as it facilitates the calculation of the amount of time needed and of the keystrokes per minute.

The results from the experiments in 2007 were compared with the results of the processes, the products and the retrospection with replay from 1997 (Hansen, 2006a, 174ff).

All corrections, revisions and reformulations were additionally specified regarding the types of errors they represented (Hansen 2008, 278f), and the changes were examined to establish if they were improvements, changes for the worse, unnecessary corrections or failed attempts at improvement. These results and the results of the other-revision task will be reported elsewhere.

5. Results with respect to changes

In the following description of the results, the average results from the experiments with the four best students and professionals will first be compared with each other. The individual results will then be presented.

The parameters for this article are (1) all changes during the process, (2) changes and corrections at word level, (3) revisions of sentences and context during the process, (4) reformulations during the process and (5) keystrokes per minute.

5.1 Average results

If we consider the aggregate of *all changes during the process*, we see that the *students* made, on average, 49 changes and the professionals 53, while translating into German (DE). When translating into Danish (DA), students made, on average, 30 changes and the professionals made 32. Overall, the professionals made more changes in both translation directions. However, the difference between students and professionals is not significant, as shown in Figure 1.

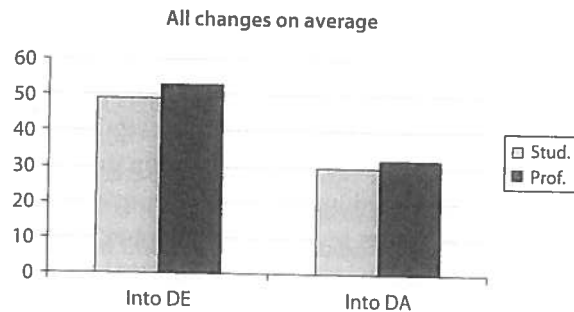


Figure 1

When translating into German, the students made, on average, 18.8 *changes and corrections at word level*, the professionals made, on average, 19.5. In Figure 2 we can see that in the translations into Danish, the students made, on average, 10 changes and corrections when writing the words and the professionals 12.5.

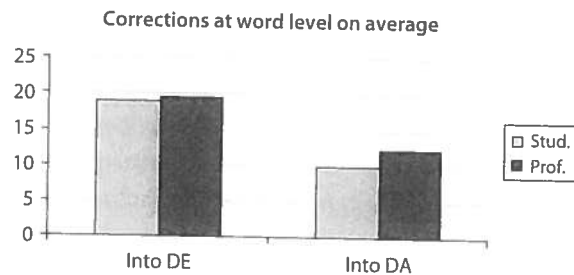


Figure 2

The *revision of sentences and context* during the translation process reveals the following results illustrated in Figure 3. When translating into German, the students made an average of 24 such revisions, the professionals made, on average, 26. When translating into Danish, the students made, on average, 16.3 and the professionals made, on average, 14.8 such revisions.

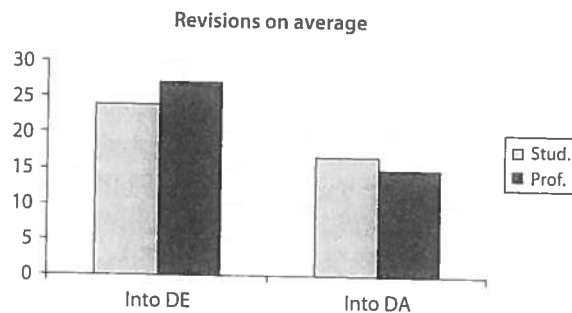


Figure 3

As for the *reformulations*, shown in Figure 4, the experiments revealed that the students made, on average, 6.3 reformulations and the professionals made, on average, 7, when translating into German. When translating into Danish, the students made, on average, 3.8 reformulations and the professionals, on average, 4.5.

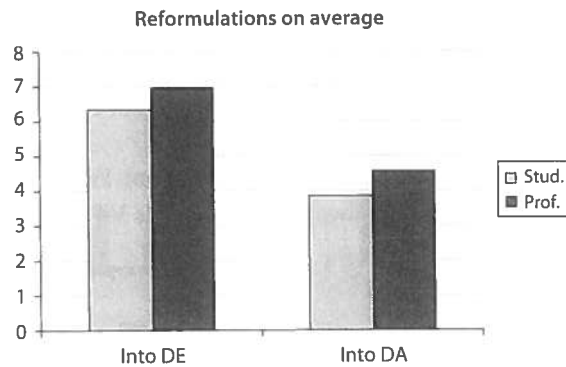


Figure 4

In Figure 5, an analysis of the *keystrokes per minute* reveals that the students made, on average, 92 keystrokes per minute when translating into German and the professionals, on average, 71. While translating into Danish, the students made, on average, 83 keystrokes per minute and the professionals 63.

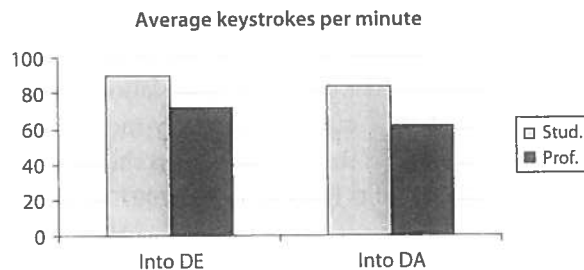


Figure 5

All of these averages are particularly interesting for the following description of the individual results. As they illustrate, there are clear similarities between the two groups — the students and the professionals. This is probably due to the fact that the *same four* participants were involved in both experiments, firstly as students and again ten years later as professionals.

5.2 Individual results

By examining the individual data of the four *good* translators, we see that their translation processes differ considerably. As we assumed in 1997, the results

confirmed that each translator has his or her own individual skills and behavioural pattern, as well as their own personal translation style. Furthermore, we see that the two different cognitive styles proposed by Asadi and Séguinot (2005, 527) can be clearly recognised among the four participants. To what extent their model of signs of the various styles would apply in all of the aspects remains to be examined.

This long-term study also indicates that the individual style of each translator may be developed at an early stage and maintained over time, and that it can always be recognised. This is revealed by several of the results from 1997 and 2007, depicted in Figure 6 to 13 below.

With respect to *all changes*, the experiments from 1997 and 2007 illustrate the following individual results of the four participants VT1, VT2, VT3 and VT4:

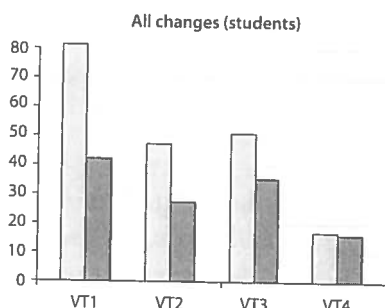


Figure 6

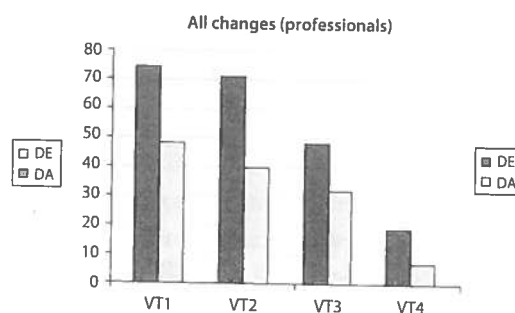


Figure 7

The figures show that VT1, both as a student and as a professional, made the most changes for both language directions during the translation process, whereas VT4 made the fewest. Participant VT2 made significantly more changes as a professional for both language directions than she did when she was a student. Overall, it appears as though the participants from 1997 and 2007 behaved similarly when compared to each other.

The following individual results were found in 1997 and 2007 for *changes and corrections at word level*:

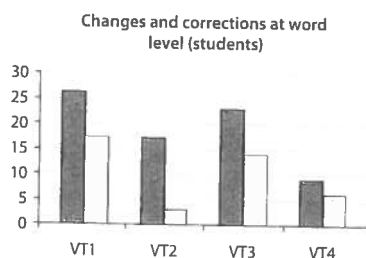


Figure 8

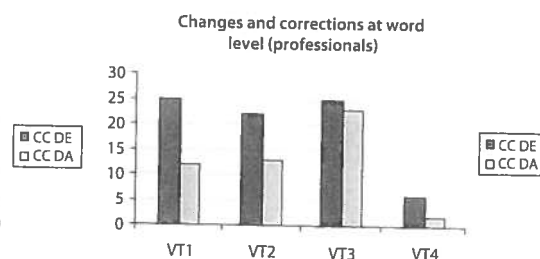


Figure 9

The figures show that the participants made most changes when translating into German. VT2 and VT3 made significantly more changes at the word level as professionals in 2007 than they did as students in 1997.

The following values were found in 1997 and 2007 for *revisions during the translation process*:

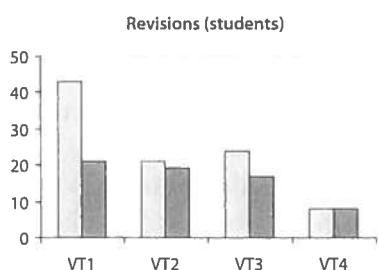


Figure 10

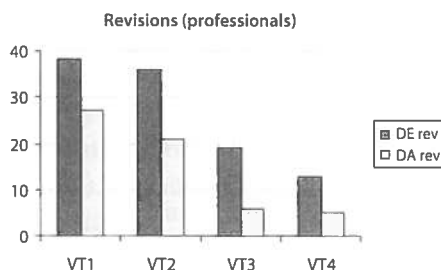


Figure 11

These figures reveal differences between 1997 and 2007, particularly with respect to VT2. However, not much has changed when the participants are compared to each other.

In 1997 and 2007, the following number of *reformulations* was to be found:

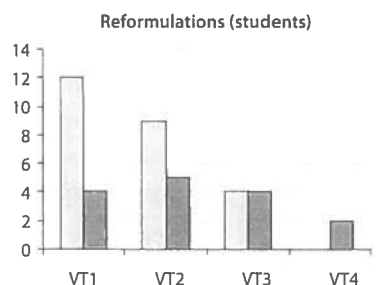


Figure 12

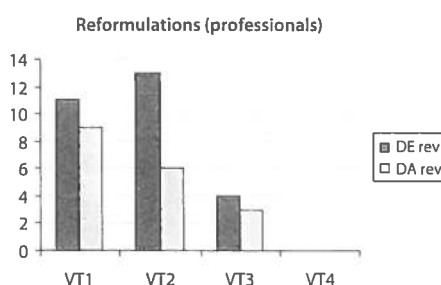


Figure 13

VT2 made more reformulations during the translation process in 2007 than in 1997, whereas the other participants remain almost completely faithful to their patterns, particularly VT4, who made significantly less or no reformulations at all.

5.2.1 Revisions and reformulations together

The individual patterns are recognisable when looking at the revisions and reformulations made during the translations in 1997 and 2007 side-by-side.

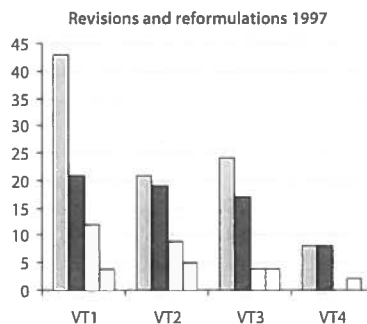


Figure 14

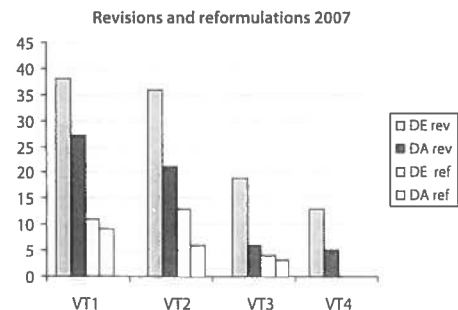


Figure 15

5.2.2 Keystrokes per minute

One would think that the translators who make the fewest changes or revisions during the translation process would complete the task sooner. As can be seen from the participants' allocation of time, measured here in keystrokes per minute, this is not necessarily the case. Participant VT4, who made the fewest changes required the most amount of time for the translations, both in 1997 as a student, and in 2007 as a professional. VT1, on the other hand, who made several changes, was finished sooner both times.

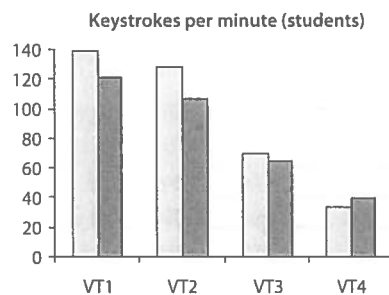


Figure 16

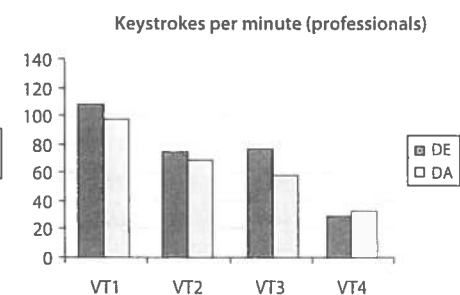


Figure 17

6. Discussion of the results: Assumptions and outlook

The results described prompt new considerations and questions with respect to individual translation styles.

6.1 Successful translating and average values

As outlined in the introduction, I primarily wanted to study the characteristics of successful translation processes that lead to *good* translation products. For this

reason, I examined the translation processes of the four participants with the best results. A certain parallelism between the results from 1997 and 2007 was revealed when we calculated the average values. The average values, however, do not lend themselves to the generalisation that “the professionals do this ... and the students do that...” nor do they demonstrate what leads to successful translations. Generalisation of this sort can lead to incorrect conclusions in relation to the individual subjects. From the descriptions of the changes, corrections, revisions and reformulations during the translation process together with the keystrokes per minute, we see that the successful individual processes of both the students and the professionals differ significantly. The participants’ individual translation processes remain almost the same after 10 years, and the participants still differ significantly from each other in several respects in 2007. For example, the participants’ number of keystrokes per minute has remained almost exactly the same as in 1997. Despite all four translators being *good*, they each have their own respective translation style.

The retrospection provides explanations for the deviations observed in VT2. Altogether, the results described here still have to be combined and triangulated with other data and results from the experiments. A linguistic and stylistic analysis of the *type of changes* made during the translation processes and an analysis of the participants’ revision competence during other-revisions may prove interesting for further research. This could possibly give us the key to explaining successful and less successful translation processes. As I already mentioned, changes and corrections made at word level could also be specified more precisely, either as unnecessary changes (to gain time to think), or necessary changes, e.g. orthographic, morphological or stylistic corrections.

6.2 When do translators develop their own translation style?

As the comparison of the results from 2007 and 1997 reveals, the translators had already developed their own individual style of translating in the course of their training. If the goal is to improve translation teaching, the individual translation style should be respected much more than it is usually the case. As the experiments show, it would have made little sense to try to make VT1 work like VT4 and vice versa.

6.3 Do all translators have their own style?

For the purposes of this experiment, we only compared four translation processes with *good* translation products and the results showed that various approaches can lead to a *good* target text. When looking at the successful translators’ processes

at first, the consideration was that translators who produce poorer translation products may suffer from insecurities, which gives reason to believe that language difficulties and disturbances could have decisively influenced their translation processes. This will be examined elsewhere.

Some of the results from the long-term study, especially the participants' commentary during the retrospection with replay, indicate that they underwent some development as professionals. However, unexpectedly, the study revealed that their individual translation style, their ICP, had already developed during their 5–6 year long course of studies, or that cognitive processes, as required for translating, were perhaps already present in the participants' personality from the outset.

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