

Cooperation and the Logic of Action Experiences of Cooperation Between Scientist and Translator

Antti Eskola and David Kivinen

Volume 35, Number 2, juin 1990

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/003321ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/003321ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Eskola, A. & Kivinen, D. (1990). Cooperation and the Logic of Action: Experiences of Cooperation Between Scientist and Translator. *Meta*, 35(2), 370–377. <https://doi.org/10.7202/003321ar>

Article abstract

This study has two purposes. As a social-psychological contribution to the theory of translation, it points to some of the advantages and drawbacks of the researcher's participation in the translation of scientific texts. As a contribution to social-psychological theory, it wishes to demonstrate that forms of cooperation cannot be planned in abstracto, without taking the overall social activity of the actors into account, of which participation in cooperation is only one part.

One of the most original and ingenious inventions in the social sciences dates back to the early 1950's: the game known as the Prisoner's Dilemma (see Rapoport 1982). With perplexing accuracy, it puts it quite plainly that, first, action taken by individuals upon perfectly rational deliberation does not necessarily lead to collective rationality. Also, showing how a social structure may produce forces motivating the individual, the Prisoner's Dilemma has something to give to social psychologists. Even in the event that the prisoners have had the opportunity to discuss different strategies and jointly decide on adopting one, each is tempted to betray the other - and both are afraid that they will be betrayed. Psychological motives, the temptation and the fear, arise out of the logic of the social situation.

Our intention has been to show that translation as a social activity involves motivating forces, assumptions to do with competence, and restrictive factors that all shape the scientist-translator cooperation irrespective of their deliberate pursuits. Therefore, rather than planning it on an abstract basis, the working method has to be deduced from the logic of action. In doing so, we will see that cooperation cannot be symmetric; the weight is necessarily on the translator's role. The scientist, then, comes into the picture when the translator needs help; he does not have to be prepared for regular and face-to-face interaction with the translator, but only to make sure that the message of his text is conveyed (provided that he has the competence in the target language). Cooperation between translator and editor, in turn, is much more dependent on face-to-face interaction.

COOPERATION AND THE LOGIC OF ACTION

Experiences of Cooperation Between Scientist and Translator

ANTTI ESKOLA AND DAVID KIVINEN
University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland

This study has two purposes. As a social-psychological contribution to the theory of translation, it points to some of the advantages and drawbacks of the researcher's participation in the translation of scientific texts. As a contribution to social-psychological theory, it wishes to demonstrate that forms of cooperation cannot be planned in abstracto, without taking the overall social activity of the actors into account, of which participation in cooperation is only one part.

One of the most original and ingenious inventions in the social sciences dates back to the early 1950's: the game known as the Prisoner's Dilemma (see Rapoport 1982). With perplexing accuracy, it puts it quite plainly that, first, action taken by individuals upon perfectly rational deliberation does not necessarily lead to collective rationality. Also, showing how a social structure may produce forces motivating the individual, the Prisoner's Dilemma has something to give to social psychologists. Even in the event that the prisoners have had the opportunity to discuss different strategies and jointly decide on adopting one, each is tempted to betray the other — and both are afraid that they will be betrayed. Psychological motives, the temptation and the fear, arise out of the logic of the social situation.

Our intention has been to show that translation as a social activity involves motivating forces, assumptions to do with competence, and restrictive factors that all shape the scientist-translator cooperation irrespective of their deliberate pursuits. Therefore, rather than planning it on an abstract basis, the working method has to be deduced from the logic of action. In doing so, we will see that cooperation cannot be symmetric; the weight is necessarily on the translator's role. The scientist, then, comes into the picture when the translator needs help; he does not have to be prepared for regular and face-to-face interaction with the translator, but only to make sure that the message of his text is conveyed (provided that he has the competence in the target language). Cooperation between translator and editor, in turn, is much more dependent on face-to-face interaction.

THE PROBLEM

This study set out to investigate a practical problem. There are two official languages in Finland, Finnish and Swedish. Over 90 per cent of the population speaks Finnish, a language that has little in common with the chief European languages. Finns have few opportunities to parley with foreigners and great difficulties in learning foreign languages. In short: Finland is behind a language barrier.

This is a major problem for Finnish science. In a recent report on the state of inorganic chemistry in Finland, an authoritative group of foreign evaluators notes that studies

“are too often published in the form of short communications, letters, or reports and not as review articles or full papers”. Also, there is “a strong tendency to publish in *Finnish Chemical Letters* rather than the more prestigious and more highly refereed journals”. There is “too little communication of Finnish inorganic chemists with other inorganic chemists throughout the world”. And finally, “the use of the English language, vital for modern chemistry, is distinctly patchy among the young chemists we heard” (Evaluation of..., 1983).

The problem is even more difficult in the social sciences and the humanities, where the scientist's tool is natural rather than technical or mathematical language. He is inclined to believe that his role is primarily that of “a local influential” (Merton 1957) within his own culture. If he wishes to become “a cosmopolitan influential”, he will have to spend a great deal of time in trying to make himself fully understood in international scientific debates. Foreign-language contributions are therefore written “in the form of short communications, letters, or reports”, or published in Finnish (often stencilled) series where there are few demands on prose.

The language barrier poses least problems to researchers with a bilingual background (in Finland researchers from the Swedish-speaking minority), to researchers doing strictly experimental work, and to researchers who operate with a mathematical language. But their work is of course not representative of all the scientific research done in Finland, nor is it necessarily the best part of it. If we are to lessen bias and to export the best studies, works originally written in Finnish have to be translated, too.

But how to go about translation of scientific texts? Are native speakers of the languages concerned the best translators? Or can a Finn, for example, come to master the English language well enough to produce translations up to international standards? How much of a specialist should the translator be in the field of science he is working with?

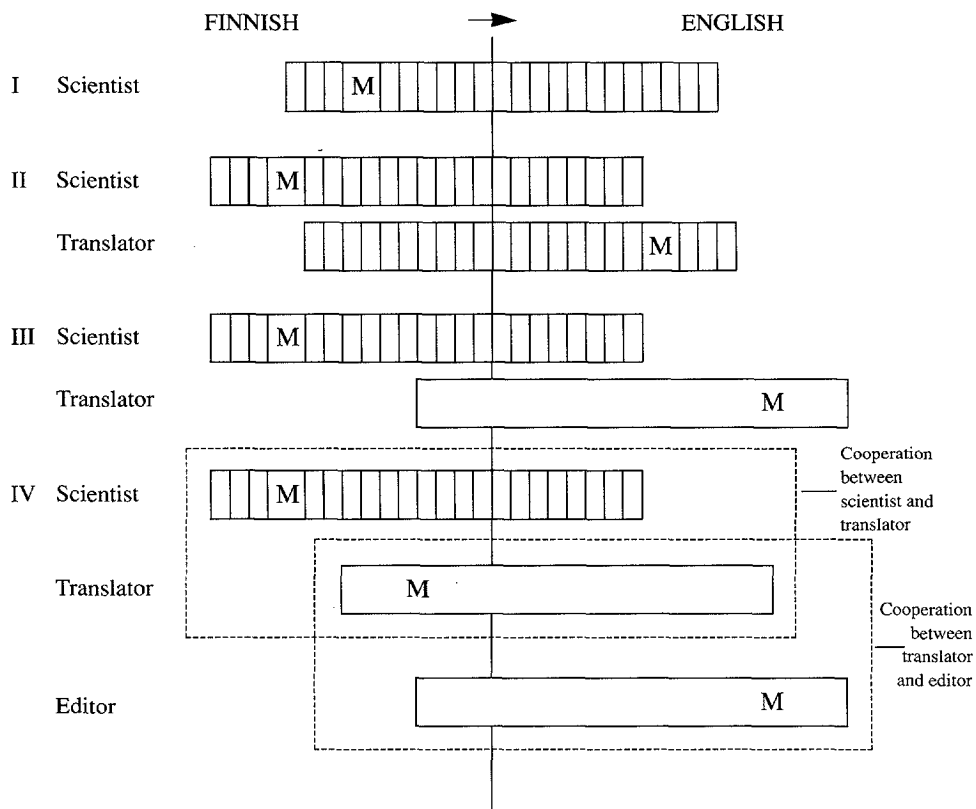
Efforts to shed some light on these questions have thus far failed to accomplish little beyond arguments with nationalistic overtones: Finnish universities train Finnish translators who obviously wish to find employment upon graduation and who therefore claim that they can do just as good a job as the foreigner. But the foreigner has a point too: no Finn can ever get to know his culture and language as fully as he himself¹.

Our concern, then, lies with how one concrete method of producing translations — close cooperation between researcher and translator — could best be organized, and how good a result it can yield. Both the researcher, a social psychologist, and the translator, working into English, keep a record of their observations and experiences related to cooperation. And as we are dealing with a social-psychological phenomenon, it is only natural that we report our findings in the terms of social-psychological theory of action and cooperation.

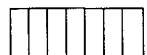

THE METHOD

Figure 1 illustrates four solutions for translating Finnish (scientific) texts into English. The best, without doubt, is the first, where the scientist (we are presuming that he lives in Finland, thinks, speaks and writes in Finnish) masters both source and target language equally well; he is, in a sense, his own translator. Ideal too is solution II, where the scientist, not so fluent

FIGURE 1:
Four solutions for translating scientific texts from Finnish into English



M = mother tongue

 = masters the science in question
 = non-expert in the science

with his English, is helped out by a translator who masters both the subject-matter and Finnish perfectly (even though his mother tongue is English).

But situations I and II are rare, to say the least. Usually, the Finnish scientist turns to a translator whose mother tongue is English but who is neither an expert in the subject-matter nor in the source language (III).

The setting of this study is shown in case IV. The translator, who comes from an Anglo-Finnish family, has spent most of his life in Finland. With a three-year college

education in Finland, he has graduated as Diploma in Translating. He has no degree in social psychology and in this sense is not an expert in the field of science. All work done by the translator in this experiment was checked by a non-expert native speaker. Our study aims at describing the cooperation between (1) scientist and translator and (2) translator and editor.

The text we started working on was the first three chapters of the researcher's book (Eskola 1982) that had already been published in Finnish and Swedish, adding up to some 90 pages. Theoretical or textbook-like as it is, sociological cookbooks with instructions on how to compile empirical reports would thus be of little help. But having already passed through the hands of editors of two publishers and one translator, the text offered one important advantage: it was well written, devoid of heavy structures often besetting (Finnish) scientific writing.

Cooperation between the scientist and translator was of three kinds: the text was discussed (1) prior to translation (which was done one chapter at a time), once the translator had ticked off points he thought might cause problems; (2) once the researcher had read the rough copy of the translation and inserted his comments and suggestions; also, the researcher and translator cooperated in (3) searching out terminology, quotations, references, background material.

Two sets of observations were obtained on cooperation between the translator and editor. First, the translator received editorial comments by letter. And second, in brushing up the last chapter, he discussed problems of translation with an English teacher from the local university.

Social scientific reports written in English or translated into English in Finland are, for the most part, published in stencilled research papers with small circulation. It is rarely the case that the language in these is commented upon. And therefore it is easy to cling to the illusion that it is correct. Wishing to put the results of our work to the test, we asked an American sociologist (Ellsworth R. Fuhrman), at the time visiting Fulbright professor at the University of Tampere, and an English publisher (Routledge & Kegan Paul) to comment on the translation.

The results of this study are based on observations made by the researcher and translator on their cooperation: on "participant observation".

THE RESULTS

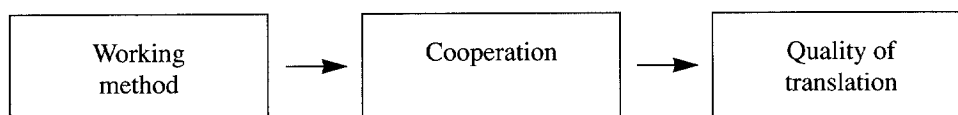
a) The logic of action

A book published in a language other than that in which it originally was written is usually a result of a clear-cut *division of labour*. The author and the translator both have their own specific roles. The former writes the book, the latter translates it; neither interferes in what the other does or leaves undone. In principle, however, it could also be the outcome of *cooperation*, of a process where the translator helps the author clarify his points and where the author helps the translator find the best solutions within the limits of the new language.

We started gathering experiences of cooperation between author and translator. To begin with, we had to agree (or so we believed) on a *working method*, on concrete rules mediating cooperation: how frequently should we meet, is it necessary to go through the text together before translating it, how are differences of opinion decided, etc. By making necessary adjustments along the way, we hoped to get to a point where *cooperation* would be as fluent as possible and, by the same token, where the *translation* would be as fluent as possible (figure 2). Our study was to become a pioneering work in explicating some of the connections between translation and social psychology.

Figure 2:

**The theoretical elements and their interrelations as assumed
at the outset of the study**



However, once the translation got under way, it soon turned out that something was very wrong. The more or less closely defined terms of cooperation we had agreed upon seemed to be more of an obstacle than an aid. Our regular meetings were not at all the concentrated and fruitful sessions we had foreseen, quite the contrary: shrinking gradually into tedious half-hours, we finally decided to meet only when one or the other party found it necessary.

Analysis of what had happened suggested that our idea of working method was too abstract. Social psychologists are criticized for bringing phenomena into laboratories, as if detaching them from their wider social context and examining them in a social vacuum. The truth is that those wider contexts follow people into laboratories; if not only in the sense that the subjects are well aware that they are participating in a social-psychological experiment. Therefore, whereas the social psychologist is under the impression that he is doing research into cooperation, competition, obedience, etc., he is, in effect, primarily examining action we could call "participation in a scientific experiment" (*cf.* Greenwood 1983).

We went wrong in believing that it would be possible to study how our working method influences cooperation and, by the same token, the quality of the translation *in abstracto*, as detached from the author's and translator's social activity as a whole. The true determinant of participation in the cooperation, however, lay elsewhere: in how central a position this action held in the participants' whole of social activity. For the translator, engaged in a job he earns his bread with and more than well aware that two experts would judge how good a job he had done — for the translator the experiment was all-important, whereas the researcher, especially as he was working on a new book, was doing something extracurricular: his job is to write books, not to help translate them. Insofar as this holds in author/translator interaction more generally, we may safely conclude that motivational imbalance is part and parcel of the *internal logic* of cooperation of this kind. So the causal relations depicted in figure 2 are obviously too straightforward.

Figure 3:

**The theoretical elements and their interrelations as
they arise out of the study's results**

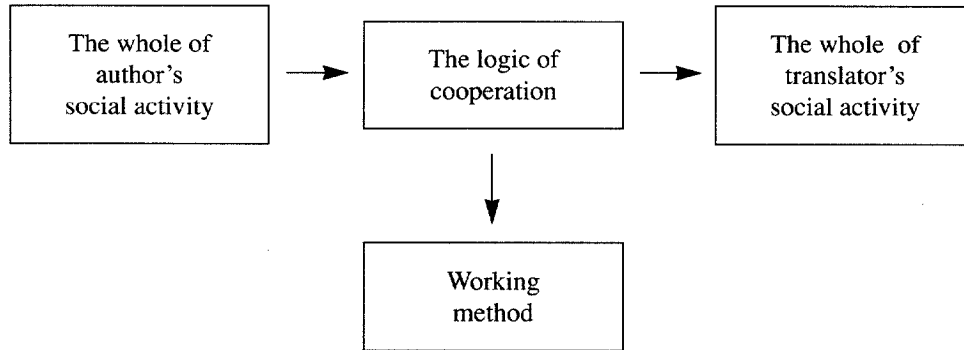


Figure 3 is probably more true to reality. We could here approach the schema as a tension system determining what form the working method eventually assumes. As Lewin (1935: 242-247) has shown, goal setting creates a tension that will continue until the task is completed. Lewin's description clearly suits the translator, more "ego-involved" (Allport 1943) in the experiment than the scientist — not because of his personality, for example, but simply because the task was more central in the whole of his task field. On the other hand, the researcher's tension system was now more concentrated around writing another book rather than on translating the previous one already published.

The researcher's lack of tension and ego-involvement is manifest in the inconsistency of his participation. When absorbed in the writing of his new book, comments on the translation were few; but with more time to spare, the checking of the translation became much more critical. The translator was left with trying to make out what stage of his own work the researcher had been in: were frequent ticks symptoms of a faltering translation or an alert reader?

This need of course not always be the case: some researchers may be dedicated to breaking the language barrier, to gaining international recognition. Here, the tension system looks different, as does the logic of action insofar as it is dependent on the scientist's motivation.

b) Competence and power

The scientist cannot always be sure that his comments are relevant. Something may "sound strange", he may feel uneasy with a choice of word, or suspect that the meaning may be distorted; he may also have a specific alternative in mind, but is perhaps not sure whether the original translation is better. Nonetheless, there are cases where the scientist can be positive that the translator has misinterpreted his intentions. Quite obviously, in the latter case, the author must have the last word. But can any general rule be deduced from the logic of action as to how possible differences of opinion between author and translator can be decided? After all, it is, says the translator, *my translation*; and *my book*, says the scientist. Whose is the final word?

The decision, if we are going for the best result possible, should evidently be coupled with competence. The very fact that a study is translated implies differences in the competences of the parties involved. The author is assumed to be better acquainted with the subject-matter, the translator with the target language. This is, in itself, part of the logic of action.

As a rule, the scientist is more into the vocabulary and idioms of his own field of science and the jargons of different traditions (e.g., the vocabulary of Marxist theory). However, responsibility for the consistency and fluency of the translation lies with the translator.

These principles are axiomatic. Much more interesting, then, are cases where there is an implicit possibility that contents and language conflict. A good example is a list in which the author has enumerated, say, terms referring to various psychological "needs"; while the translator might be tempted to shuffle the order around to get the rhythm right, he may, in some cases, break an implicit logic of the original order (e.g., the terms may be listed in the order in which they have emerged in the history of psychology).

Here, the decision lies with the author, because we are talking of meaning and information. If he wants to hold on to that order, even at the expense of fluency, the translator has to comply. Our example goes to show that true contradictions between contents and language are indeed possible, and that, at least in these cases, we tend to leave the power of decision to the author's intentions.

The example also goes to show that the author's participation and insistence on certain points may in fact even debase the fluency of the translation. The comments we received on the translation from the Routledge & Kegan editor read: "My comments on the translation would have that both grammar and vocabulary are fine, but the use of idioms struck me occasionally as unnatural as did the rhythm of the text in a few places. On the whole, though, it is a very good job". The criticism levelled by our second evaluator, an American researcher, focused also on idioms and rhythm; moreover, the translation "was marred by the use of passive voice". Basically, these weaknesses, presumably rather typical in translation (and the latter specifically in Finnish-English translation), follow from the repeating of the rhythmic patterns and structures of the source language. But was this tendency to faithful translation further encouraged by the author's close surveillance? Maybe cooperation is not beneficial as far as *prose* goes?

c) Cooperation and face-to-face interaction

Arguments for increased cooperation between author and translator are generally understood as arguments for increased face-to-face interaction. In a society that in many ways values intimacy (see Sennett 1977) and where slogans of many popular social movements run "here and now" (Back 1972), this is but natural.

However, in our experiment, face-to-face interaction between the scientist and translator tended to lessen and lessen. Whereas personality of course plays some role, we refuse to believe that this could solely be explained by us being exceptionally asocial individuals. Instead, there is something in the internal logic of translation that defines how far it is useful to go with face-to-face interaction.

First, it turned out that there is little use in discussing the text at length *before* translating it, because it is difficult to know in advance which points will prove problematic. As expressed by the Soviet psychologist Leontjev (1977: 110, Finnish edition) "an accomplished action is richer and truer than consciousness anticipating this action". Meetings prior to translation were, however, useful for looking into what background material the translator would need.

The second meeting was held once the researcher had read the rough copy of the translation and inserted his comments and suggestions. But here, too, direct interaction proved less fruitful than we had expected. The benefits of face-to-face interaction lie in its immediacy: in that the persons involved can react to each other's utterances immediately, to some extent even anticipate them. Yet much of the interaction between author and translator has to be mediate. Before we know how to react to comments, suggestions, criticism, we may want to think them over, look up a word in a dictionary, or ask a third person for advice. Therefore, instead of face-to-face meetings, conversations over the telephone proved, besides timesaving, more suitable for our purposes.

We may still mention one reason why discussions between the scientist and translator were rarely lengthy and deep-going in our experiment. Since the author had little to say on stylistic questions, punctuation, word-order, or the like, focus was necessarily on whether or not the translation would convey the message as fully and correctly as possible. Beyond this, therefore, discrepancy of competences exhausted the discussion.

The logic underlying discussions between translator and editor, on the other hand, was different. Questions dealt with ranged from fluency and style through the choice and use of words to word-order and punctuation. There was plenty to discuss because both were familiar with the problems. So while face-to-face interaction between translator and author tended to lessen, that between translator and editor prolonged itself — in fact to the extent that the translator would normally not be able to spend so much time on this kind of cooperation.

Note

1. Originally, this study was motivated by a debate on the translation of scientific texts some six years ago; the fora of this debate were the weekly newsletter of the University of Tampere and the trade journal of Finnish translators. The debate was opened by a professor of German philology (a Finn), who categorically denounced claims that Finnish scientists should be able to reproduce their results in at least one of the chief European languages. He advised humanists and social scientists in particular not to take on this kind of work themselves; the result, he argued, will in many cases be so clumsy that (if someone agrees to publish it) the international audience will not be attracted. The solution offered here was a foreign translator who would also master the field of science in question. In reply, Finnish translators expressed their doubts as to whether there were enough foreign specialists in the country in the first place; and whether they would necessarily do a better job than Finnish translators.

REFERENCES

- ALLPORT, G. W. (1943): "The Ego in Contemporary Psychology," *Psychological Review*, 50 (5), pp. 451-476.
- BACK, K. W. (1972): *Beyond Words. The Story of Sensitivity Training and the Encounter Movement*, New York, Sage.
- ESKOLA, A. (1982): *Vuorovaikutus, muutos, merkitys. Sosiaalipsykologian perusteiden kriittinen tarkastelu*, Helsinki, Tammi. In Swedish: *Socialpsykologins grunder: en kritisk granskning*, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Evaluation of Scientific Research in Finland: Inorganic Chemistry* (1983). Publications of the Academy of Finland 7/1983.
- GREENWOOD, J. D. (1983): "Role-playing as an Experimental Strategy in Social Psychology," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 13 (3), pp. 235-254.
- LEONTJEV, A. N. (1977): *Toiminta, tietoisuus, persoonallisuus*, (Dejatel'nost. Coznanie. Litsnost.) Helsinki, Kansankulttuuri.
- LEWIN, K. (1935): *A Dynamic Theory of Personality*. Selected Papers, New York and London, McGraw-Hill.
- MERTON, R. K. (1957): *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Revised and Enlarged Edition. Glencoe, Ill., The Free Press.
- RAPOPORT, A. (1982): "Prisoner's Dilemma. Recollections and Observations", in: B. Barry and R. Hardin (eds.), *Rational Man and Irrational Society? An Introduction and Source-book*, Beverly Hills, Cal., Sage.
- SENNETT, R. (1977): *The Fall of Public Man*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.