

Translating in and for higher education in Sweden: Some reflections from a practitioner

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Abstract

The English language plays an increasingly important role in Swedish higher education—and not just in English studies. More and more types of university-related documents are either written in English from the outset or translated into the language, for the benefit of students, employees and other interested parties not fluent in Swedish (and far from always native speakers of English either). This brings about an increased need for translation and review services, which are often provided in-house. The present contribution offers a few reflections regarding these types of services, covering some general issues as well as a number of concrete challenges for the translators.

Keywords: Translation, language review, Swedish, English, higher education, in-house, translation strategies, translation norms, translation challenges, Sweden

1. Introduction: Who am I to address translation in higher education?

Since the completion of my Ph.D. at Karlstad University in 2005,¹ I have, over the years, spent varying percentages of my working time as a senior lecturer in English linguistics, first at Karlstad, later at Mälardalen University (MDH), on translating university-related documents (usually from Swedish into English) as well as reviewing other people's translations into—or original texts in—English. I am currently one out of two in-house translators at MDH, with about ten percent of my full-time

¹ My doctoral thesis (Schröter 2005) deals with the analysis of dubbing and subtitling of language-play in film and is thus only loosely related to my efforts as a practicing translator and language checker of university documents, since the latter are not normally written for entertainment or as works of art. I mention my thesis here because Solveig Granath, although not my supervisor at the time, was one of those who, by subjecting my manuscripts to critical scrutiny, contributed to making the final outcome better than it would have been otherwise. But even before, as the highly respected teacher of several of my English linguistics courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, Solveig helped forming me with regard to who and where I am today, for which I am grateful.

employment reserved for these kinds of tasks.² Like many, if not most, active translators, I have no formal education, let alone a degree or official authorisation, *as a translator*. However, among the other characteristics I am likely to share with most of my translating colleagues in Swedish higher education and beyond are successfully completed language studies of a more general nature, a certain amount of interest and (I hope) talent, as well as years of experience.^{3,4}

What I intend to offer here is a few ‘notes from the field’ about the types of tasks, challenges and solutions that we who engage in translation, especially Swedish–English translation in Swedish higher education, are dealing with on a regular basis, but that all those who are not directly involved in this line of work may not be aware of. I will start with a general overview over our role and efforts, then discuss a few concrete translation issues that I have encountered over the past years, touch upon the translation aids I am using, and conclude with a couple of reasons why working as a translator can be enjoyable despite the occasional frustration—and even though the types of texts I am dealing

² The other person is working sixty percent of full-time with *nothing but* translation and review. With more abundant time and funding, we could quite easily fill a whole full-time position together, so as to keep a close eye on *all* the translations and other English texts produced at our university, which is not quite possible at the moment, even if theses and other research publications were to receive no attention at all from us.

³ That said, in at least one important respect I work under conditions that are atypical among translators and that might raise an eyebrow among some of those who are concerned about translation quality: more than 99% of the time I translate between Swedish and English or proofread texts in either of these two languages, yet neither is my mother tongue or first language (which is German). In fact, neither English nor Swedish was even the first *foreign* language I started to learn in school (which was French), so I am certainly not following the general view or recommendation that translators should work into their first language, and much of the discussion on “directionality” between first and second language in e.g. Beeby Lonsdale (2009) does not even apply to me at all.

Suffice it to say, with regard to the oddity of my translating almost exclusively between languages that I have not become fluent in, more or less, until being an adult, that it is Swedish and English I use by far the most in my professional life, which obviously also makes it less unnatural to work in and with those languages when it comes to translating and language-checking documents having to do with my workplace.

⁴ Another, if rather unrelated, circumstance that may make me somewhat unusual is that I have been able to ‘translate’, as it were, my interest in the theory and practice of translation into an introductory 7.5-ECTS-credit course in translation studies, offered at irregular intervals as part of the English studies curriculum at MDH, which in turn has informed my translation practice to some extent.

with now are so much less entertaining than the family films I analysed in my doctoral thesis.

2. Translation at MDH and in Swedish higher education: What and why?

Higher education in Sweden, as in the rest of the Nordic countries and in many other parts of the world where English does not already enjoy the status of a first or official language, has increasingly come to embrace and rely on English in its communication, to the extent that certain university-related domains, if not higher education per se, are sometimes predicted to be the first that the national languages will ‘lose’ to English, thereby initiating or accelerating the demise of the former (cf. e.g. Melchers and Shaw 2011: 210). Whether this fear is justified or not, English has acquired a strong position in the universities’ research, education and even community activities, as well as in internal communication among employees, and this affects translation and publication practices and policies.

For example, all course and program syllabuses⁵ for education offered in English at MDH are supposed to have an English version, apart from a Swedish one, even though it is still the Swedish one that is legally binding and also normally constitutes the source text (ST). Many other documents of general interest and most webpages come in two language versions as well, whether the target audience is students, employees and/or external parties. After all, not only does MDH have a sizeable number of students and faculty who do not speak or understand Swedish well: globalisation, including the enhanced international contacts between universities, also increases the number of visits by external non-Swedish speakers to the university homepage, among other things.

Most of the official translation work at MDH is based on a formal decision taken by the vice-chancellor⁶ several years ago, after a satisfactory trial period of a semester or so, that henceforth certain types

⁵ For a discussion of the Swedish terms *kursplan* and *programplan* and their possible English counterparts, see below.

⁶ The Swedish *rektor* is another one of those terms for which there is no one, self-evident English counterpart. The same applies to a significant share of the specific terminology used in Swedish higher education (cf. below).

of documents should primarily be translated or, if already in English, reviewed *within* the university, by members of the English department given time for this in their job descriptions. It was considered to be the better alternative to having such tasks consistently be done either by a broad range of inexperienced employees or by external translation bureaus, whose services were often more expensive, at least in the long run, and at the same time less satisfactory quality-wise, partly due to external translators' frequent lack of familiarity with the realities and terminology of higher education.

Among the so-called 'prioritised' types of texts covered by the new policy, the most commonly translated ones include the above-mentioned course and program syllabuses, regulatory documents such as research and education strategies, equal treatment plans and examination rules, as well as external press releases and news items for the intranet. However, research presentations, the various schools' own webpages, and even study guidelines for courses are also supposed to be translated without the person requesting the service having to worry about the cost. Most of these jobs are forwarded to us, the MDH translators, via our contact person at the Division of Communications and External Relations, though many times we get them directly from colleagues for whom we had completed an assignment previously.

When time permits, i.e. when there are no prioritised documents or other work tasks (e.g. teaching-related ones) awaiting our immediate attention, we the MDH translators can also accept requests, submitted via a special e-mail account, for reviewing or translating scientific articles, posters or (parts of) licentiate and doctoral theses. However, these jobs are not 'free', and doctoral students and other researchers need to pay for them from their annual allocations for travels, literature and special services. Another precondition is that the texts remain within certain quantitative limits (2,000 words for translations and 10,000 words for reviews) and that the deadline be reasonable.

As far as I am aware, most if not all Swedish higher education institutions have, like MDH, some routines for translation and language review that involve, among other things, both in-house expertise and lists of university-specific English terms to be used in English-language contexts. Of course, they also have access to nationally procured external bureaus if and when required. Some have more advanced language policies than others, including regulations that may be intended to protect

the status of Swedish in their education and research, threatened as it may appear by internationalisation. Many are also represented in the English-Language Professionals in Swedish Higher Education network, where translation and terminology issues of common concern can be ventilated and coordinated (for more information, see *Elps.se* (n.d.)).

3. Text types in relation to target audiences and degrees of freedom

Does the MDH translation policy have anything to say about *how* texts should be translated, about target readerships, translation strategies, faithfulness and equivalence? Of course not. While there are some internal guidelines for how to write for publication *in Swedish* on the university website (though how well known these guidelines are among the employees or to what extent they are adhered to remains an open question), there are no recommendations about translation. That is understandable, for who would have written them? Very few non-practitioners spend much thought on the possibility that there may be different ways to translate a text, both as a whole and with respect to its details, and even if they had a vague idea that there can be several solutions to a given translation challenge, what should a communications officer or other coordinator of language-related activities tell the translators about how to do their job? Not even the translators themselves may be aware of how they are translating and why they are doing it that way. Nor are they necessarily consistent in their approach over time or across different documents, and certainly not between themselves, even if they may have agreed on some details (e.g. how to write dates in English or how to spell certain words).

Obviously, our MDH target texts (TTs) are always ‘free’ in the sense that they are not word-for-word translations (for this classical distinction, see e.g. Dryden 1680/2004), and there is a general, if not explicitly expressed, expectation that they should be accessible and idiomatic, while otherwise remaining as close to the ST as possible. One of the advantages of working with Swedish–English translations of university-related prose is that some of the most notorious translation challenges, which tend to either result in some kind of loss or require a particularly creative solution, do not normally occur with great frequency. These include humour, especially the type that is based on language-play, as well as expressions of fundamental differences between source and target

cultures.⁷ Still, we the translator can always choose to take some extra liberty—or not—with sentence structure, word choice, idiomatic expressions, punctuation, deletions, clarifications, etc.

A cursory and completely subjective comparison between my colleague's translations and my own suggest that, generally speaking, his remain closer to the STs while I am more likely to rearrange clause elements, reduce redundancies, render formulations more explicit, etc. Without wishing to enter into an extended discussion regarding translation norms (e.g. Toury 1995), approaches depending on text types (e.g. Reiß 1971), the purpose or *skopos* of translations (e.g. Reiß and Vermeer 1991), equivalence (e.g. Nida 1964/2004), and/or the relative invisibility of the translator (Venuti, in Inghilleri and Maier 2009: 100), it seems, if my impressions were to prove true in a more thorough investigation, that my colleague often shows more respect for the properties of the ST than I do. Many, including some influential translation scholars, would consider this appropriate.

However, I think that occasional deviations of the types described above are justified by the nature of the documents we translate, as well as the rather weak status of the TTs: in Reiß' English terms (in Munday 2012: 111ff), the texts are rarely “expressive”, i.e. with a focus on form, but rather “informative” with occasional “operative” elements, e.g. when intended to help ‘sell’ the university in some respect, and the translations are essentially derivative offers of information aimed at mostly non-native speakers of English, with little legal or artistic weight on their own. There is, in any case, some room for us to follow our personal preferences as translators, and while we may not have tested the limits of what our clients would accept (and we do not have any ambitions in this respect either), it virtually never happens that anybody would express a negative opinion about any particular choice we have taken, provided they had an opinion at all.

⁷ It is of course hardly permissible to speak of *a* target culture when the target language is English, especially if most of the readers of the TT cannot be expected to have English as their first language, but perhaps rather Kannada, Russian or Swahili.

4. *Problems with source texts*

Before discussing a couple of typical translation challenges that are more closely related to the source and target language pair Swedish–English, it may be worth pointing out that the STs we are dealing with are rarely impeccable in the sense that they contain no errors in terms of spelling, punctuation, grammar or omitted words, let alone represent models of style. As pointed out above, they are usually informative ‘utility’ texts, possibly composed by someone whose strengths lie in other areas than formal writing (e.g. a course syllabus written by an educator of nurses or engineers) and/or at short notice and with little time for review (e.g. a news item—or some other type of text finalised close to a deadline).

In cases where we think an ST would benefit from having some obvious mistake pointed out and corrected, we take the time to write a comment in the margin, urging the author or commissioner to consider a revision. When it comes to stylistic problems, we are working on a scale from ignoring and even replicating an unfortunate formulation, via silently improving on it in the TT, to pointing it out explicitly. Here is a rather straightforward example of an ST oddity I recently encountered in an internal news item regarding the proposed external members of the new MDH university board:

Den nya styrelsen väljs därför för ett år och tillträder den 1 maj 2016. [‘The new board will therefore be elected for one year and constitute itself on 1 May 2016.’]

The problem with this sentence, which is not obvious when taken out of its context like here, is that the inclusion of *därför/therefore* is unjustified, as the preceding sentences do not provide a reason for the board being elected for one year. I wrote, in English translation, “Unclear why it says *därför* here. I chose not to have any corresponding word in English.” Apparently, this met with agreement, for the *därför* is now gone from the ST published on the university’s internal portal.

A second and last example of this type comes from the list of intended learning outcomes for a course in public health science, where the introductory standard formulation (in English usually ‘Upon completion of the course, students are expected to be able to’) clashes with part of the seventh point on the list:

Efter avslutad kurs ska studenten kunna:
[...]

7 utifrån folksjukdom/folkhälsoproblem identifiera bestämningsfaktorer för uppkomsten av ohälsa med hänsyn till ett livscykelperspektiv, föreslå åtgärder på befolkningsnivå, samt ha kunskap om uppföljnings- och utvärderingsmetoder på befolkningsnivå

The actual translation of this complex learning outcome as proposed by me was:

Upon completion of the course, students are expected to be able to:

[...]

7 identify, with regard to widespread diseases/public health problems, factors influencing the emergence of ill-health from a life-cycle perspective, suggest interventions on the population level, and give an account of follow-up and assessment methods on the population level

A lot could be said about this intended learning outcome (and others like it), where the author(s) tried to include rather too much information from the point of view of readability. There are challenges regarding sentence structure and word order,⁸ as well as terminology. The issue I wish to raise here, however, regards the part after the last comma, in particular the words *ha kunskap om* [‘have knowledge of’]. The problem is that *being able to have knowledge* does not make much sense and that a more active verb than *have* would be required, which I pointed out in a comment to the commissioner of the translation assignment.⁹ While my proposed English TT has by now been accepted and published on the university website without changes, no adjustment of the ST was made, due to reasons that I can only speculate about.

5. Translation challenges related to the language pair Swedish–English

While I was still at Karlstad, one of the Swedish words I came to detest as a translator was *verksamhet*, which is a vague all-purpose term that

⁸ Note, for example, the heavy adverbial *utifrån folksjukdom/folkhälsoproblem* between the auxiliary *kunna* and the main verb *identifiera* (remember that they belong together even though in the original, they are separated by a dozen lines of text). It would have sounded unidiomatic (even more than now) to retain the original word order in the TT.

⁹ In fact, the guidelines for learning outcomes in course syllabuses stipulate the use of active verbs that can be linked to examination. It is, strictly speaking, not possible for teachers to check that their students *have* knowledge, only that they can, e.g., *give evidence/an account of* or *discuss* their knowledge.

has plenty of approximate English counterparts,¹⁰ but none that can be used as ubiquitously as the Swedish one. I can see why it would be used in Swedish, as it frees the writer from the need to be specific (e.g. *det gäller att utveckla verksamheten på ett effektivt sätt* [‘it’s important to develop XXX in an effective manner’]), but the English translation of *verksamhet* will always have to depend on the context and often be less than satisfactory.

Among the tricky terms more specifically related to Swedish higher education are *kursplan* and *utbildningsplan*, denoting the official descriptions of aims, contents, regulations etc. regarding individual courses and entire study programmes, respectively. I have referred to the former as *course syllabuses* above, as that is the top suggestion—the only alternative being *course specifications*—in the *Swedish–English Dictionary* (n.d.) by the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR), a government agency providing coordination and support to higher education institutions. However, the description of *syllabus* provided by e.g. *Wikipedia* (n.d.) corresponds more to the course or study guidelines provided by teachers to students at the start of a course, i.e. a document clearly distinct from the more formal, static and usually much shorter *kursplan*. Similarly, UHR’s top suggestion for *utbildningsplan* in its dictionary is *programme syllabus*, but that exact phrase only yields some dozen hits in an internet search, almost all of which from Sweden. And even though the less British *program syllabus* yields many more hits, it is doubtful whether the world at large understands the same by this term as do parts of Swedish higher education.¹¹

There are also words and concepts that seem more specific to MDH, but that have not found their way into the in-house wordlist, e.g. the *chefsdialog*, which is a regular get-together of all the university’s managers/executives/superiors (the Swedish *chef* by itself is not always easy to render into English either). When I encountered *chefsdialog* in a document to be translated, I chanced on *management dialogue*, but also

¹⁰ The free online dictionaries *Tyda.se* (n.d.) and *Ord.se* (n.d.) list six and seven respectively, e.g. *activity*, *business*, *operation* and *work*, with *ord.se* also suggesting translations for more or less fixed expressions involving *verksamhet*.

¹¹ Another type of awkward Swedish *plan* is the *arbetsplan*, which specifies a university teacher’s work tasks during a given semester (courses, research, professional development, administrative duties). In how far a *work plan* (or *workplan?*), rather than, say, a *job description*, can be said to correspond to an *arbetsplan* must remain open here.

wrote a comment that it ought to be substituted by a more established English expression, should it exist.

A problem that is thankfully on its way to becoming obsolete at my school, due to an administrative reorganisation, is that study programmes used to have both a *programansvarig* [literally ‘programme responsible’] and a *programsamordnare* [literally ‘programme coordinator’]. The problem is that *programme coordinator* is the translation given by the MDH wordlist for *programansvarig*, while there is none for *programsamordnare*. What if both roles are referred to within a couple of lines, as was the case not so long ago, in a document to be translated by me?¹²

I could go on like this, but do not want to neglect another big area of potential challenges: technical and subject-specific terminology that is independent of higher education per se, but does occur in course syllabuses (or whatever they ought to be called; cf. above), descriptions of research environments etc. For example, one of the intended learning outcomes of a course in social work is for students to be able to:

5 reflektera över åldrandets psykosociala och existentiella aspekter i relation till biståndsbedömningens praktik

What is *biståndsbedömning* in English again? Unable to find *the* obvious equivalent, I came up with the following solution, while pointing out in a comment that some expert in the field ought to revise it if appropriate:

5 reflect upon the psycho-social and existential aspects of ageing in relation to the practices of aid assessment

As a more extreme example, I cannot help sharing the course content specified in an aeronautical engineering syllabus, which I translated some years ago. It would hardly matter, I think, whether I quoted the Swedish or the English version, as they would be equally opaque to the average reader. Suffice it to say that I hardly knew what I was doing as I produced the following:

¹² Both roles are now going to be conflated into that of *programföreträdare* [literally ‘programme representative’]. What the official English translation is going to be is as yet unclear.

Course content

single-axis stress and deformation analysis

normal and shear stress

Saint-Venant's principle for equations of equilibrium in two and three dimensions

Mohr's stress circle and main stresses

normal and shear strain

the relationship between stress and deformation, as well as between materials; the

modulus of elasticity and Hooke's Law

floating conditions, fracture mechanics, limits for fracture and stretching

two-dimensional equilibriums

statically determined and undetermined supportive bar structures

torsion and bending of a massive axle with arbitrary cross-section

fracture and torsion of thin-walled pipes

bending and torsion of thin sheet metals

Sometimes, we get to translate more unexpected texts, such as the menu for a semi-formal evening event, which happened to contain both culture-specific (Swedish) and topic-specific (food) terms. Both aspects came together in *löjrom*, to be served as a starter. By itself, a supposed equivalent I could identify (*vendace roe*) might have stumped most of the non-Swedish English-as-a-foreign-language speakers as much as the Swedish term, which, after all, refers to a *Swedish* specialty, while a more descriptive variant (e.g. *eggs from a Northern European fish called siklöja in Swedish*) would have been stylistically out of keeping with the rest of the short menu and perhaps insulting to those familiar with the concept. In the end, it became a possibly lame compromise: *löjrom (vendace roe)*.

6. *A few words about translation aids*

Personally, I am not a professional translator in the sense that I would make use of modern computer-aided translation (CAT) tools such as translation memories (cf. O'Hagan 2009) or regularly communicate about tricky cases within networks of practitioners. The first stops when I am uncertain about an English word or expression are the free online dictionaries mentioned above, or the in-house wordlist if it can be expected to provide an answer.¹³ There are also other online dictionaries that may come in handy, as well as the old-fashioned printed ones. In

¹³ Actually, the wordlist is partly based on UHR's *Swedish–English Dictionary*.

fact, I can sometimes zoom in on the most suitable target-language option by not only checking Swedish–English dictionaries, but also my German–English or French–English ones (or even start with a Swedish–German one and then take it from there). Of course, the synonyms function in Word is often useful, too. For some reason, I do not use the translation function in Word, just as I do not use automatic translation services online.

In theory, I could make use of free English internet corpora, notably those provided by *corpus.byu.edu* (n.d.), though in practice it often feels faster to use an internet search engine. This is also the only way to look for the English names of Swedish laws and organisations, for example. In the future, I am likely to make greater use of the government-funded and freely accessible *Rikstermbank* (n.d.) by the Swedish Centre for Terminology, which contains much technical terminology in Swedish and usually other languages too, notably English. *Wikipedia* (n.d.), finally, is often very useful when it comes to establishing the currency of a certain English term found in some other way, since the name of an entry in the English version can usually be assumed to reflect frequent usage.

7. What's in it for me?

I am far from certain that I would want to be a full-time translator, especially if it were to be on a freelance basis. While it remains an option for the future, the stress level might be high, with often tight deadlines, and the pay would likely be low. Translation can be tedious too, especially if the ST is long and difficult or poorly written, and the content uninspiring. Furthermore, translation is not for everybody: not only is proficiency in one or more foreign languages an absolute requirement, it is only one of the facets of *translation* competence (Hansen 1999: 341), and it would still remain for me to prove, e.g. by trying to become an authorised translator, that I actually have what it takes on the open market.

As it is, focusing on translation and language review during some of my working time as a university lecturer suits me just fine. Not only does it sometimes bring enjoyment for its own sake, as well as a break from other, potentially more stressful activities such as teaching and research, for which the allocated time never seems to be quite sufficient.

Translation also helps me a) to keep updated on what is going on at the university (in the case of news or information directed at employees, which I may get to see before others do, if they read it all) and b) to broaden my knowledge and competence in terms of both subject matter (e.g. aeronautical engineering; cf. above) and English usage. I also like the fact that translation assignments tend to be concrete, limited and well-defined tasks, where the time I put down equals the time I am paid for. It is not normally that way when it comes to teaching a course, for example.

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