**Which (or Whose) language should I use?**

J.P. Roos

I am extremely honoured by having been asked to write in this project. Which also means that I am highly aware that I am a much lesser figure in the field than the Great Names (Strathern, Stanley & co), whom Robin Humphrey, Bob Simpson and Rachel Douglas-Jones have mobilised for the project. Coming from Finland, which is a small European country, rich, well-organized, well-educated (PISA!), equal, a Nordic welfare model country (in all these aspects much better placed than UK or US which land on the last positions in comparisons about social development between rich countries), the only handicap I have is that I am a Finnish (and Swedish)-speaking  researcher doing research among Finns. I have interviewed them in Finnish or in Swedish, they give their stories in contexts which may be totally misunderstood in other countries. Life stories - which are our common theme with Robin - are in many ways universal: emotions, basic themes, the fundamental stages of the life course, happiness and unhappiness... But on the other hand they are extremely contextual and culturally specific. It is a strange paradox: sometimes it is precisely the strange and exotic which makes us interested, sometimes again the universal.

But usually we Finns must accept that what we write is not very interesting for others, especially in the English speaking world. Even in such areas as the welfare state, most of the books written about it come from the UK, where there is no welfare state to speak of (except for a run-down NHS...).  But in our case, we have a second paradox: to become established in Finland, we are expected to write in English, texts which do not actually interest anybody outside Finland.  Or then write about things which are too general and fashionable to be interesting for Finns, but find readers in esoteric foreign journals. This is ridiculous. Consequently, I have more and more given up writing in English. I am already a senior professor and I have no interest in getting a job abroad. So why not try to influence those who are interested? Right now the government is undertaking the largest welfare reform in the whole post-war period, which it is extremely important to try to influence, for example.

On the other hand, I have many good colleagues with whom I like to communicate. It would be great to write just for them. Which I do from time to time, when I go to a conference. So this means that before starting to write, I must make the existential decision: which language shall I use: Finnish, Swedish, English or French. This choice implies a completely different approach, style, use of references. It is not easy.

Also, I have recently become interested in evolution and sociology.  This has made the choice a bit easier, because now my scientific community is mainly international, English, American, and German. So it is just natural to write in English. The Finns who are interested in evolution and sociology are so few (I know them all, to exaggerate a little) and half of them live in UK so there is no need. This also speaks in favour of writing in English. For a native English-speaking student, this is not a problem, but I believe it is important to make you aware of it. And for many students in the UK whose maternal language is not English, this is a problem, at least when they return to their own countries. And also when they analyze their materials, which mostly are in their native languages.

I have recently reviewed an interesting book about sociological biographies (Deflem 2007), where it is clear that this problem affects quite a few sociologists all over the world. They have all spent a few years in the US or UK and this has had a deep influence in their lives. None of them mention this dilemma: for a truly global sociologist it is natural to write only in English! No, this is a joke, they only accept the fact that what they write in their mother tongue is not very relevant. Except in some cases: I rather liked the joke by Piotr Sztompka that he was very proud to have replaced Lenin in the course requirements of some Russian universities (i.e. his Sociology textbook in Russian).  So, remember this: you British and Americans are extremely privileged when it comes to the language of sociology. Of course you are poorer as to the languages you can use, but it is a small consolation for us, because our second languages have so little effect.

As to analyzing the life stories and other narrative materials, I definitely think that translation should be taken very seriously. On the other hand, there is no point to translate the interviews in full, because this is a terrible work and only a few quotes will in any case be used. But those quotes should be translated very carefully. And put in context.

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See also: [www.jproos.fi](http://www.jproos.fi)

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