

Valérie Dullion

Building “translating institutions” in nineteenth-century national contexts

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Abstract

This article looks at the professionalisation of institutional translation in multilingual countries in the nineteenth century, i.e. before the first academic training and research institutions were established in the field of translation. First of all, the article presents a case study focusing on the Swiss federal institutions from 1848 to 1914. Several types of sources from digitised public archives are used to examine specifically to what extent, how and why institutional translation became professionalised in that context, and to put together a profile for nineteenth century federal translators. Following this, the findings of the case study are linked with elements of translator history that can be derived from existing research on other multilingual countries. Several thematic clusters are identified which can be suggested as a basis for developing comparative and relational approaches. The article highlights the relevance of such approaches in contributing to a history of translation knowledge and practice, as well as their potential for stimulating theoretical reflection on institutional translation as a professional occupation.

Keywords: translation history; institutional translation; translators; professionalisation; Switzerland; archives.

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Building “translating institutions” in nineteenth-century national contexts

The proto-history of institutional translators as a professional group

Abstract

Institutional translators were employed in several multilingual countries in the nineteenth century, well before the first academic training and research institutions were established in the field of translation. Looking at the history of these translators can enrich our understanding of both the history of the countries in question and the professionalisation of translation. This article presents a case study focusing on the Swiss federal institutions from 1848 to 1914. Sources from digitised public archives are used to examine to what extent, how and why institutional translation became professionalised in that context, and to put together a profile for nineteenth century federal translators. Following this, the findings of the case study are linked with elements of translator history that can be derived from existing research on other multilingual countries. Various thematic clusters are identified, which can be used as a basis for developing comparative and relational approaches. The article highlights the relevance of such approaches in contributing to a history of translation knowledge and practice, as well as their potential for stimulating theoretical reflection on processes of professionalisation.

Introduction

Working in a multilingual institution is today a standard occupation in the translation profession (KOSKINEN 2011). European and international organisations, in particular, employ institutional translators with well-defined skills and profiles, often in full-time salaried positions. This professional group coexists and partly overlaps with others, such as translators working in the language industry, freelance translators, literary translators, sworn translators, and various categories of interpreters.

Institutional translators emerged as a professional group following the creation of supranational and international organisations after the Second World War (see e.g. European Commission 2021) and alongside the development of academic training and research in translation (LAMBERT 2013; BALLIU & FROELIGER 2022: 13-18). The European Union currently employs the largest number of these language professionals. However, they had nineteenth-century predecessors that were working on a national level, i.e., in states that adopted a policy of bi/multilingualism at that time. In Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, the Habsburg monarchy, and Finland, there were, by the end of the nineteenth century, a number of translator positions in the civil service (DELISLE & OTIS 2016; DULLION 2020: 84-85; NOUWS 2019: 274-314; WOLF 2015: 86-104; KOSKINEN 2014b: 193; PALOPOSKI 2016). These jobs were created following key

moments in the development of the respective states in modern times, but also several decades before the foundation of academic translator training and research institutions.

Knowledge about institutional translators in nineteenth-century national contexts is scattered. Yet the history of these translators is an integral part of the cultural history of the countries in question. Furthermore, from the perspective of Translation Studies, this period can be regarded as an intriguing proto-history shortly “before the professional project” (PALOPOSKI 2016; see also MILAN 2021 on the “proto-professionalisation” of literary translators in the nineteenth century). Exploring the history of these translators can provide insights into how the figure of the institutional translator came into being, or, more precisely, into the historical processes that led to the formation of a professional group. This type of research can contribute to the “cultural branch” of “Translator Studies” (see CHESTERMAN 2009: 19).

This article examines the case of Switzerland from 1848 (when the modern federal state was established) to the First World War. The development and professionalisation of translation in Swiss federal institutions are analysed using digitised documents from the Swiss federal archives. The results of this research are then linked to the findings of other studies on the history of institutional translation that have been carried out in different countries and have touched, albeit marginally, on the subject of translators. Starting from the case study and then widening the scope to consider a comparative perspective, the article identifies lines of research that could serve as a basis for larger-scale studies based on shared research questions. It aims to pave the way for a more transnational, interconnected approach to institutional translators in nineteenth-century national contexts.

The case of Switzerland

Three official languages and a federal, democratic state under construction

In 1910, Achille Fréchette, a translator at the House of Commons of Canada, sent a report to a committee within the House about visits he had made to Europe the previous year, namely to Brussels and Bern. He had travelled to these capital cities to gather information on how translation departments were organised and how they functioned, with regard to parliamentary matters (DELISLE & OTIS 2016: 180-181, 445-451). One of the characteristics shared by Canada, Belgium and Switzerland at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century was that they were bi/multilingual countries with parliamentary systems.

The case study that will be presented in this article focuses on the modern Swiss Confederation, which was founded in 1848 as a federal, republican and democratic state with three official languages (for the history of official multilingualism in Switzerland, see WEERTS 2015). According to the first existing statistics on the distribution of mother tongues (HSSO 2012), dating back to 1880, German, French and Italian speakers represented 71.4%, 21.4% and 5.7% of the population respectively; a further 1.4% spoke

Romansh, a Romance language with five different varieties present in the mountain region of Grisons, which had no official status at the time. The Confederation was made up of 22 member states – the cantons – which had their own official languages for all matters within their jurisdiction. Most of them had only one official language, which reflects the fact that the national languages of Switzerland are distributed mainly on a geographical basis. In 1874, a new federal constitution was approved, which led to two significant developments. It initiated a movement towards partial centralisation, transferring the power to legislate in more and more areas from the cantons to the Confederation. It also paved the way for the extension of democratic rights through broader access to the instruments of semi-direct democracy (popular referendum and initiative). Between 1874 and the First World War, these two developments helped to create a common political space (WEERTS 2015: 171-175). In accordance with this timeline, the federal institutions, their administrative structures and a regime for official publications were gradually established between 1848 and 1914; the foundations for a formal staff hierarchy were laid in the 1890s (BÜRKI-GYGER 1996; PINI 2017: 41-61).

Little is known about institutional translators in the Swiss Confederation at that time, which is not surprising considering that there were, generally speaking, few explicit legal rules on the use of languages (WEERTS 2015: 739-740). However, some information on specific topics can be gathered from studies on the history of the administration (ADAM 1995; BÜRKI-GYGER 1996) and from a monograph on the case of Italian (PINI 2017), a minority language that was long disadvantaged by the language policy of the Confederation.

Institutional translation, professionalisation, and translators of the past

Based on original data, this study examines *to what extent, how and why translation became professionalised in the Swiss federal, multilingual institutions in the second half of the nineteenth century*. Before introducing the sources and method used to examine these questions, it is necessary to clarify a few concepts that will be referred to in the study.

First of all, the translation activity that takes place within multilingual institutions will be understood according to the widely adopted definition of *institutional translation* proposed by Koskinen (2008: 22):

we are dealing with institutional translation in those cases when an official body (government, agency, multinational organisation or a private company, etc.; also an individual person acting in an official status) uses translation as a means of “speaking” to a particular audience. Thus, in institutional translation, the voice that is to be heard is that of the translating institution. As a result, in a constructivist sense, the institution itself gets translated.

When communicating in several languages, the institution not only “gets translated”, but also uses translation to fulfil its “core function [, which is] to govern [...]. [R]egulatory organisational systems (i.e. institutions) that operate in a multilingual

environment can and often do employ translation in performing their governing function. In that case, they *govern by translation*” (KOSKINEN 2014a: 481). Multilingual institutions exist at various levels: supra- or international, national, regional, local; they also include NGOs (TESSEUR 2023). They adopt translation policies that create specific settings for the practice of translation (BOURGUIGNON et al. 2021). The types of translation processes and products that are used in such institutions can hardly be analysed in isolation from this specific context.

A second key concept is *professionalisation*. It has been the topic of numerous articles and several collective publications over the last 15 years, drawing on the fields of economics and the sociology of professions (SELA-SHEFFY & SHLESINGER 2009-2010; PYM et al. 2013; DAM & KOSKINEN 2016). In a recent systematic review of this literature, Sulaiman et al. (2022: 1) – who define professionalisation as “the process of upgrading the status of translation practice to a publicly recognised profession” – identify “three main theoretical approaches (trait, control, signalling) and six aspects of professionalisation (status, signalling devices, certification, institutional intervention, principles of good practice, education and training)”. The latter list will be used here as a reference that can help to analyse which aspects were represented in the historical processes under study and which were not, and how the situation evolved over time. However, this reference can only be used to a limited extent, and methodological precautions will be taken in data collection to avoid imposing current definitions on past phenomena which should rather be regarded as part of a proto-history of the translation profession. Although translation historians are currently interested in signs of professionalisation in the nineteenth century in a variety of contexts (e.g. ATEFMEHR 2022), they are aware that certain aspects of professionalisation were the exception in the past, which makes the socio-cultural context in which they appeared particularly worth examining (e.g. PLENCOVICH et al. 2021 about academic training). Furthermore, nineteenth-century translators did not form a homogeneous, visible group that could be easily traced in the archives (MILAN 2021).

This leads to a third concept requiring clarification. The very attribution of the name *translator* notoriously varies according to time and place (HUNG 2006). Even when conducting research on European countries in the nineteenth century, it is necessary to question the use of this designation (PALOPOSKI 2016). The initial range of keywords that will be used in this study to locate translation and translators in the sources will therefore be wider (see next subsection). However, the focus will be on the communication that has a direct and lasting impact on shaping the discourse of the institution and thus its “voice”. The archival sources will therefore be searched for traces of *written* translation (e.g. in the political, legal and administrative fields). Given the complexity of professional profiles and designations, this does not rule out the possibility that information on (oral) interpreting may be found in the data, but it should remain marginal.

A systematic analysis of digitised sources

As the professionalisation of translation in the federal institutions of nineteenth-century Switzerland is a largely unexplored field, this study is based mainly on data taken from a general source that gives an overview of the government's activities: annual reports submitted by the Federal Council (government) to the Federal Assembly (parliament), which are available in digitised format. These data are supplemented on certain points by other archival sources: directories, vacancy announcements, legislation, and legislative history materials. The primary aim is to provide a basis for more targeted research that could be carried out in more specific sources.

The data taken from the annual reports are a subset of those that were collected for the purposes of a previous study with a broader scope (DULLION 2020), in which the reports were systematically analysed to investigate the Confederation's translation policy between 1848 and 1914. A full-text search was carried out based on an extensive list of keywords, and the relevant passages were classified by theme¹. The results (86-89) showed that the Confederation's translation policy had remained selective, flexible and only partially institutionalised during the period under study, and that this had been to the disadvantage of Italian. Furthermore, it appeared that this translation policy had been shaped and reshaped as the state framework was changing, particularly as the federal and democratic structures were being reformed. The data relating to the translators turned out to be one of the richest thematic categories. They are analysed in depth in this article, with regard to the research questions on professionalisation (to what extent, how and why?) which were formulated above.

The next subsection presents the main features that stand out in the resulting group profile: the characteristics that give translation and translators a place on the institutional map; the diversity of job types and professional statuses; the essential link between translation and law in the process of building multilingual institutions; the position and role of institutional translators within society at large; and, by way of conclusion, the level and aspects of professionalisation.

¹ The annual reports are bilingual parallel documents (in German and French) with equal official status. The French version was used in the study.

The list of keywords was: "tradu*"; "langue*"; "en allemand", "en français", "en italien", "en rhét*", "en roman*"; "édition*", "publication*", "rédaction*", "texte*", "version*".

The resulting thematic categories were: 1. managing multilingualism in general, 2. translation and transfer, 3. non-translation, 4. what is translated, 5. multilingualism and official publications, 6. multilingualism in the legislative process, 7. communicating with the cantons, 8. Italian and Romansh as special cases, 9. multilingualism in foreign affairs, 10. *profile and status of translators*, 11. constraints and costs of multilingualism, 12. paying for translation, 13. problems with translations, 14. benefits from translations, 15. approaches to intertextual divergence.

For details on the methodology, see DULLION 2020: 69-72.

A group profile

Locating and identifying translation and translators

The analysis of the Federal Council’s annual reports [hereafter cited as “AR”] from 1848 to 1914 mainly highlights the fact that Swiss federal institutions initially operated in a multilingual way on a daily basis. They practiced translation, along with a range of other activities. As a result, translation appears in a wide variety of forms. It was practised in different interactional contexts and social environments, by many types of actors, and at multiple levels. This can be illustrated by the following quote:

Les délibérations de la commission d'experts pour la revision de la partie spéciale de l'avant-projet de code pénal suisse de 1903 ont eu lieu au mois d'avril, comme c'était prévu, sur la base d'un nouveau texte élaboré par M. le professeur Dr Stooss; leur résultat a été communiqué au département, avec un rapport du rédacteur. M. le professeur A. Gautier, à Genève, a été chargé de la traduction de ce projet en français, travail qu'il a remis à la fin de 1908 au président de la commission. Le texte français sera discuté et arrêté définitivement au printemps de 1909, après quoi il sera transmis au département. (AR 1908: 14)

[The deliberations of the committee of experts on the revision of the special part of the 1903 preliminary draft of a Swiss criminal code took place in April, as planned, on the basis of a new text drawn up by Professor Stooss. The results were communicated to the department, together with a report from the drafter. Professor A. Gautier, in Geneva, was asked to translate the draft into French. He submitted his work at the end of 1908 to the chairman of the committee. The French text will be discussed and finalised in the spring of 1909, after which it will be forwarded to the department.]

In this example, translation occurs at an early stage of a bilingual legislative process. A target-language subject-matter expert is entrusted with the task of translating a draft document, and his contribution will be discussed and amended in the collective and bilingual context of an expert committee, before the document makes its way to the government.

Some features drawn from the data set make translation identifiable among complex multilingual practices of this kind. One of the most salient features is a number of reflections on how to ensure the quality of multilingual texts. Measures taken to ensure quality included checking the accuracy of the translation through bilingual re-reading (AR 1884: 251), revising the translation (AR 1868: 238; 1869: 242), and having the translation re-read by the author of the source text (AR 1865: 2-3) or revised by other subject-matter experts (AR 1880: 397). Corrections were occasionally made after a text had already been approved (AR 1877: 42, 49). These measures are prominent in the production of legislation, a field in which particular care was taken to ensure consistency between the texts in the different languages (AR 1874: 172, 179) (see the subsection on translation and the law). Concerns for quality can be observed in the

legislative field as early as the 1860s. They become more apparent following the adoption of the 1874 constitution and the major legislative projects that arose as a result. Another feature of the data set that gives a certain visibility to translation activities and to the people who performed them is the way they were named. On this point, it is worth supplementing the analysis of the annual reports with targeted research using more specific sources and explicit designations as keywords. It turns out that the position of “translator” was referred to as such when Switzerland first became a federal state: one position was advertised in each house of parliament (VA 1849; 1850b), and three more vacancies were opened in the Federal Chancellery (central administrative service) (VA 1850a). Translators made up a significant proportion of the latter’s staff: three out of the 13 employees were translators in 1850 (BÜRKI-GYGER 1996: 4). The first vacancy announcement for the Chancellery emphasised the need for handwriting ability, education and morality. As for the parliament’s translators, it is interesting to note that they were given their own premises in the Federal Palace (AR 1895: 266). From the mid-1870s onwards (coinciding with the adoption of the second federal constitution), further positions were created in the administration’s specialist departments (for details of the appointments, see AR 1873-1879; for an overview of the resulting situation, compare FD 1879 to 1873). Incidentally, there is evidence of translators moving from one department to another (compare AR 1879: 17 and 1882: 112). Translation was thus partly decentralised, which made a positive impression on the Canadian translator Fréchette during his visit in 1909-1910 (quoted in DELISLE & OTIS 2016: 447-449).

As for the distribution of federal translators by language combination, it can be noted that while German (majority language) to French (first minority language) stands out as the most common pattern, all combinations and directions were represented (e.g. Italian to German, AR 1857: 280). Information on the geographical origins of these translators (which is systematically included in the federal directories) shows that bilingual areas, or areas of intensive language contact, were overrepresented, suggesting that some translators were likely to work in several language combinations and/or directions. It should also be mentioned that the annual reports illustrate the already well-known imbalanced nature of language policies and how this negatively affected Italian, the second minority language. Translation into Italian was marginalised, relocated to the Italian-speaking region (far from the capital Bern), or even outsourced (AR 1851: 67-69; 1883: 62-63, 386; 1886: 180; 1892: 194; see also Fréchette’s observations, quoted in DELISLE & OTIS 2016: 445). The situation only gradually improved from 1917 onwards, with the creation of a special department within the Federal Chancellery (see PINI 2017: 25-61). Although the third minority language, Romansh, had no official status at the time, traces of translation into Romansh supported by the Confederation can be found in exceptional cases (AR 1909: 10). (For more information on the general German-French focus of federal language and translation policy in the nineteenth century, beyond the specific question of institutional translators, see DULLION 2020: 70, 74, 75, 79, 82-83, 87-88.)

Translator positions in the civil service and a patchwork of other jobs

In addition to clearly identifiable translator positions, translation played a part in a whole collection of hybrid and external jobs, either on a permanent or occasional basis. This situation continued throughout the period studied.

In 1897, the translator positions within the civil service were integrated into a system of salary grades, which were applicable to the entire federal administration (Act 1897). The grades ranged from I (CHF 6000-8000 per year) for heads of administrative departments to VII (less than CHF 2500) for junior staff, clerical assistants, copyists, messengers. Translators were placed in grade III (CHF 4000-5500, art. 8), with other qualified professionals who potentially had supervisory duties. In a later document relating more specifically to the Federal Chancellery, this ranking on the salary scale was justified by the fact that capable, well-read translators could not be recruited for lower salaries (“on ne saurait à moins trouver des traducteurs capables, ayant une culture littéraire” – Dispatch 1919: 291). Furthermore, the annual reports show that there was a hierarchy and opportunities for promotion between different translator positions (AR 1903: 81). Promotions also occurred from translator positions to jobs in other fields and vice versa (compare AR 1895: 156; 1896: 78; 1899: 96-97; 1904: 5).

Other people were performing translation duties within the federal administration either as part of a hybrid role, such as clerk-translator, or as part of a non-designated role that involved translation. The last two categories can be found at the bottom of the ladder (clerk-translator, AR 1875: 292), at the very top (second vice-chancellor – see AR 1896: 78; VA 1895; Act 1897: 629, where the position appears in grade I; see also the section on translation and law), and at intermediate levels (AR 1881: 293; 1914: 623). On one occasion, it is mentioned that a translator acted as an English interpreter at an international conference (AR 1876: 133). Moreover, the annual reports mention external translators working regularly (under a kind of framework agreement, AR 1869: 242) or occasionally (AR 1891: 48; see also Dispatch 1919: 291). Finally, people with different mother tongues incidentally acted as translators in major federal projects, as voluntary members of official committees in their specialist fields (e.g. pharmacists and doctors in AR 1892: 206-207, 215). This is an effect of the system of part-time public service which was an important feature of Swiss public life in the nineteenth century and continued to some extent afterwards (see the entry “Milice, système de” in DHS).

The boundaries between the different groups listed in this section were relatively fluid (AR 1862: 31 in conjunction with 1866: 65-66; see also Dispatch 1919: 291). Furthermore, the coexistence of translator positions and various jobs involving translation within the federal administration can still be observed towards the end of the period studied (e.g. FD 1900: 32, 34, 79 and passim). This means that the kind of institutional translation which could have an impact on the country’s (linguistic) history was largely performed by people whose job title was not “translator”. This also raises the question of whether and to what extent the different groups formed a community.

Translation and law: a key field for building multilingual institutions

In the early days of the federal state, institutional translation was intertwined with governmental activities in various areas. The Federal Chancellery quickly realised the need to use not only “des traducteurs ordinaires [ordinary translators]”, but also “des hommes spéciaux pour les travaux difficiles [specialists for difficult jobs]” (AR 1854:141). Institutional translation was part of building a new political space at a time of profound technical, economic and social change. This process involved implementing rules for the whole country in the increasingly broad areas of life that the federal state had been given responsibility over, and this was done with a democratic ambition. So it is hardly surprising that institutional translation was closely associated with law, in terms of the profiles and tasks of the people who performed it. When the annual reports provide information on translators (of all categories), legal qualifications are often mentioned. Many of the people working as translators held a doctorate in law and came from judicial (AR 1881: 18) or academic circles (AR 1864: 110 – in this particular case, the translator demonstrated his competence in a job described as “scientifiquement exigeant [scientifically demanding]”, which led the administration to pay an exceptionally high fee, in line with market standards, see AR 1865: 3).

As noted above, specific measures to guarantee reliability were taken most visibly in the legislative field. They were often adopted under parliamentary pressure (e.g. AR 1868: 238; 1869: 242; 1874: 172, 179; 1880: 397). From the 1890s onwards, they developed into highly sophisticated working methods: bodies and procedures were introduced which helped to integrate translation into complex processes of multilingual text production. First of all, the position of second vice-chancellor was created in 1895. Interesting details of this job can be found in a document released in 1919 (shortly after the period studied in this article), which provides a historical overview of the organisation of the Federal Chancellery. At that time, the second vice-chancellor was, as originally planned, responsible for checking the French version of Federal Council documents. In doing so, he paid particular attention to ensuring that the French translations were both accurate and flawless in style (“à ce que les traductions en français [...] soient exactes et de forme irréprochable”); he also had to translate particularly important decisions himself, especially those of a legal nature (“il doit faire lui-même la traduction [des décisions] qui présentent une importance particulière, notamment celles qui sont de nature juridique”) (Dispatch 1919: 291). From 1902, the second vice-chancellor took part in the work of parliamentary drafting committees responsible for checking the texts of federal acts before they were voted on. The task of these committees was to ensure, among other things, consistency between the different language versions (for details, see Dispatch 1899: 651-652, 662, 666, 674; and the resulting Act 1902: 606-607, art. 8, 9 and 12).

Georges Wagnière, the first person to be appointed second vice-chancellor, was trained as a lawyer (see his entry in DHS). Beyond him, several bi/multilingual lawyers mentioned in the annual reports for their work as translators are also renowned for their role in building the Swiss federal state in the nineteenth century. In the annual reports, they appear as experts or as members of parliament taking part in committees, in

particular in the context of the codification of civil and criminal law. They were active and influential players whose contribution included, but was by no means limited to, translation. Examples are Virgile Rossel and Albert Gobat for French (AR 1894: 447-449; 1899: 239-240; 1903: 13-14), and Brenno Bertoni and Stefano Gabuzzi for Italian (AR 1905: 13; 1910: 17; 1911: 665-666) (see the corresponding entries in DHS). Virgile Rossel is known in contemporary Translation Studies as a pioneer, who left his mark both through his practice and his revolutionary thinking. He is considered to be a precursor to communicative approaches to legal translation, where the focus is on the function of the translated text (see among others ŠARČEVIĆ 1997: 36-41).

Thus, it appears that a background in law was a key factor in becoming a translator – and in particular an influential translator – in nineteenth-century Swiss federal institutions. Participating in state-building processes as a lawyer was instrumental in enabling some translators to shape legal translation practices and legal language (for the influence of lawyers on the modern federal state and on the unification of law in Switzerland in the nineteenth century, see DHS, “Juristes”). The absence of a clear separation between institutional translation and other activities (political, legal, administrative) placed these translators in a position of agency. The latter observation casts an interesting light on more recent developments: in the early 1990s, once translation had become a specific, professional activity, one of the measures taken to improve the quality of multilingual legislative texts was to better integrate language professionals into interdisciplinary processes (see ALBRECHT 2001 on co-drafting) – what this amounts to is rebuilding a close link between translation and law after the advent of the “professional project”.

Mediators within a multilingual society in the making

While the sources show that a legal profile was an important characteristic of institutional translation and translators, it is only the most obvious manifestation of a more general characteristic: proximity to power and involvement in public life. Institutional translation and translators were taking part in the process of building a new society.

On the one hand, translation was a power issue. As shown by the effect of parliamentary pressure on the methods for multilingual text production in the legislative field, translation quality was occasionally subject to powerful feedback. Some recipients of the translations (namely members of parliament from minority language regions) were in a position to assess the quality and voice their opinions. Moreover, the lack of translation to Italian and Romansh had democratic implications, which were debated against the backdrop of federalism and semi-direct democracy (AR 1877: 31-32; 1881: 34-36; see also PINI 2017: 25-61 and appendix 163-177).

On the other hand, translators were part of or had close links with political circles. This was obviously the case for the most influential translators, but also for many translators who were members of the federal parliament (AR 1866: 65-66) or of cantonal governments (AR 1891: 10) and who were working on a freelance basis on specific assignments. On this point, it is interesting to look at the biographies (DHS) of the leading lawyers mentioned in the previous section, as well as that of Elie Ducommun, who

worked as a translator for the Federal Assembly and the Federal Chancellery in the years around 1870 (AR 1868: 238; 1869: 242; 1871: 206). These people shared the following characteristics: they were members of (or close to) the Free Democratic Party (a pillar of the federal state in the nineteenth century – see DHS “Parti radical-démocratique (PRD)”); they were involved in public life (societies or movements); their work was published in the press and/or in a wide variety of cultural fields (literature, history, economics). These recurring features in the personal backgrounds of institutional translators highlight their position as mediators *within* a multilingual society in the making – their efforts as bridge-builders between languages and cultures were directed towards their fellow citizens.

This is clearly a direct consequence of the fact that institutional translation was, to a large extent, the domain of educated, multilingual people for whom it was just one of many activities in society. This pattern, which is widespread and not limited to nineteenth-century Switzerland, was potentially reinforced by the country’s tradition of part-time public service which was referred to above (see “Milice, système de” in DHS). Two points that tend to give translation and translators a distinct profile should nevertheless be borne in mind. First, the act of translating was explicitly named, even when it was of secondary importance (AR 1893: 628; 1910: 497). Second, institutional translation was indeed professionalised, albeit partially.

Level and aspects of professionalisation

How can this professionalisation be described? As a conclusion to the case study, which has examined historical processes on the basis of archival sources and with reference to a broad conception of translation and translators, this initial question can be addressed here while taking into account more recent thinking on the concept of professionalisation.

At the end of the period under study, a number of elements were in place that helped to distinguish translation as an activity in its own right, requiring specific, valuable skills. One of these elements was a status (SULAIMAN et al. 2022: 6-8): in the early decades of the federal state, positions had already been created in the civil service for a clearly defined activity, involving skills and methods, a spatial and temporal framework, a formal status within a hierarchy, substantial remuneration, and career development opportunities. These positions contributed to “upgrading the status of translation practice to a publicly recognised profession” (SULAIMAN et al. 2022: 1). An in-depth study of other sources would be necessary to learn more about the recruitment criteria for these internal translators. Significantly, one annual report states that a position was left vacant due to a lack of suitable applicants: “la place [...] est restée vacante par suite du manque de postulants capables” – AR 1873: 83. With regard to external translators, the signalling devices for making skills identifiable on the institutional labour market (SULAIMAN et al. 2022: 5-6, 8-10) were not yet highly developed. Besides being a lawyer who is well connected in political circles, the information available in the reports points to signals such as already being known to federal institutions, and/or already having worked as a translator (AR 1881: 18) – in other words, at the time, usual

signals seem to have been limited to work experience and word-of-mouth recommendations (in contrast to a list that would be longer today, including translator certifications, academic qualifications, and association memberships).

In addition to the *status of internal translators*, another key element of professionalisation that is well represented in the historical process under study is the *principles of good practice*, in particular the process standards (SULAIMAN et al. 2022: 12-13). Working methods were formalised, *in response to a need for good quality that was politically motivated and strongly voiced*, in the context of a federal and democratic state under construction.

These elements of professionalisation, however, coexisted over the long term with hybrid profiles and activities, including in particular a legal background. This hybridity gave certain translators influence by enabling them to participate more widely in shaping the new institutions, and society in general.

A comparative perspective: from similar facts to shared research questions

Institutional translation in multilingual countries in the nineteenth century – an overview of existing research

In addition to Switzerland, the bilingual national contexts of Canada and Belgium, as well as various relevant cases from nineteenth-century Europe, have been the subject of studies on the history of institutional translation and translators (see the references mentioned in the introduction to this article, and also D’HULST & SCHREIBER 2014; SCHREIBER 2016). Researchers have also begun to explore translation policies during the same period in the local contexts of various European towns and cities (D’HULST & KOSKINEN 2020), providing a perspective on how institutional translation and translators were affected by the interaction between different levels of power within a state (national, regional and local).

The case studies that are part of this body of research were conducted from different perspectives: not all of them have a specific focus on *translators* and on how they came to form a professional group in multilingual institutions. However, the historical information that they provide can be used – in combination with the findings from the Swiss case study presented in this article – to open avenues for comparative studies that examine what lied at the heart of professionalising institutional translation in nineteenth-century national contexts.

Traces of institutional translators and signs of their professionalisation could also be found at earlier points in history and in other parts of the world, namely in cases of multilingual empires. It would certainly be relevant to conduct research on such a large temporal and spatial scale. In relation to this overall picture, it should be noted here that the cases covered in this article have proto-historical relevance for a particular type of multilingual institution – those that refer to a relationship between language, society and power inherited from Western modernity.

Thematic clusters for a translator history beyond case studies

An initial, descriptive comparison between various national contexts could obviously focus on practical aspects, such as the status of institutional translators, their formalised working methods, the organisational structure, levels and pace of professionalisation, languages and specialisations, and sociological profiles (particularly with regard to gender – women are conspicuously absent from the data presented here, which contrasts with the chapter in DELISLE & OTIS 2016: 249-276). Expanding on this, similarities between broader phenomena can be identified that call for more ambitious research questions. A possible approach would involve highlighting local variations of these phenomena and analysing them in relation to wider cultural contexts, with reference to appropriate theoretical frameworks.

By way of illustration, several thematic clusters are presented here, together with comparative references and some suggestions for theoretical development:

- What can be inferred from the *staff profile and distribution* of institutional translators with regard to the priorities of translation policies, particularly in terms of languages? In this respect, the institutional map in Switzerland looks very different from that in Canada (DELISLE & OTIS 2016: 26-33, 42-43) or the Habsburg monarchy (WOLF 2015: 41-43, 49-114).
- How and why did institutional translators adopt – or were institutional translators integrated into – *procedures and processes* to ensure what was considered to be *good-quality* multilingual communication? (See e.g. WOLF 2015: 82-96.)
- What *different types of translator status* coexisted, even within institutions? (See DELISLE & OTIS 2016: 21-25; KOSKINEN 2014b: 192-193, 197-200; WOLF 2015: 62-72.) Hybrid jobs still exist today in certain local contexts (see DE CAMILLIS 2021 on civil servants working as “occasional translators” in the provincial administration of South Tyrol). Did the different types of institutional translators form a *community* (TAIVALKOSKI-SHILOV 2017: 15; see also CADWELL et al. 2022)? If that is the case, what held this community together and what were its tangible manifestations, for example in relation to language norms (see e.g. DELISLE & OTIS 2016: 127-132, 303-319, 356-365, 429-431, 435-436)?
- How important was *subject specialisation*, particularly in the field of *law*, for institutional translators? (See DELISLE & OTIS 2016: 4, 43, 427; WOLF 2015: 72-110.)
- In what respects was the professionalisation of institutional translation an *issue of power*, an object of debate, or part of a national narrative? How can this political dimension be analysed in relation to the country’s constitutional model and to the balance between the different language groups? Delisle & Otis 2016 give a detailed account of the heated debate in Canada over whether or not to centralise language services (171-211) and highlight the symbolic importance of the translation profession in Canada (431-437). (See also NOUWS 2019: 389-433 for Belgium.)
- What *other activities* – professional or not – did institutional translators tend to do alongside translation, according to their biographies? Delisle & Otis 2016 provide an in-depth analysis of the specific cultural factors and networks that may explain the close connection between institutional translation and journalism in Canada

(67-170, 427-429); they also explore combinations with other activities in the arts, sciences and sports (353-424). Pym (2009: 23 – see also 33-35, 45) has suggested using “multidiscursive involvement (translators usually do more than translate)” as a basis for “humanising Translation History”. A prosopography and a sociology of translators (DELISLE 2022: 6) offer ways of identifying and understanding combinations specific to a given context, as well as the implications of these combinations in terms of agency (CHESTERMAN 2009). Studies along this line could refer more specifically to the “multipolar model of cultural mediators within multicultural spaces” proposed for Belgium in the period 1830-1945, a “heterogeneous context in which several languages and cultural domains interacted” (D’HULST et al. 2014: 1255).

Finally, the story of Achille Fréchette suggests a further avenue of research, namely contacts and exchanges *between* institutions. Bridges between the experiences of different bi/multilingual countries are yet to be explored, as well as possible links between these experiences and the establishment of the language services in international organisations. Comparative studies could then turn into “relational approaches” such as “connected history and *histoire croisée*” (WAKABAYASHI 2018).

Concluding remarks

The possibility of these broader approaches sheds new light on the relevance of a history of institutional translators in nineteenth-century national contexts, i.e. “before the professional project”. The experience of these translators no longer appears to be merely a prescientific craft, confined to mundane activities such as producing multilingual administrative documents. Neither can it be reduced to a piece of (occupational or cultural) heritage, waiting to be rescued from invisibility. As a matter of fact, these translators had to continually ask themselves “how and why”, and to make choices between several possibilities. In this respect, their practices and ideas can be seen as *part of a history of “translation knowledge and know-how”* rather than of a “pre-discipline” (D’HULST 2021: 17, 4).

The history of these translators can also stimulate reflection at a more theoretical level, provided it is given enough empirical attention, and care is taken to avoid overgeneralisation. This potential can be illustrated here by three points. First, this article has shown that *a powerful driver for professionalisation in some national contexts was a need for translations that would meet the quality expectations of the time, provided that this need was recognised and voiced on the political scene*. This raises the question of the possible implications of the absence or loss of such political traction in other multilingual contexts. Second, *the process of professionalisation appears to be neither linear, nor unequivocal in terms of agency and recognition*. The creation of a body of civil servant translators may mean a loss of influence on society and on translation policy itself. In any case, professionalisation is a transition “from thick to thin trust” (RIZZI et al. 2019: 50), that is from “trust based on close connections with and knowledge of a person or institution” to “impersonalised trust based on the reputation of an institution or

profession rather than individuals” (115), and this development has a significant impact on the question of agency. Third, one of the characteristics of translators in multilingual national institutions compared to other categories of translators is that *their work is targeted primarily at their fellow citizens*. How do relation to the target audience and awareness of this social dimension appear in different cultural contexts? Historical variations in the way institutional translators, as a group, approach this aspect of their task may be central to understanding what meaning they give to their work.

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NB: All these documents are fully available from the Swiss Federal Archives (Bern) – digitised official publications, <https://www.amtsdruckschriften.bar.admin.ch>, in parallel official German and French text. The materials are listed here in the French text, which was used as the basis for this study.

- AR [year]: [page] = Annual reports from the government: *Rapports de gestion du Conseil fédéral*, 1848-1914.
- FD [year]: [page] = Federal directories: *Annuaire de la Confédération Suisse*, 1873, 1879, 1900.
- VA 1849, 1850a, 1850b, 1895 = Vacancy announcements retrieved from the Federal Gazette [*Feuille fédérale*, hereafter “FF”]: FF 1849 I 74; 1850 I 6; 1850 I 94; 1895 IV 188.
- Legislation and legislative history – materials from the Federal Gazette, in chronological order:

Act 1897 = Federal act on the salaries of Confederation staff: *Loi fédérale concernant les traitements des fonctionnaires et employés fédéraux (du 2 juillet 1897)*. FF 1897 III 626-641.

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