# Problems and advantages of multidisciplinarity: Some practical observations from a multidisciplinary Translation Studies project

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**Abstract**

This article is a practically oriented case study on a multidisciplinary Translation Studies project, my PhD thesis (Hekkanen 2010), involving a combination of translation archaeology, translation sociology and text analysis. It aims to demonstrate some practical problems and advantages related to combining several methods in a one-author project. The main advantages in this case were the possibility to obtain a wider perspective of a field where previous research was scarce and the ability to use various materials and methods to support each others' findings. Problems, on the other hand, involved problems fitting different types of data together, questions on the extent to which the various methods in fact address the "same" phenomenon, and issues in reporting the results in an approachable manner. The main aim of the article is to make it easier for researchers in the early stages of their career who are planning to embark on a multidisciplinary project to prepare for the task ahead.

**Keywords**: multidisciplinarity, translation sociology, translation archaeology, reception, combining theories, translations of Finnish literature

## 1 Introduction

This article is a very practically oriented case study on a single multidisciplinary one-author project, i.e. my PhD thesis completed in autumn 2010 (Hekkanen 2010). The main theoretical framework of the thesis was Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS; see, for instance, Toury 1995), which more specifically involved translation archaeology (on this matter, see e.g. Pym 1998); text analysis of the target text (TT), addressing both correspondence with the source text (source or S strategies) and corpus-like analysis of target text features (target or T strategies); and, in a minor role, research on the reception of the translations. In addition to DTS, I extensively used sociological theories, mainly actor-network theory (ANT; on this, see e.g. Law and Hassard 1999), complemented with Granovetter's idea of strong and weak ties (Granovetter 1983); initial attempts to use Bourdieusian field theory were abandoned, for instance because of questions on whether a very loose translation environment could really be considered a field in the Bourdieusian sense (for a longer discussion, see Hekkanen 2009). The main theoretical and methodological framework remained quite stable during the project, even though many details changed.

The area approached with this sizeable theoretical and methodological machinery was quite limited: the translation of Finnish-language literary prose into English in the United Kingdom, particularly between 1945 and 2003. Materials included both archival material – translator correspondence, reviews etc. – and interviews with roughly a dozen persons currently or recently active in and around this area. The archives used included the Literary Archives of the Finnish Literature Society, the archives of the Finnish publishing houses WSOY and Otava, and the archives of Sariola-Seura (the Mauri Sariola Society). Archaeological work involved tracing published translations on the basis of published book lists (e.g. the British booksellers' annual publication *Whitakers' Cumulative Book List*) and other publication data (*Index translationum*, databases on the translation of Finnish literature). Previous research on this area was very limited and mainly focused on text analysis, while studies on translation sociology – where, how and in what conditions the translations had been produced – were lacking entirely. According to some sources (Vähämäki 2000), translated Finnish literature had made a very limited impact on the target culture, an assumption to some extent supported by my own experience. I therefore also wanted to investigate the reception the translations had received. As translations turned out to be few and only 28 books met my criteria, it was feasible to utilise several approaches at once, partly in the hope of providing a rich starting point for further researchers. I also hoped that combining several approaches would make my research more useful for those currently active in the field, including national promotion bodies and active translators.

On the basis of this specific case, I will now discuss problems and advantages that may occur in a multidisciplinary research project, using a very down-to-earth perspective. The obvious starting point is why a project should be multidisciplinary in first place rather than rooted in one discipline only. After this, I will move on to discussing more specific details. It should be pointed out that I do not aim to provide clear-cut answers to specific questions on how a multidisciplinary project should be composed or carried out, since these are heavily situation-dependent and must be considered on a case-by-case basis. I nevertheless hope this case will be useful for new researchers embarking on a multidisciplinary single-author project.

## 2 Why multidisciplinarity?

The basic idea of multidisciplinarity in research is that combining several approaches will help to create a "better" view of the field being addressed. What this "better" is depends on the individual case; the aim might be creating a richer and deeper perspective, addressing several linked perspectives at the same time, meeting the multiple needs of a specific audience etc. The reasons might also be negative, for instance, when using material that for some reason does not function well on its own. Supportive material from other approaches may then help to balance gaps in one approach.

Multidisciplinarity is common in Translation Studies (TS), as we see in the very fact that the 2011 KäTu symposium – the Finnish symposium on translation and interpreting studies – was structured around multidisciplinarity in Translation Studies research and the use of multiple theoretical and research methods. Simply searching for "multidisciplinarity" in the Translation Studies Bibliography brings up hundreds of hits; for a more detailed analysis, see Hartama-Heinonen 2011 (in this publication). One discipline that has been commonly used to support TS research is sociology, which has gained ground to the extent that translation sociology is currently an established sector of TS. Several sociological models have been borrowed; in addition to Bourdieusian field theory (e.g. Bourdieu 1993, Hermans 1999, Gouanvic 2002 among others), actor-network theory has recently been a source of interest (Buzelin 2005, Kung 2009). Other disciplines from which TS research eagerly borrows include studies on cognition (e.g. TAP and other translation process studies). While my project joins a solid tradition in combining TS and sociology, combining text analysis with sociology is less common, and reception is only rarely studied (see e.g. Fawcett 2000) and even less frequently combined with other approaches.

While multidisciplinarity has many advantages, it is not a default solution. A research project should only be multidisciplinary if there are good grounds to do so. Combining several disciplines always means the researcher's resources – including time and expertise development – must be divided between different approaches, several of which may be relatively new to the author (particularly in the early stages of a research career). Dividing a limited amount of research resources between a higher number of takers inevitably means less resources per taker; in practice, the researcher is left with less time to focus on learning the nuances of each approach or hone her skills in each area. Combining different materials may be problematic both practically and theoretically (see next section). Once tangible results are obtained, writing out the results in article or book form requires careful planning to ensure all approaches used are presented and an extremely precise explanation is given as to how and why they are being combined. While the reasons may be evident to the researcher, an outside audience may find it difficult to understand e.g. the rationale for using "too many" or "too different" approaches at once. Indeed, this is not the audience's responsibility, either; quite the contrary, it is the researcher's duty to ensure she presents the theoretical framework, methods and findings in an easily approachable manner.

In my thesis project, I found there were several strong reasons for a multidisciplinary approach. The subject area being addressed, translation of Finnish-language literary prose into English, with focus on the United Kingdom in 1945–2003, had not previously been discussed at depth in literature. While some articles mainly focusing on textual features in individual texts had been published (e.g. Leppihalme 2002, 2005, Vähämäki 2000), there was no systematic review of the number of translations published during different periods of time and of the sociological context in which translations had been produced. The reception of published translations had not been studied much in literature (even though some discussion is given in Branch 1989 and Vähämäki 2000), and analyses of textual features were scattered. My project therefore aimed to provide a strong overview of the area to serve as a basis for further research, with particular interest in the sociological context of translation activity and reception. Because of a lack of systematic data on published translations, translation archaeology was inevitably required: the sociological context of translation activity cannot be analysed systematically if the researcher is unaware of which books have been translated, when, where and by whom. The project therefore required a combination of translation archaeology and translation sociology to be feasible at all.

It soon turned out that in the period covered by my project, few books had been translated.[1] Typically, there was only one translation per author, and many books were obviously aimed for a niche audience only. To this rule, there was with one notable exception: translations of Mika Waltari's historical novels had gained enormous success among the mainstream audience in the 1950s and 1960s. These translations, however, had been subject to heavy omissions and other unusual strategies. They were frequently translated indirectly, via Swedish; some material was often omitted in the Swedish translation, and even more extensive omissions were used when translating the Swedish version into English. Such manipulation had nevertheless had no unfavourable impact on the books' reception, which appeared surprising. To be able to analyse this, I found some level of textual analysis was required. Introducing textual analysis also appeared necessary because of the widespread belief that the poor international reception of these translations was explained by poor translation quality,[2] a belief reflected e.g. by Branch (1989). I wanted to test whether the quality of the translations matched these beliefs – i.e. whether they were as poor as they were believed to be – and whether this would explain the low international visibility.

In this case, the advantage of combining several methods was the opportunity to obtain a richer and deeper perspective, which could then serve as a basis for further research in future. At the same time, there were also negative reasons. The total number of translated books meeting my criteria – one-author novels or collections of short stories totalling 50 pages or more, published in the United Kingdom between 1945 and 2003 – turned out to be very low, only 28. The amount of sociological data available in terms of correspondence, memoirs and interviews was also low, and because of the low number of translators and books, it appeared very difficult or impossible to gather more. Opportunities for interviews with translators, for instance, were limited to translators with at least one published book-length translation, currently alive and interested in discussing the area with the researcher. In this case, one translator declined to participate, several were already deceased and others had started their translation career too recently to have published book-length translations as yet. The number of potential translator interviewees thus turned out to be lower than initially expected. I found it impossible to collect enough sociological material to be able to focus on translation sociology only; in any case, such a study would not be sufficient for a PhD project. Reception material also turned out to be surprisingly scarce, and again, more could not be obtained: reviews can only be analysed if a book has been both published and reviewed in the first place. I hoped that using textual analysis in addition to translation sociology and reviews would both help to explain a potential connection between the sociological context and reviews, perhaps help to rectify a misunderstanding of poor reception being largely caused by poor translation quality, and complement the limited sociological material available.

Whilst such a combination of approaches had its advantages, as discussed above, it also involved several problems, which I will present next. Two large categories were problems in combining different materials and those in reporting the different results in an easily approachable manner. The limits of any one researcher's skills are also an issue. I will start by looking at problems in combining materials.

## 3 Combining materials

The different materials used can be roughly categorised as sociological material (archival correspondence, memoirs, interviews, authority records), text analysis material and reviews. The problem of combining different materials is perhaps easiest demonstrated by the following figures where the availability of various materials is shown in different colours. Basically, text analysis material is available for all periods of time when translations have been published; however, the scarcity of translations over a specific period may make it difficult to find suitable translation pairs or groups for comparison.

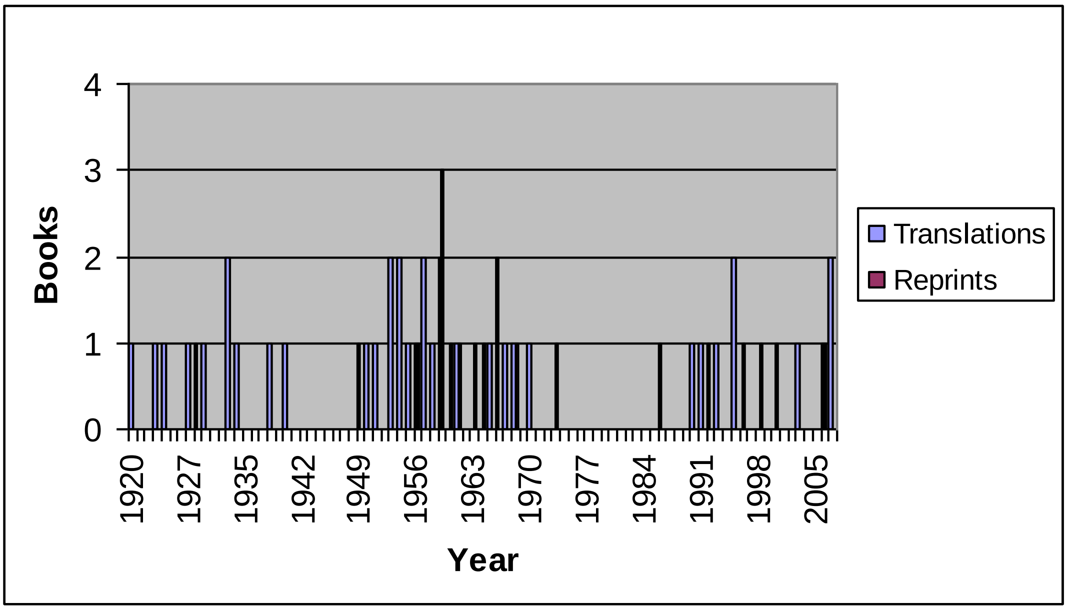


**Figure 1**. Translations and reprints, 1920–2007. New translations are shown in blue and reprints in red.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the number of translations published during this period is low; three translations/reprints per year is exceptional, and in the majority of years, no translations were published at all. The translations are unevenly distributed over time, with some clustering in the 1930s, 1950s–1960s and 1990s/2000s. There are no translations between 1941 and 1948 and again between 1971 and 1985. This means that comparing certain translations, such as the 1986 one, with other translations is likely to involve confounding factors as the translation environment is likely to have changed over time, potentially resulting in changes in prevailing translation norms, practices etc. that may greatly influence target text features. In this respect, comparison is likely to be easiest in periods where there are a cluster of translations, since translation norms and the overall translation environment have probably been more consistent.

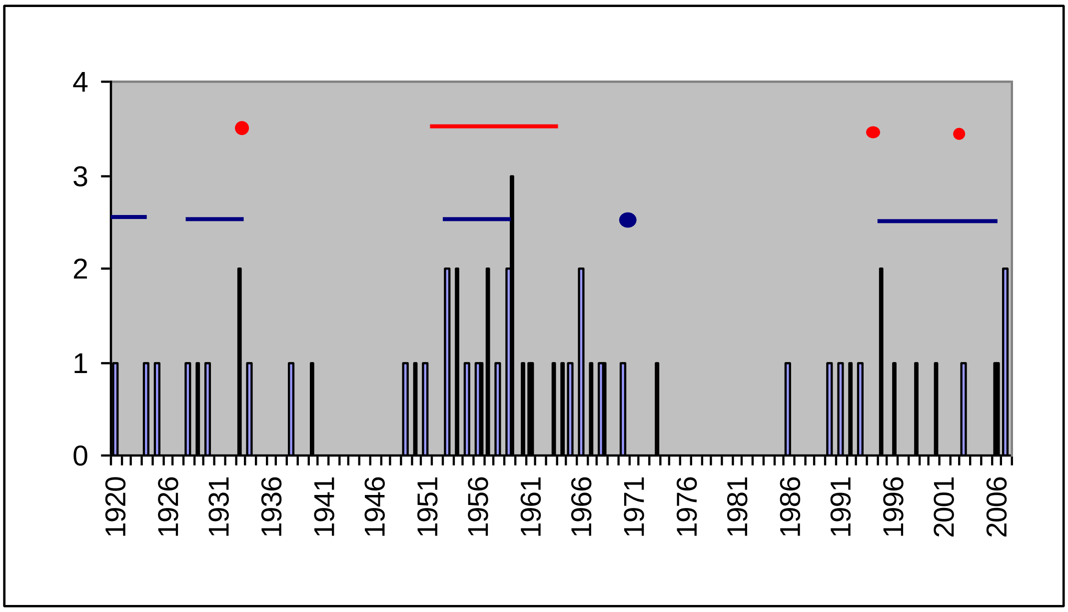


**Figure 2**. Availability of other materials: sociological material is shown in blue and reviews in red. Dots are material from a very short point of time, e.g. isolated reviews or correspondence on one book only. Note that this is a rough overall view only.

Reflecting the temporal distribution of published books, sociological and review material also turned out to cluster in three areas: the 1930s, 1950s–1960s and 1990s/2000s. As seen in Figure 2, however, periods where all three materials are available are rare. Sociological material (in this case, correspondence, authority records and memoirs) is available for the 1930s but reviews from this period could not be obtained. Reviews are available throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, but relevant archival correspondence from this period covers a considerably shorter time. In the 1990s and 2000s, reviews are few and far between, but sociological material is available for a longer period. Plenty of sociological material is available from the end of the period, but concurrent translations are scarce and reviews almost unavailable. Interesting material on e.g. working methods (correspondence, unpublished translation manuscript) is also available on an unpublished translation around 1970, but since the translation was not published, there are no reviews and a textual analysis of the final text cannot be performed, either.

In this case, I finally decided to omit some materials entirely. My aim was to obtain multiple perspectives for each period being analysed, and I therefore decided to exclude the sociological 1970 material from the main analysis since published translations and review material were unavailable for the same period. I could nevertheless use the 1970 case as a supporting sideline in the sociological analysis of the 1950s material. An overall view of the inclusion and exclusion of various materials is presented in Figure 3.

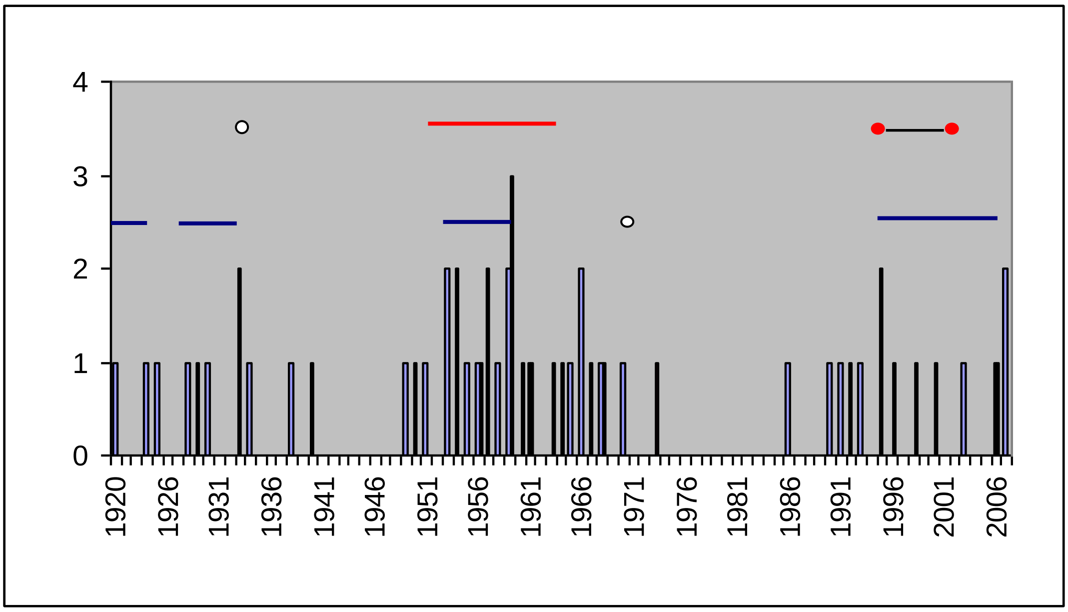


**Figure 3**. Inclusion/exclusion of materials. White materials were excluded from the analysis. The black line shows an area where I decided to focus on lack/scarcity of material.

Review material was plenty for the 1950s and 1960s but turned out to be less easy to find for other periods. On the whole, gathering book reviews is very work-intensive unless commercially collected material, for instance reviews collected by the publishing house or a commercial press cuttings agency, is available. This is reasonably often the case since many publishing houses monitor book reviews to follow up on the success of their books. In my project, such material was indeed easily available from Mika Waltari's and his Finnish publishing house WSOY's archives, both of which contained a large amount of commercially collected reviews. Thanks to the commercial success of Waltari's novels in the 1950s, plenty of cuttings were available from a range of newspapers large and small. I also collected more with archive searches and by browsing hard-copy papers from the time. For other periods, however, practically no review material was available; for instance, very little – less than I had expected – was available from the 1990s and 2000s. It should be noted that while several newspapers and magazines store their reviews in an accessible online archive, searching such archives may simply show that no reviews have been written at all.

The disparity in review numbers was problematic since I specifically wished to compare two periods of time to assess translation reception, translation "success", in different periods. This "success" was, in this case, mainly measured by book reviews in newspapers and journals. Searches for academically oriented reception material, e.g. analyses of translations of Finnish literature or translated Finnish literature, showed that such material was actually practically unavailable; these translations have not been discussed much in scientific articles or books. This approach was therefore unhelpful. The best solution turned out to be looking at what was missing. Was it really the case that reviews were not available for a certain period – more specifically, most of the

1990s – and why? Analysing not the reviews but the lack of reviews turned out to be a useful perspective.

In addition to these practical problems, another problem manifested that is perhaps theoretical only but still requires thought: to what extent do the different perspectives address the "same" phenomenon? Suppose that we look at the textual features of a translation and compare them against the sociological context in which the translation was produced. While we can easily acknowledge that the two are related, it is more difficult to pinpoint what exactly is their association. Can the sociological context be assumed to stand in a causal relation to the textual features? To some extent, perhaps, but not entirely. The working context, prevailing norms, pay, previous working history and so forth certainly help to explain why a human agent chooses to adopt a certain strategy instead of another, but they do not provide causal or exhaustive evidence of why each decision was made. The sociological context provides the frame in which translation activity takes place but leaves room for huge individual variation that cannot be fully explained by mechanical external factors. Factors such as the translator's habitus (as described by e.g. Simeoni 1998 or Inghilleri 2003), including personal background and previous working history, are insufficient to explain such variation.

The same problem occurs when looking at the reception of translations. In this particular case, we know that translations were heavily edited, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, and editors often eliminated hundreds of pages per novel. Reviews could be very positive nevertheless and often varied strongly depending on where they were published. (For a detailed analysis, see Hekkanen 2010: 93–99.) The same feature may be considered either vulgar or attractive depending on the reviewer. What exactly do reviews then tell us about the translation? In fact very little: translations are practically never compared to the original if the source language is as small as Finnish, and the positive or negative attitude adopted appears to depend more on the reviewer's preferences than on the translators' choices. For instance, the translator's mastery of Finnish and English was specifically pointed out in a review of Väinö Linna's *Unknown soldier* (*Times Literary Supplement*, 30 August 1957), while the quality of the translation is actually very poor (see e.g. Suominen 2001). Intuitively, one would assume that the text and the review are related, but looking at such data, what exactly is their interrelation? Perhaps something very different from the one assumed (e.g. that producing a good-quality translation results in a positive review and producing a low-quality one does not).

The question of the interrelation between texts and reviews may be partly answered if we remember that the presence of a review, whether positive or negative, indicates the book has received some attention in literary circles. Such attention is very much related to the publisher's perseverance in promoting a book. A book well promoted is much more likely to be reviewed. Whether the publisher is willing to make the effort in turn depends on the sociological context, the publisher's range of contacts, the importance of the author and other associated parties for the publisher, the influence that other parties may exercise, perhaps the active participation of a translator willing to promote the book in book fairs. Reviews are thus more strongly related to the sociological context than to the textual features of the book. Even so, establishing a strong causal connection between the context and the review is probably impossible, except in the rare cases where the reviewer can be interviewed to discuss the specific motives for each review. Failing that, as is normally the case, the strongest evidence likely to be obtained is a host of contributory factors, factors changing the context a little and perhaps adding up to something together. To some extent, I assume this uncertainty in combining different perspectives may be an inevitable element of a multidisciplinary research project.

Combining different methods is not only problematic for the researcher but also for the intended audience. I will now briefly look at problems that occurred at this stage in my specific case.

## 4 Presenting study results and the theoretical framework in an approachable manner

Having found what appears to be a good combination of methods, it is easy to believe that others will understand it as well. This is not to be assumed in a multidisciplinary project, particularly not a single-author one. In my case, it turned out that combining these methods in this manner was fairly problematic for the intended audience. This was partially my own doing: I felt I had found a balanced and self-explanatory system, which I could justify by referring to a number of instances in the data and explain by the overriding intention to form a good overall starting point for others. What I forgot was that the audience had no access to the data and could not know the researcher’s intentions; decisions must therefore be explained very carefully and explanations must be crystal clear. People with whom the project is regularly discussed are not a good trial audience in this regard as they are probably familiar with the project from previous occasions and may not see areas that will appear problematic to someone hearing about the project for the first time. The best solution is probably regularly presenting the study to others outside one’s normal circles, in seminars and at conferences, and carefully listening to the feedback and adapting any publication drafts accordingly. Any comments on clarity and combining materials and methods are particularly important, but any area where the audience has trouble understanding the researcher’s intentions usually requires further thought. The same events are also useful for networking, which is as important for the TS researcher as it is for a translator.

A thorough initial presentation of research questions and strategies is particularly important in a multidisciplinary project report since the audience is unlikely to be equally familiar with all aspects of one’s theoretical framework. Those highly versed in certain aspects, e.g. DTS or translation sociology, may not be equally familiar with other elements involved (e.g. corpus analysis of TT features). This is not their problem but rather a problem that the researcher writing on a multidisciplinary project must work to solve. On a practical level, the use of bullet points, lists of questions and hierarchies – e.g. a list of primary research questions, followed by separate lists of the secondary research questions within each primary question and a discussion of their connections – may be helpful. The approaches used must be presented very early on in the publication and discussed at length, with particular focus on why exactly each approach is used and what the project would lose if one or several of them were omitted. Again, it is helpful to ask for advice from persons previously unfamiliar with the project, to avoid the blind spots easily created by familiarity from previous occasions.

## 5 Summing up

In this article, I have very briefly touched on the advantages of using a multidisciplinary approach in my project (restricted availability of each type of material, aims of the study) and specific problems I observed in connection with it, such as problems combining materials and reporting the results in an approachable manner in spite of combining very different approaches. My article is mainly aimed for researchers in the early stages of their career and planning a multidisciplinary project. While it does not aim for major scientific discovery, I hope it serves as a practical introduction to some of the issues lying ahead.

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[1] Note that both translation activity and the international reception of Finnish literature have changed somewhat since the period covered by my thesis, with increases brought along by increases in absolute translation numbers and also by the more and more international environment in which authors now operate.

[2] While translation quality may be defined in a number of ways (on this, see e.g. House 1977 and 2005, Brunette 2000, Williams 2004 and 2009), the issues relevant here appeared to be at times excessive, at other times insufficient fidelity to the source text, omission of factors considered important in the source culture or lack of fluency.