

Transformation Through Translation: Translation policies at Amnesty International

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ABSTRACT

International non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are powerful political players who aim to influence global society. In order to be effective on a global scale, they must communicate their goals and achievements in different languages. Translation and translation policy play an essential role here. Despite NGOs' important position in politics and society, not much is known about how these organisations, who often have limited funds available, organise their translation work.

This study aims to contribute to Translation Studies, and more specifically to investigating institutional translation, by exploring translation policies at Amnesty International, one of the most successful and powerful human rights NGOs around the world. Translation policy is understood as comprising three components: translation management, translation practices, and translation beliefs, based on Spolsky's study of language policy (2004). The thesis investigates how translation is organised and what kind of policies different Amnesty offices have in place, and how this is reflected in their translation products. The thesis thus also pursues how translation and translation policy impact on the organisation's message and voice as it is spread around the world.

An ethnographic approach is used for the analysis of various data sets that were collected during fieldwork. These include policy documents, guidelines on writing and translation, recorded interviews, e-mail correspondence, and fieldnotes. The thesis at first explores Amnesty's global translation policy, and then presents the results of a comparative analysis of local translation policies at two concrete institutions: Amnesty International Language Resource Centre in Paris (AILRC-FR) and Amnesty International Vlaanderen (AIVL). A corpus of English source texts and Dutch (AIVL) and French (AILRC-FR) target texts are analysed. The findings of the analysis of translation policies and of the translation products are then combined to illustrate how translation impacts on Amnesty's message and voice.

The research results show that there are large differences in how translation is organised depending on the local office and the language(s), and that this also influences the way in which Amnesty's message and voice are represented. For Dutch and French specifically, translation policies and translation products differ considerably. The thesis describes how these differences are often the result of different beliefs and assumptions relating to translation, and that staff members within Amnesty are not aware of the different conceptions of translation that exist within Amnesty International as a formal institution. Organising opportunities where translation can be discussed (meetings, workshops, online platforms) can help in reducing such differences. The thesis concludes by suggesting that an increased awareness of these issues will enable Amnesty to make more effective use of translation in its fight against human rights violations.

KEYWORDS: ethnography, institutional translation, non-governmental organisations, press releases, translation policy

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