

Report on Ewa Tomczak-Łukaszewska's PhD thesis entitled "From translation process and product to reception: Investigating cognitive effort of the translator and the reader"

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Decision: positive evaluation - the PhD candidate should proceed to the final stages towards earning a PhD degree

Overall assessment (& strengths of the thesis)

This PhD thesis has embarked on an ambitious and innovative path towards exploring the links between the translator's cognitive effort and the reader's experience and reception. As the PhD thesis itself successfully argues, the link between production and reception remains underexplored and is crucial in understanding translation as a communication task, i.e., whether the intention and effort of facilitating written communication across different languages have been effective and successful in helping the reader comprehend the text. The research objective(s) has been clearly set out in the thesis, and the research plan has been successfully executed.

Although the author has humbly framed her efforts as exploratory, this PhD thesis sufficiently demonstrates originality and the breadth and depth of engagement with the relevant literature, which is admirable. The findings and analyses have further yielded insightful knowledge that helps Translation Studies develop, and the contributions to the academia, the translation profession, and translator education are obvious. The thesis is also well-structured and succinctly conveys the core methodologies (including challenges) and findings (including limitations) to provide a good, balanced overview of the research efforts and findings. To this end, I'm convinced the thesis, consisting of five individual research articles, is of sufficient quality to merit a positive evaluation and should move onto the final stages towards earning a PhD degree.

The thesis itself provides the contextual information to explain how the five research articles form a continuous path of exploration that aims to establish the links

between production and reception. Article 1 and 2 focus more on the relationship between directionality and the translator's effort and quality (in particular in lexical selection and information behaviour), bearing important implications for professional practice and translator education (although this may seem more loosely linked to the overarching theme of the thesis—more details see the below section on areas of consideration and deliberation). Article 3 serves as a pivot point, as the focus shifts from the translator to the relationship between the producer and the receiver. The article has established a partial link between the translator's effort and the reader's reception and elucidated how translation quality, especially low translation quality, impacts reader's reception. Article 4 removes translator's effort from the equation and focus exclusively on quality and reception, providing a detailed portrayal of the relationship between the two via fine-grained indicators, particularly later-stage processing, e.g., re-reading and second & third pass reading (again see the below section on some points of reflection); the nuanced findings of how different types of error (e.g., cultural adaptations vs. logical issues) is linked to cognitive effort and reading behaviour is particularly refreshing. Article 5, based on my impression, close the cycle of exploratory inquiries and re-examine the process-product-reception relationships.

Critical assessment (Areas of consideration and deliberation)

As mentioned, the thesis provides contextual information and help the reader connect the five research articles to an overarching research objective, i.e., the links between translation, quality, and reception, and whether reader's responses can be used to evaluate translation quality and the effectiveness of the translation process. That said, I cannot help but notice some links between articles being looser than others when all are examined as part of the PhD thesis, although they each are rigorously designed and offer insightful and interesting findings. The points of reflection and discussion below mainly aim at examining the thesis as a whole instead of commenting on the rigour of each individual article:

1. Consistency and relevance of some individual articles. The core objectives of the thesis are presented as exploring the relationship between the translation, quality, and reception and testing “whether the act of reading a translation (i.e.

the end product of the translation process) can serve as a means of evaluating its translation quality and the effectiveness of the translation process itself” (p.2). In practice, the concept of translator’s effort is operationalised differently between Article 1&2 and Article 3&5. Therefore, the role and importance of Article 1&2 seem more obscure at this point, especially when considering their exclusive focus on directionality, which does not appear in later articles and do not contribute directly to the two central research objectives.

2. While the thesis claims to centre on testing whether reader’s effort can indicate translation quality and the effectiveness of the quality of the translator, the abstract and the main text do not directly address this objective but rather imply the author’s position via discussion of the intricate relationships between the translator’s effort and reader’s processes, mediated by quality and reader profiles.
3. Linking reader reception directly with translation quality might be tricky, as making it easy for the reader to read (i.e., demanding lower cognitive effort) is not always the goal of the author, and the assumption seems to apply perfectly well to some types of texts but not others. This comment is linked to the section on translation quality and quality assessment, which seems to assume a certain position about what translation involves and the context and scenarios of translation. Different strands of recent conceptual discussion of translation have moved their focus away from quality assessment based on the concepts of functionalism. We have seen foci going in divergent directions now, e.g., cultural translation, or the translation’s relationship to the source text, especially when two cultures do not always have things in common (and when power differentials exist), and the (cultural) norms and individual context in which the source text sits do not always easily correspond to the target text context, let alone the “untranslatability” of some terms and concepts, but their views have not been reflected in the discussion. Rather than singling this out as a weakness/ flaw, the thesis simply needs to acknowledge the assumption and the applicability of the assumption upfront. To be fair, the author in fact mentions this but only near the end of the thesis by specifying that this assumption is for functional texts, i.e., on p.71.

4. Some theoretical concepts have not been discussed in sufficient depth to help frame the findings and the discussion, either in the research articles or the main thesis, e.g., translation expertise vs. experience (which seem to be used interchangeably); Gile's Effort Models, in particular how the focus on the impact of cognitive demands exceeding capacity is used to infer the impact of low cognitive demand, and how Effort Models are imported from Interpreting Studies, with the intricate inter-related cognitive efforts being streamlined into just reading & analysis plus writing, which seems to run contradictory to the author's claims elsewhere (e.g., when citing Hvelplund 2011, 2016).
5. It is unclear why the author settled on different operationalisation of the concepts examined in different articles, e.g., the later articles decided not to use lexical decision and information behaviour as part of the indicators to represent the translator's effort, especially when their relevance to quality has been established; the reader's cognitive effort is also represented differently, and a case in point is how the indicators in Article 4 are much more comprehensive than Article 5.
6. Different research articles also lean on various levels of control of the potential confounding variables when conducting analysis, e.g., language use and language proficiency are factored into some analyses but not others, and it's unclear whether the thesis has considered familiarity with the topic, which seems to also be a variable evident in the data. It'd be helpful to provide some comments in the thesis to contextualise the author's decision-making.
7. In the author's defence: the author at times takes on a harsh view of the ecological validity of her own research articles. The concept seems to have been considered only in terms of the resemblance of the experimental task in question to real-life tasks, e.g., reading task with comprehension checks in real life vs. reading tasks with comprehension checks in the experiment. Instead of pursuing mundane realism, ecological validity should be considered from three major aspects, i.e., the setting, the material, and the expected behaviour that will be elicited via the design (see more in Mellinger et al. 2025; Mellinger and Hanson 2022). It's not always the closer to the real-world situation the better.

8. As the author has rightly pointed out in the limitations of the thesis and in corresponding research articles, recruiting only readers with high English proficiency is probably not ideal. It'd be helpful to also explain the considerations of limiting the analysis one group instead of aiming for a wider spread of English proficiency.

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Date: 22 April 2026