



Social policies in Europe and the issue of translation: the social construction of concepts

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Translating texts on social policy into several languages, comparing the social policies and social reality of different member countries, and transferring social policies across national borders are becoming more and more important for European integration. At the roots of these issues, the question of translation is found; since to compare and transfer, one must first translate. So the objectives of the paper are to present some reflections on the translation process, and to outline and explain the main difficulties faced, in particular in the field of social policy.

Preliminary reflections on translation

I started thinking about the question of translation when I was doing my doctorate thesis. This thesis in sociology (Eyraud 1999) was focused on the analysis of Chinese state-owned enterprise and reforms regarding it. The thesis was based on about 60 interviews conducted with managers of state-owned firms and with people in charge of economic reforms. These interviews were conducted in Chinese, therefore I had to translate them. In order to understand more clearly the difficulties I faced, I surveyed the work of linguists, theoreticians of translation and ethnologists (for example: Nida 1945, Whorf 1958, Mounin 1963, Larose 1989). From this, I singled out two main ideas. The first is that a language organizes and prepares the experience of its speakers. It is a specific vision of the world: thus translation is an operation using facts that are both linguistic and cultural. Secondly cultures represent not only different visions of the world but are also different actual worlds in themselves. In other words a language speaks of a particular social reality. Things to be translated from language A to language B – whether these things are tools, types of industrial relations, types of social organization or institution, etc – do not necessarily exist in the society in which language B is spoken and therefore do not have a name.

These two phenomena are generally perceived by translators as obstacles to translation. I tackled them as being an integral part of the object of my study, since the objectives of the thesis were to describe on one

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hand the categories which social agents used when thinking about their world and their activities and, on the other hand, the specific organizations belonging to Chinese society. Having said that, I was faced with the following difficulty: in order to translate the interviews, these categories and institutions had to be known, and yet it was from these very interviews that I wanted to describe these categories and organizations.

I ended by choosing first to include the translated interviews in an appendix to my thesis and to translate these terms literally into French, putting them between quotation marks followed by the terms in pinyin (which is the phonetic transcription of Chinese) in brackets. Second I developed, in the main part of the thesis, an explanation of the Chinese economic and social world and the vision of the world by which these categories and organizations were integrated. These two parts of my thesis are in fact interrelated: the main volume was based on material in the appendix, which was essential for it to be fully understandable. I was greatly helped in the explanation of these categories and organizations by a method of analysis: the componential analysis which is mainly used by ethnologists (Goodenough 1956, Nida 1975, Bendix 1970, Mucchielli 1991). It seems to me that this method is very useful when one is working on a well-defined set of texts. It enables one to analyse in a systematic way the different elements which enter into the definition of a concept, and it can be extended to take into account first, the connotations or the suggestive values of that concept, and second, the relations of this concept to other key concepts in the texts. This brief outline regarding my first approach and my preliminary reflections about translation set the scene for the rest of the article.

A step forward: the social construction of concepts

A second type of activity has allowed me to progress along the line of this reflection. It is the opening at the University of Aix-en-Provence of a new curriculum in sociology called 'Understanding social and demographic phenomena' which takes a European perspective. The understanding of social and demographic phenomena is partly based on the analysis of statistical data, and therefore on the comparison of statistics that have been put together by different countries using different statistical systems. There is an immediate question: what categories and concepts are at the root of these statistical constructions, how can they be translated, how can they be compared? I would now like to reflect on these questions. I will limit myself to a particular type of concept, the legal or quasi-legal categories (such as unemployment, industrial injury, or rural-urban). A reflection on this type of category is important in the context of social policy, essentially for two reasons: first because it is partly on the basis of these categories that social policies are built, and second because these are the categories which structure the understanding we have of social reality, an understanding which is necessary for the elaboration of social policies as well as their assessment.

Over the last 15 years, French sociologists have undertaken an important analysis of the genesis of these categories in the French society. Salais and his team (Salais *et al.* 1986) have worked on the genesis in France of the categories of 'unemployment' and 'unemployed'. They have shown that the development of these categories is intrinsically linked to the development of the category 'wage-earning employment'. One category has become the model for what work is, the other the model for non-work. This team has underlined the different elements which have contributed to the establishment of these two categories. These different elements are most likely to be found in all European countries with varying nuances. These elements are set out below. First element: the development by the employers of social policies (such as housing, childcare centres, health and retirement benefits, etc.) which have enabled a specific status (such as sickness, retirement, maternity leave) to emerge from an undifferentiated non-work position. From this, one can distinguish between unemployment as a particular form of non-work, and unemployed workers will acquire a different status from that of sick or retired people. Second element: the development of Taylorism, of large industries and of a certain mode of management of the workforce. In short we might say that the limit between work and non-work becomes a clear divide between two worlds and that the amount of work is divided into work stations and wage-earning jobs. Third element: the development of collective labour agreements will sanction the division into materially defined wage-earning jobs, which are matters of regulation and calculation. Fourth element: the position of the unemployed dates back to the crisis of the thirties; unemployment was then considered as the loss of a wage-earning job because of shortage of work in a particular firm. Registering at a job centre created groupings of individuals; collective organizations of unemployed people were started, and conflicts arose concerning who was eligible for unemployment benefits. Government policies, trade unions and the actions of various associations, all contribute to shape and define the position of the unemployed.

In France, on the other hand, the Second World War era and the ANPE (*Agence nationale pour l'emploi*, the French national agency for employment) are going to play an important role in the constitution of the category. The Second World War reinforced the evolution towards state administration of the labour market. After the war, in the eyes of most people, the state became responsible for the global management of the labour market and for placing those seeking employment. The criteria defining unemployment became absence of job and search for job, rather than the loss of a job. Thus these new criteria include individuals who have never worked; they fit the needs of national manpower planning (knowing what labour is available) and the objectives of the industrial employers (decentralizing production to places where there is a pool of unused labour). In France, today one is officially unemployed because one has signed up at the ANPE as a jobseeker; but this is quite different in other European countries. Each definition of the category actually determines the affected population, its size, and therefore the knowledge of the phenomenon that one can acquire.

Let us take another example: the concept of ‘industrial injury or accident’ (Lenoir 1980). This concept has also been constructed and legally codified. Today it is at the root of numerous specialized organizations and service activities. The legal recognition of industrial injury was an important issue opposing the respective interests of workers and employers. In France, the 1898 Industrial Injury Law was very important. Since then an accident has not been attributable to a fault by the employer that the worker must prove, but is the consequence of a risk inherent in industrial activity. The employer is recognized as being liable, without being at fault, and it is no longer his personal responsibility which is involved but his liability as a representative of the firm. This change – from the moral notion of fault to the notion of risk – implies a specific conception of social justice, a definition of industrial relations, a relation to work and, more broadly, an attitude to life. In 1975, the manager of a company was accused and detained on suspicion following several breaches of the labour regulations which caused a death. This imprisonment challenged one of the gains of the 1898 law: the personal impunity of professionals and managers even when they are seriously at fault. It provoked violent reactions by professionals and managers led by two trade unions: CGC (*Confédération générale des cadres*) and CNPF (*Conseil national du patronat français*). More recently, methods to look into the causes of industrial injury have been developed. Reports have sometimes pointed to faults committed by the employee. Workers’ trade unions have been more or less violently opposed to the development of these methods, or have tried to bend them in a direction that they felt was fairer to the workers. We can therefore see that arguments around the issue of industrial injury continue to shape this notion and its social treatment.

What can be concluded from these two examples (unemployment and industrial injury categories) is that these legal or quasi-legal categories are the end result of a long historical process: they are, so to speak, ‘accumulated history’ (Desrosieres and Thevenot 1996: 110). By defining an inside (that which is included in the category) and an outside (that which is excluded from the category), definitions generate political and financial issues. This question is clear enough regarding unemployment; so let us take the categories ‘industrial injury’ and ‘rural’. In France, an industrial injury is an ‘accident that has occurred during activities related to work’. Included in that definition we find accidents that occur on the work site and during working hours as well as, progressively and as a result of trade unions actions, those which take place on the way “to and from work”; but in spite of pressures exercised by trade unions, accidents occurring on the work site, but related to trade union activities are excluded for the present.

In France also, a ‘*commune*’ (which is the smallest French administrative entity) is considered as rural if it has under 2000 inhabitants. This definition is used to delineate areas eligible for specific development policies: rural development policies which are subsidized. A commune of 1999 inhabitants can therefore sign up for a rural development project, which a commune of 2001 inhabitants can not

do. In the eighties, mayors of communes with 2000 up to 5000 inhabitants regrouped to lobby for the definition of a rural commune be raised up to 5000 inhabitants. This action did not succeed. It is likely that this grouping of mayors was not a powerful enough lobby. These two examples (industrial injury and rural) clearly indicate that the current definition of these categories is the product of political logics and forces.

If we go deeper into the question, we can see that, besides being accumulated history, these categories are implemented differently according to the economic and social context. So, let us reconsider the issue of industrial injury. The action of reporting an accident that occurred on the work site as an industrial injury depends on a large number of parameters. Declaration constitutes an issue that opposes the respective interests of the workers and the employers, and sometimes also divides the workers themselves. In order to understand this, one must know that in France, the level of premium that the employers must pay for industrial injury insurance depends on the industrial sector and the size of the company, but also on how many accidents have occurred on the site and how serious they have been.

Thus, employers tend to decrease the number of accidents by taking preventive measures, but also tend to reduce the number of accidents that they report. The declaration is therefore often the cause of conflict between the victim and his or her employer. Direct pressure can be exercised, like threatening wage cuts or dismissal; indirect pressures are also applied by co-workers because of the system of 'safety bonus'. This bonus which is widespread in French industry is aimed at motivating workers in regard to safety, the higher the level of safety in the workplace (that is to say the fewer the accidents reported), the higher the bonus. Under this system, it is in the workers own interests that accidents remain undeclared since declaration would lower their bonus.

Finally the pressures upon the victim for the non-declaration of the accident depend on the economic situation; a monograph about the safety in coal mines revealed that miners would declare injuries less frequently when the economic situation was unfavourable, from fear of losing their jobs (Cazamian 1963). The pressures upon the victim also depend on how active and how influential the trade unions are within the company. In conclusion, the overall industrial relations system within the country and within its different industrial sectors, is involved in the notion of industrial injury and has an impact on statistics.

What can be concluded from these few examples is, first that these kinds of categories or concepts are social constructs and products of a long historical process; secondly their current definition is a result of this construction process, the opposing forces involved, and the mode of regulation in force; thirdly these categories and their definitions are activated differently according to the broad economic and social contexts. No comparative analysis has meaning if it does not take into account these three dimensions.

Conclusion: towards a construction of a common definition?

It might be thought that the problem of translation of these categories and the problem of comparability of statistics would not arise if European countries constructed common definitions of these legal or quasi-legal concepts. I therefore move to examine the construction of common definitions, the forms this construction takes, and the problems that it generates.

To take three possible types of common construction: first it is possible to choose a definition which is not connected to any of the different countries involved, for example the definition of unemployment established by the International Labour Organization. But each country activates this definition in its own way, and shapes the limits of the definition in its own way: for example people who are over 55 with different pre-retirement systems (France), or married women with working husbands (England), are not classified in the category of unemployed but in the category of inactive (or non-working) population. The importance and the forms of this shaping of the limits of the category vary from one country to another (Maruani and Reynaud 1993). So even if the International Labour Organization definition is adopted by all, differences in implementation affect the content and the meaning of the category.

Secondly, it would be possible to adopt the definition established by one particular European country. That seems unlikely, even before the criteria for choice are considered, because if a category represents an accumulated history, imposing that category would mean imposing a history which took place in other times and other places. It would be a category which had no meaning in other societies. Thirdly, one could imagine uniting to construct a new definition. Let us take the term rural as an example (Dogan 1984, OCDE 1994). This category does not exist in some European countries (probably because they have not established specific rural policies or because they are dealing differently with the question), as seems to be the case in Norway and in Sweden. In other countries, the criteria that is used to distinguish the rural from the urban is the size of the population, the threshold can then go from 2000 inhabitants (France) to 20 000 inhabitants (in Italy in the eighties); the criteria can also be the density of population: under 150 inhabitants per square kilometre in Germany, or the proportion of non-agricultural population for Belgium and Holland. European Community rural development policies offer subsidies which are accessible only to rural areas. Countries benefit more or less depending on the way the term 'rural' is defined. It is in the interests of each country to turn the definition to its own advantage, and the final settlement might be the result of power struggles between different countries. In such circumstances, the construction of a common definition is a fundamentally unequal process, in which smaller European countries have little weight unless they co-operate to exert political leverage on a process that is on the face of it a 'scientific' matter.

Finally, the notion of 'rural area' has been used in several texts of the European Community which define rural policy objectives, but the

application of these texts in each country remains subject to local definition. And this might be the best solution, to meet the objectives of equality, pluralism and meaning for the different populations that are concerned. So today the construction of common definitions for these legal or quasi-legal concepts might not be either necessary or desirable.

On the other hand, we feel there is the necessity to develop cross national studies on the largest possible number of these concepts which are at the core of social policies, and which structure what information and knowledge we may have about neighbouring countries. For the category of industrial injury for example, this type of study would present an analysis of the genesis of the category, its current definition, the concerned institutions, the modes of management related to it, the policies, the stakes and the process of implementation for each European country. At the same time, this presentation would explain related terms whether they are concepts or organizations (MIRE 1998). Research of this kind would facilitate a better understanding of neighbouring countries, ensure a more relevant analysis of their reality, be a basis for real comparative analysis, and also enable researchers to have a better understanding of their own countries, because meaning often emerges from comparison. It would also be useful for an eventual progressive construction of common definitions based on a better understanding of the facts.

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