

# Translation Spaces

## Assessing the impact of translation guidelines in Wikipedia: A praxeological approach to the study of documented standards across four language communities

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# Assessing the impact of translation guidelines in Wikipedia: A praxeological approach to the study of documented standards across four language communities

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Wikipedia is a multilingual, user-driven online encyclopaedia available in 325 languages and language varieties. Such linguistic diversity has drawn the attention of translation scholars over the past decade. Previous research has addressed, among other issues, the quality of translated Wikipedia entries, the motivations driving editors-translators, and the taxing negotiations behind editorial changes. Nevertheless, the processes underpinning translation practices in the encyclopaedia have often been overlooked. Consequently, this paper adopts a praxeological approach to translation by analysing documented standards across four Wikipedia language communities and the extent to which 16 experienced translators have assimilated them. The findings suggest that Wikipedia guidelines on translation have slight but tangible differences across the communities under investigation. Moreover, the interview data showed a tendency among participants to attach more importance to cross-wiki editing policies than to any local translation guidelines. This preference ultimately reinforces previous claims that translation and editing in Wikipedia form a continuum.

**Keywords:** Wikipedia, practice theory, communities of practice, translation guidelines, translation practices, volunteer translation

## Introduction

Launched in 2001, Wikipedia is a multilingual, user-driven online encyclopaedia comprising 325 language communities loosely connected by a set of universal goals and values. As the platform's co-founder, Jimmy Wales, stated in a 2008 interview with *The New York Times*, the core ethos of Wikipedia is to “create and distribute a free encyclopaedia of the highest possible quality to every single person on the planet *in their own language*” [my emphasis] (Cohen 2008). Considering Wales' sensitivity to language diversity, it is revealing that Wikipedia's multilingual potential has thus far not attracted much scholarly attention.

The somewhat limited studies in this area have focused, among other things, on the values and motivations driving Wikipedia translators (McDonough Dolmaya 2012), the quality of translated Wikipedia entries (McDonough Dolmaya 2015), and the problems arising from the lack of an official translation policy in the encyclopaedia (McDonough Dolmaya 2017). Further investigations have sought to challenge preconceived beliefs about altruistic behaviour in Wikipedia translators (Jones 2018a) and the traditional divide between translation and other forms of original writing (Jones 2018b, Shuttleworth 2018). More recently, Torres-Simón (2019) investigated the role of talk or discussion pages as negotiation foci across 93 language communities of Wikipedia and discovered that smaller language communities had a tendency to follow dated definitions of translation.

Although this research has helped delineate how translation transpires in Wikipedia, scholars have for the most part overlooked the role and influence of the encyclopaedia's translation-related guidelines – documented standards – and how they inform and shape the volunteers' decisions. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to ascertain whether 16 experienced translators of the Spanish, French, Dutch and Swedish Wikipedia language communities have incorporated documented standards into their activities. Drawing primarily on Wenger's (1998) concept of “communities of practice”, I begin by examining the guidelines approved by each of the four language versions under investigation, looking for cross-lingual similarities and differences. Then, I move on to analyse the extent to which a selected group of senior Wikipedia translators show familiarity with the provisions put forward by their respective language communities. I conclude by revisiting the overall impact of documented standards on the translators' practices and the implications for future research.

## *Wikipedia translation as a collaborative process*

Since its inception, Wikipedia has attracted worldwide attention as a powerful source of first-hand information written for and by laypeople. As an encyclopaedia-building project, Wikipedia has managed to recruit individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds under its “anyone can edit” slogan. This democratisation of knowledge, which coincides with the rise of crowdsourced science, means that editors, regardless of their personal circumstances, can take a leading role and contribute on an equal footing. As O’Sullivan (2016, 88) observes, part of Wikipedia’s success resides in the fact that “contributors are judged by their track record of service” instead of “by any formal or ‘real life’ qualifications.” Therefore, volunteers in Wikipedia – as in other platforms such as Yeeyan (Yu 2019) and YouTube (Lee 2021) – negotiate and configure their identity roles through performance and self-disclosure.

As a multilingual collaborative project, volunteer translation has long fulfilled an important function in enabling the dissemination of knowledge across various Wikipedia language versions and beyond in scientific domains (Jones 2018, O’Hagan 2016, Shuttleworth 2017). Although each language community is independent and articles are not necessarily equivalent across the different versions (McDonough Dolmaya 2012, 2015), translation – mostly from the English Wikipedia – is a relatively common form of creating content. Yet, given the unstable nature of Wikipedia, where articles are subject to constant revision (Jones 2017, Shuttleworth 2018), drawing the boundaries between practices such as translating and editing is difficult if not impractical. Jones (2018a, 2018b), for instance, contends that translation in Wikipedia should be considered as a subtype of editing. In a similar vein, Shuttleworth (2018, 234) has noted that due to the sheer amount of post-editing that occurs in the encyclopaedia over the years, translated material is not always clearly identifiable. He referred to this phenomenon as the “dark matter” of Wikipedia, a term that captures the obscure and ill-defined nature of translation on the site. The impracticality of drawing hard boundaries between the two practices can also be inferred from McDonough Dolmaya’s (2012) study of the reasons prompting volunteer translators to collaborate in Wikipedia. Her research found that the motivations driving individuals to translate in the user-generated encyclopaedia were no different from those of editors with neither experience nor interest in translation.

1 More recent research by Jones (2017, 2018a, 2018b) has unearthed that, behind the seemingly  
2 altruistic sentiment associated with Wikipedia translators, there are centrifugal forces in  
3 action largely characterised by lengthy discussions fraught with dispute. Simply put, editors  
4 in Wikipedia, including translators, not only cooperate but they may also strongly disagree  
5 with one another. As discussed elsewhere by Góngora-Goloubintseff (2020), disagreements  
6 between Wikipedia editors are relatively frequent, especially in highly contentious subjects,  
7 such as politics and religion. Similar results have been reported by Weltevrede and Borra  
8 (2016). Furthermore, Shuttleworth (2017) has drawn attention to the more individualistic  
9 aspects of volunteer translation in Wikipedia, noticing that some editors are likely to work in  
10 isolation with little if any interaction with their peers.  
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18 To counteract disruptions and guarantee a hospitable work environment, organised practices  
19 such as editing in Wikipedia rely on a series of written policies and guidelines. While such  
20 regulations are not “dictated from on high” (Ayers *et al.* 2008, 363), core policies such as  
21 Verifiability of Content (VER) and Neutral Point of View (NPOV), to name but a few, are  
22 common across all language communities of Wikipedia. Other policies regulating the use of  
23 materials, such as Wikipedia’s Content Translation Tool (an extension designed to translate  
24 articles from one language community to another), are negotiated locally by engaged editors  
25 of individual language communities. As regards translation, McDonough Dolmaya (2017)  
26 has observed that the encyclopaedia does not have an official policy dictating how the  
27 practice should be performed. She viewed this lack of documentation as particularly  
28 problematic for smaller Wikipedia communities, which tend to import culturally biased  
29 information from larger versions such as the English Wikipedia. Cognizant of the difficulties  
30 arising from the absence of a policy, McDonough Dolmaya (2017, 154) called for more  
31 research into “less structured” local rules, such as translation guidelines, to gain a better  
32 understanding of the practice across various communities of the platform.  
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47 Against this backdrop, this paper ascertains the role and subsequent impact that documented  
48 standards such as translation guidelines have had on the practices of 16 Wikipedia translators  
49 of four language communities. First, I conduct a thematic analysis of the documents, looking  
50 for their most salient features. In particular, I concentrate on the similarities and differences  
51 across the guidelines approved by the communities under investigation. In doing so, the aim  
52 is to gain insight into the set of norms that are specific to individual language versions of  
53 Wikipedia. Second, I analyse data gathered from semi-structured interviews with experienced  
54 Wikipedia translators of those communities to determine whether they explicitly follow the  
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1 guidelines or acquired their knowledge elsewhere. As mentioned in the introductory section,  
2 this paper undertakes a praxeological approach, drawing primarily on elements from  
3 Wenger's (1998) "communities of practice", but also from Warde's (2016) conceptualisation  
4 of documented "standards of performance."  
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### 7 *Wikipedia as a community of practice*

8 Before embarking on the study of Wikipedia as a community, it is worth noting that there is  
9 no such thing as a unified practice theory (Nicolini 2012, Olohan 2017, 2021, Schatzki 2018).  
10 However, there is a set of shared theoretical foundations underlying different approaches to  
11 practice theory. Most theorists agree that for practices to exist, thrive and evolve there must  
12 be a group of individuals willing to come together with the sole purpose of enabling their  
13 performance (Olohan 2017, Shove et al. 2012). Schatzki (2010, 129), for instance, defines  
14 practice as "an evolving domain of varied activities linked by common and orchestrated  
15 understandings, rules and normative teleologies." From Schatzki's definition, it follows that  
16 practices are in constant flux and their successful performance or enactment hinges on the  
17 individuals' capacity to subscribe to a series of conventions.  
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20 According to Warde (2016, 42-43), the vast majority of practices are "irreparably normative  
21 in character." Thus, for practices to emerge and prosper there must be a set of collective  
22 expectations and rules underpinning their performance. Such rules can be documented  
23 (explicit) or non-documented (implicit), and quite often their enforcement is contingent on  
24 the ability of distinct individuals to endorse them. For instance, highly institutionalised  
25 practices such as professional sports draw on a series of rules that all participants must follow  
26 or else risk being disqualified. As Warde (2005, 138) posits, to guarantee compliance with  
27 the norms and ultimately secure the survival of the practice itself, a group of engaged  
28 individuals oversee their fulfilment and provide beginners with the tools they need to  
29 succeed. In the sports example above, this responsibility lies with referees, judges and  
30 professional governing bodies. In user-driven projects such as Wikipedia, there are senior  
31 editors and administrators tasked with ensuring observance.  
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34 While some practitioners may disagree on specific standards, Buch and Schatzki (2018)  
35 observe that long-term engagement in practice can only be achieved by a relationship of  
36 mutual accountability. Therefore, practitioners must sometimes accommodate their actions to  
37 those of others. Not doing so can hinder the performance of the practice and lead individuals  
38 to abandon the group and engage in other activities where they feel welcome. In Wikipedia,  
39 behavioural guidelines such as "Please do not bite the newcomers", "Etiquette" and "Assume  
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1 Good Faith” were devised to discourage attacks against fellow editors and guarantee their  
2 successful integration into the community.  
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4 Along the same lines, Wenger (1998) maintains that the emergence, proliferation and  
5 preservation of communities of practice depend on the willingness of diverse individuals to  
6 mutually engage with one another. This relationship of mutual engagement is driven by the  
7 pursuit of a joint enterprise and is supported by a shared repertoire. A joint enterprise can be  
8 defined as the set of common goals towards which all the practitioners’ actions are directed,  
9 while the shared repertoire consists of concepts, styles and artefacts that are required to  
10 achieve those ambitions (Wenger 1998, 72-73). Wenger (1998) argues that the shared  
11 repertoire is restricted to established members of the community of practice, although  
12 newcomers or peripheral members are occasionally allowed access. More specifically,  
13 individuals without access to the values, expectations and materials that underpin the  
14 performance of a given practice, lack the knowledge and understanding that are necessary to  
15 engage with the community.  
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17 Engaged members of a given community of practice often find themselves negotiating  
18 aspects of performance with their peers. As part of this negotiation process, Wenger (1998)  
19 holds that novice practitioners can often bring innovative ideas to the community, while  
20 senior members are likely to resist change. In his view, the capacity of a community of  
21 practice to foster new approaches and adapt to the current demands may stem from what he  
22 calls “rebellion” (Wenger 1998, 77). Such term, as used by Wenger (1998), is not an  
23 invitation to disrupt the balance of a community. On the contrary, being rebellious is a sign of  
24 strong commitment and is usually done in the best interests of all parties involved.  
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26 Warde (2016, 40) links change to performance and posits that it is through the latter that  
27 “individuals carry a practice forward, expressing, affirming, reproducing and transforming  
28 it.” Moreover, he draws the line between practitioners and non-practitioners by applying the  
29 concept of “mutual intelligibility.” Similar to Wenger’s (1998) shared repertoire, Warde’s  
30 definition of mutual intelligibility means that engaged individuals know what is relevant to  
31 the performance of a specific practice. Such knowledge is usually retrieved from observing  
32 others.  
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34 Building primarily on Wenger’s (1998) concept of “communities” and Warde’s (2016)  
35 “standards of performance”, I propose that each language version of the user-generated  
36 encyclopaedia can be considered a community of practice. Consequently, they all have  
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1 separate shared repertoires consisting of values and understandings that are negotiated locally  
2 and are therefore not always found across other Wikipedia language versions. To illustrate  
3 this point, I proceed to examine documented standards of performance in the form of  
4 translation guidelines. Moreover, drawing on qualitative data elicited from semi-structured  
5 interviews, I further investigate whether the practice of translation in Wikipedia is shaped by  
6 these local standards. With the theoretical framework in place, the next section introduces the  
7 methodology and data-selection criteria.  
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### 13 *Methodology and datasets*

14 The data analysed in this paper are part of a larger dataset stemming from a praxeological  
15 study tackling not only the incorporation of norms in translation but also the deployment of  
16 automated content-creation tools across the Spanish, French, Dutch and Swedish language  
17 versions of Wikipedia (Góngora-Goloubintseff 2021). Thus, the data selection criteria were  
18 driven by other aspects not covered in this investigation, such as perceptible cross-wiki  
19 differences in automation usage. Taking that into consideration, the translation guidelines  
20 examined in the first part of the analysis are (1) *Ayuda: Cómo traducir un artículo* [Help:  
21 How to translate an article]; (2) *Aide: Traduction* [Help: Translation]; (3) *Help: Tips voor het*  
22 *vertalen van een artikel vanaf een andere Wikipedia* [Help: Tips for translating an article  
23 from another Wikipedia]; and (4) *Wikipedia: Översättningsrekommendationer* [Translation  
24 tips]. The four documents were rendered into English by volunteer translators.  
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36 A frequent data collection method in qualitative research (Mann 2016), interviews have been  
37 used by practice theorists to investigate the performance of distinct individuals in a wide  
38 range of social settings (Nicolini 2012, Wenger 1998). For example, they have been  
39 employed to examine the practices that transpire in healthcare centres (Nicolini 2011),  
40 companies (Wenger 1998, Yli-Kauhaluoma and Pantzar 2016), schools (Sato et al. 2020) and  
41 translation agencies (Olohan 2021). Despite this diversity and the growing interest in the  
42 motivations driving volunteer translators on other platforms such as TED (Cámara de la  
43 Fuente 2015, Olohan 2014), there is in general a lack of praxeological studies on non-  
44 professional domains such as Wikipedia. Therefore, this paper takes a step forward by  
45 drawing on semi-structured interviews to elicit data on the practices of volunteer Wikipedia  
46 translators. In so doing, the aim is to gain a better understanding of the interplay between  
47 documented standards of translation and performance in the user-driven encyclopaedia.  
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1 The semi-structured interviews were conducted on Zoom<sup>1</sup> between July and August 2020. A  
2 small number of participants (n=16, n=4 per Wikipedia language community) were audio-  
3 recorded for approximately 45 to 60 minutes using the platform's feature. The sample was  
4 deemed representative and manageable considering the logistic restrictions imposed by the  
5 Covid-19 pandemic, hence increasing the probability of completion. Although participants  
6 were informed beforehand that the preferred language of the interviews was English, those  
7 who felt more comfortable speaking Spanish were also given that option. Unfortunately, my  
8 lack of fluency in spoken French, Dutch and Swedish meant that participants were limited to  
9 either English or Spanish. In accordance with sets of conventions typically used in  
10 transcribing and translating research work, the recordings were encrypted and the  
11 transcriptions were outsourced to an independent agency, which also handled the translation  
12 into English of the five interviews that were conducted in Spanish.  
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22 The participants were selected based on their translation expertise in Wikipedia. They were  
23 all approached privately using Wikipedia's "email this user" function. As part of the selection  
24 process, three purposive sampling criteria were applied. First, all participants were required  
25 to have a registered Wikipedia account that had been active for at least three years. The  
26 degree of seniority could be verified consulting each participant's registration log in  
27 Wikipedia. Second, participants were expected to have devoted a considerable amount of that  
28 time to translation. As a result, only those with no fewer than 10 translated Wikipedia articles  
29 were considered. Third, since the interviews were going to be conducted in either English or  
30 Spanish, all participants had to be fluent in at least one of those languages. The information  
31 on fluency was retrieved from the participants' self-reported language competence available  
32 on their Wikipedia user pages, and was subsequently verified in a questionnaire that each of  
33 them were asked to complete ahead of the interview. Although no ethical approval by a board  
34 was required because the project fell under the category of "low risk"<sup>2</sup>, special care was taken  
35 to ensure that the participants felt free to speak without fear of having their identities  
36 exposed. To further guarantee anonymity, the interviewees were assigned fictitious gender-  
37 neutral names.  
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55 <sup>1</sup> Alternative arrangements were made for two participants who requested to be interviewed on Jitsi, an open-  
56 source platform.

57 <sup>2</sup> According to the ethics regulations established by the University of Manchester, most low risk projects are  
58 approved by the researcher's main supervisor. For a project to be considered low risk, participants must be  
59 interviewed strictly in a professional capacity, as practitioners of a specialised practice, and no audio-visual  
60 material must be produced.  
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1 The analysis conducted in this paper follows a thematic approach. The data collected from  
2 the Wikipedia translation guidelines and the semi-structured interviews underwent a process  
3 of inductive coding.<sup>3</sup> In the case of the guidelines, data coding was done manually and  
4 cyclically, grouping the findings in two broad categories following criteria of universality  
5 (common to all or most communities) and locality (specific to one community). As regards  
6 the interviews, the data were coded in several phases, with some minor adjustments made  
7 during the investigation. In the first phase, transcripts were skimmed and general codes were  
8 assigned inductively to the data. For example, the label “Translation guidelines” was created  
9 during this primary stage. Once the general themes were identified during the initial  
10 screening, the next stages focused on breaking down the themes further into subthemes to  
11 gain insight into the participants’ knowledge of and views on the documented standards of  
12 translation in Wikipedia. These subthemes emerged from the participants’ comments on the  
13 guidelines, policies and principles they tended to prioritise during the translation process as  
14 well as from their recommendations on the norms that Wikipedia translators should follow. In  
15 this second phase, codes such as “Verifiability” and “Notability” were created. The coding of  
16 the interview data was completed using NVivo12. Due to the length of the transcripts and the  
17 flexibility allowed by the semi-structured format, NVivo12 was considered a suitable option  
18 for handling the data and providing easy and ready access during the analysis.  
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### 33 *Wikipedia translation guidelines and essays*

34 Before analysing the translation guidelines, it is worth noting that documented standards in  
35 Wikipedia take on three different forms: policies, guidelines and essays. According to  
36 information retrieved from the English Wikipedia, policies “have wide acceptance among  
37 editors and describe standards that all users should normally follow” (Wikipedia, 2021a).  
38 Guidelines are defined as “a set of practices supported by consensus”, which editors “should  
39 attempt to follow” (Wikipedia, 2021a). Further down the list, essays are “the opinion or  
40 advice of an editor or group of editors for which widespread consensus has not been  
41 established” (Wikipedia, 2021a). The page makes it explicit that essays, unlike policies and  
42 guidelines, “do not speak for the entire [Wikipedia] community and may be created and  
43 written without approval” (Wikipedia, 2021a).  
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58 <sup>3</sup> As Saldaña (2021, 41) notes, inductive coding is a data-driven process whereby new themes emerge during the  
59 analysis. Although overarching themes such as “universality” and “locality” were pre-coded, subthemes were  
60 coded inductively.  
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As Table 1 illustrates, three of the four documented standards of practice examined in this study fall within the category of guidelines. Their approval was subject to consensus and, as a result, the guidance they provide is aligned with the community's shared repertoire (values and expectations). The Swedish Wikipedia is a notable exception because *Wikipedia:Översättningsrekommendationer* [Translation tips] is classified as an essay. Consequently, the advice given by the page has not been endorsed by the community and is likely to be the work of a small group of engaged editors with an interest in translation. Notwithstanding its lower status, the Swedish Wikipedia's "Translation tips" remain this community's only documented standard available for analysis, since they have neither policies nor guidelines on the practice. Thus, for the purposes of the rest of the paper, the Swedish Wikipedia essay is included in the set of translation guidelines.

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Data retrieved from the revision histories – Wikipedia's record of contributions – show that the four standards were created more than a decade ago, with the Dutch Wikipedia guidelines dating back to 2006. Considering that Wikipedia was first launched in 2001, it is apparent that communal interest in regulating translation did not emerge until at least 5 years later, something similar to what transpired in the social media platform Facebook, where localisation began in 2008, four years after it was launched (Chung 2012, 66).

Notwithstanding this gap, some sections of the selected Wikipedia standards draw on core editing policies that have been in the encyclopaedia since its inception. For example, all four documents address the importance of verifying encyclopaedic content. An official Wikipedia policy, Verifiability (WP:VER), states that the information presented in an article must be substantiated by reliable sources, even if the editor believes that "something is true" (Wikipedia, 2021b). The Spanish Wikipedia translation guidelines encourage editors to avoid "unverified information" (Wikipedia, 2021c), while the French Wikipedia text notifies contributors that "the facts presented in the [translated] article must be verifiable by sources and references" (Wikipedia, 2021d). Likewise, the Dutch Wikipedia *Tips* discourage the translation of articles "in need of citations" (Wikipedia, 2021e). Unlike the others, however, the *Tips* lay stress on the need to check every reference before importing them from the

1 source text to the target text. More emphatic about verifiability, the Swedish Wikipedia essay  
2 resorts to a cooking analogy (Wikipedia, 2021f):  
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4 Wikipedia articles, especially the longer ones, are cooked by many different chefs, some of whom may  
5 have motivations that have little to do with writing a neutral and verifiable encyclopaedia. Therefore,  
6 when possible, translators into the Swedish Wikipedia should avoid unsubstantiated facts.  
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9 Another common element found in the guidelines is the requirement to acknowledge the  
10 source of the translation. Copyrights (WP: COPY) stipulates that, although encyclopaedic  
11 content in Wikipedia can be reused, readapted and redistributed, the source must always be  
12 recognised (Wikipedia, 2021g). Simply put, articles in all language versions of Wikipedia are  
13 protected under certain license agreements that editors should respect. Consequently, it  
14 comes as no surprise that the translation guidelines subscribe to this official policy. The  
15 Spanish Wikipedia page dedicates one section to copyright (Wikipedia, 2021c), the French  
16 Wikipedia *Aide: Traduction* [Help: Translation] states that it is obligatory to acknowledge the  
17 original authors (Wikipedia, 2021d), and the Dutch Wikipedia *Tips* dictate that it is essential  
18 to “mention which Wikipedia article served as a source” (Wikipedia, 2021e). The Swedish  
19 Wikipedia essay does not refer to licensing, but translators into that community are still  
20 bound by this overarching non-negotiable principle (Wikipedia, 2021h).  
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23 Alongside verifiability and licensing, the standards are unanimous in their rejection of  
24 unrevised automatic translations. The Spanish help page makes it clear that “automatic  
25 translations are not allowed” (Wikipedia, 2021c). The French Wikipedia, which has an  
26 official policy tackling automation (Wikipedia, 2021i), informs editors in *Aide* that “it is  
27 important to never perform an automatic translation” (Wikipedia, 2021d). The Dutch  
28 Wikipedia guidelines are more permissive but they go on to explain that machine-generated  
29 texts have to be revised thoroughly to prevent their deletion (Wikipedia, 2021e). In a similar  
30 vein, the Swedish Wikipedia page recommends editors to avoid automation, “even as the  
31 basis for manual translation” (Wikipedia, 2021f).  
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34 Two other themes that surfaced during the analysis were linguistic prescriptivism and style.  
35 Although from slightly different angles, the four documented standards attach importance to  
36 quality as a synonym of linguistic prescriptivism. For instance, both the Spanish and French  
37 Wikipedia guidelines state that all translations should aim to be comprehensible, with texts  
38 written in a standard variety, devoid of colloquialisms and regionalisms (Wikipedia 2021c,  
39 2021d). Under the premise that “a good translator is a proficient writer in Dutch” (Wikipedia,  
40 2021e), the *Tips* furnish editors with similar advice, who are encouraged to remain watchful  
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1 of false friends, barbarisms and culture-specific terms. The Swedish Wikipedia essay gives  
2 copious examples of commonly accepted normative style, including recommendations on  
3 how to write dates and measurements. Nevertheless, the advice given boils down to using  
4 “the mechanisms available in Swedish” until the text “sounds natural” in the target language  
5 (Wikipedia, 2021f).  
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9 Having examined the similarities, I now turn my attention to those elements where the  
10 standards diverge. To begin with, subtle discrepancies arise when it comes to the criteria for  
11 selecting an article for translation. As part of its shared repertoire, the Spanish Wikipedia  
12 differs from the advice given in the other communities in that it favours featured articles over  
13 other sources (Wikipedia, 2021c). Featured articles or FAs are Wikipedia articles that have  
14 been nominated, voted and approved by editors after undergoing a scrupulous peer-review  
15 process. Therefore, unlike ordinary Wikipedia articles, FAs are generally considered to have  
16 exceeded the encyclopaedia’s standards of quality. For this reason, the Spanish Wikipedia  
17 guidelines strongly encourage editors to import such articles into the community. The French  
18 Wikipedia, while also suggesting FAs as a suitable option, allows for more flexibility and  
19 extends the advice to “articles of a certain quality” (Wikipedia, 2021d).  
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23 The Dutch and Swedish Wikipedia standards are more knowledge-oriented. Thus, translators  
24 are expected to be if not knowledgeable at least conversant in the subject they have chosen to  
25 translate. In *Tips*, editors are told that they should “only translate articles [they] are familiar  
26 with” and be selective when possible, summarising or even omitting sections of the text that  
27 may not be relevant to a Dutch-speaking reader (Wikipedia, 2021e). In the Swedish text,  
28 editors are also reminded of the importance of discerning relevant information from  
29 superfluous detail, especially when translating lengthy articles from the English Wikipedia.  
30 To ensure that the translated article is more pertinent to a Swedish-speaking audience, the  
31 essay recommends drawing on material from Wikipedia versions in other Scandinavian  
32 languages, such as Danish and Norwegian (Wikipedia, 2021f).  
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36 Aside from the criteria outlined above, the documented standards take a different stand in  
37 aspects pertaining to advice on technical Wikipedia knowledge or wikisyntax. While neither  
38 the Dutch nor the Swedish documents seem to be geared towards such purpose, the Spanish  
39 and French Wikipedia guidelines provide fine-grained detail on how to deal with “translation  
40 templates.” In the wiki-jargon, templates are bespoke maintenance banners that are typically  
41 added to a Wikipedia article by an editor to indicate that further improvement is necessary. In  
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1 the case of translation templates, they are deployed to inform readers whether someone is  
2 working on the article and to alert them of possible inaccuracies. For example, the Spanish  
3 Wikipedia guidelines establish three types of templates depending on the status of the text  
4 (Wikipedia, 2021c): revise translation (minor errors), bad translation (major errors), and  
5 automatic translation (almost unintelligible). Moreover, templates are often used to  
6 acknowledge the source of the translation. The French Wikipedia guidelines stipulate that  
7 templates could be placed at the top or bottom of the article or in the ancillary talk page.  
8 Alternatively, *Aide* recommends writing a link to the source in the edit summary box of the  
9 translated article before uploading it to Wikipedia (Wikipedia, 2021d).

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11 Thus far, the analysis has revealed that the four standards of performance subscribe to  
12 universal policies and guidelines of Wikipedia, such as Verifiability and Copyrights  
13 (Wikipedia, 2021a). This is somewhat expected, because all Wikipedia articles, regardless of  
14 how they were created, are subject to the same policies and principles. Furthermore, the four  
15 standards agree on issues such as quality and writing style. Once more, Wikipedia's manual  
16 of style stipulates that articles should be of a certain quality, clearly written and fact-checked.  
17 Although these values are common to all four Wikipedia communities and may indicate that  
18 translation is embedded in editing, there are some nuanced differences between the two, such  
19 as the emphasis on avoiding unrevised machine-generated texts.

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21 At the cross-wiki level, differences can be found in each community's shared repertoire. For  
22 example, communities such as the Spanish and French Wikipedia seem to value the quality of  
23 the source text as a clear indicator of translatability whereas the Dutch and Swedish versions  
24 lean towards familiarity with the topic. Equally, the Spanish and French Wikipedia guidelines  
25 give pointers on how to handle templates. In so doing, they explicitly place expectations on  
26 editors who, by immersing themselves in a regime of mutual intelligibility, are taught to  
27 incorporate this set of technical skills to their practice and become conversant with wikicode.  
28 To ascertain whether the provisions included in the documented standards have any bearing  
29 on the Wikipedia translators' performance, in the next section I probe into data elicited from  
30 semi-structured interviews with 16 participants.

### 31 *Incorporation of the translation guidelines*

32 Participants were sent a brief questionnaire ahead of the interviews. In a similar fashion to  
33 previous studies (McDonough Dolmaya, 2012), the primary aim was to gather some  
34 background information, including their age group, translation expertise and qualifications.  
35 The questionnaire was also designed to confirm the participants' year of registration in

Wikipedia and, when available, their self-reported level of English. As Table 2 illustrates, five participants indicated that they were over 50, another five reported being between 31 and 40, three were between 41 and 50, and the remaining three fell under the category of 18 to 30 years old. Regarding their qualifications, 13 had a STEM<sup>4</sup> background, with four identifying as engineers. When asked to rate their knowledge of English using Wikipedia Babel scale, all 16 interviewees described their level to be at or above EN-3 (advanced).<sup>5</sup> Of the 16 participants, six declared having previous translation experience outside Wikipedia. Three had been engaged in professional translation activities while the other three had partaken in volunteer initiatives. To better identify the Wikipedia community they each belong to, without referring back to Table 2, the bracketed ISO code for Spanish (ES), French (FR), Dutch (NL), and Swedish (SV) will accompany the participants' names in the analysis.

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INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE  
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During the interview, participants were asked the next two interrelated questions: (1) In your view, what are the most critical Wikipedia policies and guidelines that translators should follow? (2) Which policies and guidelines do you tend to prioritise when you translate? Six clearly identifiable themes emerged from the interviewees' answers. All participants mentioned Verifiability of Content (WP: VER), four reported subscribing to Notability (WP: NOTE), and three cited Wikipedia's Five Pillars. In addition, five participants indicated that standards of good practice, such as being familiar with the topic, were one of their priorities. Four participants stressed the importance of knowing the local conventions approved by their communities, and the same number drew their attention to proofreading.

Concerning WP: VER, there was widespread agreement among participants on the consequential function of independent sources to substantiate information in the text. For instance, Alex (ES) argued that including external references is "a general rule of Wikipedia", while Pau (ES) noted that importing references from the source text to the target text was a requirement. In a similar vein, one of the French Wikipedia participants, Maxime,

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<sup>4</sup> STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

<sup>5</sup> Echoing the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel, Wikipedia uses a scale known as "Babel" where editors can self-report their proficiency in almost any language, represented by an ISO code. The scale, which is added to the user page, goes from 0 (non-competent) to 5 (professional/expert), with 1 indicating basic competence, 2 intermediate level, 3 advanced, and 4 near-native skills.

1 posited that “an article with no references is not supposed to be translated.” Dutch Wikipedia  
2 translator Nik commented that they tended to approach unreferenced articles with caution.  
3

4 Closely related to verifiability is WP: NOTE, variously described as a policy or guideline of  
5 Wikipedia according to which only subjects of relevance can have their article in the  
6 encyclopaedia. To assess relevance, the page stipulates that “if no reliable, independent  
7 sources can be found on a topic, then it should not have a separate article” (Wikipedia,  
8 2021j). While the existence of sources appears to be an objective yardstick of significance,  
9 not all topics enjoy the same status across the different language communities of Wikipedia.  
10 Therefore, editors often have to ponder whether the article they want to translate is important  
11 to their community. Deciding on what is notable can pose some challenges to editors. For  
12 Ange (FR), adhering to WP: NOTE when selecting an article for translation can be a skill that  
13 editors acquire through experience by performing their practice:  
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23 Because if it’s not notable enough, the article could be deleted and you’ve worked basically for nothing,  
24 so clearly it’s the first thing I look, and it’s quite easy...I’ve been here for a long time, so now I know,  
25 and I don’t need to look too much at it. I look at the beginning, I make sure that the article is reasonably  
26 admissible and notable, and then I can move on. That’s the first step, and the most important one I would  
27 say.  
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31 Third on the list of policies, the Five Pillars are “the fundamental principles of Wikipedia”  
32 (Wikipedia, 2021k). The “Pillars” establish the norms that all members of the community  
33 should abide by in their engagement with others. A manual of mutual accountability, the  
34 Pillars inform current and potential contributors that Wikipedia is (1) an encyclopaedia, (2)  
35 written from a neutral point of view, (3) with free content that anyone can use, edit and  
36 distribute. Moreover, Wikipedia is (4) a place where civility should prevail, and (5) where  
37 policies and guidelines are “not carved in stone” (Wikipedia, 2021k). According to Cris (ES),  
38 “what you always have to follow no matter what are the Five Pillars.” Likewise, Ange (FR)  
39 asserted that “rules are very important” and that “the Five Pillars are non-negotiable.”  
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49 Along with the policies mentioned above, five participants indicated that familiarity with the  
50 topic was essential. As stated in the previous section, this recommendation features in the  
51 Dutch Wikipedia *Tips* as one of the selection criteria, but is missing in the Spanish and  
52 French Wikipedia guidelines. Notwithstanding, Sam (FR) commented that, for them, “it  
53 would not feel okay to translate an article from another domain of knowledge, even if the  
54 English [Wikipedia] page is well-sourced.” Kim (SV) held a similar view and argued that  
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1 “some sort of preconception of what the concept is about is as important as knowing  
2 something about the subject.”  
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4 Equally important to four interviewees was compliance with the standards of their language  
5 communities. Although none of them mentioned the translation guidelines at that stage of the  
6 interview, participants showed awareness of the importance of integrating local norms into  
7 their practice. In other words, access to, and assimilation of, the community’s shared  
8 repertoire is required to become a full-fledged translator in Wikipedia. For example, Cris  
9 (ES) stated that they knew inexperienced editors whose translations had been criticised by  
10 other contributors for going against the Spanish Wikipedia naming conventions. Pau (ES)  
11 explained that “[Wikipedia] communities think differently, and sometimes they mean things  
12 in a different way.” Robin (SV) opined that acquaintance with the norms and values (shared  
13 repertoire) could be achieved by consulting the community’s manual of style.  
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23 As stated above, a quarter of the participants referred to proofreading as another necessary  
24 procedure to ensure that the article was up to Wikipedia quality standards. Ariel (ES), who  
25 reported using Google Translate on occasion, said that they “always proofread and edit the  
26 text thoroughly” before uploading it to Wikipedia. In a similar vein, Sam (FR) recognised  
27 that revising MT-generated texts was of the utmost importance to guarantee that the article  
28 was “as good and accurate and relevant as possible.” For Nik (NL), an unrevised translation  
29 in Wikipedia is likely to be deleted by an administrator. While these views are aligned with  
30 the advice given in the documented standards, it is Kim’s (SV) comment below that best  
31 encapsulates the volunteers’ engagement:  
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40 Wikipedia is part of the Internet and, as such, we make all information available as we possibly have the  
41 time to do. Still, at the same time, we do not have to give false expectations and write things that we  
42 don’t know if they’re really true. So, it’s some sort of idea when you translate an article or write an  
43 article in general, that this will not be over within a minute or even an hour, because it can take days. It  
44 can take ten or fifty edits before the article looks like what you expected from the beginning because you  
45 didn’t know how hard it was to get it to this.  
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50 Since none of the interviewees referred to the translation guidelines examined above, I  
51 resorted to prompting, and phrased the question as follows: Are you familiar with the  
52 translation guidelines/essay approved by your Wikipedia community? The vast majority of  
53 participants were either unaware of their existence or had not consulted them in a long time.  
54 Of these, 11 downplayed their importance, with five participants noting that not many editors  
55 read them, and another three casting doubts on their currency. When asked to elaborate on  
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1 their argument, a few participants were under the impression that the documented standards  
2 fell into impracticalities and redundancies. A smaller number argued that guidelines were not  
3 always easy to find in Wikipedia. Of note is that none of the Spanish Wikipedia participants  
4 were able to comment on the guidelines, while only two participants – both from the Swedish  
5 Wikipedia – reported being familiar with the translation essay of their community.  
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9 On the irrelevance of the guidelines, Ange (FR) was of the opinion that they “could be useful,  
10 but more as help documentation that’s always very specific and doesn’t always apply to what  
11 you’re doing.” Maxime (FR) observed that although guidelines were devised to help  
12 newcomers become full-fledged translators, they had failed to recruit new members into the  
13 community. For the participant, such failure was partly because “people that use Wikipedia  
14 don’t read the manual.” Likewise, Sam (FR) overtly acknowledged not having consulted the  
15 translation guidelines of their community. The interviewee believed, however, that their  
16 “sufficient knowledge of Wikipedia rules” had allowed them to perform their practice  
17 successfully.  
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21 Guus (NL) held a similar opinion concerning the weight of the *Tips*. The participant, who  
22 considered that the page does not provide “real or formal guidelines”, was outspokenly  
23 critical of fellow editors of their Wikipedia community that “are always hammering on [the  
24 topic].” On a similar note, Jos, Leslie and Nik minimised the impact of translation guidelines  
25 and declared combining both editing policies and common sense. Such combination suggests  
26 that, at least for these participants, long-term engagement in practice has equipped them with  
27 an implicit knowledge – Schatzki’s (2010) “orchestrated understandings” – of what is  
28 required to thrive in their community. Jos’ statement below illustrates this point by  
29 correlating experience to mutual intelligibility:  
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33 I’ve been doing this for so long I have no idea what the policies are these days. Like, I just follow  
34 common sense mostly. Dutch Wikipedia is not a very policy-heavy Wikipedia in the sense that we have  
35 probably a lot of policies, but people don’t...Some people care a lot about them, but most people don’t  
36 care that much.  
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40 As this article has made apparent, the participants’ knowledge of what is relevant to the  
41 performance of translation in Wikipedia seems to derive from their exposure to the practice  
42 itself rather than from specific guidelines. The paucity of documents was also prevalent  
43 among participants of the Swedish Wikipedia. Although essays have a more minor degree of  
44 enforcement than guidelines and policies, and adherence to them is less expected, the absence  
45 of more structured documentation in the Swedish Wikipedia does not seem to have hindered  
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1 the participants' ability to succeed in their joint enterprise. For instance, when asked about  
2 the essay, neither Robin nor Charlie were aware of its provisions. Another participant, Kim,  
3 noted that the essay was "not the most important rule [they] have, although it can be useful."  
4 Alva, the only interviewee to give a more detailed account of the document, explained that  
5 the page was outdated and that any attempt to enhance its status had been met with resistance  
6 from some members of the community:  
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11 Sometimes we have tried to change the recommendations, and there have been extremely long  
12 discussions. Well, I'm going to restart this debate on how we're going to do it because I think we should  
13 add data. Exactly how to do it is a whole another [sic.] issue.  
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17 In line with Wenger's (1998) definition of mutual engagement, Alva's statement elucidates  
18 that disagreement among committed practitioners on what is best for their community can  
19 bring changes in documentation to a halt. This stagnation, however, does not seem to have an  
20 impact on the translators' ability to perform their practice. As mentioned earlier, most  
21 participants have been translating for multiple years without giving much notice to the  
22 documented standards established by their communities. Others, such as Jos (NL), when  
23 asked about the guidelines, felt compelled to search the page during the interview and  
24 challenge some of its recommendations. On the requirement to check every reference before  
25 importing them to the target text, Jos argued:  
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29 So, for example, there is a policy that says that if you include references you have to open every  
30 reference and check it and actually verify that the information is there. Nobody does that, let's face it,  
31 there is just no way that people actually go to the library, look up the book, and then check the book.  
32 There is just no way.  
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35 The participants' answers demonstrate that overarching non-negotiable editing policies such  
36 as Verifiability and to a lesser extent Notability have had a significant impact on their  
37 practice. Their responses further attest that complying with these enforceable principles and  
38 producing articles of a good quality is at a minimum sufficient to reach Wikipedia's goals.  
39 Thus, although some aspects of the translation standards stem from decisions made at any  
40 one point within a specific Wikipedia community, compliance with their provisions is left at  
41 the discretion of the editors as long as they do not contravene any core policy. In other words,  
42 editing policies that are common to different language communities of Wikipedia appear to  
43 supersede local standards of performance (guidelines and essays), documented as  
44 recommendations.  
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### *Conclusion and suggestions for further research*

The analysis showed that the four documented translation standards drew from core Wikipedia policies such as Verifiability (WP: VER) and Copyrights (WP: COPY). These guidelines also equipped editors with similar advice on the importance of clarity in writing and the avoidance of automation, even though translation tools have undergone major improvements over the past years. Arguably, since the quintessential Wikipedia article is expected to meet certain standards of quality, translations are no exception to the rule. There were some nuanced differences regarding article selection criteria, references and the deployment of translation templates. These discrepancies are likely to be the result of decisions made by engaged members of individual Wikipedia language communities. As such, they form part of each community's shared repertoire and set a benchmark for translators.

Despite being conceived as help pages or thresholds of good practice within a specific Wikipedia community, the interview data revealed that adherence to documented standards among the participants was generally low. While most participants overtly acknowledged their own lack of awareness that such standards existed, others emphasised their optionality and lack of currency. Furthermore, the participants' responses indicate that editing policies such as Verifiability and Notability were vastly more pertinent to their practice because, unlike guidelines and essays, such norms are often non-negotiable.

Consistent with previous studies on translation in Wikipedia (Jones 2018a, 2018b, Shuttleworth 2018), the findings discussed in this paper further lend support to the idea that editing and translation in the user-driven encyclopaedia form a continuum. Although the participants devoted a considerable amount of their time and efforts to translation, the findings indicate that most of them felt that compliance with editing policies was sufficient. The lack of clear-cut boundaries between translation and editing in Wikipedia is further acknowledged in the Dutch and Swedish documented standards, where translators are encouraged to readapt the text during and after initial publication. Crucially, senior translators in Wikipedia are also veteran editors who dedicate their time to the site, not for any monetary incentive but because they believe in Wikipedia's core ethos.

Regardless of the marginal role that documented standards seem to play under this translation-editing scheme, it would be simplistic to assume that translators in Wikipedia do not subscribe to most of their provisions. The investigation demonstrated that despite not having consulted them, participants still managed to become full-fledged practitioners. By

1 virtue of their long-term commitment, the participants accrued knowledge of what is  
2 necessary to reach their community's joint enterprise. The capacity to be selective, and, at  
3 times critical, of the standards seems to stem from long-term engagement in practice.  
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6 To conclude, the data suggest that translation standards in Wikipedia may not be relevant for  
7 experienced contributors who attained their knowledge elsewhere, i.e. by engaging in other  
8 editing tasks. Nevertheless, since this study only tackled the incorporation of standards by a  
9 reduced number of senior translators of four language communities, it is not possible to rule  
10 out their value for less experienced individuals. As written manuals of practice, guidelines  
11 and essays could be an optimal point of reference for beginners. Future research could seek to  
12 ascertain the role of translation guidelines for newcomers from several language communities  
13 with little exposure to the social fabric of the user-generated encyclopaedia.  
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24  
25  
26

#### 27 *Data access statement*

28 The data about Wikipedia policies and guidelines are referred to in the "References" section  
29 of this publication. Additional raw data related to this publication cannot be openly released;  
30 the raw data contains transcripts of interviews, but none of the interviewees consented to data  
31 sharing.  
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Standard	Community	Date of creation	Status
<i>Ayuda: Cómo crear un artículo</i>	Spanish	8 <sup>th</sup> September 2008	Guideline
<i>Aide: Traduction</i>	French	5 <sup>th</sup> November 2007	Guideline
<i>Help: Tips voor het vertalen van een artikel vanaf een andere Wikipedia</i>	Dutch	10 <sup>th</sup> October 2006	Guideline
<i>Wikipedia: Översättningsrekommendationer</i>	Swedish	4 <sup>th</sup> January 2007	Essay

Table 1. Documented standards of translation across the four Wikipedia communities.

Participants' background					
Name	Registration date	Age group	Education	Level of English	Translation experience
Alex (ES)	2007	>50	Architecture	EN-4	Yes
Ariel (ES)	2015	31-40	Chemical Engineering	EN-3	No
Cris (ES)	2009	18-30	Student (BSc)	EN-3	No
Pau (ES)	2009	41-50	Civil Engineering	EN-3	No
Ange (FR)	2004	31-40	Environmental Science	EN-3	No
Dominique (FR)	2004	31-40	Computer Science	EN-3 to EN-5	Yes
Maxime (FR)	2008	31-40	Mechanics/Digital	EN-4	No
Sam (FR)	2017	18-30	Oceanography (PhD student)	EN-3	Yes
Guus (NL)	2002	>50	Physics	EN-3	No
Jos (NL)	2005	31-40	Engineering	EN-4	No
Leslie (NL)	2012	41-50	Law	EN-3	No
Nik (NL)	2005	>50	Economics	EN-3	No
Alva (SV)	2009	41-50	Engineering	EN-5	Yes
Charlie (SV)	2012	>50	Education	EN-3	Yes
Kim (SV)	2006	>50	Geography	EN-5	Yes
Robin (SV)	2008	18-30	Literature (MA)	EN-5	No

Table 2. Participants' background information gathered from the questionnaire and their Wikipedia user page.