

## Translating into L2- the Unachievable Perfection

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### **Abstract**

This paper tackles the problem of translating into the second language and how hard it is to reach a perfect translation. The issue of directionality in translation has caused a controversy that has not been conclusively settled. The superiority of one direction over the other largely depends on the very purpose of the translation itself; that is, on what the translator wants to achieve in his translation task. If the translator's aim is to produce a natural looking text, then the scale will tilt in favour of translation into the mother tongue. On the other hand, if the value of the translation lies in the accuracy of the transferred information, particularly in cases of non-literary, informative texts, then priority will go to the correct rendering of the source text. The paper propounds another requirement for a perfect translation, namely specialisation in the topic which must be one of the factors that has to be taken into account when commissioning translation jobs.

**Keywords:** translation directionality, linguistic competence, cultural competence, language superiority, language interference

## Introduction

Translation, according to Encyclopedia Americana (1983, p. 12), is “the art of rendering the work of one language into another.” This simple and straightforward definition reflects a basic feature of translation, namely that it is an *inter-lingual* activity that involves at least two languages, technically called source language (SL) and target language (TL). Since its beginning in ancient Greece, translation has often been performed from a foreign language, i.e. second language (L2), into the translator’s mother tongue, or first language (L1). However, with the development of the modern world and the waves of immigration from poor countries to the rich world, there has been a shift of directionality whereby translation from L1 into L2, also called “inverse translation” (Hatim, 2001), has become a common practice. This shift of directionality has been received with strong objection from some translation scholars who insist on the supremacy of translation into the mother tongue (L1 translation) to translation into the second language (L2 translation). Casting doubt on the feasibility of L2 translation, these opponents advocate the notion that a translator can only translate well from the source language into his or her first language, and not vice versa. In this essay, we shall discuss this notion and examine its truthfulness, as well as explore the reverse view and see whether L2 translation might be at times preferable to L1 translation.

## The perfect bilingual: An exception rather than a rule

No person can ever claim that he has a native-speaker’s mastery of two languages and hence can perform translation in both directions with equal proficiency. With the exception of some language geniuses, like George Steiner who “supposedly [possessed] equal fluency in English, French and German” (Pokorn, 2000a, p. 71), the perfect bilingual translator does rarely, if ever, exist. This view is better illustrated by Ivir (1997, p. 4) (quoted in Grosman, 2000, p. 23) in his following binary classification of translators according to languages:

It is a fact of life that the translator is a non-native speaker of one of the languages with which he/she works- either of the source language (when he translates into his mother tongue) or of the target language (when he translates into the non-mother tongue).

## Translation Competence: the key to L1 translation supremacy

Based on this fact about the translator’s different degree of proficiency in the two languages involved in his work, most translation scholars have argued that translators who work into their first language are in a better position to produce good translations than those counterparts working into foreign languages. In fact, the supremacy of L1 translation can be attributed to the notion of “translation competence” (Campbell, 1998) which encompasses three elements that enable the native translator (who works into his L1) to come up with a better translation output than the non-native one. These elements are linguistic competence, cultural competence and immunity from interference, and as will be seen below, there is good reason to think that they play a vital role in the production of fluent, natural looking translations.

## Linguistic competence

Linguistic competence is perfect mastery of a language with all its subsystems and rules. As a native speaker of the target language, a translator translating into his first language enjoys this competence, and the task of producing a good target text is easy for him because he makes use of a natural linguistic repertoire which he has acquired from birth and comes naturally and

smoothly when called upon. In contrast, a non-native translator (working into a foreign language) may lack full control over the target language grammar and suffer from gaps in the lexical repertoire, with the inevitable result of flouting TL rules and coming up with unusual grammatical configurations. Therefore, to quote Campbell (1998, p. 57), “working into the mother tongue avoids the problem of lack of textual competence in the target language- in other words, native writers can manipulate all the devices that go to make up natural-looking texts.” In a similar vein, Newmark (1995, p.180) stresses the aspect of natural writing in translation which can only be produced by the native speaker:

[The translator] knows that he cannot write more than a few sentences in a foreign language without writing something unnatural and non-native. He will be ‘caught’ every time, not by his grammar, which is probably suspiciously ‘better’ than an educated native’s, not by his vocabulary which may well be wider, but by his unacceptable collocation.

Baker also subscribes to the supremacy of L1 translation and sets a lot of store by the native speaker’s linguistic intuition, considering it a decisive factor in the translation of idioms and metaphors. Spelling out the importance of the native speaker’s intuitive use of language, Baker, (2002, p. 64) writes:

A person’s competence in actively using the idioms and fixed expressions of a foreign language hardly ever matches that of a native speaker. The majority of translators working into a foreign language cannot hope to achieve the same sensitivity that native speakers seem to have for judging when and how an idiom can be manipulated. This lends support to the argument that translators should only work into their language of habitual use or mother tongue.

Based on this linguistic fact, Newmark (1995) reaches the straightforward conclusion that “For the above reasons, translators rightly translate into their own language, and *a fortiori*, foreign teachers and students are unsuitable in a translation course” (ibid, p. 180, italics in the original). This conclusion is notably reflected in practical translation courses where translation teachers are always native speakers of the target language. In an English-Arabic translation course, for example, the English-to-Arabic module is taught by a native speaker of Arabic, and the Arabic-to-English module is taught by a native speaker of English, and the same is true for any pair of languages involved in a translation course.

### **Cultural competence**

If we accept Toury’s (1998, p. 1) assertion that “translation as an event inevitably involves intercultural and cross-cultural factors,” the insistence on L1 translation supremacy can be further justified by the fact that the task of translation requires not only linguistic competence, but also, and perhaps more decisively, cultural competence. For as argued by Nida (1964, p. 130), “the difference between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure,” a view which is inspired by his work as a Bible translator and his dealing with remote languages and cultures.

This sense of cultural competence can be appreciated in the translation of culture-specific items, commonly referred to in translation circles as cultural references. In such cases, being naturally familiar with the target culture, a translator working into his mother tongue is by far more able than one working into a second language to cope with translation problems involving

unmatched cultural references. His cultural background makes him aware of the difference in cultural situation between the ST and TT, with the happy result of ST cultural items being rendered correctly with their right target culture equivalents. An English translator working into his mother tongue who comes across the French expression *Bon appetit*, for instance, will naturally render it as *Enjoy your meal*, whereas a native French whose L1 culture could be projected on to the TT would probably provide the odd literal equivalent *\*Have a good appetite*, an expression which is never uttered in English eating situations. Hence the importance of the native's knowledge of his own culture; the crux of the matter is not faithfulness to the ST, but rather the reproduction of the same cultural situation.

### **Immunity from language interference**

Still another advantage of translating into the first language is the translator's ability to avoid the pitfall of language interference. "Interference", says Newmark (1995, p. 162), "is the translator's worst problem... Failure to recognize interference makes him look most foolish." This problem is normally avoided by a person translating into his mother tongue since he will be immune from producing unnatural TL structures that mirror those of the source language. The native speaker's natural feel for a language imbues him with the intuitive ability of suspecting what seems unnatural, an ability which can be attributed to the native's 'massive common sense...[which] will protect him [the translator] from his own ingenuity, his *recherche*' and exotic brainwaves, which are so often idiotic" (ibid, p. 163).

Conversely, translating into a second language may be inflicted with the flaw of interference because the translator can never achieve the status of native speaker's proficiency in the second language. In fact, according to Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, p. 53, quoted in Campbell, 1998, pp. 14-15), one of the decisive criteria for the assessment of translation into a second language is "the translator's ability to avoid transferring first language phenomena in their [sic] translation," a criterion which is rarely met by a non-native however proficient he may be in his second language. For, in Newmark's (1995, p. 181) words, "A foreigner appears to go on making collocational mistakes however long he lives in his adopted country."

Indisputably, due to the above factors, translating into the first language may be much easier than that into a second language, and the latter's output is generally better than the former's. This position is also backed by Pokorn (2000b, p. 62) who rightly states that:

Every language has its own way of expression, which remains inaccessible to everyone who does not speak that particular language from birth. Translation should therefore always proceed from foreign languages to one's mother tongue and never vice versa, since the hidden essence of the target language is not attainable by any foreign speaker.

### **L1 Translation supremacy in translation practice**

Actually, the view that translation should only be in the direction of the mother tongue squares well with real-life experience. For instance, the established norm in international organizations is that translators translate only into their mother tongues. "The European Union", for instance, writes Dollerup (2000, p. 61) in a footnote, "sticks to the 'mother-tongue principle' according to which translation professionals only work into their mother tongue." This unwritten rule is due, to "a conviction that we can grasp the ungraspable only in our mother tongue, and consequently create a convincing translation only in our native language" (Pokorn, 2000b, p. 62).

This conviction can also be said to be behind Nida and Taber's (1969, p. 174) suggestion in an appendix on their "Organisation of Translation Projects" involving native and non-native speakers of the target language, that "the native speakers in such cases are recognized as the real translators, while the foreigners who participate are exegetical informants and assistants." However, in endorsing the supremacy of L1 translation, one must not go too far in rejecting the possibility of inverse translation which might be at times preferable to translation into the mother tongue. Interestingly, the word *exegetical* in Nida and Taber's quotation above evokes an important factor in translation other than the felicity or naturalness of the target text, namely the comprehension of the ST and the accuracy of its rendering which may sometimes determine the success or failure of the translation.

### **L2 Translation: accuracy, not fluency**

In some translation cases, proficiency in the target language may not be enough to render a text written in a foreign language. Here, the problem lies in the comprehension of the source text. As stated by Campbell (1998, p. 57), "In translating from a second language, the main difficulty is in comprehending the source text." This comprehension can at times outweigh the fluency of the target language when the content of the source text is more important than the language or structure of the translation. "Examples of such tasks are translations of contracts and patents, where the full understanding and accurate rendering of the source text is more important than fluency of the target text" (Mackenzie and Vienne, 2000, p. 125). Such a view is equally stressed by Crystal (1987, p. 344) who rightly declares that "for certain types of texts (e.g. scientific material) where translation accuracy is more crucial than naturalness, it makes more sense for translators to be more fluent in the source language." This is particularly true in the case of scientific translation where the value of the target text lies less in its natural language than in its accurate content. The flavour of such an assertion can be seen from the following remarks (Khoury, 1998, p. 92, translated by the researcher):

The reader of a scientific translation does not seek enjoyment in what he reads. He is rather concerned with understanding the content which must be rendered accurately with simple expressions. Scientific knowledge speaks to the mind, not to the feelings or imagination.

Hence the importance of grasping the correct ST message and rendering it in clear, straightforward language, an endeavour which can only be carried out by a native speaker translating from his mother tongue into a second language. No less important is the fact that accuracy mistakes in translation can have disastrous consequences and may even cause legal action against the translator and the agency for which he works. Such mistakes are often due to the ambiguity of the ST, and only a native can handle the task of disambiguation and arrive at the correct meaning. In fact, contrary to literary works where ambiguity is considered a laudable device that should be reproduced in the translation, scientific and legal texts should be crystal clear in their meaning. This is because a legal text that has an opaque meaning can cause a long judicial process and, in case of international organizations, may even decide the fate of whole nations. A case in point is the United Nations Security Council Resolution No.242 which was adopted on November 22, 1967 in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli Six Day War. Due to the different use of the definite article in the English and French versions, this resolution has

remained ambiguous till the present day, which has hindered a final and enduring settlement of the Middle East conflict.

### Accuracy in the translation of culture

The importance of the accuracy of rendering is not restricted to legal and scientific translations, because comprehension can also be a decisive factor in literary translation, especially when the source text belongs to one of the minor or less diffused languages. In such cases, even if the native translator's target text is natural looking, with smooth expressions and style, it can be, however, marred by some accuracy pitfalls. This is especially true for cultural references which are notoriously resistant to translation. An illustrating example proving this statement can be found in Pokorn (2000a) where the writer presents an enlightening comparison of two English translations of the Slovenian writer Ivan Cankar's short story *Hlapec Jerneh in njegova pravica* [The Bailiff Yerney and His Rights]. The difference between the translations, one of which being done by native speakers of English and the other by native speakers of Slovene, leads Pokorn (2000a, p. 75) to question the supremacy of translation into the first language and emphasize the importance of the translator's knowledge of the source language and culture as she states:

The knowledge of the source language and culture of Slovene translators, in spite of the fact that they do have their flaws as far as their mastery of different styles of the TL is concerned, is so superior to that of English translators that this relativises the proclaimed superiority of the translations made by native speakers of the TL."

One of the key elements of comparison between the native and non-native translators' versions is the way of rendering cultural references, such as the Slovene word *hlapec* which means "a man who has been hired for an indefinite time, usually life-long, for work on a farm" (Pokorn, 2000a, p. 76). This word, which is pregnant with connotations in Slovene culture, is transliterated by the Slovene translators, whereas it is rendered as *baliff* and *servant* by their English counterparts. In her comment on the two versions, Pokorn (2000a, p. 78) concludes that:

The English translators lost the author's play on the double meaning of the word, failed to convey [the protagonist] Jerneh's confused understanding of the Bible, and changed the social status of the main character by using a term taken from the TL culture and society.

Pokorn goes on with her analysis and posits that "the translation by the English native speaker is inconsistent and misleading, probably because the translator was not sufficiently well acquainted with the Slovene language and culture," although she (Pokorn) equally concedes that "the translation by the Slovene native speaker is consistent but maybe too exotic or in Venuti's terms too "resistant" for the taste of the TL readers" (Pokorn, 2000, p. 78).

Even so, despite the salient flaws of the native speakers' translation, Pokorn (2000a, p. 79) still insists on the supremacy of accuracy over natural expressions and ends her article with the following statement:

The advantage of fluency in the target language that native speakers of the TL have is often counter-balanced by an insufficient knowledge of the source language and culture, which means that translations by native speakers of English

are not automatically “superior” to those by native speaker of Slovene or by pairs of English and Slovene translators.

Here again, while acknowledging that familiarity with the source language and culture helps the translator into L2 with understanding the ST content and rendering it accurately, one should not overlook the pitfalls which may be due to the lack of proficiency in the TL, and an accurately-rendered TT will amount to nothing but a non-translation (a badly written text) if it abounds with language mistakes and awkward expressions.

### **Conclusion**

As can be gathered from our discussion above, the issue of directionality in translation has caused a controversy that has not been conclusively settled. The superiority of one direction over the other largely depends on the very purpose of the translation itself; that is, on what the translator wants to achieve in his translation task. If his aim is to produce a natural looking text that can enjoy a status of an original piece of writing in the target culture, then the scale will tilt in favour of translation into the mother tongue, because the native translator is innately equipped with the various linguistic tools that make him immune from the potential pitfalls made by a non-native translator. On the other hand, if the value of the translation lies in the accuracy of the transferred information, particularly in cases of non-literary, informative texts (such as legal and scientific material), then priority will go to the correct rendering of the source text and, in Hatim’s (2001, p. 166) words, “accuracy will be more important than stylistic felicity.” However, despite the accepted norm of the superiority of translation into the first language over inverse translation, the latter has become a widespread enterprise that can no longer be ignored. In the current context of globalization with its multicultural and ethnic encounters, peoples from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds come into contact and exchange their ideas and experiences. This linguistic and cultural diversity and the resulting need for inverse translation has pushed scholars to accept this practice and explore ways of reducing its drawbacks. To this effect, the most common strategy consists in cooperation between native and non-native translators so as to ensure that the target text is at once natural and idiomatic, and faithful to the source text. Nonetheless, this cooperation cannot achieve the desired result unless the translators, be they natives or non-natives, are well versed in the ST subject matter. Specialisation in the topic can be another valuable component of translation competence, and it must be one of the factors that have to be taken into account when commissioning translation jobs, and this is what Khoury (1988, P. 93) calls for in his following anecdotal query:

As we never ask a carpenter to sew clothes, or a tailor to build a wall, then how can we ever ask a journalist to translate a book on medicine, or a physician to render a book on astronomy or mathematics?” (Translated by the researcher)

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