Challenging the Traditional Axioms

Benjamins Translation Library

The Benjamins Translation Library aims to stimulate research and training in translation and interpreting studies. The Library provides a forum for a variety of approaches (which may sometimes be conflicting) in a socio-cultural, historical, theoretical, applied and pedagogical context. The Library includes scholarly works, reference works, post-graduate text books and readers in the English language.

EST Subseries

The European Society for Translation Studies (EST) Subseries is a publication channel within the Library to optimize EST's function as a forum for the translation and interpreting research community. It promotes new trends in research, gives more visibility to young scholars' work, publicizes new research methods, makes available documents from EST, and reissues classical works in translation studies which do not exist in English or which are now out of print.

Volume 62 [EST Subseries 3]

Challenging the Traditional Axioms: Translation into a non-mother tongue
by Nike K. Pokorn

Challenging the Traditional Axioms

Translation into a non-mother tongue

Nike K. Pokorn
University of Ljubljana

John Benjamins Publishing Company
Amsterdam / Philadelphia

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences – Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nike K. Pokorn
Challenging the Traditional Axioms : Translation into a non-mother tongue / Nike K. Pokorn.
p. cm. (Benjamins Translation Library, ISSN 0929–7316 ; v. 62)
Includes bibliographical references and indexes.
1. Translating and interpreting. I. Title. II. Series.

P306.P646 2005
418'.02--dc22 2005042120
ISBN 90 272 1668 1 (Eur.) / 1 58811 634 4 (US) (Hb; alk. paper)

John Benjamins Publishing Co. · P.O. Box 36224 · 1020 ME Amsterdam · The Netherlands
John Benjamins North America · P.O. Box 27519 · Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 · USA

Table of contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those who distributed the questionnaire and graciously contributed their time and intuitions to this study: in particular, Prof. Andrew Louth from the University of Durham, Dr. Donal McLaughlin from Heriot-Watt University, Prof. Tom Priestly from the University of Alberta, Prof. Marc Greenberg from the University of Kansas and Prof. Tom Ložar from Vanier College. I am also very grateful to Dr. David Limon not only for his meticulous linguistic revision but also for his invaluable advice and encouragement; and above all, I would like to thank my family, Marko, Žiga and Ivan, for their continuous support and assistance.

Nike K. Pokorn

Introduction

A questioning approach to Translation Studies

Translation into a non-mother tongue or inverse translation, especially of literary texts, has always been frowned upon within Translation Studies in Western cultures with a dominant language, and regarded as an action doomed to failure by both literary scholars and linguists. But despite this traditional "prohibition", literary translation from "minor" into "major" languages has always been carried out by local translators, often working in a pair with a stylistic advisor for the target language. Since this particular translation practice has been more or less ignored by Western translation theory, an attempt is made here to approach it theoretically in order to identify the characteristics and distinguishing features of translations into a non-mother tongue, and to determine the advantages or disadvantages of translators who are native speakers of the target language compared to non-native translators. The study will thus try to find answers to the following questions: Can the native language of the translator be considered as a criterion for assessing the acceptability or even the quality of the translation? Are translations out of one's mother tongue indeed inferior in quality compared to those carried out by native speakers of the TL? On the other hand, do all translators who are native speakers of a major or central linguistic community reveal in their translations from minor languages a limited knowledge of the SL culture and language? Can we identify typical features of the translation that are the result of the translator's or translators' mother tongue?

First, some basic concepts referred to in the study needed to be clarified. Thus Chapter 1 focuses on the commonly-accepted definitions of the terms "mother tongue" and "native speaker". It is established that these two terms are vague, subjective and often defined according to the needs and wants of the individual providing the definition. Bearing this in mind, broad definitions of these terms are adopted for the purpose of the study.

Throughout the text, an attempt is made to remain alert and not to accept in an uncritical way what is already in place, anything that is undertheorised

and taken for granted – notions we seem to know so well and which have grown all too familiar to us. Being aware of the perils of ethnocentric and phallogocentric formulations, a mode of thought is nurtured that is essentially non-fixed, unstable and non-rule based, constantly questioning. This stance may seem anarchic at first sight, but the aim is not to disrupt all classifications and definitions or to wallow in indecision: it is rather founded in a desire to express fundamental criticism of the existing power-based order of translation theory. Indeed, I am deeply convinced that Translation Studies needs a questioning approach, revealing "the invisible sclerosis of theory, often not bearing an obvious mark of ideology but, however, systematically strengthening a new form of barbarity coupled with power" (Gorazd Kocijančič 2004: 58). While Translation Studies should remain essentially open to different ideas and also to the possibility of different understandings of the phenomenon of translation itself – from, for example, a hermeneutical, deconstructivist, culturally materialist, post-colonialist or feminist angle – it should also be wary of those manifestations of these categories that fail to recognise their own relativity and try to create an image of objectivity and universality.

In accordance with this position, in Chapter 2 it is established that little actual research has been carried out in Translation Studies concerning the differences between translation into and away from the translator's mother tongue. However, a close reading of some of the fundamental theoretical works reveals that almost all translation scholars have expressed their views on this issue. Although explicit discussions of this problem are rare and frequently restricted to two or three paragraphs, a hidden discourse on translation into a non-mother tongue can often be detected in the discussion of other translational issues, or in definitions of basic terms and concepts. The most widely spread opinion is the "traditional view", according to which translators should translate only into their mother tongue in order to create linguistically and culturally-acceptable translations. I shall argue that this "traditional view" stems from an aprioristic conviction unsupported by any scientific proof that translation into a mother tongue is *ipso facto* superior to translation into a non-mother tongue. Moreover, our discussion reveals that this generally-accepted truth is not, in fact, traditional or universally accepted in either translation practice or theory.

Chapter 3 presents the method used and the corpus for analysis, while the following three chapters focus on an analysis of a selection of texts translated from Slovene into English. The texts chosen for the analysis were originally written in Slovene, a Slavonic language spoken by approximately 2 million speakers in and around the Republic of Slovenia. Slovene was chosen because

it is a typical representative of a minor language or "a language of limited diffusion", whose users have always been forced to translate into foreign languages. Translations into a non-mother tongue thus reflect the common practice of minor-language communities. The analysis is applied to literary works, in particular to prose works by Ivan Cankar, the most praised and canonised author in Slovenia, that have been translated into English more than once. The choice of literary works was deliberate: it allowed us to create a corpus of translations where the same text is translated into the same TL by different translators – non-literary texts, on the other hand, only rarely get retranslated. The choice of literary texts may seem to impose certain limitations on this study; however, following the post-structuralist claim that the traditional boundaries between fictional and non-fictional discourse are blurred, and the argument of some literary theoreticians that "literature" is a functional term and not an ontological one (see Eagleton 1983), and that features traditionally applied to literature can be found in non-literary texts and vice-versa, our findings can be interpreted as valid not only for the texts that traditionally belong to literature but to texts in general.

The translators of the selected corpus ranged from native speakers of English or Slovene, through non-native speakers of English or Slovene, to pairs of translators consisting of native speakers of Slovene and English or some other language. Since English is taught at school in Slovenia but does not have the status of the second language, all native Slovene translators had English as a foreign language. The analysis of the texts, following the methodology suggested by van Doorslaer (1995), where Slovene originals were compared to their English translations, shows that none of the commonly-accepted assumptions proved absolutely valid. The translators who were members of a major linguistic community did not necessarily reveal unsatisfactory knowledge of the peripheral source language and its culture. On the other hand, some translators who were native speakers of English revealed scant knowledge of the source language, but at the same time also a questionable competence in English. Then again, some non-native speakers of Slovene or of English showed no lack of understanding of the original or had difficulty in phrasing the target text. The translations carried out by native speakers of Slovene were not necessarily full of improbable collocations and strange turns of phrase. At the same time, surprisingly, the comparison often revealed that even Slovene translators at times failed to understand the source text.

These findings are then compared with another study, involving native speakers of the TL and their response to the selection of previously-analysed translations. The purpose of this second study is to see if the lack of any

formal connection between the nationality of the translator and the direction of translation revealed by the textual analysis is also reflected in the response of competent native speakers. A questionnaire was designed for this purpose, which included seven fragments of different English translations of two of Cankar's short stories and a novel. It was answered by 46 competent English native speakers, and it corroborated the findings of the textual analysis. It showed that native speakers were unable to *unmistakably* determine whether the text had been translated by a native or a non-native speaker of English, especially when two translators worked together. It seems that translating in pairs also did not affect the fluency of expression: on the contrary, in spite of the fact that the vast majority of the subjects interviewed chose target-oriented translations as the most acceptable, a translation by a pair of translators was selected as the "best" according to their tastes.

In conclusion, it is observed that translations into a non-mother tongue do not inevitably sound strange to native speakers of the target language; furthermore, translators who are members of major linguistic communities do not necessarily reveal unsatisfactory knowledge of the minor source language and its culture. The study also shows that the status of native speaker does not guarantee that a translator is also a competent user of his/her mother tongue. None of the "traditional" and commonly-accepted assumptions thus proved to be true – the translator's mother tongue proved not to be a criterion according to which the quality of the translation or faithfulness to the original could be assessed. It is therefore also impossible to claim that native speakers of the target language are necessarily more suitable translators than native speakers of the source language or pairs of translators. The study thus concludes that the quality of the translation, its fluency and acceptability in the target language environment depend primarily on the yet undetermined individual abilities of a particular translator, on his/her translation strategy, on his/her knowledge of the source and target cultures, and not on his/her mother tongue and the direction into which he/she is translating.

Open definitions of the terms "native speaker" and "mother tongue"

In order to approach the topic of translation into a non-mother tongue, it is first necessary to clarify the concepts of "mother tongue" and "native speaker", which are fundamental to such a discussion. At first sight, the concepts seem clear enough and sufficiently well-defined; however, a closer examination shows that their definitions are far from objective and water-tight. In fact, the linguistic competence and proficiency of the native speaker are hard, perhaps even impossible to define objectively. And although we all feel that we know who the native speakers and foreign speakers of a particular language are, and that it is not hard to tell them apart, it soon becomes obvious that neither linguistics nor real life provides us with a rigorous and conclusive test which would help us establish a clear distinction between them. Moreover, in some cases, although rare, foreign speakers come close to the group of native speakers of a particular language.

Since the meaning of the concepts of "mother tongue" and "native speaker" seem so unproblematic, it is not surprising then that numerous translation theorists and linguists take them for granted and use them as if their "definitions" had no gaps, no blurred and fuzzy edges. However, despite their pivotal position in both Translation Studies and linguistics, there is considerable variation in the connotations attributed to those terms, which seem to depend on the ideological position of the person providing the definition, or at least on the motives hidden behind his/her need to determine them.

Native speakers of the languages that are regarded as major or core because of the global distribution of power and wealth tend to safeguard their authority and prestige, and therefore rarely grant the status of native speakership to those who were not born into a language but who learned it later in life. When dealing with translations into English from minor or peripheral languages,[1] which are quite often carried out by immigrants, who were not born into the TL culture but who have, however, spent most of their lives within it, the question arises

as to whether these individuals should be considered native speakers of the new linguistic community or not.

The concept of "mother tongue"

There are differences in referential meaning and connotation attributed to the concept of "mother tongue". For example, the term can be simply understood literally to denote the language of one's mother, used in her everyday communication with her child. The term is based on the assumption that the child's first significant other is its mother. And indeed, in most cases it is the mother, biological or not, who provides most of the spoken input for the child, and therefore it is with her that the child wishes to exchange meanings. This definition becomes problematic when the child's carer is not its mother but its father, grandparents, foster parents or, indeed, a nanny who is not related to the child. In this sense, the child can have more than one mother tongue: in cases when the mother is bilingual, or if the role of mother is divided among more than one person, speaking different languages, the first linguistic input the child receives is bilingual or even multilingual.

Sometimes the term "mother tongue" is replaced by the term "first language" (e.g. see Crystal 1994: 368), which avoids inaccuracy when the mother is not the first carer of the child and denotes, in a similar way to the interpretation mentioned above, the language(s) the child learns first.

There are two more terms that are also sometimes used instead of the term "mother tongue": "dominant language" and "home language". The former denotes the language which becomes dominant in a particular environment or situation. And although in monolingual societies the child's mother tongue often remains its dominant language, in many multilingual or multidialectal societies this is not so. For example, members of the Slovene indigenous minority in Austrian Carinthia have their first linguistic input in Slovene, but then often shift to German in school and later on at work. Slovene is thus usually gradually relegated to childhood experience and German is used in all other situations. In this case, then, the Slovene language still remains dominant at home, while German assumes this role in other situations and environments. The term "home language" denotes the language a person uses at home when communicating with his/her family. This language can be completely different from (as in the case of Carinthian Slovenes who tend to use their own dialect) or the same as the public standard code of the language.

However, the general usage of the term "mother tongue" (i.e. the usage we are most interested in, because it has also been adopted in Translation Studies) denotes not only the language one learns from one's mother, but also the speaker's dominant and home language, i.e. not only the first language according to the time of acquisition, but the first with regard to its importance and the speaker's ability to master its linguistic and communicative aspects. For example, if a language school advertises that all its teachers are native speakers of English, we would most likely complain if we later learned that although the teachers do have some vague childhood memories of the time when they talked to their mothers in English, they, however, grew up in some non-English speaking country and are fluent in a second language only. Similarly, in translation theory, the claim that one should translate only into one's mother tongue, is in fact a claim that one should only translate into one's first and dominant language.

The vagueness of the term has led some researchers to claim (e.g. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas in Robert Phillipson 1989:450–477; see also Phillipson 1992:39) that different connotative meanings of the term "mother tongue" vary according to the intended usage of the word and that differences in understanding the term can have far-reaching and often political consequences. They argue that criteria for the definition of the concept depend on the hidden agenda of the one providing the definition and that they are thus likely to differ considerably and can even be contradictory. For example, these are some of the most common criteria and definitions found in linguistics:

Criterion	Definition
Origin	The language(s) one learned first.
Competence	The language(s) one knows best.
Function	The language(s) one uses most.
Identification	
– internal	The language(s) one identifies with.
– external	The language(s) of which one is identified as a native speaker by others.

Despite their extensive use, none of these criteria defines the concept of "mother tongue" objectively and completely; every definition necessarily reflects the original cultural, political and personal experience and expectations of the one providing the definition. And very often, these expectations vary considerably from those of the speakers defined and classified by such definitions. For example, the criterion of origin can be used to discriminate against

second generation immigrants, who would like to be granted the status of native speaker in their new linguistic community. Their second language is often the language they count in, dream in, write their diary in and use in conscious inner speech; however, if the first criterion of origin is applied, they are considered as native speakers of only the language their parents spoke, even if they can barely understand it.

The second criterion of competence and the third criterion of function could be used to discriminate against indigenous minorities. These definitions, which are often a result of political decisions, can be used to ignore the rights of and exclude all those who are by origin native speakers of a minority language in order to deny them the opportunity to use and develop their mother tongue (see Phillipson 1992: 39). The members of a linguistic minority are quite often more proficient in the language of the majority and also use the language of their environment more often. In fact, if we adopt these criteria in legislation, minority groups could be seen as gradually completely losing their mother tongue, since children in a foreign environment, watching TV programmes in the foreign language, attending school or day care where this foreign language is employed, use their mother tongue less often than the language of the new community and therefore have poor proficiency in their mother tongue.

The fourth criterion of identification, internal and external, probably most often creates tensions, especially in the case of the post-colonial independent development of the languages of colonisers: for example, native speakers of a peripheral English-speaking community, i.e. speakers of one variety of English developed in former British colonies (of the so-called new varieties of English or the World Englishes, e.g. Indian English) are often denied the status of native speakers of English by native speakers of a core variety or the metropolitan English variety (e.g. British native speakers). Here the native speaker question is accompanied by the question of the existence of various Englishes – is there only one English or are there more? Are other Englishes only corrupt versions of the "proper English"? Which English is an Indian English speaker a native speaker of? For some speakers, answers to these questions can be vital – a case has been recorded of an English-speaking Indian who considered himself a native speaker of English because this was the only language he used, but who was not accepted as a teacher at a language school in Great Britain on the grounds that he did not comply with the advertised criteria, in particular with the condition that all candidates should be English native speakers.

This last criterion, of identification, touches upon another controversial issue in linguistics, which was largely triggered by the emergence of more than one variant of English and French in colonial settings: i.e. a decision has to

be taken when a particular variety of the language is granted the status of a new language. Contemporary linguists approach the problem of the existence of different variants of English in different ways. The "traditional approach", embodied by Sir Randolph Quirk, distinguishes between native and non-native varieties of English. The latter including Indian English, Nigerian English, East African English, i.e. variants of English that developed during and after the period of the British Empire, but also Russian English, French English, Japanese English, etc., i.e. variants of English that developed in countries where English is used as an international link language. On the other hand, the native varieties cover American English, Australian English, New Zealand English, South African English, Yorkshire English etc. According to Quirk, only two of the native varieties are institutionalised: American English and British English, while there are one or two others with standards somewhat informally established, in particular Australian English (Quirk 1990: 6–7). Such a distinction led to the obvious conclusion that all native speakers of a non-native variety of English are not native speakers of English and are therefore denied any right to define the correctness or appropriateness of a particular expression in English.

The opposite view is represented by "liberation linguistics", which claims that languages or new varieties of English that developed in various peripheral English-speaking communities are new and independent languages, and should therefore not be governed by the norms of the core English-speaking communities (Kachru 1991: 3–13). Native speakers of those new varieties are therefore considered native speakers of English, i.e. of their variety of English, e.g. Indian English. The tension still persists when the core English-speaking community attempts to impose its norms on new varieties of English or when members of peripheral English-speaking communities represent themselves in core English-speaking communities as native speakers of English. And indeed, the question remains whether a native speaker of, for example Indian English, could also be used as an arbiter of acceptability in British English or American English (the role which is usually denied to them), and vice-versa, whether the native speakers of the core English-speaking countries can define the norm for the peripheral English-speaking communities (the role which is usually usurped by them). There is no doubt, however, as Davies reminds us (Davies 2003: 159), that the "traditional" attitude is similar to the attitude of British colonizers: the attitude that allowed the colonised "natives" to remain native, that accorded them large measures of local autonomy but which took for granted that it was never going to be possible for the colonised to become British.

To conclude, the definition of the term "mother tongue" depends on what those providing the definition and those defined by it want to achieve or express. All the criteria and definitions provided by linguists can be used to discriminate against one of the minority groups in the community. The concept "mother tongue" is thus not an objectively defined term which is unequivocally understood by users, and the issue is further complicated by the fact that according to the above-mentioned criteria (with the exception of the first criterion of origin), speakers can have more than one mother tongue and can even change it during their lifetime.

Defining the term "native speaker"

The concept "native speaker" has, like the term "mother tongue", more than one meaning.[2] It can be used to define a person who uses his/her mother tongue or first language, but also someone who uses his/her dominant or home language, sometimes all four at once, and sometimes only one of them. The concept of "native speaker" is defined according to different criteria, and in this case again, there is no objective definition of the concept which would cover all potential native speakers and not only the majority of them. Although there are many different definitions of a native speaker used in linguistics, all eventually turn out to be defective to a lesser or greater degree. Let us look at some of them:

1. *A native speaker of L1 is someone who has native-like intuitions by virtue of nativity.*

In this case, the status of L1 native speaker is given to those who were born in a family where L1 is spoken. The concept is defined in terms of mode of acquisition rather than of level of proficiency – which means that this criterion does not guarantee that native speakers are also proficient users of the language. Of course, in the majority of cases when the child is not only born in the country where L1 is spoken but also in a L1 family or community and lives in that community all his/her life, then the definition of origin is enough to guarantee the quality of the language used. However, the language competence and proficiency might be questionable when the child is born into a closed foreign-speaking minority group and may never achieve a native-like competence in the language of the majority. L1 proficiency might also not be attained when the child is born in the country where L1 is spoken but changes its domicile and moves to a foreign linguistic community, never using L1 again,