Challenging the traditional axioms: translation into a non-mother tongue

By Nike K. Pokorn


Reviewed by Doug Trick
Canada Institute of Linguistics

Goal of study

This study considers a notion, apparently prevalent in the field of Translation Studies, in which it is largely assumed that when interlingual translation takes place, the translator should be a native speaker of the receptor (or “target”) language. In other words, according to this assumption, translation properly occurs in only one direction, “toward” the mother tongue of the translator. To engage in a process in which a text is translated into a language which is not the native language of the translator is thus referred to as “inverse translation.”

Pokorn challenges this assumption, seeking to demonstrate that there is no empirical evidence which demonstrates that the single most important factor in an effective translation process is the native language of the translator: “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” (p. xii).

Procedure

Pokorn approaches this question from three different directions. First, she critically examines the theoretical concept, “mother tongue” or “native language,” demonstrating some of the complications in attempting to apply those terms within certain specific sociolinguistic situations. Second, as she examines several texts translated into English, she evaluates the effectiveness of each translation and considers whether or not there is a correlation between translation quality and the native language of the translator. Finally, she has 46 university
students read the (translated) texts and respond to a questionnaire with a view to documenting 
native-speaker intuition concerning the native language of the translator.

**Questioning the validity of the concept, “mother tongue.”** The first issue Pokorn addresses in 
detail is that of the notion of “mother tongue.” She points out the difficulties in defining this 
expression with respect to various criteria (pp. 2–5), including:

- language of mother (or “child’s first significant other”)
- origin (the language(s) one learned first)
- competence (the language(s) one knows best)
- function (the language(s) one uses most)
- identification (the language(s) one identifies with or is identified with)

On the basis of competing criteria and sociolinguistic complexities (e.g., a “dominant language” 
may replace one’s “first language”), Pokorn argues for a broad understanding and application of 
the notion, “mother tongue” or “native language.” She does not go quite so far as to reject the 
notion altogether, but in identifying some of the complexities involved, she clearly demonstrates 
a problem in seeking to define the translation task in terms of straightforward reference to a 
translator’s “mother tongue.”

**Examination of translated texts.** In order to assemble and analyze empirical data which would 
provide greater understanding of whether or not quality translation takes place only in one 
direction (i.e., when text is translated into one’s mother tongue [even given a broad understanding 
of that notion]), Pokorn chose a series of texts written by a prominent Slovene, Ivan Cankar.

Many of Cankar’s writings have been translated into English; in some cases a work has been 
translated at different times and by different translators. Pokorn conducted a critical analysis of 
each such translation. She reasoned that if the assumption is valid (that is, that effective 
translation takes place only when one translates into his/her native language), then the best 
English versions of Cankar’s works should be those for which the translator’s native language is 
English. She found no such correlation; rather, she found that some of the best translations were 
produced by those whose native language was other than English, and that some of the poorer 
translations were produced by those who were in fact native speakers of English, the target 
language (p. 105).

**Survey of representatives of target audience.** Pokorn also considered that educated native 
speakers of English should be able to discern, by reading a translated text, whether or not the 
translator was a native speaker of English (based largely on whether or not readers would 
encounter what they consider to be “infelicities of style” (p. 42)). She thus had 46 university 
students from various campuses in Canada and the United States read portions of the translated 
texts and attempt to identify whether or not the translator of each text was a native speaker of 
English. She found that respondents were unable to consistently identify which texts were 
produced by translators whose proficiency was highest in English, and which were produced by 
those whose proficiency was highest in the source language, Slovene. Rather, “…the results of 
the questionnaire show that translations into a non-mother tongue are often regarded as
acceptable by the target readership, with the degree of acceptability depending on the individual capacities of the translator” (p. 117).

Conclusions

Pokorn’s conclusion is that there is no real merit to the assumption that the translation process is necessarily more effective if it takes place into the mother tongue of a translator (as opposed to translating from a translator’s mother tongue into a different language). Rather, she identified several other factors which significantly contribute to the quality of a translation, namely, “the individual capacities of the particular translator, his/her translational strategy, and his/her knowledge of the source and target cultures” (p. 121).

Contributions to the study of translation

This is an important study, on several levels, for translation practitioners and theorists. To begin with, it makes explicit a strongly held assumption which is in need of being either substantiated or rejected, on the basis of evidence. Pokorn has summarized some of the complications of the notion, “mother tongue,” and has shown that, at least in the case of a selection of Slovene literary texts which have been translated into English, there is evidence that translation quality does not correlate with whether or not the translator is a native speaker of the target language. Furthermore, she has presented evidence indicating that other factors (e.g., translators’ knowledge of the source and target cultures) do in fact correlate with translation quality (pp. 77, 83).

A further insight from Pokorn’s study has to do with the value of collaboration in the translation process. She refers to Eugene Nida’s early awareness of this fact: “Since…an ideal set of abilities in one person cannot be found, he [Nida] distributes the essential elements of the role of translator among several persons in various ways” (p. 36). Pokorn illustrates the problem of even asking who was “the real translator,” as “many translation solutions were the result of collaboration” (p. 49). Among the various English translations of Cankar’s works, one stands out as being of particularly high quality:

The translation by Elza Jereb [a native speaker of Slovene] and Alasdair MacKinnon [a native speaker of English] does not fit into any of the presupposed categories; it is faithful to the original but at the same time fluent in the target language; it does not reveal any problems the translators might have had in understanding the original text, and at the same time it avoids excessive foreignness in the target language. (p. 91)

Perhaps of less interest theoretically, but still significant from the perspective of translation practice, are several examples that Pokorn describes of translation errors (pp. 69–75), several of which demonstrate that the translators clearly lacked critical background or cultural information which would have been accessible to Cankar’s original audiences.
Concerns with the study

Pokorn’s comparative evaluation of texts translated from Slovene into English is significant in providing empirical evidence with respect to the widespread practice of privileging translated texts in which the (primary) translator is a native speaker of the target language. It is, however, a very limited study. Presumably, Pokorn was intentionally limiting the variables within his project by confining it to the works of a single author which have been translated from a single language into one other language. Replication of this sort of research with other languages and a variety of authors, discourse genre, etc. would strengthen the claims very considerably.

It would have been very helpful if Pokorn could have been more explicit about the criteria which she used to evaluate the various translations under review. Her remarks appear to be well-founded, but seem somewhat ad hoc in the absence of a clear statement of criteria, their relative weight, procedures for evaluation and confirmation, etc. Her evaluation of the various translators’ linguistic competence in Slovene and English was largely inferential; such evaluations would perhaps be more convincing if they could include some sort of objective assessments, or at least direct interviews of the translators themselves.

Pokorn’s approach of having native speakers attempt to identify whether or not a given translation was produced by another native speaker is based on the claim (Newmark 1981:180; Davies 1991:94) that one characteristic of a native speaker of a given language is the ability to discern fairly quickly and with a high degree of reliability whether or not a text in that language was composed by another native speaker. However, this claim should be understood as referring to original texts, not to translated texts. When someone encounters a text which they know to be a translation (which was the case in this study), there is no reliable means of knowing the mother tongue of the (primary) translator without at least knowing a great deal about the constraints under which the translator was working. For example, were translators (either as a result of personal preference, or of their understanding of the nature of the translation process, or in response to the translation commission) attempting to “domesticate” or to “foreignize” the text? Similarly, it is not at all clear how a respondent would be able to determine, “How many translators were involved in the translation?”

Again, in this part of the study (that of native speaker evaluation of translated texts), it would have been very helpful to know more about the evaluative criteria followed by those who completed the questionnaires. At the end of the survey was a question which evidently attempts to discover this, but the question tends to be somewhat weighted in favour of a simple binary distinction between choosing clarity ("easy to read, fluent in the target language") or else formal fidelity ("as close to the original as possible, even if the structure of sentences in the target language (i.e. English) sounds awkward"). The issue of semantic/pragmatic equivalence or communicative faithfulness was not suggested to respondents, nor did there seem to be any way for respondents to assess such factors, since they did not have access to the original texts.
Summary

Pokorn has made explicit an important assumption in the field of Translation Studies which is highly questionable. Even if this study is limited in its scope, and if there are some concerns with her methodology, her research at the very least suggests that one’s mother tongue is not the most significant factor which affects the quality of translation work. Her critical analysis of several translated texts, together with what may be known about the translators themselves, demonstrate that factors such as knowledge of the source and target cultures, literary skills in each of the languages, and view of the translation process all contribute to the outcome. She provides both anecdotal and principled evidence for the benefits of collaborative translation projects involving participants who together contribute native speaker competency in both source and target languages.

Notes

1 It appears that Pokorn is aware that at least some of the examples that she cites are somewhat marginal, and thus does not reject a useful generalization solely on the grounds of certain apparent exceptions.

2 These students all identified themselves as “members of the English-speaking community by indicating that their mother tongue was English” (p. 108).

3 (That is, Cankar’s Slovene works translated into English.)

4 This is confirmed by the intuitions of those who read translated texts and were asked to rate them in terms of translation quality. “83% of subjects chose one of the three translations done by pairs of translators for their personal best” (p. 115).

5 For example, “Noyes [one of the translators] most probably did not check the original” (p. 95); “it seems plausible to claim that Noyes only stylistically revised the translations and was not involved in the process of translation itself” (p. 103).

6 Perhaps Pokorn considered that the respondent might be expected to answer “one” if the translated text included highly unnatural formal features, on the assumption that there was a single translator who must not have been a native speaker of English. But of course several Slovene-speaking translators working together could produce a highly unnatural English translation, and an individual who is fluent in both Slovene and English could produce a stylistically excellent rendering.

7 To be fair, there is a third option, “c) other [criteria] (specify).” Still, it probably would have been helpful to suggest a wider selection of criteria and possibly to do so at the beginning of the questionnaire; doing so may have assisted the subjects in considering their criteria ahead of time and thus perhaps being more consistent in applying them.
References
