Directionality in translation and interpreting practice. Report on a questionnaire survey in Croatia

NATAŠA PAVLOVIĆ

University of Zagreb, Croatia, and
PhD program in Translation and Intercultural Studies,
Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona, Spain

Abstract. *"Directionality" refers to whether translation or interpreting is done into or out of one's first language (L1). In traditional, prescriptive approaches, work into one's second language (L2) is regarded as inferior to work into L1, as evidenced by terms such as "inverse" or "reverse" translation. However, L2 translation is a regular practice in many countries around the world, particularly where "languages of limited diffusion" are used. An empirical study was designed to question prescriptive statements against L2 translation by describing the actual, real-world translation and interpreting practice. A questionnaire survey was conducted among translators and interpreters in Croatia, who were asked about their professional practice and their attitudes regarding directionality. Preliminary findings show that L2 translation is a regular practice for more than 70% of the full-time translators/interpreters in Croatia. One third of the respondents prefer L2 translation, and almost as many find this direction easier than the other. Further, 45% get better rates translating into L2. The responses also reveal that some of the traditional views concerning directionality still hold strong.*

Introduction

In this paper we report on our research into directionality in translation and interpreting practice in Croatia (population 4.5 million). We look at some traditional views on the issue of directionality, and then present some critical arguments against them. Next we describe the stages of research and, in particular, the methodology used to obtain the data. Finally, we present some findings from a questionnaire survey conducted among translators and interpreters in Croatia in late 2005. First, some key terms are defined.

Key terms

"Directionality" refers to whether translation or interpreting is done into one's "mother tongue," or "language of habitual use," or out of it. The terms "mother tongue," "language of habitual use," "native language," "foreign language" and "second language" are not unproblematic, as pointed out by various authors. In a detailed discussion in the proceedings of the 2002 Forum on Directionality in Translating and Interpreting, Kelly et al. (2003b: 35) stress the "ideological charge" many of these terms have. After weighing all the pros and cons of different terms, the authors borrow the nomenclature of "A language" and "B language," used by the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC). AIIC (2006) defines "B language" as a language "other than the interpreter's native language, of which she or he has a perfect command and into which she or he works from one or more of her or his other languages".

For the purposes of our study, however, we have opted against the labels "A language" and "B language" for two reasons. If the research sets out to check whether people translate into a language defined *a priori* as the language into which translators/interpreters work, as is the case with the term "B language", we run into the risk of terminological circularity. Secondly, in Croatia's foreign-language degree courses, terms "A" and "B language" were in the past used to denote "L2" and "L3," respectively. If we had adopted these labels in the questionnaire, they might have confused some of our respondents. We have therefore decided to keep the old labels "L1" and "L2" which in our opinion, despite being borrowed from the field of Second Language Acquisition, have the advantage of being clear to practitioners and relatively neutral (insofar as choosing any term over another can be deemed so).

It might be worth pointing out, with Pedersen (2000: 109), that "first language" does not necessarily mean chronologically first, but "the language that is most readily available" to a translator. This is especially relevant in the case of translators who have lived most of their lives in a linguistic environment other than that into which they were born.

The use of *any two* contrasting terms, however, will be fundamentally misleading. Labels such as "L1" and "L2" suggest a much clearer distinction between two languages than the one that exists in many real-world cases, not only when "bilingual" speakers are concerned ("bilingual" being another term eluding easy definition). The binary opposition between "L1" and "L2" rests on the idealized notion of "native competence" and fails to take into account the realities of the multicultural, multilingual world we live in. This is especially true when one of the languages in question is English, because of its special position as a *lingua franca* of the globalized world. As Lorenzo (2002: 86) explains, the very distinction between "mother tongue" and "second language" is called into question by the revolution in international communication, increased mobility and the development of technology, all of which give rise to increasingly multicultural societies.

This paper will continue to use the terms "L1" and "L2" only with the above observations in mind.

Various terms have been used in the literature to designate translation or interpreting from one's first into second language, among them "le thème", "service" translation, "inverse" or "reverse" translation, "retour" interpreting, and so on. They all seem to imply a negative value judgment ("inverse", for example, evokes "going in the wrong direction"), which is why this report will avoid their use. We will instead refer to "L2 translation", or "work into L2".

Traditional view of directionality

The traditional view of translation theorists regarding directionality is probably best reflected in the following (in)famous statement by Peter Newmark (1988: 3): "translat[ing] into your language of habitual use […] is the only way you can translate naturally, accurately and with maximum effectiveness". Although Newmark acknowledges that in practice translators "do translate out of their own language," he dismisses the practice by calling it "service" translation and by saying that those translators who engage in this "contribute to many people's hilarity in the process" (ibid.). Indeed, there are many examples of suboptimal quality in L2 translation. However, there are just as many examples of bad translations done into L1. Dismissing one direction of translation on the basis of anecdotal evidence of bad translations does not seem helpful.

Beeby (1998: 64) describes Newmark's opinion as "so widely held in Europe that the unmarked direction of translation is into the mother tongue".

In the past decades, Translation Studies has seen a shift from traditional prescriptivism, as represented by Newmark, toward more descriptive, empirically-oriented research. However, when it comes to directionality, some attitudes rooted in traditional prescriptiveness seem to persist, even among researchers. The notion that "translating into one's mother tongue generally yields better texts than translating out of it" (Marmaridou 1996: 60) was taken for granted in a study conducted in 1996, in which specificities of particular language pairs, text types or cultural settings are not taken into account or problematized. Marmaridou (1996: 59; our italics) further claims, without offering any evidence, that "a professional translator is *usually asked to*, and *prefers* to translate into his or her mother tongue". For her, translation out of the mother tongue happens only in didactic and experimental settings (ibid.). The results of this study suggest that this is not always the case.

Among the practitioners who have written articles on "best practices" (e.g. Carpenter 1999, Borges 2005, Neilan 2006), the principle that translators should only work into their mother tongue still seems to be accepted as one of the “golden rules”. Many professional associations (e.g. ATIA 2004, ITA 2006, CEATL 2006) in their codes of ethics urge members to work exclusively into their mother tongue. Even a cursory glance at translation agencies on the web (e.g. SDL, The Language Factory, Syntacta) reveals that many make a point of assuring potential clients of their policy to employ only mother-tongue translators. The portal “Translation & Languages”, which describes itself as “your ultimate guide to translation services that helps you choose translation agencies, translators, and language translation providers”, offers the following advice to potential users of translation services:

> The translator should only translate into his or her mother tongue and preferably live in a country that speaks the target language or have close ties to his or her home country. [Retrieved Dec.16, 2006]

Challenging the traditional views

Campbell (1998: 4) is among the authors who take a critical stance toward the views presented above. According to him, L2 translation is “an activity as normal and possibly as widespread as translation into the first language”. Snell-Hornby (1997; cited in Kelly et al. 2003a: 26) likewise points out that “translation into English non-mother tongue is a fact of modern life”.

Campbell (1998: 4) suggests that Translation Studies has tacitly assumed the existence of a perfectly bilingual translator, without paying much heed to the translator as “a living being with a role and abilities that can be described and discussed”. Lorenzo (1999: 124; our translation here and throughout) makes a similar point when she says that “until very recently, translation theory took a prescriptive stance based on an idealized construct of translation instead of observing the reality of the translator”. The point is further driven home by Hansen et al. (1998: 59–60), who note that “it is difficult for researchers based in countries with major languages to accept how important translation into the foreign language is for a country like Denmark, whose language is virtually only mastered by its own inhabitants (population: 5.5 million)”. The situation is similar in Finland, where “it is impossible to find sufficient foreigners […] able to work as translators, and in any case, foreigners seldom acquire a good enough passive command of Finnish” (Ahlsvad 1978, cited in Campbell 1998: 27). McAlester (1992: 292), also writing in the Finnish context, makes the same point when he says that the “volume of work exceeds the number of available translators who are major language native speakers” (ibid.). McAlester reaches a conclusion akin to Campbell’s, namely that the lion’s share of translation out of “minor” languages is inevitably done by native speakers of those languages.

The Slovene scholar Pokorn (2005: 37) agrees that translation into L2 is "especially common in languages with restricted distribution" but also "in larger linguistic communities which are pushed into a peripheral position because of the global distribution of power and in major-language societies when communicating with ethnic minorities". China and Australia are listed as respective examples. Like Lorenzo and the others, Pokorn criticizes traditional translation theory for ignoring the practice of L2 translation and for accepting what she describes as "predominantly Romantic assumption" that translators should work only into L1:

> This conviction of the linguistic and cultural inferiority of inverse translations in an opaque way ethnocentrically defends the superiority of post-Romantic West-European concepts concerning translation and translational practice, and thus consequently the *a priori* superiority of the translators and translational practice of major-language communities. (Pokorn 2005: 37)

But that is not all. Cronin (2003: 144–146; emphasis in original) makes another important point when he says that "the hegemony of English in the fastest-growing areas of technological development means that all other languages become in this context *minority languages*". Thus a survey conducted among translators in Spain in 1998 showed that 84 of the 100 respondents translated out of their L1 "with certain regularity" (Roiss 1998: 378, cited in Kelly et al. 2003c: 46). Although the sample might be considered small relative to the number of translators in Spain, the survey suggests that the situation may be changing even when it comes to languages that were traditionally considered "major", such as Spanish. This is further supported by the results of another study (Schmitt 1990: 101, cited in Kiraly 2000: 117–118), carried out in Germany, in which respondents reported doing half of their work into non-mother tongues.

In the area of interpreting, traditional Western views are also changing. The growth of the non-institutional interpreting market has meant an increase in bidirectionality (Fernández 2003: 347). Even in institutional settings, work into L2 is sometimes inevitable: "The European Institutions will require some accession country interpreters to work back into B, given the shortage of interpreters with a sufficiently sound knowledge of candidate country languages in B or C" (EMCI 2002: 1). Interpreting scholars and trainers seem to be switching from saying work into L2 "should not be done" to investigating ways in which interpreters could be trained to do it well (e.g. Minns 2002, Hönig 2002, Fernández 2003, Donovan 2003, Tolón 2003, Padilla & Abril 2003) . One study on user expectations (Donovan 2002) has found the delegates to be "uninterested" in whether the interpreters are working into their mother tongue or out of it, i.e. no clear correlation between client satisfaction and directionality.

Methodology

This study was conducted as a questionnaire survey in November/December 2005. The questionnaire was set up as an online form. An e-mail message with a link to the web page was distributed by "snowball method", meaning that every person contacted was asked to pass on the link to as many other potential respondents as possible. The initial e-mail was sent to the translators/interpreters from the author's address book, as well as to the main translators' and interpreters' associations in the country. Therefore, it did not target a particular segment of the market but rather aimed to reach as many different translator/interpreter profiles as possible.

The reason why the survey included interpreters as well as translators is that in the context of such small markets as Croatia's many professionals work as both. The Croatian language even uses a single word—*prevoditelj*—for both 'translator' and 'interpreter', distinguishing between the two only when necessary, by using a modifier (e.g. *usmeni prevoditelj* for 'interpreter'). Since the issue of directionality is just as important for Interpreting Studies as it is for Translation Studies, this did not seem to be a shortcoming of the survey.

This first stage of the research focused on Croatia. The next step is expected to include other countries which use a "language of limited diffusion," expanding the survey finally to the so-called major-language countries. A data comparison with regard to language pairs should be interesting, especially in connection with English.

Findings

The sample

A total of 199 questionnaires were returned within a span of five weeks. Six were discarded as not valid, either because they were sent unfinished or were sent twice. Of the 193 respondents who submitted a valid questionnaire, 165 said they were women and 28 men.

The translator/interpreter profession is not very well defined in Croatia and there are no translator training institutions as such (the situation is changing at present with the Bologna process). Most people who engage in translation/interpreting hold a degree in modern languages (about 70% of our respondents) and many do translation/interpreting part time (see below for details). It is therefore very difficult to estimate the total number of professional translators/interpreters in Croatia and make strong claims regarding the representativeness of the sample relative to that number. The figures that follow might nevertheless help the reader get a perspective of the scale we are dealing with.

According to Odisej (2007), a business web portal, there are 82 companies in Croatia which list translation or interpreting as their main business activity. Such companies may have one or two full-time employees only and use the services of freelances, sometimes students. Large national or international companies typically employ a handful of translators, as do ministries and other administrative bodies. The notable exception is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, which, in preparation for Croatia's accession to the European Union, uses the services of freelancers in addition to its 20-strong team of full-time translators (Prohaska-Kragović 2004).

Table 1 shows the number of members in four major professional associations in the country (the first three figures are from the associations' websites, listed in the References section, while the fourth figure was obtained through personal communication).

Association	No. of members:
The Croatian Association of Scientific and Technical Translators	c 300
The Association of Croatian Literary Translators	207
The Croatian Society of Conference Interpreters	40
The Croatian Society of Translators for Television, Film and Video Distribution	c 70

Table 1. Members of professional associations in Croatia

A degree of overlap among the members of these associations is likely. Furthermore, not all translators/interpreters are members of professional associations, and, conversely, many of those who are members of professional associations are not full-timers. The latter is especially true of literary translators, as one can apply for membership in the Association after translating a single book.

Taking into consideration the figures presented above, the 193 questionnaires we received can be considered a relatively large sample. The good response was probably due to the fact that surveys among translators and interpreters in Croatia are very rare.

Language combinations

Since the questionnaire was distributed by snowball method, there was no control over the people it reached. It did spill over the boundaries of Croatia and of the Croatian language, but not too far, probably because the cover letter was in Croatian (and in English). The respondents therefore reported the following languages as their L1: Croatian (166), German (9), English (6), Serbian (3), Albanian (2), Bosnian (1), Serbo-Croatian (1), Slovene (1), Czech (1), French (1), Latvian (1), and Macedonian (1). The samples of L1 speakers other than Croatian are too small to be considered here, but will be set aside for latter stages of the research, which will purposely target other countries.

The total number of respondents who consider themselves bilingual was 14. Of these, 7 gave Croatian as the language with which they are more comfortable, and another 7 indicated languages other than Croatian.

Of the 166 respondents with L1 Croatian, 127 reported their L2 to be English (4 bilingual and 123 non-bilingual respondents), 21 German (2 bilingual and 19 non-bilingual), 8 French, 5 Italian, 2 Spanish, 1 Swedish, 1 Portuguese (there were no bilinguals in any of these five groups), 1 Polish (bilingual). In addition, the following languages were reported as L3: English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Slovene, Czech, Polish, Norwegian, Swedish and Danish. By far the largest group was that consisting of people who work with L1 Croatian and L2 English, without an L3 (60 respondents). Other significant combinations included Croatian-English-French (18), Croatian-English-German (16), Croatian-English-Italian (11) and Croatian-German-English (10). The remaining combinations were reported by fewer than 10 respondents.

Full time vs. part time

A little over 50% of all our respondents report that they translate and/or interpret on a part-time basis, which is in line with the observations about the translation/interpreting profession in Croatia made above. Of the 123 non-bilingual respondents with L1 Croatian and L2 English, 61 reported to be full-time translators/interpreters. Of that number, 34 described their position as “in-house/staff,” while the remaining 27 said they worked freelance. Of all the 61 full-timers, 13 said that more than 50% of their workload comprised interpreting assignments (4 staff interpreters and 9 freelancers). The rest predominantly engaged in written translation.

The findings that follow are based on the data gathered from the questionnaires submitted by the 61 full-time translators/interpreters whose L1 is Croatian and L2 English, some of whom also work with a third language and none of whom are bilingual.

L2 translation/interpreting (Croatian >English)

As Table 2 shows, only 16 of the 59 respondents who gave a valid answer to this question engage in L2 translation/interpreting less than 50% of their time. As many as 41 report that 50% or more of their workload is into L2. Another two respondents can be added to the latter group because one of them said she translates/interprets into L2 *and* L3 70% of her time, while the other reported translating/interpreting into L3 Spanish 95% of his time. (It would probably be more accurate to speak of a second L2 in each of these cases rather than of L3.) Two of the respondents gave unclear answers to this question and were excluded from the final score.

The first two columns of Table 2 show a detailed account of the respondents' workload in the L2 direction. The numbers in the second column indicate the number of participants who report working into L2 the percentage of time stated in the first column. It is interesting to note that although five respondents said they worked into L2 less than 10% of their time, only two of them reported an "absolute zero": both of them full-time subtitlers. All other text types involve L2 translation at least to some degree. As many as 19 respondents (32%) say they translate/interpret into L2 more than 80% of their time.

Percentage of L2 workload	**Number of respondents**	**Collapsed figures**	
0%	2	<50%	16 (27 %)
1-9%	3		
10-19%	3		
20-29%	3		
30-39%	2		
40-49%	3		
50-59%	12	>50%	43 (73%)
60-69%	4		
70-79%	6		
80-89%	8		
90-100%	11		
L2-40%+L3-30%	1		
L2-5%+L3-95%	1		
Unclear answer	2		
Total valid answers	59		

Table 2. Percentage of L2 workload.

Revision by a native speaker of L2

The opponents of L2 translation are generally willing to concede that this direction may be acceptable provided the end product is revised by a native speaker of L2. Our respondents were asked how often they have their L2 translation revised by a native speaker, and their answers are presented in Table 3.

How often	**No. of respondents**
"never"	14
"sometimes"	31
"most of the time"	10
"always"	2
"not applicable"	4

Table 3. Revision by a native speaker of L2.

The figures do not, of course, explain *why* only a slim number of respondents have their translation revised by a native speaker on a regular basis. One could speculate that the insufficient number of competent L1 English revisers in Croatia might be among the main reasons, perhaps coupled with the employers' unwillingness to pay for the extra cost of revision. Follow-up interviews should investigate this matter further.

Attitudes regarding the "difficulty" of L2 translation/interpreting

A relative majority of the respondents predictably find working into their L1 easier than the other way around (27 of the 61). But the number of those who say they find L2 translation/interpreting easier is far from insignificant. As many as 20 report that work into L2 is less difficult, with another 14 saying they are equally comfortable (or uncomfortable, as the case may be) in either direction. As Table 4 shows, work into L1 falls short of gaining an absolute majority when it comes to how easy the respondents perceive it to be.

How difficult?	**No. of respondents**
Easier into L1	27 (44%)
Easier into L2	20 (33%)
No difference	14 (23%)

Table 4. Difficulty

Preferences regarding direction of translation/interpreting

Data regarding the translators' and interpreters' preferences also proved interesting. As many as 21 (of the 61) respondents say they prefer working into their L2, a similar number to those who prefer the other direction (20) or those who have no preference regarding directionality (also 20).

When asked at the end of the questionnaire to write whatever additional comments they might have concerning the direction of translation/interpreting, a number of the respondents touched on the reasons why they preferred work into L2. Some said they found this direction more challenging and therefore more rewarding professionally. A simultaneous interpreter said she found it easier to make quick decisions while working into her L2 (English), because in that language she does not have as many options to choose from as she does in her L1.

The next section of this paper might suggest another type of reason why some professionals prefer working into L2.

Rates

The questionnaire asked participants whether their rates were in any way related to directionality. Almost half of the respondents (27 of the 56 who found this question applicable to their situation) reported no difference in rates regardless of the direction in which they translate/interpret. Of the remaining 29, however, only four said they receive a better rate into L1. As Table 5 shows, work into L2 pays better for 45% of the respondents. This is in contrast with observations made by some authors, e.g. Snell-Hornby (1999: 110), who mentions "suboptimal fees" in L2 translation.

Rates	**No. of respondents**
Better into L1	4 (7%)
Better into L2	25 (45%)
No difference	27 (48%)
Not applicable	4
Invalid answer	1

Table 5. Rates

Newmark's statement

Finally, we asked the respondents to what extent they agreed with Peter Newmark's statement, cited at the beginning of this paper, about translation into one's L1 being "the only way you can translate naturally, accurately and with maximum effectiveness" (Newmark 1988:3). The questionnaire asked the translators and interpreters to express their attitude on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 expressed strong disagreement and 5 strong agreement with the statement. Table 6 shows the results.

Agreement with Newmark	**No. of respondents**	**Collapsed**
"disagree strongly"	3	17 (28%)
"disagree"	14	
"neither agree nor disagree"	18	18 (30%)
"agree"	15	26 (42%)
"agree strongly"	11	

Table 6. (Dis)agreement with Peter Newmark's statement.

Surprisingly, as many as 42% of the respondents (26 of them) agree or strongly agree with a statement that is in such sharp contrast to their everyday practice. It would be interesting to find out why this is so, but that is the subject for another study, which may be conducted by means of interviews as a follow-up to this one. The results, however, suggest that there exists a gap between theory (even one's personal, subjective theory) and practice.

Discussion

As the figures presented in previous sections show, the question at the heart of many heated debates on translators' forums—whether professionals should work into L2 or not—is in many settings simply not up for discussion. In countries using a "language of limited diffusion", L2 translation is taken for granted. If a client needs a translation or interpretation from Croatian (or any other "small" language) into a major language such as English, the question is not framed in terms of who should do it but rather who *can* do it. As L1 Croatian translators/interpreters with sound L2 English by far outnumber the L1 English translators/interpreters with L2 Croatian good enough for work involving that language, clients are likely to use the services of an L1 Croatian translator/interpreter regardless of direction.

Does this mean that in settings involving a "language of limited diffusion" the quality of translation/interpreting into a major language will be suboptimal? This, of course, is a subject for a different kind of study, one involving quality assessment in the translation/interpreting market. Personal experience as a translator and translation teacher for 15 years would suggest that this is not necessarily so. The reason why L2 translation/interpreting may be satisfactory—rather than merely the only one available—could be that, as suggested by Gile (2005), the direction of translation is not the only variable involved in the overall picture. The level of L2 competence is obviously the most relevant factor. In minority-language settings, people have traditionally invested a lot of effort in learning foreign languages. Examples of translators/interpreters who have mastered a major world language to the level of near-native competence are far from rare. Additionally, the level of L1 competence of expatriate major-language speakers may have been compromised through years of living in L2 environment, blurring the distinction between L1 and L2 major-language translators/interpreters even further.

Apart from language competence, Gile points out that motivation and professionalism also play an important role. The type of text or interpreting situation is certainly another variable, as is the translators'/interpreters' familiarity with the topic. Preparation, in the case of an interpreter, and research skills in the case of a translator, are likely to make a difference in the overall performance. Working memory capacity (for interpreters) and the efficient use of electronic tools (for translators, but also for interpreters) are among the variables that will jointly contribute to the final quality of the service. We could add to the list the norms prevalent in a given culture (whether L2 translation/interpreting is considered acceptable in professional circles and among the users of the service), as well as the translators'/interpreters' training and previous work experience (whether it included translation/interpreting into L2 and to what extent). In addition, for certain areas of specialized (technical) translation/interpreting, "smaller" languages may lag behind in the development of terminology and terminology-related tools, which may make translation/interpreting into a technologically dominant language such as English less challenging than work into one's own language.

Additional research in this area should help to destigmatize L2 translation/interpreting by further investigating the practice. This, in turn, should help practitioners and their trainers meet the demands they face in the many settings of the world where translation/interpreting is done from a "language of limited diffusion" into a dominant language. This study is an example of the kind of empirical research that can be done as the first step.

Conclusion

The aim of our research was to find out more about actual translation and interpreting practice regarding directionality, as well as the attitudes of practitioners, in a setting involving a "language of limited diffusion". This should provide a useful social context for other types of research into directionality, which is an important issue for both translation/interpreting theories and training. The results of our study show that more than 70% of full-time translators/interpreters in Croatia whose L2 is English work regularly into L2, and that one third prefer this direction of translation, find it easier and are better paid for it. These results may or may not prove to be representative of the situation involving other "languages of limited diffusion". However, they seem sufficiently interesting to justify further research.

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