Evening in Ljubljana, Slovenia

ENGLISH: AXES FOR A TARGET LANGUAGE

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The issue addressed in this volume is crucial to working conditions of most translators in the modern world.

As far as literary translation is concerned, publishers are in command of the translation: they determine what books are to be translated and who will be commissioned with the task of translating them. With notable exceptions among near-bilingual authors (such as Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov) who translate their own work, literary translators are usually expected to be native speakers of the target language by both publishers and readers (= sales). But the literary market is dwindling all over the world, not in absolute numbers, but in percentages of translations actually done.[1] Outside the

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. The situation is largely unchanged (and has in all likelihood worsened) since 1985 when Margaret Grindrod found that "In Britain, the percentage of 'purists', whose target languages are

sphere of aesthetics, it is, to my knowledge, only translators in the English-speaking world and at some international organisations, such as the European Union institutions, who enjoy the privilege of translating exclusively, or at least most often, into their mother tongue.[2] Having to translate into a foreign language is thus widespread, but it is a particularly acute problem to translators of small nations, such as Denmark, the Netherlands, and Slovenia. Having minor languages (also termed 'languages of small diffusion') which are not all that well-known outside the national frontiers, they must usually recruit translators from among their own population in order to have an international impact by means of a world language.

Although it may still be the language of domination in certain parts of the world, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 has turned English into the unchallenged 'lingua franca' and the primary means for international communication.[3] To the vast majority of people, it is no longer the language of empire but a politically neutral language which people are learning, not in order to bow to UK culture or US technology and showbiz, but in order to communicate with other people, the mother tongues of which are not Eng- // … 62 // lish either.[4] It fulfills this function in peaceful international cross-cultural communication even when no native speakers of English are involved.

This article addresses some problems which the changing status of English will pose not only to speakers of minor languages but to the global community of translators and interpreters. The issues will be discussed from the point of view of a non-native speaker of English.

Former views

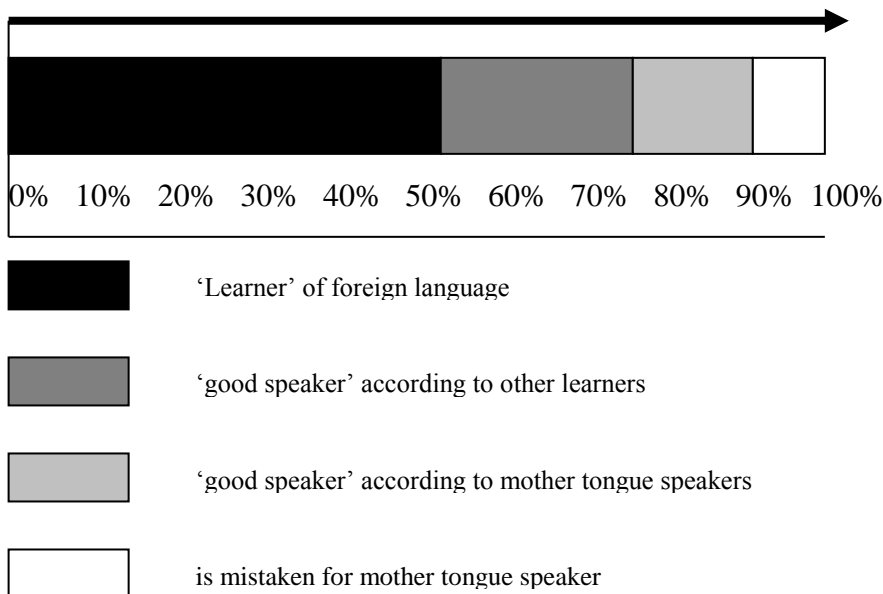Previously, 'problems with English' could be defined along a binary axis, where

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their mother tongues is only 84%. It is considerably lower in Europe: generally about 65%, dropping to an astonishing low 35% in Germany" (Here quoted from McAlester 1992: 294). At a conference in Monterey, USA (January 1999), former alumni of the prestigious American Graduate School of Translation and Interpreting at Monterey called for more training in translating into B and even C languages as they were increasingly asked to do so on the market.

[2]. The European Union sticks to 'the mother tongue principle' according to which translation professionals only work into their mother tongue; however, those with an intimate knowledge of the linguistic workings of the European institutions will be aware that especially interpreters from minor languages are often obliged to function as 'chevals', meaning that they must interpret from their mother tongue (the A-language) into their first foreign language (the B-language) (This is also described in Sunnari 1997: 88). At the United Nations, Russian and Chinese interpreters will work in both directions (for a description of the ideology and some funny outcomes, see Pearl 1995: 183-186).

[3] Mary Snell-Hornby drew attention to the important distinction between a 'dominant' language and 'lingua franca' in a Translation Studies context (Snell-Hornby 1997:28).

[4] Described in considerable detail covering Western Europe (Dollerup 1996) and Eastern Europe and Asia (Dollerup 1998).

speakers of the source or target language would assess the 'foreigners" or 'translators" problems on a uni-dimensional scale in relation to 'Received Standard British English', written or spoken. It was taken for granted that the desired goal in foreign language teaching would be near-native mastery and, in translation, perfect end-products. This is shown in Illustration 1 ("Foreign-language command"):

0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

■ 'Learner' of foreign language

▨ 'good speaker' according to other learners

▨ 'good speaker' according to mother tongue speakers

☐ is mistaken for mother tongue speaker

// … 63 // It must be stressed that this is an illustration of principles, not a picture of the real world. The percentages are fictitious figures set up to serve as anchors for a cogent discussion which will otherwise lapse into opaque pronouncements because of the complexity of the issues; for the same reason, I make precise and unmodified statements.

Illustration 1, then, shows, in principle, that foreign language learners start at point zero. Thanks to talent, to training, and to experience, they move along the axis, and become increasingly more proficient in their command of the foreign language. Learners in specific linguistic societies (social class, nation, culture) will 'progress' along the same axis: Depending on the mastery of the foreign language in their surroundings, that is, among teachers and peers, they will, somewhere along the axis, pass on to a stage where their command of English is assessed as 'good'. The point to note is that this 'good' English is not 'objective' and universally valid; on the contrary, it is fluid because it is a societal construct; 'good' English proficiency in one culture may be 'poor' in another. Conversely, in well-defined societal contexts, it is intersubjective and, as any teacher will know, 'objective': Otherwise, teachers would be incapable of giving marks.

Even in well-defined societal contexts, there are gradations in 'good' English. Hopefully the learner passes to a stage where even native speakers of English accept that the foreigner's English is 'good', spanning from praise for a learner who is to be encouraged, to the (mistaken) belief that they are indeed addressing a compatriot, a native speaker of English born and bred.

However, as non-native speakers, we should not fool ourselves into believing that we

shall ever master English as the natives do. Our command of English will never be perfect: There are white spots, uncharted domains in our linguistic and cultural mapping of English and, consequently, there are cases where we are incapable of producing a good translation in the sense that it sounds like an authentic, native text to target language users. It will stand out on account of subtle points concerning linguistic and cultural integration. In Illustration 1, mother-tongue command was *arbitrarily* placed in the 90-100% area in the axis. From now on, native command will therefore be referred to as the "90+" area.

The axis also presupposes that there is a goal, namely a 100% command. Until the 1970s, it was taken for granted that this aim was native command of 'Received Standard British English'. Within the English language as it was actually spoken, there were many pointers that this aim could be questioned, but the Eurocentric international community of yesterday did not realise the implications of the existence of pidgin English and regional varieties of English as problems in intercultural communication, although these varieties were used, recognised in local settings, and even studied academically. // … 64 //

The situation today and the binary axis

Today, there is a general recognition of this problem because the changed international status of English implies that no other language can rival it as the globally preferred 'lingua franca'. Independent of whether they use a truly minor language, such as Dutch or Slovene, or, like the Chinese, they speak a language used by hundreds of millions and which foreigners believe is hard to learn (at least at present), most non-English language professionals, translators and interpreters have to work into English.

The binary axis serves to show the problematic nature of communication in English under these circumstances.

One area should be excluded from the discussion: At the specialist level, there are few international experts who are bilingual. Accordingly, most groups of experts use an interlanguage which is understood by peers, a kind of international expert English. This expert English has a 'deficient' grammar but this is offset by the experts' mastery of specialist jargon, of their Languages for Special Purposes.[5]

However, in a translation context, the problem is different since language professionals operate on the implicit premises that there is an axis and that they are close to near-native proficiency.

In the first place, non-native speakers never attain a 90+ command. It is therefore inevitable that most translators will speak and write a binary interlanguage which may even include features from regional varieties of English. Furthermore, as hinted, the 90+ will differ in extent and in nature according to the mother language and culture of departure. To a Chinese, the 90+ mastery of English may cover incomprehension of the British (and European) lack of reverence for ancestors and old age, to a Dane of the frequent use of biblical and literary quotations, and to a Slovene of the lack of references to woods and

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[5] Wilkinson (1990) documents a European type of business English and discusses its implications for translation. Snell-Hornby (1997) terms it a 'plastic language' and 'International English'. I believe that we are seeing the emergence of a number of 'international English sociolects' defined by e.g. domains, social class, education etc.

mountains. The 90+ area thus includes both linguistic and cultural references. // … 65 //

Secondly, the binary axis is naive and, in principle, inapplicable *inside* many of today's Western societies: due to the migrations in recent times (immigration, trade etc.), there are now many non-native speakers who learn English in non-English-speaking countries (Turks who learn English in Germany, Somalians in the Netherlands, etc.).

In principle, the axis stretches from 0 to 100%. But with different zeros, each defined by the language and culture of departure, we are now faced with a multiplicity of axes, in which all learners *aim* at converging at the 100% mark. The immigrant in Western society will have a point zero which is defined in and by her, say, Turkish or Somalian culture. This can be illustrated by another axis which will apply to countries with less exposure to the English-speaking culture than those of the European Union. It may, for instance, look like this (Illustration 2):

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
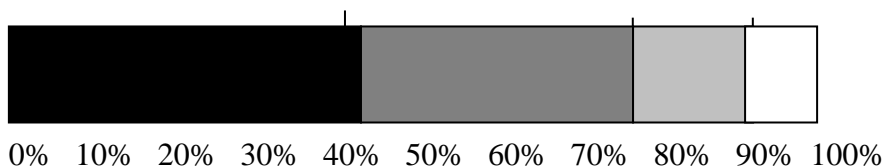
Non-European immigrants may have to attend classes with students whose zero point is, say, German or French. In these classes, immigrants' performance, their movement from 0% to 90%, is now all of a sudden assessed along other binary axes, such as the local German or French ones. Measured by these local axis, the immigrants' intermediate stages are alien and therefore considered full of 'errors' since errors are not identical along different binary axes. The immigrants are now assessed by others whose linguistic background is different from theirs, namely by local peers, students and teachers of their new language society. Their errors being unacceptable, the 'aliens'' English proficiency must therefore be higher than that of locals before they are accepted as 'good' in their 'host' society. This is shown in Illustration 3 ("Model for non-native language of departure"):

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
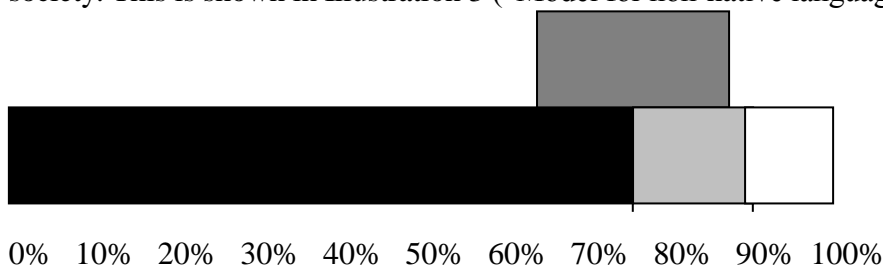
// … 66 // Teachers of English as a foreign language and teachers of translation also have to face the *external* problem of the changing definition of the English we are aiming at in the 90+ area.

As long as we move along the axis from point zero to, say, 70% there is no problem (and please, remember that the figures are not 'real figures' but only principles). But unless we follow the suggestion made by Silvana Orel Kos elsewhere in this volume and deliberately introduce a non-culture bound Western European English lingua franca, the

aim beyond the 70% point must be an identifiable target language, be it American, Australian, South African, or British English.

The 'new' perspectives on the 'old' problems

The application of traditional European standards to linguistic products, especially nowadays, from parts of the world previously rarely heard of, highlights some facts.

The first is that most of us are foreigners using English. This is a trite observation, but once one comes across a translation into English from China or Uzbekistan, it is forcefully brought home.

The second fact is that internally and locally, because we all move along specific binary axes, we actually reinforce interference errors which are fully acceptable within, indeed characteristic of, our own binary axis. But it may be that these errors are less tolerable for those moving along other axes.

The third fact is that when the axes are combined, they reveal interference errors in each axis.

The fourth fact is that interference errors are more common in translational products than is normally realised when both clients and language professionals are evaluating translational product within one specific axis.

As hinted, translators and interpreters in most communities will increasingly use English as a lingua franca for intercultural and international communication. Approaching the 100% command of English along different binary axes, they will find their common ground at some place around a 90% command. On the one hand, they will contribute their separate shortcomings and - in due time - come to tolerate those of others: the non-native speakers of English will end at a compromise which is not 'perfect', only tolerably good English, in their daily work (Wilkinson's English may be a precursor of this phenomenon (1990)).

In relation to most clients, this will probably not matter all that much. With others, it will matter somewhat. It will depend on

- the text-types in so far as some types simply do not demand more than a 90% command. This goes for much technical writing, for manuals, scien- // … 67 // tific articles and so on. In these types of texts, it is clear that, in the future, clients will increasingly write source-text material in 'controlled language' for easy (often machine-aided) translation.

- the domains involved, since some areas are less demanding than others. The translations for experts might be a typical example - and why not include the tourist literature so often castigated in Translation Studies (because it is so eminently accessible to your vagrant Translation Studies scholar) and admit that, in the final analysis, most tourists are able to deduce the intended meaning of most signs like this one in a zoo: "Please do not feed the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to the guard on duty."

- the specific countries in so far as the knowledge of English varies a lot globally. And, finally,

- factors which are specific to each society and culture.

**The implications for translation work**

This last-mentioned societal and cultural specificity is particularly relevant in the present context: Professionals should strive to make the best products possible and perhaps points in this discussion can be used to reduce what Erich Prunč elsewhere in this volume terms 'suboptimal' products. The *inside* 'erosion' can be used by the educational system in the teaching of English as a foreign language in order to highlight and call attention to the interference errors usually committed and overlooked along local axes. A heightened awareness in societies about such errors must surely be conducive to a higher standard in English proficiency and consequently translational products. The *external* problem of defining the target language will probably be solved by the market forces in a given society. At the same time there is no doubt that by being explicit about the choice of target language, we do heighten awareness about this issue. Personally I believe that most European translators are best served with British English as the culturally and politically least controversial variety in a European context.

Finally the awareness of the existence of the binary axis can be put to practical use in translation work:

Conventional wisdom has is that we should ask native speakers to act as revisers of non-natives' translations into English. The binary axis, however, indicates that the principle is probably wrong: non-natives can never move with ease in the 90+ area. Only native speakers can. Accordingly it is only native-born speakers of English who can catapult a Slovene, a Dutch, or a Chinese text into that linguistic and cultural area.

This can also be illustrated by means of the axis: // … 68 //

Here is, in principle, how far the native target language speaker *may* get (illustration 4):

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%
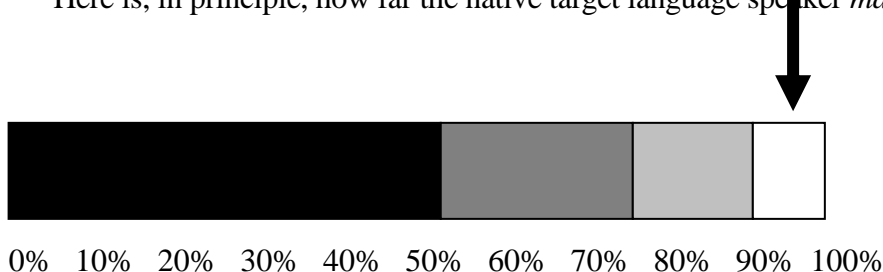
And here is how far the translator working into the foreign language *can* go (Illustration 5):

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%
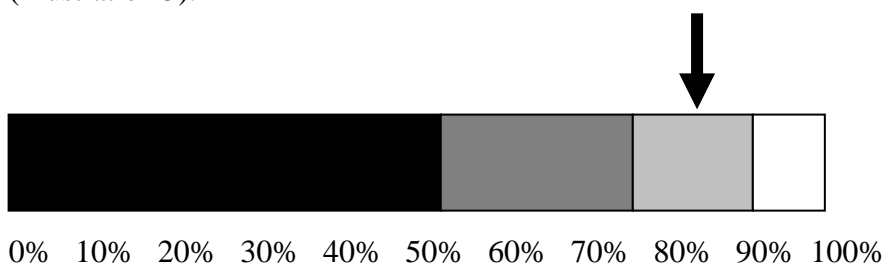
When translating a text from a foreign source language, target language speakers may commit startling errors in decoding the source text. But, at the same time, they render it in a stylistically and idiomatically authentic target language. Once they have stylistically and linguistically brought the source text safely into the idiomatic areas which are not for

foreigners to master, source language speakers with a good command of English can act as the revisors who check on the correct decoding of content. This is a better approach than having native English speakers heave some 90% English stylistically closer to 100% - in which they rarely succeed.

By having the first stage of a translation done by a native speaker of the target language, professionals also avoid committing or at least overlooking typical interference errors along a specific binary axis. The principle of having a first translation done by a target language speaker and then revised by a source language revisor might, possibly, work just as well, and perhaps even better, at the European Union institutions than the present policy of having only target language translators *and target language revisors*. It might, at least, be worth a try.

At present, however, there are not many native speakers of English in China, in Slovenia, and in Denmark, who are willing to do language work and suffer the humiliation of being corrected all the time (which they are). But the principle adduced also applies to translation work undertaken by non-native speakers and which includes revision: If a text is to be revised, the // … 69 // translators involved will make the 'best product' by having the best stylist, i.e. the one with the 'best' command of English, do the first version and then another member of the team revise, not the other way round.[6]

There is yet another lesson: In literature the shortcomings of the non-native translator are obvious, for reading literature is an aesthetic experience which includes enjoyment of style and register, that is, of features which can be covered only by native speakers who move easily within the 90-100% area: this is the way to make for successful literary translation which find favour with target language audiences.

In other fields non-natives cannot reach perfection either, but this is not of such crucial importance. Being aware of this fact and using it constructively may help to produce better translations. Hopefully, this article has contributed to that end.[7]

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[6] We set up a commercial translation agency doing mostly 'cultural texts' at the Centre for Translation Studies at the University in Copenhagen in 1994. Being a university agency, it had to aim at the highest standards possible. Accordingly, it was our policy from the start that all translators were to be university graduates and that all translations must be revised. Within a couple of months we had also found out the hard way that all staff (including free-lancers) should translate into their mother tongues and that revision should be undertaken by source-language speakers. The agency is headed by Ms Annette Lindegaard.

[7] I gratefully acknowledge constructive criticism from Mary Snell-Hornby and Tatjana Zener.

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Dawm, October 2007