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TRANSLATION DIRECTION: WHY TRANSLATING INTO A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IS DIFFERENT FROM TRANSLATING INTO YOUR OWN

Sevara Muhammadjonova Muzaffarovna
O'zbekiston Davlat Jahon tillari universiteti
Ingliz tili 1-fakulteti
Filologiya va tillarni o'qitish
2-bosqich talabasi
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Short summary: Translating is not the same task in every direction. When a translator works from their own language into a foreign language, the work is different from when they work from a foreign language back into their own language. This paper looks at these two directions and compares the problems that come with each one. It also explains what this means for people who train translators. The main idea is simple: translating into a foreign language is mostly hard because of writing, while translating into your own language is mostly hard because of understanding. Neither direction is simply "easier" than the other — they are hard in different ways.

Introduction

In the past, many translation experts believed that translators should only work into their own native language. In real life, though, translators often work in both directions. They translate from their native language into a foreign one, and they also translate from a foreign language back into their own. These two directions are usually called "translation into a foreign language" and "translation into the native language." This traditional expectation that translators should work only into their native language is discussed by Newmark.[1]

Even though both directions involve moving meaning from one language to another, they are not the same task. A translator who is very good in one direction may find the other direction much harder. This paper looks closely at why this happens, what kinds of mistakes appear in each direction, and why these matters for translator training and for checking the quality of translated texts.

Background: What "Direction" Means in Translation

The direction of a translation simply means which language is the starting language (the source) and which language is the ending language (the target), compared to the translator's strongest language. Some call this "direct translation" (into the native language) and "inverse translation" (into the foreign language).

Most professional translator organizations base their rules on one basic fact: being able to read and understand a language well is not the same skill as being able to write it well. A person can often understand a foreign language very well long before they can write in it as naturally and smoothly as a native speaker. This gap between understanding and writing is the main

[1] Newmark, P. (1988). *A Textbook of Translation.* Prentice Hall, New York. https://archive.org/details/textbookoftransl0000newm/mode/1up

reason why translation direction changes the type of difficulty a translator faces, a point central to Campbell's (1998) study of translation into a second language.[2]

Difficulties When Translating into a Foreign Language

When translators work from their own language into a foreign language, they almost always understand the original text perfectly. They know their own language's hidden meanings, tone, and cultural references without effort. The real difficulty appears on the other side — in writing the foreign-language text.

3.1 Natural, fluent style: Even translators who know a foreign language very well often write text that is grammatically correct but still sounds slightly "foreign" to a native reader. This happens because natural word combinations and common phrases are learned mainly through years of exposure to a language, not through grammar rules (Newmark, 1988).[3]

3.2 Range of style and tone: Native speakers can easily move between different styles — formal, casual, technical, or literary — without thinking about it. Non-native speakers, even skilled ones, often have a narrower range of style. They may use the same safe, neutral tone for every kind of text, which can change the feeling of the original (Baker, 1992).[4]

3.3 Missing words and playing it safe: Translators working into a foreign language often know exactly what they want to say but cannot find the right word for it. This leads them to choose simpler, safer words or sentence structures instead of the ones the original text really needs, which can make the translation feel flat or less detailed than the original.

3.4 Errors that are hard to catch: Because a translator's natural sense of "what sounds right" is weaker in a foreign language, small mistakes in word combinations, word order, or connecting words can slip through even careful checking. The translator's own inner sense of the foreign language is simply less reliable than their sense of their native language.

Difficulties When Translating into the Native Language

When translators work from a foreign language back into their own language, writing the final text is usually smooth and natural. The real difficulty moves to the other side — fully understanding the original foreign text. Pokorn (2005) challenges the traditional assumption that this direction is automatically the easier one, showing that comprehension gaps can be just as costly as production errors.

4.1 Missing hidden meaning: Even advanced learners of a foreign language can miss small but important shades of meaning — irony, humor, or a hidden criticism — that a native speaker of that language would notice right away. Reading the text too literally, or too carefully but without real insight, can lead to a translation that is technically correct but misses the true message.

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[2] Campbell, S. (1998). Translation into the second language. Longman. https://archive.org/details/translationintos0000camp

[3] Newmark, P. (1988). *A Textbook of Translation.* Prentice Hall, New York. https://archive.org/details/textbookoftransl0000newm/mode/1up

[4] Baker, M. (1992). *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation.* Routledge, London. https://archive.org/details/inotherwordscour0000bake

4.2 False friends and confusion between languages: "False friends" are words that look similar in two languages but mean different things. These words often confuse even experienced translators, especially when the two languages are closely related.

4.3 Gaps in cultural knowledge: Original texts are often full of cultural background — history, social customs, humor, or references to institutions — that a non-native reader may not fully know without extra research. Missing this hidden cultural layer can change the whole meaning of a passage, even if every single word is translated "correctly."

4.4 Feeling too confident: Interestingly, translators sometimes trust their own understanding of a foreign text too much, simply because they can produce a smooth, natural-sounding translation in their native language. A fluent final text can hide a mistake in understanding, which makes this kind of error harder to notice while checking one's own work than a writing mistake would be.

Comparing the Two Directions

The table below sums up the main differences between the two directions of translation.

Point of comparison	Native language → Foreign language	Foreign language → Native language
Main risk	Writing well in the foreign language	Fully understanding the foreign text
Typical mistake	Unnatural word choice, wrong style	Missed meaning, false friends, missed culture
How easy it is to notice your own mistake	Hard — the translator's feel for the foreign language is weaker	Hard — a smooth native-language text can hide a wrong reading
Skill that matters most	Active writing skill in the foreign language	Deep reading and cultural understanding of the foreign language

This comparison shows that the two directions are not simply two versions of the same problem. They test two different skills. Translating into a foreign language test how well a translator can actively write in that language. Translating into the native language tests how deeply a translator can understand the source language and its culture. Because of this, a translator can be strong in one direction and noticeably weaker in the other - being generally bilingual does not automatically mean equal skill in both directions.

The real difficulty of each direction can also depend on the specific languages involved, the type of text, and how the translator learned their foreign language. A translator who learned the foreign language mainly by living abroad may write it almost like a native speaker, which reduces the usual difficulty of translating into that language. On the other hand, a translator who learned mostly through classroom study, without much real-life exposure, may find it harder to fully understand foreign texts, even if their grammar knowledge is strong.

What This Means for Training and Professional Practice

These differences matter in real, practical ways. First, translator training programs should treat the two directions as partly separate skills, each needing its own kind of practice, a distinction also emphasized in translator-training literature (Beeby Lonsdale, 1996).[5] Translating into a foreign language benefit from wide reading and copying good style, to build strong writing

[5] Beeby Lonsdale, A. (1996). Teaching Translation from Spanish to English: Worlds Beyond Words. University of Ottawa Press.

skill. Translating into the native language benefits from deeper study of the source culture, to sharpen understanding.

Second, when checking translation quality, it is very useful to have a native speaker of the target language review the work, especially for translations into a foreign language. This is because a translator's own sense of what "sounds right" is weaker there, so checking their own work alone is less reliable.

Third, translators themselves benefit from being honest about which direction is their stronger one, instead of assuming that general fluency in two languages means equal skill in both directions of translation.

Conclusion

The difficulties of translation are not the same in every direction. Translating from one's native language into a foreign language mostly tests writing — producing text that sounds natural, fits the right style, and reads smoothly in a language the translator did not grow up speaking. Translating from a foreign language into one's native language mostly tests understanding — correctly reading hidden meaning, culture, and intention in a language the translator did not grow up hearing.

Understanding this difference leads to more realistic expectations of translators, better training programs, and stronger quality checks in professional translation. In the end, translation skill should not be seen as one single ability. It is really two related but different abilities, which can grow — or struggle — separately from each other.

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