

Translation into a non-native language – IAPTI’s survey

ATTILA PIRÓTH

PhD, freelance English to Hungarian translator
Vice president of the Ethics Committee of the International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters (IAPTI)
translation@pirothattila.com

ABSTRACT

This paper gives a concise summary of the motivation, design and findings of the International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters’ (IAPTI) survey on translation into a non-native language.

KEYWORDS

Survey, translation, non-native, IAPTI, Common Sense Advisory.

1. MOTIVATION

Translation into a non-native language and other closely related topics have long been considered sensitive issues among professional translators.¹ Forum discussions rarely offer a sufficiently broad focus, and are often dominated by few vocal participants. While first-hand accounts may be of great value for practicing pro-

¹ See, for example, *Should “native language” claims be verified?*, <http://www.proz.com/topic/227485> (last accessed on June 23, 2016).

professionals and translation scholars alike, a more systematic approach is required to derive representative – qualitative or quantitative – results. Surveys may offer such a systematic approach.

2. SURVEYS IN THE TRANSLATION SECTOR

Many business aspects of the translation and interpreting sector are explored by Common Sense Advisory² (CSA), an independent Massachusetts-based market research and consulting firm. Their survey results have been cited by influential business newspapers (including *The Economist*, the *International Herald Tribune* and *Wired* magazine), while their consultancy services have been used by major corporate and governmental translation buyers, including the Translation Bureau of Canada.

CSA's two most frequently cited figures pinpoint the size of the global outsourced language services market (over \$38 billion in 2015) and the drop in the average translation rates observed between 2010 and 2012 (34.71%). Unfortunately, both figures are based on grossly flawed methodology. Below we shall explore both.

2.1. SIZE OF THE OUTSOURCED LANGUAGE SERVICES MARKET

CSA's estimate on the size of the global outsourced language services market is based on the revenue reported by "language service providers" (LSPs) willing to participate in CSA's survey. Note that CSA insists on using a definition of LSP that is different from the one used in international standards (such as EN 15038). While the international standards use the term LSP for both translation companies and individual professionals, the latter are not included in CSA's definition. In other words, CSA excluded freelance translators from this survey – even though they constitute the broadest category of those who eventually produce outsourced translations. This is in stark contrast with how the size of the automotive industry is calculated: estimates are based primarily on manufacturers' data.

Failure to take appropriately into account the ad-hoc participation of respondents has led to some manifestly implausible results, including jumps in revenue per employee, ranging from 60% in Switzerland to +130% in Belgium.³ CSA made no attempts to explain these findings, and the criticism reported to CSA received no reply.

2 <https://www.common sense advisory.com> (last accessed on June 23, 2016).

3 See, for example <http://anmerkungen-des-uebersetzers.com/2013/11/11/highs-and-lows-of-translation-business-interview-with-don-depalma-csa/#comment-810> (last accessed on June 23, 2016).

Comparison of subsequent years' lists of top companies provides solid proof of inconsistency.⁴ Moreover, other resources – e.g., information on open, unclassified contracts for the US Army – show the consistent absence of major companies, some of which would immediately land at the top of the list.⁵ Classified and confidential contracts are, understandably, omitted from CSA's survey – but their massive expected value implies that the survey is hopelessly incomplete. CSA makes no mention about these limitations of the research methodology.

It is worth noting that even if all translation companies in the world reported their revenues consistently from year to year to CSA, and even if CSA took into account individual professionals, the gathered data would still not lead to a meaningful figure about the global outsourced language services market. The reason is that by counting the revenue of each company in a potentially long outsourcing chain, projects are counted at each level – but only on the revenue side, not on the cost side. This means that the relation between the revenue of a translation company and its costs (including overhead and the money it pays to individual translators) is not taken into account by CSA. In other words, how the revenues of all participants in the outsourcing chain are related to the amount paid by the final translation buyer is unknown. Without this piece of information, any estimate of the global size of the market is meaningless.

2.2. TRANSLATION RATES ARE FALLING

*“Did you know that the average per-word rate for translation for the 30 most commonly used languages on the web fell 34.71% from US\$0.205 in 2010 to US\$0.134 in 2012?”*⁶ This key finding of CSA's 2012 research was cited widely, and even used by the Translation Bureau of Canada to “readjust” its prices for buying translation services. The price pressure that Canada's most important governmental translation buyer exerted on individual freelancers did eventually contribute to a drop in their average fees. However, CSA's findings (and the ensuing price pressure) were the result of a massively flawed methodology. The survey populations were very different – and their difference alone may explain the seemingly dropping average rate.⁷

4 CSA's 2011 list was topped by Mission Essential Personnel, a US company operating in the intelligence field with 8300 employees. Its 2011 revenue was US\$ 725.5M, see http://www.common-senseadvisory.com/Portals/0/downloads/120531_QT_Top_100_LSPs.pdf; last accessed on June 23, 2016). However, this was the only time the company appeared in CSA's list.

5 <http://www.translationtribulations.com/2014/08/post-slavery-bondage-and-poverty.html?showComment=1408219887716#4808212212243319625> (last accessed on accessed June 23, 2016).

6 <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Monthly-Update--Global-websites--manufacturing-industry--and-upcoming-webinars.html?soid=1011053815353&aid=riRl3RaamSs> (last accessed on June 23, 2016).

7 <http://anmerkungen-des-uebersetzers.com/2013/11/11/highs-and-lows-of-translation-business-interview-with-don-depalma-csa/#comment-814> (last accessed on June 23, 2016).

The 2010 survey population comprised 26.9% of freelancers and 73.1% of “LSPs” (according to CSA’s definition). The 2012 survey population had 83.9% of freelancers and 16.1% of LSPs. As a working hypothesis, assume that freelancers charge 1 unit and LSPs charge 2 units per word. The “average price” is then 1.731 in 2010 and 1.161 in 2012. This corresponds to a 33% drop in the average price – even though neither the freelancers nor the LSPs changed their prices from 2010 to 2012. The drop is an obvious artifact of using different populations – possibly the most elementary error a market research company can make. After his interview with CSA’s co-founder and CEO Don DePalma,⁸ Valerij Tomarenko pointed out this error to CSA – but received no reply.

2.3. TRANSLATOR ASSOCIATIONS

Designing, conducting and analyzing large-scale surveys requires massive resources. Translation associations derive their revenues mostly from membership fees, and cannot create another revenue stream from consultation services based on industry intelligence that such survey data would facilitate. Therefore they cannot usually afford running many surveys: they may not conduct any surveys or may stick to one on translation pricing and working conditions.⁹ Between subsequent surveys, their survey populations are usually fairly stable, thus these surveys can be useful sources of information for members of the same population (freelance translators). The International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters (IAPTI) faces the same limitations and thus has conducted only one survey to date, which addresses a controversial topic of interest: translation into a non-native language.

3. IAPTI’S SURVEY

3.1. DESIGN

The topic of translation into a non-native language merits a widely international treatment. That is why IAPTI, with members in 67 countries at the time, was in a unique position to conduct such a survey.

8 <http://anmerkungen-des-uebersetzers.com/2013/11/11/highs-and-lows-of-translation-business-interview-with-don-depalma-csa> (last accessed on June 23, 2016).

9 See ATA’s (USA) 2015 survey http://www.atanet.org/membersonly/switch.php?url=p_ata_compensation_survey_2016.pdf&t=pdf, SFT’s (France) 2015 survey http://www.sft.fr/clients/sft/telechargements/file_front/45866_2015_RESULTATS_PRELIMINAIRES.pdf.pdf, BDÜ’s (Germany) 2014 survey http://www.bdue-fachverlag.de/onlineshop/publikationen/detail_book/100, or ITI’s (UK) 2011 survey <http://www.iti.org.uk/attachments/article/62/ITI2001Rates%20and%20Salaries%20Survey.pdf> (all accessed on June 23, 2016).

Replies were collected on SurveyMonkey.com over a 10-day period between February 28 and March 10, 2014. The survey was completed by 780 respondents – mostly practicing professional translators. The obtained sample was sufficiently large to split into various subsamples according to experience, certification status, native language, etc., in order to identify major factors and tendencies beyond overall averages. While the 77-page survey report presented results only for a limited number of subsamples, IAPTI proposed to check any reasonable correlations participants might be interested in, and invited participants to comment on the methodology.

The survey contained 32 questions, including many open-ended ones. Unlike in most other surveys on translation and interpreting, participants could review all questions before they started to complete the questionnaire, and skip any question they might have found too intrusive. Through the open-ended questions, participants could explain their situations and choices in quite some detail. In many cases, they wrote half-page case studies, presenting a very wide array of opinions. The full survey report contains a sizable and representative collection, while only a handful of comments could be included in the present article. They are quoted verbatim both here and in the full report.

3.2. LIMITATIONS

The survey was conducted in English, so translators who do not speak English could not participate. Also, those who are not comfortable with expressing themselves in English may have felt less inclined to participate or their participation might have been limited (for instance, resulting in fewer or less detailed answers). This is by no means unique to this survey: in English-only forums, the points of view of native English speakers are generally overrepresented. This bias is particularly important in the present case, as translating into a non-native language means, in the overwhelming majority of cases, translation from one's native language into English.

While the answers to multiple-choice questions led to some detailed statistics, we warn against considering the obtained values very accurate (such as CSA's infamous 34.71%). For example, our data showed that L3>L2 translations represent about 1/6 of the volume of L1>L2 translations. Instead of claiming that our results pinpoint this figure at 15.99%, we prefer to say that in our sample the reported volume of L3>L2 translations was almost an order of magnitude smaller than that of L1>L2 translations – but exploring the variations in the subsamples reveals much more interesting trends.

4. RESULTS

4.1. DEMOGRAPHY

The average professional experience of the survey population was 13.7 years, with 6 out of 10 categories (1-3, 3-5, 5-10, 10-15, 15-20, 20-30 years of experience) representing over 10% of the population each. 95% of the respondents reported to have or work on a university/college degree/certificate – confirming that higher education is a *de facto* requirement for professional translators. Seventy-three countries of origin and 80 countries of residence were listed; the percentage of respondents for whom the two were different was 42.8%. This indicates a very strong correlation between moving countries and choosing translation as profession.

For the purpose of the survey, we used the following working definition for native language:

For people who were born and raised in a monolingual environment until the end of their studies, the concept of native language is straightforward. For the purposes of this survey, any other person who can justifiably claim to possess indistinguishable language skills from such educated native speakers are also considered native speakers. (If you find this definition inadequate, please add a comment below.)

Most respondents found this working definition acceptable – though several participants highlighted the potential problems with “justifiably claim” (self-assessment is often too optimistic), “end of studies” (undefined – but based on our previous finding, it makes sense to set it at end of college/university), and even the definition of language (response from a native Serbian speaker: “*One native language. Unless, of course, I add what is called Bosnian, Montenegrin, and Croatian to my ‘native corpus’. It used to be one language until 1991, Serbo-Croatian.*”)

Based on this definition, 81% reported one native language, 18% two native languages, and 1% three or more native languages. 46 different languages were listed as first native language, and 60 different languages as first, second or third native language (see chart below).

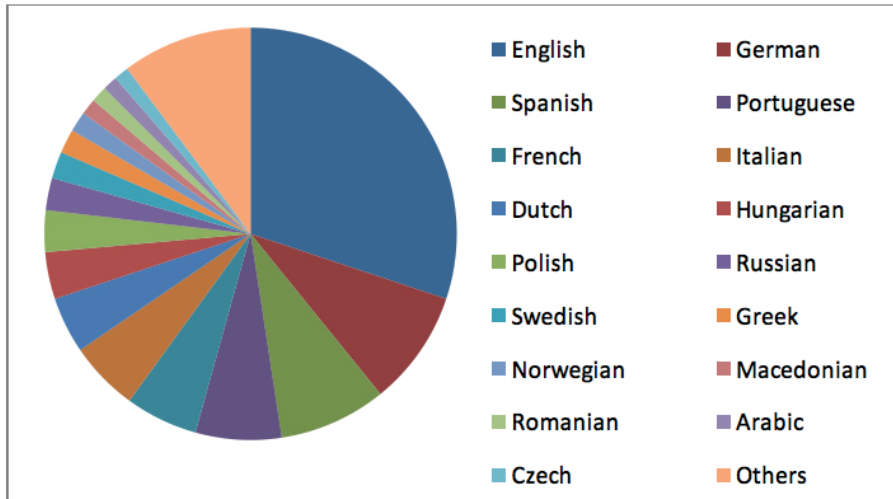


Figure 1: Distribution of languages listed as first, second or third native language.

4.2. OWN PRACTICE

Among those who claimed to have more than one native language, about 40% provide the same services into each, 32% provide more extensive services into one of them and 28% work into one only. Some sample comments:

Language, like all acquired skills, need continuous practice. Although I still have a native understanding of Italian, I no longer consider myself sufficiently prepared to translate into Italian.

[Br Pt ↔ US En, Same services] What triggered it was having passed the exam and been appointed a sworn translator/interpreter in Brazil. From that moment on, the law says that I MUST translate in both directions. Until then, I didn't have much demand for translating into my L2.

The second comment highlights the importance of national legislation – a point that we will revisit later.

Next, we asked whether respondents translated into any non-native language. Forty-five per cent chose “No” and another 45% chose “Into 1 non-native language”. The remaining 10% chose “Into 2 or more native languages”.

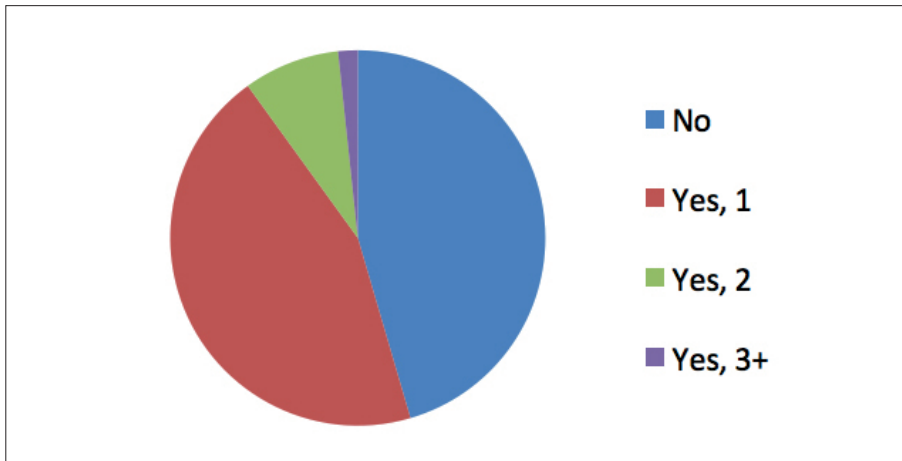


Figure 2: Percentage of respondents translating into 0, 1, 2 or 3+ non-native languages.

We then tried to identify factors that have a major impact on this answer.

Are the percentages significantly different for those whose country of residence is not the same as their country of origin? (Not really: 49%, 44%, 7%).

Are the percentages different for translators certified by translator associations or professional bodies (such as ATA or CIOl)? It seems there is a slight difference (56%, 39%, 5%) – however, it should be kept in mind that certifications are not equally available across all language pairs: English is a preferred (source or target) language. Therefore the certification status variable is not entirely independent of the native language variable.

Do the percentages depend on one's native language? With respect to this variable, significant differences were observed. The languages were grouped as English, Scandinavian, PFIGS (Portuguese, French, Italian, German, Spanish – the first five languages most projects are translated into) and Slavic. Two other languages were added, Dutch and Hungarian, because of their relatively large subsamples. The results are shown in the next figure.

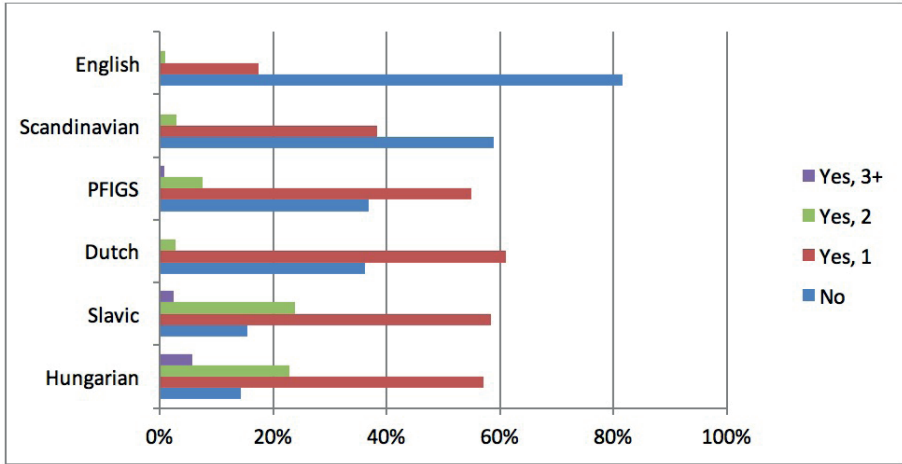


Figure 3: Percentage of translators working into non-native languages, according to their native language.

We checked again the variations according to certification status: among native speakers of English, 81.5% did not translate to a non-native language, while the same value among certified native English translators was 87.5% (significant difference). For translators with a PFIGS native language, the same percentages were 36.8% and 40.3% (less marked difference than for English).

These percentages equally include those who translate into a non-native language once in a while and those who translate very regularly. To obtain more relevant figures, we asked participants what percentage of their work came from translation into a non-native language. Using the same language categories as above, the following chart was obtained.

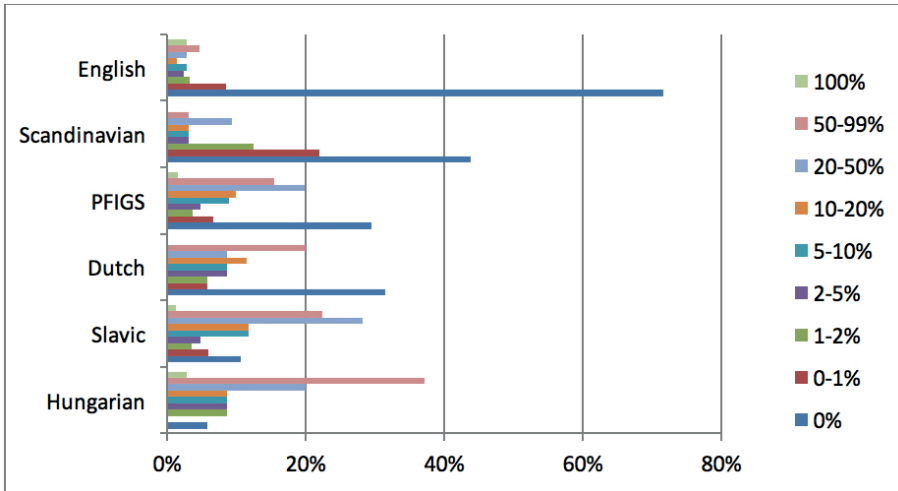


Figure 4: Percentage of work represented by translation into a non-native language.

Using mid-interval values (7.5% for the 5-10% interval, 35% for the 20-50% interval, etc.), we calculated a single average value for each native language. We also separated the PFIGS group into individual languages.

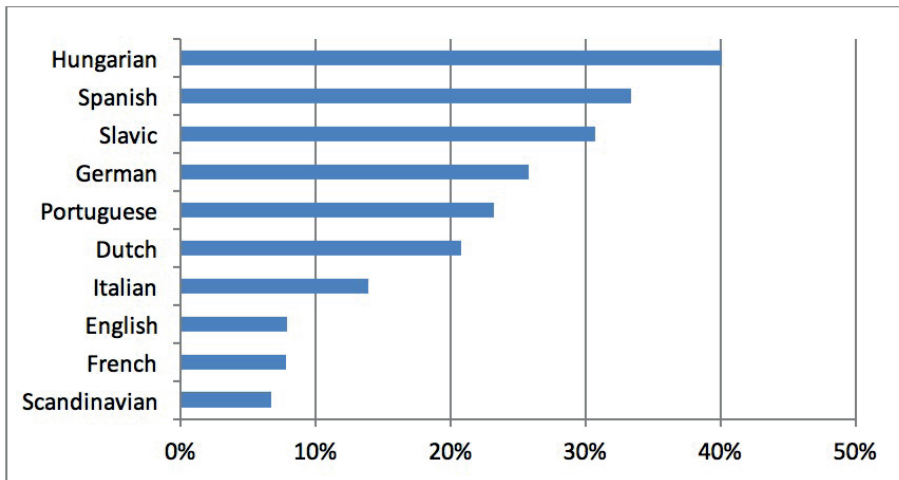


Figure 5: Average percentage of work represented by translation into a non-native language, by native language.

4.3. PERCEPTION OF PEERS' PRACTICE

Comments regarding peers' practice were generally quite negative:

Innumerable Brazilians, native Portuguese speakers, claim to be able to translate into English, their non-native language. The results are usually atrocious. The clients don't know how awful the translation is.

There are MANY Italians who—having felt the recession in their country—translate into (abysmal!) English because they need the money and, having spent 6 months in London, think they're an expert. It's practically an epidemic.

I am Italian mother-tongue and when I started translating, 15 years ago, I had a couple of clients who asked me to translate from Italian into English. I did it for a while, but soon stopped because I knew the result was not good.

It's common here, when you start, to translate into English too, because direct clients want only that – and cannot tell the difference with a text translated by a mother-tongue. The clients thought that an English mother-tongue could not understand clearly their Italian text, and so they wanted the texts to be translated by an Italian.

It's fairly common in Italy for direct clients to reason like that. Then comes an English customer that doesn't understand their texts... and they change their mind. But it takes a money loss to have them understand.

Many Germans feel they are capable of translating into English. They are usually wrong but do it anyway, and the results are usually catastrophic. However, if their clients are German they usually don't know any better.

Europeans especially often overestimate their skills in English, so it's fairly common for nonnative speakers of English to translate into English. This is the source of a lot of the weird, humorous, or silly translations we see in the English-speaking world.

Overestimating one's own foreign-language skills is very common. Proper feedback may curb overconfidence – but 18% of respondents reported they never received feedback on their translations into a non-native language, and 31% reported they rarely received any. It also transpired that feedback was rarer for translations into a non-native language than for translations into a native one. Perhaps there is a simple solution, as a respondent suggested:

I've written before about the importance of translators and translation companies signing their work. Amazingly (but not really amazingly :-)) this cuts the bullshit factor dramatically. It also displaces a lot of the paranoia from non-native translators about “commercial forces keeping me from making a good living” since you can actually see who does what. Very healthy, that. And surely a wake-up call regarding work produced by everyone (including peers who claim expertise).

4.4. EDITING NON-NATIVE AUTHORS/TRANSLATORS

Editing the work of non-native authors or translators is a viable source of income for many colleagues, especially in academic fields, where articles are often published in a single language, English. The percentage of revenue derived from such activities is shown in the next figure for English and PFIGS languages. (The demand is practically non-existent in most smaller languages.) As a respondent commented,

It's an occasionally attractive segment market in my language combination, with demand depending on a number of factors. In any case, it's an extremely good way to consolidate strong and positive ties with good clients (since you demonstrate so very clearly where your added value lies).

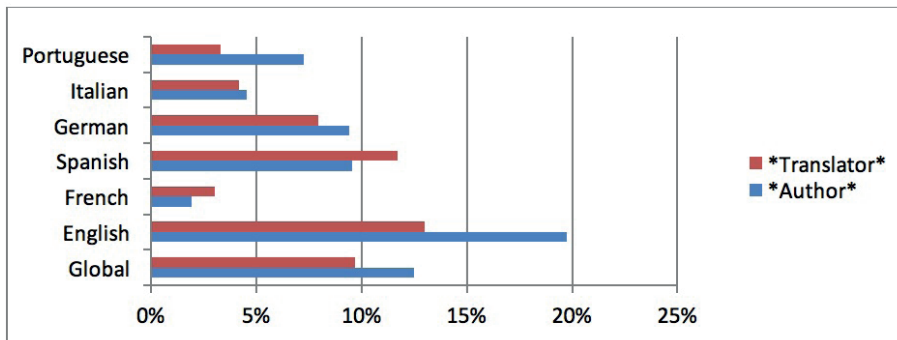


Figure 6: Percentage revenue of revising non-native translators' / authors' work.

4.5. CASE STUDIES

Next, we asked participants to share their first-hand experience about projects in which translation into a non-native language can be acceptable and when it can be even advantageous.

Several respondents noted their legal obligation to translate official documents out of their native language once they obtained a specific status (in particular, Argentina and Brazil were cited). A common trait of such documents is that they serve specific administrative purposes (often a one-off purpose) rather than outbound corporate communication. Some comments:

Some source texts are incomprehensible for non-natives. I once translated Dutch letters, written from prison, into Polish. Handwritten, a lot of strange words, associations, incomplete sentences etc. In that case I used a reviser who corrected my Polish.

When the source language is incredibly difficult, such as archaic English into Portuguese. A native Portuguese speaker would not understand the archaic English so he or

she must work with a native English speaker to interpret and then translate the text in writing.

Being a native speaker of the target language is often an excellent indicator of authenticity. But not always: in expert-to-expert communication among scientists deep subject matter knowledge is the top priority. An L1->L2 expert translator with a near-native command of the target language can produce a translation that is either fit for purpose (e.g., for publication in a peer-reviewed journal with an international readership and author pool) or that will require a reasonable amount of proof-reading.

I was sent a transcript of a Skype conversation in my native language, and was asked to translate it into English. The text was full of abbreviations, typos and chat colloquialisms, many of which would have been very difficult to pick up for someone who is not a native speaker of the source language. The translation was expected to convey the meaning accurately – without colloquialisms, etc. Looking at the text it became obvious that a jealous boyfriend was spying on his girlfriend, and wanted to know what the conversation was about. Due to the abbreviations, typos, emoticons, and colloquialisms, Google Translate must have failed pretty badly in even that. I refused to take it on, but am convinced that a native speaker of the source language would have done a much better job here than a native speaker of the target language.

I do some interpreting missions as a liaison interpreter during audits in French nuclear power stations. Some team members are previous employees from EDF, the French nuclear power company, and besides knowing all the ins and outs about EDF (and all the jargon, and EDF uses a lot!) some of them are also qualified to go into Restricted Control Areas.

Native speakers of the source language are regularly used for translation for intelligence purposes, where understanding informal language, recognizing obscure references that require further investigation and rendering the contents accurately are the top priorities, whereas stylistic considerations are secondary. Expert-to-expert communication between a small (say, Eastern European) and a large (Western European) language may also filter the pool of potential candidates so strictly that non-natives are seriously taken into consideration. In these cases, the involvement of a native speaker of the target language as a reviser may ensure that the text flows smoothly. Close collaboration between a native speaker of the source language and a native speaker of the target language is fairly common in literary translations.

4.6. ASSOCIATIONS

The final questions were about the role translator associations should play. Should they get involved in verifying the native speaker status of their members? Should they formally ban translation into a non-native language?

None of the codes of ethics we examined posed a formal ban; a typical formulation is found in FIT's position: "The translator shall possess a sound knowledge

of the language from which he/she translates and should, in particular, be a master of that into which he/she translates.”¹⁰

Respondents’ attitude showed great variations according to their native language, as shown in the next figure. (*Verification* = the association should get involved in the verification of the native language; *Recommendation* = the association should include in its code of ethics a recommendation about translating only into one’s native language.)

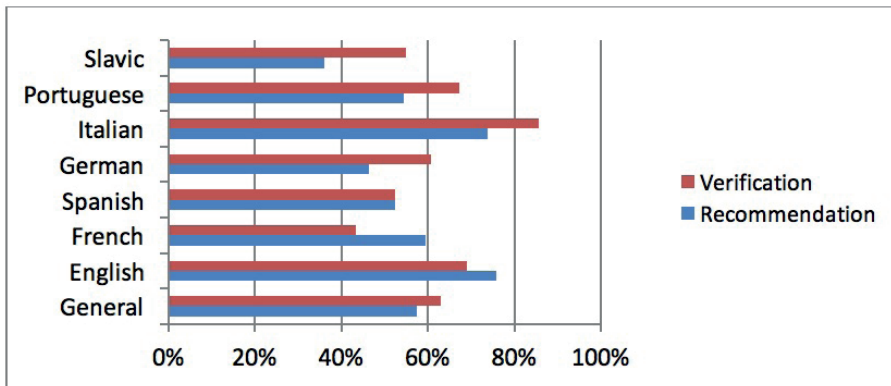


Figure 7: Percentage of translators in favor of active involvement of their association in the verification of native speaker status / including a recommendation in the COE about translating into one’s native language only.

5. CONCLUSION

Some of the most widely quoted survey results about the translation sector are based on entirely flawed methodology – including the use of inconsistent population samples for comparisons –leading to misleading or entirely meaningless results. And when such results can steer the market and translators’ professional practices (as happened with CSA’s seriously flawed rate survey results in Canada), the consequences are detrimental. That is why translator associations must play an active role in running carefully designed surveys, and must be particularly clear about the limitations of their surveys.

IAPTI’s first survey on translation into a non-native language was designed with these considerations in mind. Among others, it aimed to answer the following questions: *Is native speaker status a good indicator of expected success? Is the lack of it a good indicator of expected failure? What does professional practice look like? What factors affect translators’ attitude?*

10 <http://www.fit-ift.org/?p=251> (last accessed on June 23, 2016).

The multiple-choice questions of the survey provided some numerical results and shed some light on trends, but as warned above, one should not attribute excessive importance to the specific figures. We also received thousands of insightful comments; for many readers, these may provide the deepest insight. There was a refreshingly wide array of opinions as well as a lot of relevant case studies. Only a handful of comments could be included in the present article. The interested reader is encouraged to consult the full report on IAPTI's website.¹¹

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my colleagues in IAPTI's Ethics Committee, in particular Maria Karra and Vivian Stevenson, for their help with the survey and this article.

11 https://www.iapti.org/files/surveys/2/IAPTI_non-native_report.pdf (last accessed on June 23, 2016).