Native speaker intuitions

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Challenging the Traditional Axioms: Translation into a non-mother tongue
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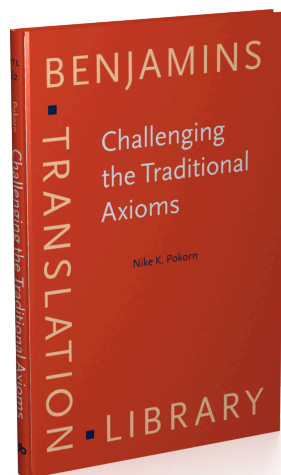
Native speaker intuitions

The questionnaire

The analysis of the translations revealed no particular connection between the mother tongue of the translator and either the quality or the accuracy of his/her translation. However, I needed the help of native speakers of English to test the truth of the final reproach to inverse translation: the assumption that all inverse translations inevitably sound strange to native speakers of the TL, that they contain undefinable elements that are disturbing to native-speaker readers, who represent the text's intended public. This assumption can be found, for example, in the writings of Peter Newmark, who claims that non-native translators of the target language "will be 'caught' every time" (Newmark 1981: 180) by native speakers of the TL, and it stems most probably from a widely-accepted hypothesis in linguistics that every native speaker is able to rapidly detect any non-member of his/her linguistic community. For example, Alan Davies in his book *The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics*, after admitting that there is no consensus among linguists on the definition of the term "native speaker", claims that the detection of non-members of one's native linguistic community is one of the basic and essential characteristics of every native speaker. According to him, every native speaker should have a feeling "of implicit – and very rapid – detection of others as being or not being members" (Davies 1991: 94). Thus in order to answer the question as to whether every native speaker is in fact *always* able to immediately detect a non-native translator, and if so, which elements of a text are crucial for such identification, a questionnaire was designed.

Included in the questionnaire were seven fragments taken from four English translations of *A Cup of Coffee*, one translation of *The Ward of Our Lady of Mercy* and two translations of *Children and Old People* (see Appendix I). Two texts were translated by Slovene native speakers: by Louis Adamic and Jože Paternost. Two texts were translated by English native speakers: by Henry Leeming and Anthony J. Klančar. Three texts were translated by pairs of translators: one pair consisted of a native speaker of Slovene and a

native speaker of English, Elza Jereb and Alasdair MacKinnon; the second pair consisted of a person who was familiar with Slovene but was not a native speaker and a native speaker of English, Agata Zmajić and M. Peters-Roberts; and the third pair consisted of two native speakers of English, Anthony J. Klančar and George R. Noyes.

The questionnaire was intended for English native speakers only. All subjects were born in an English-speaking community, where they also live and work. They also identified themselves as members of the English-speaking community by indicating that their mother tongue was English. To ensure a homogeneous socio-economic background and competence in English, all subjects were students or staff at different universities. Empirical evidence suggests that not all native speakers are *ipso facto* endowed with an intuitive ability to make judgements about grammar and acceptability. It is assumed, however, that educated native speakers are more reliable, in fact, the more educated the better (see e.g. Paikeday 1984:73). Thus the subjects were all highly-educated native speakers; included in the group were 5 university undergraduates, 8 graduates, 15 masters of arts, and 18 doctors of philosophy, all working in the humanities. There were 46 subjects in total, who varied in age but were all over 20. Since some of the passages were translated by British and other by American translators, 23 subjects were from the UK (11 from the University of Durham, England, 12 from the University of Heriot-Watt, Scotland), 8 from the USA (the University of Kansas) and 15 from Canada (8 from Vanier College in Quebec and 7 from the University of Alberta).

The selected passages in the questionnaire were preceded by a short introduction explaining that the fragments were taken from different translations of two short stories and a novel by Ivan Cankar; that the original texts were written in Slovene, i.e. in a language spoken by approximately 2 million people in Central Europe. The names of the translators were not given, since a foreign-sounding name could influence their answers; however, the date indicating the year when the translation was done was given in brackets at the end of each passage. Subjects were asked to read the passages and indicate whether the translator was a native speaker of American English, British English, some other English (Canadian, Australian, etc.) or some other language, not English. By giving them those options, an attempt was made to inform the subjects that the translators might be members of different English communities. The English native speakers were also asked to briefly describe what their decision was influenced by.

Each translated passage was followed by a question about how many translators were, according to their judgement, involved in the translation. The following three options were given: one, more than one, I could not tell how many. At the end of the questionnaire they were asked to define their "ideal" translation, i.e. they could provide their own definition or decide for one of two options: that the translation should be easy to read and fluent in the TL or that it should be as close to the original as possible, even if the structure of sentences in the TL sounds awkward. Finally, the subjects were asked to specify the translated passage they liked best.

The results showed that even competent native speakers cannot always distinguish between a native and a non-native translator when faced with the translated text only.

Table 1. Answers given by native speakers identifying the native language of the translators. The third column gives the number of answers indicating that the translator of a particular passage was an English native speaker, the fourth column that the passage was translated by a non-native speaker of English, the fifth column indicates when the subjects could not decide whether the translator was a native or a non-native speaker of English and the sixth column indicates how many interviewees failed to answer the question.

Names of the translator(s)	Mother tongue of the translator(s)	Native speaker	Non-native speaker	Cannot tell	No answer
Adamic	Slovene	20	26	/	/
Zmajić & Peters-Roberts	Croatian and English	35	9	/	2
Paternost	Slovene	14	32	/	/
Jereb & MacKinnon	Slovene and English	31	14	/	1
Leeming	English	34	8	1	3
Klančar	English	9	35	1	1
Klančar & Noyes	English and English	36	7	/	3

Table 2. Answers given by the interviewed native speakers indicating the native language of the translators, in percentage terms. The language in brackets indicates the mother tongue of the translators.
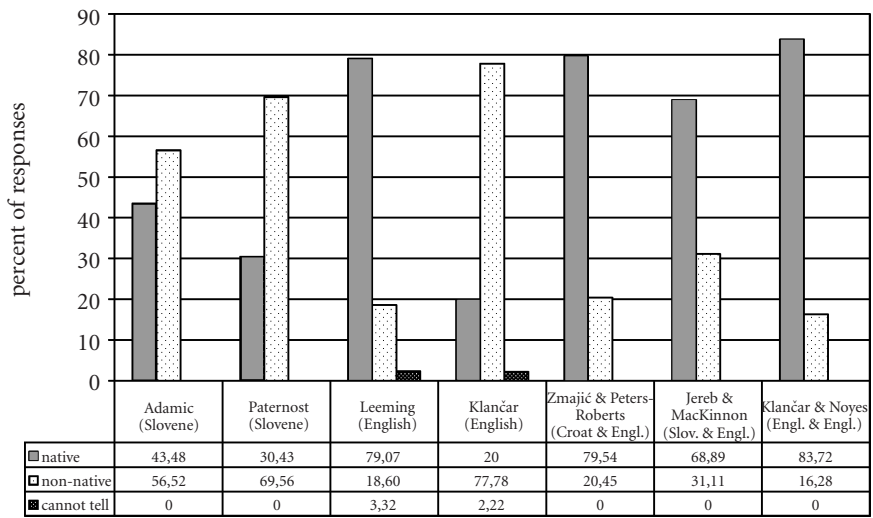
	Adamic (Slovene)	Paternost (Slovene)	Leeming (English)	Klančar (English)	Zmajić & Peters-Roberts (Croat & Engl.)	Jereb & MacKinnon (Slov. & Engl.)	Klančar & Noyes (Engl. & Engl.)
native	43,48	30,43	79,07	20	79,54	68,89	83,72
non-native	56,52	69,56	18,60	77,78	20,45	31,11	16,28
cannot tell	0	0	3,32	2,22	0	0	0

Table 3. Accuracy of the native speakers in identifying the native language of the translators. The third column gives the number of answers correctly identifying the native language of the translator of a particular passage, the fourth column the number of answers incorrectly identifying the native language of the translators, the fifth column indicates when the subjects could not decide whether the translator was a native or a non-native speaker of English and the sixth column indicates how many interviewees failed to answer the question. The bottom row indicates the total number of answers according to the defined categories. Pairs of translators, consisting of a native and a non-native speaker of English, are treated as non-native speakers of English.

| Names of the translator(s)	Mother tongue of the translator(s)	Correct answer	Incorrect answer	Cannot tell	No answer
Adamic	Slovene	26	20	/	/
Zmajić & Peters-Roberts	Croatian and English	9	35	/	2
Paternost	Slovene	32	14	/	/
Jereb & MacKinnon	Slovene and English	14	31	/	1
Leeming	English	34	8	1	3
Klančar	English	9	35	1	1
Klančar & Noyes	English and English	36	7	/	3
	TOTAL	160	150	2	10

Table 4. The results of Table 3, expressed in percentage terms.
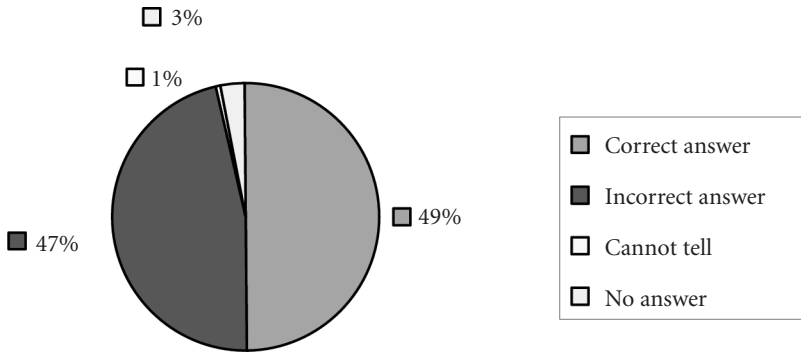
If the two pairs of translators, i.e. Zmajić and Peters-Roberts, Jereb and MacKinnon, each consisting of a native and a non-native speaker of English, are considered as non-native speakers of English, then the percentage of incorrect answers is extremely high (47%). But even if those pairs are excluded from the study, native speakers still prove to be unreliable in defining the linguistic affiliation of the translators.

Table 5. The accuracy of the interviewed native speakers in identifying the native language of the translators. Pairs of translators, consisting of a native and a non-native speaker of English are excluded.

Names of the translator(s)	Mother tongue of the translator(s)	Correct answer	Incorrect answer	Cannot tell	No answer
Adamic	Slovene	26	20	/	/
Paternost	Slovene	32	14	/	/
Leeming	English	34	8	1	3
Klančar	English	9	35	1	1
Klančar & Noyes	English and English	36	7	/	3
	TOTAL	137	84	2	7

Table 6.   The results of Table 5 expressed in percentage terms.
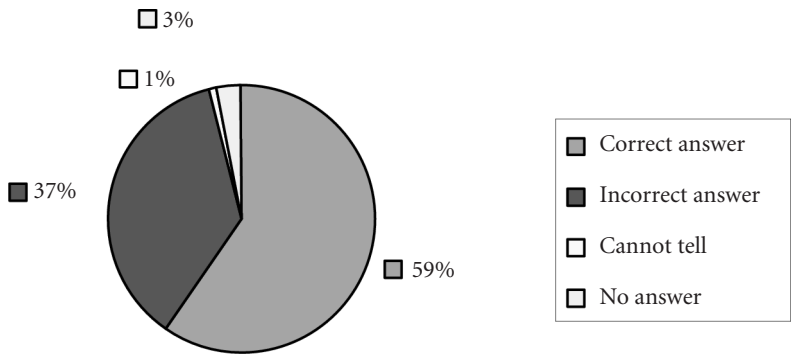
In responding to the passages translated by one translator or a pair of translators consisting of speakers of the same language, a mean of 59% of subjects correctly identified whether the translator of a particular passage was a native or a non-native speaker of English – which is far below the expected rates. 57% and 70% of subjects respectively thought that the two Slovene translators (i.e. Louis Adamic and Jože Paternost) were not English; the fact that 43% of subject still thought that Adamic was a native speaker of English was particularly surprising, since the translator himself admitted that he was still developing his skills in English when he published this translation. The results for the English translators were even more strikingly out of line with expectations: in Leeming's case 79% of subjects thought correctly that the translator's native tongue was English, although 19% of them considered him a non-native, while in Klančar's case only 20% of subjects granted the translator the status of a native speaker of English.

Anthony J. Klančar thus presents a particular problem: according to criteria accepted in linguistics, he should be classified as an English native speaker; however, the response shows that his English would not be accepted as a native variety by other members of the community. And since Davies claims that "The native speaker has a unique capacity to interpret and translate into the L1 of which s/he is a native speaker" (Davies 1991:149), these results suggest that Klančar was not a native speaker of English after all. His case is even more problematic since the analysis of his translations showed that he had problems with Slovene as well and that he often misunderstood Slovene texts. Would that mean that Klančar was semi-lingual, that his mother tongue was not isomorphic with any language? Perhaps – it does seem to suggest, though, that the number of years of use of a particular language and even the fact that

one is born in a particular linguistic community do not correlate with linguistic competence and performance in translation.

Since he was most probably aware of the fact that his English did not sound right to others (or perhaps requested by the journal to stylistically review his translations), Klančar decided to rewrite his translations with Noyes. A passage from that revised translation got a much better response in the questionnaire: 84% of subjects thought it was done by a native speaker of English. In fact, when assessing the passages translated by pairs of translators, a mean of 77% of subjects thought that the passages were translated by native speakers of English (79%, 69%, and 84%).

When indicating the number of translators involved in the translation, the native speakers interviewed were again often in doubt.

Table 7. Answers given by the interviewed native speakers indicating the number of translators involved in the translation. The third column gives the number of answers indicating that the passage was translated by one translator, the fourth that the passage was translated by more than one translator, the fifth column indicates when the subjects could not decide on the number of translators involved in the translation of a particular passage, and the sixth column indicates how many interviewees failed to answer the question.

Names of the translator(s)	Mother tongue of the translator(s)	One translator	More than one	Cannot tell	No answer
Adamic	Slovene	12	13	19	2
Zmajić & Peters-Roberts	Croatian and English	28	1	14	3
Paternost	Slovene	15	4	22	5
Jereb & MacKinnon	Slovene and English	15	6	23	2
Leeming	English	22	1	17	6
Klančar	English	19	4	15	8
Klančar & Noyes	English and English	18	6	18	4

Table 8. Answers given by the interviewed native speakers indicating the number of translators involved in the translation in percentage. The language in brackets indicates the mother tongue of the translator(s).
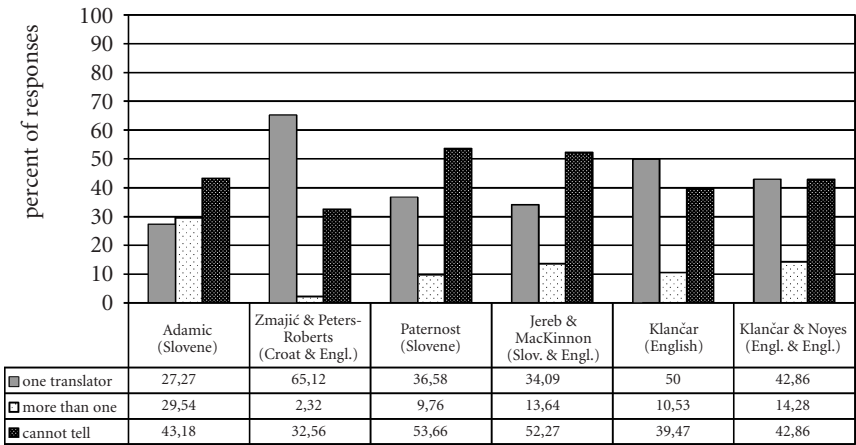
	Adamic (Slovene)	Zmajić & Peters-Roberts (Croat & Engl.)	Paternost (Slovene)	Jereb & MacKinnon (Slov. & Engl.)	Klančar (English)	Klančar & Noyes (Engl. & Engl.)
one translator	27,27	65,12	36,58	34,09	50	42,86
more than one	29,54	2,32	9,76	13,64	10,53	14,28
cannot tell	43,18	32,56	53,66	52,27	39,47	42,86

Table 9. Accuracy of the interviewed native speakers in identifying the number of translators involved in the translation. The second column gives the correct indication of the number of translators of a particular passage, the third column gives the number of incorrect answers, the fourth column indicates when the subjects could not decide on the number of translators involved in the translation of a particular passage, and the fifth column indicates how many interviewees failed to answer the question. The bottom row indicates the total of answers according to the defined categories.

Names of the translator(s)	Correct answer	Incorrect answer	Cannot tell	No answer
Adamic	12	13	19	2
Zmajić & Peters-Roberts	1	28	14	3
Paternost	15	4	22	5
Jereb & MacKinnon	6	15	23	2
Leeming	22	1	17	6
Klančar	19	4	15	8
Klančar & Noyes	6	18	18	4
TOTAL	81	83	128	30

Table 10.   The results of Table 9 expressed in percentage terms.
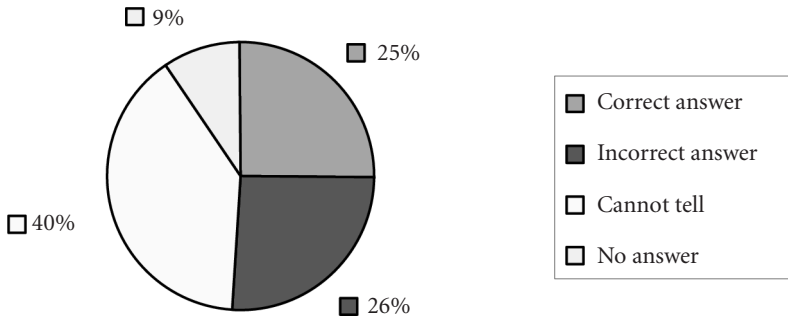
A mean of 40% of subjects were unable to identify the number of trans-lators involved in the translation of a particular passage, and 26% of them made the wrong choice, which means that 66% of 46 subjects interviewed were either unable to tell or were incorrect in identifying how many translators worked on a particular text. The subjects were particularly inaccurate when confronted with collaborative work: a mean of only 10% correctly indicated that a translated passage was the work of a pair of translators.

In accordance with the findings (Venuti 1995), the vast majority of subjects (86%) think that an ideal translation should be fluent and easy to read in the TL. Only 7% of subjects opted for source-oriented translations, and the remaining 7% added that the translator's strategy must be influenced by text type/genre or that the translation technique should fit the target audience.

Despite the fact that some theoreticians argue that translation pairs con-sisting of native and non-native speakers of the target language are "usually an unsatisfactory compromise" (Samuelsson-Brown 1995:16), the results of this study show the opposite. Surprisingly, translations done by pairs of translators are most appreciated: 83% of subjects chose one of the three translations done by pairs of translators for their personal best, which shows that a collaboration, apparently, does not influence the fluency in the TL.

Table 11. The "ideal" translation strategy according to the interviewed native speakers, expressed in percentage terms.

SL-oriented translation 7%
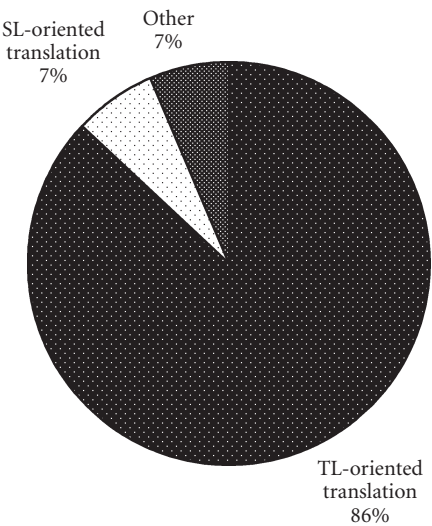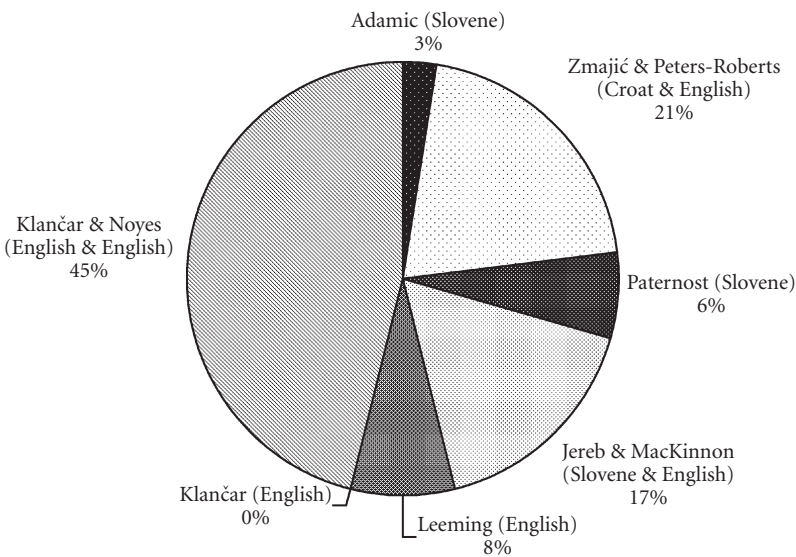
Other 7%

TL-oriented translation 86%

Table 12. The "best" translated passage according to the interviewed native speakers expressed in percentage terms. The language in brackets indicates the mother tongue of the translator(s).

Adamic (Slovene) 3%

Zmajić & Peters-Roberts (Croat & English) 21%

Klančar & Noyes (English & English) 45%

Paternost (Slovene) 6%

Klančar (English) 0%

Leeming (English) 8%

Jereb & MacKinnon (Slovene & English) 17%

To sum up, the results show that competent native speakers of English cannot *always* locate the foreign and disturbing elements in translations by non-native speakers and that they sometimes find the non-native elements in work by native speakers of the target language. The questionnaire thus shows that the assumption that every native speaker is able to rapidly detect any non-member of his/her linguistic community, when confronted only with a written document, has no solid foundation. Nor can native speakers tell if the work was done by one or more translators. Since native speakers of the TL of the translated text do not find the foreign and disturbing elements in some translations by non-native speakers and the majority of them do not detect such foreign-sounding elements in translations which are the result of a collaboration between a native and a non-native translator, this leads to the conclusion that the definition of the term "native speaker" in linguistics and translation theory is still far from being final and that translation theory should therefore be cautious when referring to the innate capacities of the ideal native speaker. On the other hand, the results of the questionnaire show that translations into a non-mother tongue are often regarded as acceptable by the target readership, with the degree of acceptability depending on the individual capacities of the translator. Moreover, that translations done by pairs of translators are not regarded by the target audience as hybrid and unsatisfactory, but as acceptable as those done by competent native speakers of the target language only.