

It's Not About Passing

Tul'si (Tuesday) Bhambry

Home

In the US I pass as English. Not in the UK though: I am read as an international hybrid as soon as I open my mouth. Once I was told I spoke like the Queen, perhaps because I had no regional English accent and rarely used slang. More recently, my British friends have been teasing me about my delicate American twang. I keep catching myself asking for the bathroom when I'm in the UK and need the loo. I'm often unsure if an expression is British or American or both. I'm confused, and I throw into confusion those who try put me in a linguistic or cultural box. I like to use words like *Doppelgänger* and *Ohrwurm*, and my accent suggests I must be German. According to my passport, too, I am. My bookshelves (in Berlin and North Carolina) are filled with books from France, where I got my first degree in French language and literature. But neither English, nor German, nor French are my mother tongues. Not in the narrow sense at least.

My mother tongue is Polish. I learned my nursery rhymes in Warsaw, and when my family emigrated to Germany, Polish continued to be our language at home. I don't have a foreign accent when I speak Polish, and with a PhD in Polish literature I have considerable linguistic and cultural competence. Yet a careful listener will have no trouble identifying me as a "heritage speaker". That's how linguists describe a person who spoke a language as a child but wasn't schooled and socialised in it. Ironically, one of the subtle differences that give me away as not-quite-native is my tendency to use Polish words where most Poles of my generation use anglicisms. Some people fail to identify me as a heritage speaker, assuming I'm an advanced Polish learner. Not really because of the way I speak, but on account of my "exotic" looks and my "Ayurvedic" name. I am half-Indian. Apparently it's not so easy to wrap your head around the idea of a non-white native Polish speaker. I understand. I, too, have a hard time imagining a multiethnic Poland...

Hindi and Punjabi, my father's native tongues, weren't part of my upbringing. As an adult I tried to teach myself basic Hindi. I learned to read the Devanagari alphabet, but I can't write much more than my name, तुलसी. Still, I can't pronounce my name the way my father does.

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"Hey, I'm Tuesday, nice to meet you," I say, hoping my new acquaintance won't ask if I was born on a Tuesday, or say, "Ha ha, my name is Wednesday," or insist on calling me Friday. When someone seems genuinely interested, I might tell them how and why I came by my preferred alias, but that's a bit of a private story that I'd rather keep for later. I prefer polite small talk when I meet a new person. Like this:

"That's a nice name. What do you do for a living, Tuesday?"

"I'm a translator."

"What do you translate?"

"Polish literature, and academic texts."

I'm more comfortable talking about work than explaining my identity to a perfect stranger. However, when I mention my profession, identity issues sometimes come up anyway. Especially when I come out as an "inverse" translator.

inverse translation

A term used to describe a translation that is done from the translator's native language into a language acquired later in life.

I find the word “inverse” quite striking. Here are the first two definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary:

inverse, adj.

1. Turned upside down; inverted.
2. Inverted in position, order, or relations; that proceeds in the opposite or reverse direction or order; that begins where something else ends, and ends where the other begins.



So inverse translation is upside down translation? That's an acrobatic feat. Meanwhile, the alternative notion – that of an inverse translation being one that ends where other translations begin – seems teasingly poetic. Acrobatics and poetry: two disciplines that combine talent and hard work to produce stunning results. I like that.

But inverse translations are rarely associated with acrobatic poetry, with extraordinary feats of balance. In fact, many people – including professionals in the industry – worry that a non-native translation can never be as fluent as one produced by a native speaker of the target language. The general opinion is that it would be much better for non-native translators to turn around and do it the natural way, i.e. into their mother tongue.

Illustration: Pola Bychawska

This condescending idea brings me to another association. “Inverse translation” makes me think of “sexual inversion,” an obsolete theory according to which “homosexuality is the result of abnormally close identification in early life with role models of the opposite sex,” and where homosexuality is “regarded as a pathology or perversion” (OED). From the late nineteenth century through the 1950s, “inversion” signified both cross-gender identification and same-sex desire. “Sexual inversion” began to be seen as distinct from homosexuality in the mid-twentieth century.¹ The term “transsexualism” emerged more or less at the same time, soon displacing “inversion”. Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) tells the story of a self-identified invert, a mannish lesbian called Stephen. Towards the end of the novel the protagonist asks herself:

¹ See Daniel G. Brown, “Inversion and Homosexuality”, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 28 (1958), p. 424.

How long [would God] tolerate the preposterous statement that inversion was not a part of nature? For since it existed what else could it be? All things that existed were a part of nature!²

I wonder if Stephen's reasoning about the naturalness of different sexual orientations could be mapped onto translation. After all, there's no denying that non-native translation *exists*. Perhaps we needn't go as far as calling it "natural," but we can definitely see it as part of our normal cultural practice. Mirroring Stephen's argument, I'd say it would be preposterous to claim that inverse translation was not a part of culture.

To queer things up a little bit more, let me propose that an individual translator's work cannot always be divided into such simple categories as "inverse" and "direct". These can be fluid categories. I once spoke and wrote in German like a native speaker, now I don't, perhaps one day I will again. Translation, just like desire, is complex, intimate and in flux, and every translator's experience is unique. It's our right and our privilege to celebrate this difference and to experiment with the possibilities it affords.

The idea that an "inverse translation" must be inferior to a "direct" translation makes sense if we focus on translators who have a presumably perfect command of their mother tongue but are just about proficient in the target language. Anecdotal evidence based on classroom exercises or semi-professional work suggests that non-native translation is a bad idea. But isn't such a sampling a bit problematic? To my knowledge, no serious study based on a corpus of professional literary translation has proven non-native work to be inferior. In fact, scholars have recently begun to question the dogma that translators should always translate into their mother tongues. Clifford Landers, for instance, suggests that despite the powerful arguments in favour of the status quo, "there are enough counterexamples [...] to convince a fair-minded observer that this rule is not inviolable".³ Nike Pokorn's systematic study (though its design is not flawless) has led her to conclude that the native translation process is not necessarily more effective. Most importantly, Pokorn identifies several factors that contribute to the quality of a translation: "the individual capacities of the particular translator, his/her translational strategy, and his/her knowledge of the source and target cultures".⁴ Experts have also distanced themselves from the notion of the "mother tongue" itself; today, the translator's "native language" is usually mentioned in one breath with a less restrictive alternative formulation, such as the translator's "language of habitual use".⁵

It's remarkable that this development in the field of Translation Studies hasn't percolated through the translation community. Clearly, more research is needed to devise effective ways of tapping into the potential of speakers with different language backgrounds. In the meantime, non-native translators will continue to face significant obstacles – institutionally as well as in our own heads.

I was fortunate to find a supportive and open-minded mentor. Antonia Lloyd-Jones believed in my ability to learn what I didn't know already, and thanks to the BCLT's mentorship programme and

² Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*; with a commentary by Havelock Ellis (New York: Covici Friede, 1929), p. 468.

³ Clifford Landers, *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001), p. ix.

⁴ Nike Pokorn, *Challenging the Traditional Axioms: Translation into a Non-Mother Tongue* (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2005), p. 121.

⁵ See for instance the definition of "inverse translation" in the *Dictionary of Translation Studies*, ed. by Mark Shuttleworth, Moira Cowie (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 90.

financial support from the Polish Cultural Institute, we were able to do six months of intensive language work. I benefitted hugely from Antonia's comments on my draft translations and her encouraging feedback. Still, I spent a lot of energy combatting internalised prejudice against non-native translation. I felt like a fraud. Wasn't it crazy to launch a career in which all the odds were against me? Last year, however, my translation of Maciej Miłkowski's short story "The Tattoo" won the Harvill Sacker Young Translators' Prize. Over 160 anonymised submissions were judged by an expert panel of Polish-to-English translators, literary critics and editors with no access to the Polish original. For me, this objective form of validation was proof positive that non-native translation can be done, and quite successfully, too. It was what I needed to really start believing in myself. I'd be honoured if my being awarded the prize also helped raise the profile of non-native translation, or if it inspired and encouraged others like me.

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The demand for translators is huge, so perhaps we should focus on ways of helping different translators find and do the kind of work they identify as suitable. In specialised translation, subject expertise is often more relevant than native-speaker competencies, so it makes perfect sense to bring your background and accomplishments into your work as an "inverse" translator.

But let's focus on literary translation, which requires a keen sensitivity to both languages and both cultural contexts. Few translators feel equally comfortable across the literary spectrum in their chosen languages. Most of us, native or not, find a niche – a favourite group of writers, a genre, style or time period that strikes a chord with us. For me it's clear what kind of writing suits my profile. For example, I don't do children's books, and I avoid texts that draw heavily on dialect or slang, but I enjoy experimental literature where I can trust the writer knew exactly what they were doing when they decided to bend the rules. Besides, the text must challenge me emotionally or intellectually, otherwise I don't see the point in translating it.

With these criteria in mind I'm able to define what projects are potentially suitable, but the only way to know for sure is to do a sample. It only takes 10-15 pages to know if I really want to do the whole book. Of course translation is all about expressing other people's words, *their* ideas, *their* stories, *their* jokes and games. But it also has a lot to do with *our* personal taste, *our* sense of humour, *our* politics. *We* decide what we translate, and the more difficult the text is, the more we must be in tune with it.⁶ If you're working on a living writer, moreover, it's good to know if you click, as you will probably end up working together in one way or another. It doesn't need to be love at first sight, but mutual respect is key. (The fact that this professional relationship can morph into friendship with people I might otherwise never have met is, to me, one of the most rewarding aspects of this profession.) Given the many requirements to make a good fit between the translator and the text (and the author), it seems less urgent to quiz the translator on nursery rhymes in the target language.

I want to make one final point. It's about editors and the fact that they exist for a reason. My translation of Maciej Miłkowski was good enough to win a prize, and yet it underwent several rounds of editing before it was published by [Granta online](#). No fewer than four people were involved with the English version. Since then, I've had occasion to work with several other editors, and I always find the process exhilarating and inspiring. Literary editors ask hard questions, and they're really smart.

⁶ I made a similar argument about the translation of humour in my article 'Aisance et précision: trois traductions de *Ferdydurke* de Witold Gombrowicz', in *Traduire l'humour*, ed. by Y.-M. Tran-Gervat (*Humoresques*, 34 (2011)): 51-62.

However, they don't necessarily read the source language. This means that when a native English translator makes a mistake based on a misunderstanding of the source text – say in Polish, a language they learned as an adult – the English editor will have no way of catching it. The outcome will be a sentence that's correct but whose meaning is different from the original. I've seen mistakes like that in English translations of Polish classics published by the most prestigious presses.⁷ Ideally, perhaps, a native English translation should be proofread by a native Polish speaker with excellent English skills (co-translations are not uncommon – but that's a separate topic). I'm not saying that such line-by-line correction is a must – clearly, that would not be economically viable, and a few minor misunderstandings don't usually harm an otherwise brilliant translation. But the myth about non-native translation being a liability can be safely laid to rest.

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Translation inverts of the world! Come out, share your stories! As some genderqueer activists say: passing is not necessarily the only desirable option. We can't form a strong community if we obsess over having our decisions and identities judged.⁸ I'm far from telling you to always be truthful. I don't always stick to the facts when someone in the US asks me where in England I'm from – I just tell them I'm from Germany or Poland or India or whatever. All they need to know is that it's complicated. To you I can say: I'm at home in translation, and it's a good place to be. And, given the ever denser migration patterns across our planet, there are going to be more and more of us third-culture kids. Let me conclude with Stephen's words from *The Well of Loneliness*:

Nature was trying to do her bit; inverters were being born in increasing numbers, and after a while their numbers would tell, even with the fools who still ignored Nature.⁹

⁷ In her article "Native versus Non-Native Speaker Competence in German-English Translation: A Case Study" Margaret Rogers similarly concludes that "fluent but inaccurate translations by native speaker translators can be counter-productive". See *In and Out of English: For Better, For Worse?*, ed. by Gunilla Anderman and Margaret Rogers (Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 2005), p. 271.

⁸ I'm inspired by Juliet Jacques's *Guardian* blog "A transgender journey," esp. the post "[Confidence is the key to passing – or at least to silencing the hecklers](#)".

⁹ Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), p. 469.