

Please Mind the Gap: Defending English Against “Passive” Translation¹ **by Wendell Ricketts**

Let me begin with a simple statement, one guaranteed to have any group of translators howling at each other within minutes: Translators can be defined as professional (by which I mean, among many other things, that they are entitled to charge money for what they do) solely and exclusively if they work *from* their second (or other) language *into* their native one.

In case that’s not enough to ignite a row, I’ll add a corollary: Translating into one’s dominant language is not a sufficient condition for holding oneself out as a professional, but it is a necessary one. It is, to break into a language that is not my native tongue, the *sine qua non* of professional translation. Without it, there is nothing.

And yet we find—we translators who are native English speakers, trained in our language, in our culture (high, low, and pop), in our literature, in our media, and in our craft—that translations into English are increasingly supplied (one is tempted to write “committed”) by non-native speakers; that our work is ever-more-frequently revised by non-native speakers who correct what does not require correction; and that clients are either unmoved by the mangled, macaronic, deformed English that is foisted on them as true translation or are unable to tell the difference. I’m not sure which of those two propositions is more chilling.

How did it come to pass, at a time when the English language is in such rapid diffusion, that the power, expressiveness, flexibility, and (dare I say it?) poetry of English have given way to the production of a lingua that is not franca but fractured, not vehicular but vile?

How have we come to consider it acceptable for English to be treated, unlike any other language you could name, as if it had no country or history—as if, that is, it “belonged” to anyone with access to it? How have we let English be kidnapped, stripped of context and meaning, and “simplified” rather than preserved as a cultural treasure and celebrated for its richness? How, in short, is it possible for English to be so widely used (in more than one sense of the word) and, at the same time, so ruthlessly disrespected?

¹ In translation, the terms “passive” and “active” generally refer to the source and target languages, respectively. Here, I use the term “passive” to indicate translation into a target language that is not the native or dominant language of the translator. The “passive translator,” in other words, translates *into* what would normally be considered a source (or passive) language. This is as good a place as any to add that my comments in this article are limited exclusively to written translation and exclude professional interpreting, for reasons that are presumably obvious.

Who's Minding the Mediators?

I'll say it even more bluntly: I'm convinced that translators in no other language would tolerate what passive translators are doing to English, especially in the context I know best—the decade I've spent as an Italian-to-English translator. I have every reason to believe, moreover, that my experience is far from confined to the Italian love-hate relationship with English.

I am not, let's be clear, concerned with translations from so-called "limited diffusion" languages into English or with other situations in which native-English-speaking translators may be hard to come by. What specifically troubles me, instead, is the increase in non-native written translations from major European languages into English—a situation in which no lack of native-English-speaking translators exists and which, at least in Italy, has become epidemic.

In the specific case of Italy, in fact, where nearly every university offers a three-year undergraduate program in translation and where hundreds of private institutions vend master's degrees and certificates in "language mediation," "qualified" translators are being churned out at an unsustainable rate. Required to translate into second or other languages, students are also taught and encouraged to market themselves as bidirectional translators, even after only a few years of professional-level foreign-language study. (I specifically exclude from such study the English-language instruction that is typical in Italian public schools: overcrowded classrooms, instructors who cannot speak English and who lecture exclusively in Italian, textbooks written in Italian and designed like comic books, and virtually no opportunity to speak English or to hear it spoken correctly.)

Upon completing their programs, these new "language mediators" join the throngs of self-selected translators with no special training or experience who view translation as a sort of temp job—less onerous than food service, babysitting, or manual labor, perhaps, and at least vaguely artistic. The result has been disastrous on two fronts: first, in terms of the abuse of the English language and, second, in its impact on the IT>EN market. To cite just one statistic: though 80% of translations in Italy are from or into English, according to the president of the Italian Association of Translators and Interpreters (AITI), translation rates remain lower in Italy than in any other European country (Baldazi, 2007).

Vehicular English—Check Your Mileage?

In the translation field, discussions regarding the use of ESOL as a target language are frequently shunted off onto a side track where they pick up steam in heated pronouncements about "vehicular languages," "globalization," and other twenty-first-century buzzwords. We're often assured, in fact, that "the English-speaking world will soon lose effective control of the English language," as Jack Lynch somewhat gleefully argues in his recent *The Lexicographer's Dilemma* (Genzlinger, 2009). Let's make sure we don't get derailed as well.

Simplified versions of English, intended as "international languages," have been around for at least eighty years. Charles Kay Ogden's Basic English, for example, was introduced in 1930 and is still widely taught in Asia, where it has merged with the 1500-word Special

English created by the Voice of America in the late 1950s for its international radio broadcasts. In his excellent *Oracle Bones*, Peter Hessler describes the teaching of Special English in China: “the linguistic equivalent of McDonald’s—a slow-paced fast-food language” (p. 52).

Pared-down versions of English have also been created for use in specific industries—the Transport Association of America’s “Simplified Technical English” (STE), to name one of several. More recently, French marketing consultant Jean-Paul Nerrière introduced his 1,500-word “world language,” Globish, setting out its principles in his book, *Don’t Speak English, Parlez Globish*. Among other things, Nerrière writes, users of Globish “must speak slowly and in short sentences,” avoiding “humor, metaphor, abbreviation and anything else that can cause cross-cultural confusion” (New Lingua Franca, 2009).²

In all these cases, however, this essential point remains: Basic English, Simple English, Globish, and similar inventions are based upon precise rules, grammar, and syntax. Words in their lexicons often have specific, inelastic meanings. In STE, for example, the word “follow” means “come after” and not “obey.” Thus, it becomes permissible to write “obey the safety instructions” but not “follow the safety instructions” (Skapinker, 2008). As a result, these forms of English can be deployed correctly or incorrectly; if the rules are ignored, the communication fails. In other words, neither Globish nor any existing version of “simplified” English does away with the requirement that users employ the language properly if they intend to be understood. In other words, these inventions are governed by the same irreducible rules as is standard English.

Moreover, though an extraordinary number of English pidgins or creoles are in use across the planet, there is simply no evidence to suggest that such variants spell the demise of the mother language. To the contrary, there are strong indications that exclusive users of localized forms of English are unlikely to be literate in standard English or even readily understandable to those who speak a different pidgin. One survey of high-school-aged “World English” students in Fairfax, VA, for example, concluded that the “ease of [such speakers] in conversational English masks the difficulties they face in learning ... the grammar rules they need for writing” (Glod, 2005). In consumer research reported in *Der Spiegel* between 2004 and 2009, meanwhile, as many as 92% of German consumers couldn’t make sense of simple advertising slogans in English—despite the fact that Germans use English as a vehicular language on a regular basis (Sometimes English, 2010).

These are revealing findings. What they suggest is that “vehicular English” can’t actually be driven very far. They suggest that reports of the death of standard English, especially as far as translation is concerned, have been greatly exaggerated. More to the point, of course, simplified forms of English (even if they are used correctly) or “world English variants” (if

² Nerrière’s approach to marketing his books and courses, incidentally, hinges upon a unique premise: You’ll never learn English, Nerrière argues; it’s too difficult and takes too long. You’ll always have an accent. Native speakers will always make fun of you. English teachers will keep recommending additional lessons, but only because they need the work. The solution to all that, of course, is Globish (Nerrière and Hon, 2009).

they are used out of local context) are all but entirely useless in translation. “Globalization” notwithstanding, there is still no substitute in written translation for correct, meaningful, standard English.

But the real issue is something else entirely: the increasing number of non-native-speaking translators who assure clients—and who are themselves evidently convinced—that the tortured, bewildering corruptions they put on the market are legitimate renderings of written English. In such cases, appeals to the presumed flexibility of “vehicular English” or claims that English has been conquered by ESOL speakers are nothing more than a smokescreen. What they conceal is a desire to “punish” English for its presumed hegemony; a blatant lack of respect for translators and translation; and a shocking willingness to engage in unfair business practices in highly competitive markets.

Getting Down to Cases

For several years, I have been collecting specimens of dubious passive translation practices and mistranslations (most but not all from Italian), a few examples of which are reported below. (A larger collection may be viewed on the “Inglisc: Mèd Een Eetaly” website, <http://inglisc.wordpress.com>.) I want to be clear that my criticisms of passive translation are not rooted in a desire to pick linguistic nits over tough cases of “cross-cultural mediation” that would give anyone pause. This isn’t a question of the cavils of that favorite straw man, the English-language “stickler,” who carries a Sharpie around to correct grocery-store signage and risks a stroke if forced to read an email that hasn’t been spell-checked. We’re not just talking about typos or a flubbed verb tense now and then.

We’re talking about egregiously bad translations and a genuinely troubling translation climate.

We’re talking, for example, about the failure to communicate serious warnings—such as on a bike path along the Naviglio Martesana in Milan where “beware of falling branches” was rendered as “beware of falling coppers” because the “translator” couldn’t distinguish between the plural of “copper” and the plural of “branch,” both of which are *rami* in Italian; we’re talking about the translation of a medical protocol specifically intended for *pazienti anziani e defedati* (elderly and debilitated patients) but which an Italian native speaker working IT>EN rendered as “ancient and defedated patients” (“to defedate” exists as an obscure remnant in English, but it means to befoul or pollute).

We’re talking about advertising “draft beers” as “beers to the thorn” (while a *spina* in Italian may be a thorn, it indicates “on tap” in the phrase *alla spina*); calling a vacuum cleaner bag a “product collection bag”; or informing readers that the Livorno coast has been “withdrawn by important painters as Factors, Christmases, and Lomi” (the coast, that is, had been “*ritratta*”—which can mean both “painted” or “withdrawn”; the painters in question are Fattori, Natali, and Lomi). We’re talking about the reason why Giorgio Armani is famous not “for his planning skills” (as an Italian passive translator insisted on interpreting the word *progettazione*) but for his skills in *fashion design*. We’re talking about a colleague of mine who was told by her Italian reviser that the proper translation of

preoccupare was “preoccupate” and not “preoccupy” (the reviser was certain because she had found it on the internet).

We’re talking about Coesia, one of Italy’s largest software-licensing and -development companies and Microsoft’s official partner in the sale of a large suite of business-specific “solutions” – which regularly features chop-shop English on its own websites and that of its affiliate companies. Here’s an example from its subsidiary, CIMA:

Thanks to the experience acquired in Formula 1 and in racing and luxury cars business, CIMA is devoted to the realization of a product that could contain in itself all those characteristics what innovation, safety and efficiency. In the awareness of a use of materials highly sophisticated, specific studies on the heat treatments and mechanical workmanships of high precision, CIMA boasts a great deal him of a product maneuverable, applicable to extreme conditions of power.... The adaptation to the peculiarities of every service makes even more it eclectic, satisfying the elevated performances required by different automotive companies.

We’re talking about the mini-scandal that erupted in mid-2009 when a member of the Emilia-Romagna Regional council criticized macaronic English signage posted at the University Hospital in Modena, taking particular issue with a notice that read: “Telephone or visit the consultory of your commune, where you will find an obstetrcian (*sic*) who will help you to resolve such problems as breastfeeding, etc.” The Director of Hospital Services, Simonetta Ferretti, rushed to defend the signage, subjecting the translation to a level of linguistic analysis unusual for a press release.

Unfortunately, Ferretti got just about everything wrong. First, she pointed out that the dictionary confirmed “commune” as the translation of *comune*, disregarding the difference between *la comune* and *il comune* in Italian: the former is a commune; the latter (which was the word used in the Italian text) means local or city government. Further, she argued that “consultory” (which does not exist in English as a noun) was “generally more comprehensible to English speakers” than “health center” (though “call or visit your local health center” would have resolved both *comune* and *consultorio* quite nicely). Finally, she defended “resolve” as a fair translation “in the figurative sense” of the original *risolvere*. Well, it is—and not figuratively—but Ferretti entirely missed the point: the sign failed to say that obstetricians were available to “help resolve any difficulties you may have, such as problems in breastfeeding” (which is what the Italian text meant).

Concluded Ferretti, “[I]t is not always possible to translate Italian terminology unambiguously into English” (Azienda Ospedaliero, 2009). Agreed, especially not when it’s a matter of such highly technical terminology as “health center,” “local government,” and “resolve.”

We’re talking about IT>EN translators who boast both of extensive lists of clients and of being “certified mothertongues” but who nonetheless manage phrases like these: “[The town] is situated in an optimous position on the Chianti hills”; “On 2000, jubilee’s year,

modern pilgrims come back to ancient route;” “We persue [sic] an essential goal: to avoid the neglect of the care of (our) orchards”; “Captain Umberto Nobile ... was flying over the geographical north pole, leaving fall-down on the ice pack a Norwegian flag”; and “The firm, was born in 1957 as a small craftsmen [sic] firm and become S.r.l. in the ‘79, are specialized in the planning and production of metal constructions.”

We’re talking about Italian “translators” all over the country who routinely place online ads promising “Translations into any language. Send text via email and it will be translated in less than 24 hours”—and who then run texts through Google Translate and charge clients €3-5 per page for the unedited results.

We’re talking about experiences such as one I had in 2008, when a tenured professor at the University of Florence hired me to translate an article about conservation efforts in the Ombrone River delta. After I delivered the assignment, he complained that I hadn’t followed his Italian closely enough and insisted I replace my translations with sentences like this one: “The second reason depends on this, that the geographic issue discussed above, changed now into a mere pretext used to introduce in wider questions, cultural as well as politic: they arose directly from the geographic issue and are the subject of the following discourse.” Naturally, I refused and he grudgingly accepted my version. Predictably, of course, I later found out that he’d completely restored his version of the text before publishing it, having also removed my name from the translation (for which I could only be grateful).

I have a difficult time believing that Italians—who are justifiably proud and protective of their language—would ever accept my telling them how to translate into Italian. Indeed, in a country whose defense of its traditions not infrequently borders on nationalism, Italians would be outraged if a foreigner claimed ownership of the language of Dante and Manzoni.³

³ Consider, for example, the national outrage that surrounded a publicity spot for the Le Marche regional tourist bureau. In the spot, actor Dustin Hoffman, depicted against a background of rolling hills and historical monuments, is seen in rehearsal for a staged reading of Giacomo Leopardi’s early-nineteenth century “idyll,” *L’Infinito* (*The Infinite*), arguably one of the most famous short poems in the Italian language. Dustin’s pronunciation is imprecise and his phrasing halting, and no less a figure than the “queen of Italian music,” the singer Mina, bitterly attacked the spot in an OpEd published in *La Stampa*, Italy’s fourth-largest daily. The editorial, entitled “You Have to Deserve Leopardi,” began this way: “They might just as well have used Oliver Hardy—whom Hoffman, in this demoralizing ‘performance,’ rather resembles.... Hearing our potent, marvelous language mangled by an American actor, wonderful though he may be, reminded me that we are always, eternally a colony.... Hoffman is surely an actor with ‘box office power,’ but have we no actors who are just as talented? And who speak Italian?” (Mina, 2010). Criticism of the spot grew so fierce in blogs, on YouTube and, especially, on Facebook, that the Region of Le Marche threatened to sue detractors for defamation. On the “pollution” of Italian by English see also “Italian Lies Dying ... and the Assassin Is English” (Ray, 2004) or “No, l’angliano no!” (Arcangeli, 2009).

Splendid Traductions⁴

As China prepared to host the 2008 Olympics, government officials in Beijing launched a “Plan of Action” aimed at stamping out confusing or inaccurate “Chinglish” translations in the city (signs such as “deformed man toilet” outside a handicapped bathroom or “don’t bother” instead of “do not disturb” on hotel room doors). In something of a miracle of understatement, the director of the Beijing Speaks Foreign Languages program acknowledged that “an over-reliance on the dictionary can lead to the incorrect choice of synonyms.” The main reason for the program, however, the director admitted, was embarrassment: “The government realized that if [the signs] weren’t changed, the city would lose face” (Simons, 2007).

I’ve never understood why Italians aren’t worried about losing face. In Italy, “Italish” is everywhere. Enter a restaurant in any town and you’ll encounter menus that offer “mushrooms with ham pants” (*calzone con funghi e prosciutto*), “first flats” (*primi piatti*—first courses), or “cooked queers” (*finocchi al forno*—baked fennel), while sidewalk cafés in Rome advertise “greedy sandwiches” (*panini golosi*) or “cocktails from fear” (*cocktail da paura*); take a stroll in the park and be warned “Do Non Abandon Garbage” or “Dog Only to the Last”; consult your hotel’s website for directions and be advised to “continue along the unsealed road” or assured that you can purchase bus tickets “to the cost of trafficking urban.”

And there are more serious matters. You might accidentally wander into the spearfishing zone in the waters off a Tuscan beach, assuming you weren’t able to interpret the posted warning to avoid “the area used by the swimmers with a charged fish weapon.” Alternately, visit such important monuments as the Arena in Verona or Bernini’s *Estasi di Santa Teresa d’Avila* in Rome and find “translated” tourist information that couldn’t be more indecipherable if it were written in Klingon.

Are we in the midst of some alarming shortage of native-English-speaking IT>EN translators? I can assure you we are not. So why not use native-English speakers, assuming they are also qualified to be translators? Though the almost universally cited excuse is cost (on the theory that Italian translators charge less to perform what should theoretically be more difficult and more time-consuming L2 translations), I suspect the real reasons lie

⁴ This heading is stolen from a 2007 article by novelist and TV writer, Matteo B. Bianchi, “Guglielmo e Grazia (and Other Splendid Traductions).” Beginning with a criticism of EN>IT translations of the sit-com, *Will & Grace*, in which cultural ignorance flattens or distorts much of the humor, Bianchi raises a distressingly common issue: though Italian television transmits hundreds of American comedies, dramatic series, and movies, all dubbed in Italian, an alarming percentage of them demonstrate indisputably that the translators have failed to understand either the English language or American cultural references or both.

elsewhere: a widespread conviction that translation is easy and that anyone can do it;⁵ a persistent refusal to recognize translation as a professional category (in a country in which nearly 60% of adult trade books are translations); a growing ambivalence regarding foreign-born translators; and the assumption of a sort of *droit de seigneur* regarding any text that passes through Italian on its way to English.

But perhaps the most primal reason for the Italian approach to English—a bias that Italians carry with them (as they like to say) “in their DNA”—lies in their endemic certainty that Italian is a complex, eloquent language while English is a simple, rather vapid one. English, in other words, is a language that Italians are forced to contend with, but that doesn’t make it a language worthy of respect.

One example will suffice: In January 2010, *La Repubblica* published a piece on lexical impoverishment among the young, focusing on the spread of teen slang and “text talk” (Balbi, 2010). Comments poured in from *La Repubblica’s* readers, many of them certain that blame for the presumed deterioration of the Italian language could be laid squarely at the feet of English. The invective reached its apogee when one reader wrote,

The Italian language is extraordinary and difficult precisely because of its enormous expressive richness—unlike American English, which represents the sanctification of ignorance carried to the extreme. The emulation of inane levels of linguistic lunacy and their diffusion among the younger generation is only the latest aberration imported from America. As if deregulation, globalization, revolving credit, rap music, sagging, television with more commercials than programming, reality shows, and McDonald’s weren’t enough.

Come Si Dice?

English nonetheless remains commonplace in Italy. It is frequently the language of business and is increasingly the language of science. More and more often, translations into Italian of English-language books and films appear with their English titles intact. English courses are widely offered in the schools, and parents are anxious that their children will be disadvantaged in the work world if they fail to learn English. Large companies such as Barilla hire teachers to bring English lessons directly into the workplace, and leading universities such as Milan’s La Bocconi offer degree programs conducted entirely in English. Knowledge of English has become a status symbol—although, like all status symbols, it mainly needs to be visible on the surface.

None of this, of course, has much to do with the qualification of professional translators. To state what should be obvious, the ability to live, work, study, or travel in a second or other language is not equivalent to the ability to write skillfully and fluently in that language.

⁵ In the case of the “charged fish weapon,” this and other bad translations into English, French, and German came to the attention of the press after German tourists complained that signage posted at the beach was gibberish. A spokesperson for the city in question admitted to reporters, “We wanted to save money, so we asked the wife of one of our employees to help us out. She has a degree in literature” (Traduzioni Show, 2009).

Language teachers know this better than anyone, perhaps: Second-language acquisition falls, very roughly, into two categories—what we might call “receptive” skills (reading and listening) and “productive” skills (writing and speaking). Students of a foreign language almost always lag behind in productive skills, even when their receptive skills are good.

The same was true of all of us when, as infants, we learned our first language. Our “receptive” vocabulary (our ability to understand what we heard) grew by leaps and bounds with respect to our “productive” vocabulary (the words we could summon independently), and this situation remains unaltered in our adult lives. In his 1988 book *The English Language*, David Crystal, professor of linguistics at Bangor University in Wales, calculated that an average English speaker recognized 38,300 words either “well” or “vaguely” but used only 16,300 “often.” More recent research on the language of English-speaking adolescents suggests that teenagers know as many as 40,000 words but use only about 800 in their daily production (speech, emails, text messages, etc.) (Griffiths & Gourlay, 2010). “Passive vocabulary is much larger than active,” Crystal remarked (p. 49), an inconvenient truth that non-native translators tend to disregard.

But of course the ability to speak a language, even well, and to write well in that language are two entirely separate skills. And of course the capacity to function in two languages does not, standing alone, constitute biculturalism. Who would argue the contrary? Quite a lot of people, as it turns out.

During an online seminar sponsored by the Rome-based European School of Translation in March 2009, Italian participants were asked to suggest English translations of the phrase *PULSANTE APRIPORTA*, the sort of sign one might encounter on the door between two subway cars. Variations on the theme of “door-opening button” figured in all responses—precisely the sort of context-free word swap that fails what I call the *Come Si Dice* (“How We Say Things”) Test. It references the concept, but it is not a translation. In a true Anglophone context, no one would post a sign that said “door-opening button” on the subway, and someone who hadn’t grown up in an English-speaking environment might never have seen the common PUSH TO OPEN.

Along the same lines, one of my favorite examples of *Come Si Dice* failure comes from a question sent to an online translators’ forum regarding the translation of the legend *NON CAPOVOLGERE*, which appeared on the outside of a carton of retail merchandise. An Italian translator working passively from Italian into English posed the question, and another passive translator looked in the dictionary and found that the verb *capovolgere* meant “to turn over” or “to turn upside down.” Thus he suggested: “Do not turn over.”

“Do not turn over” cannot be called wholly inaccurate (though the verb lacks a grammatical object—unless it is the reader who is meant to remain upright), but the reasoning of the passive translators in this case demonstrates two significant (and depressingly common) problems. First, the common failure to acknowledge that the presence of a term in the dictionary is no excuse for a bad translation. And, second, that many *Come Si Dice* errors derive from the most obvious of sources: a lack of *cultural* familiarity with the target language. Only someone with everyday life experience in an (American) English

environment would be likely to know that the correct English translation of the identical concept in an identical context—a true translation, that is, and not simply the slavish substitution of English words for Italian ones—is: THIS END UP.

Translation is not simply a game of cross-cultural *Password*. That's why a *grattacielo* is a skyscraper and not a "skyscraper" in English; why a person is "healthy as a horse" in English and not "healthy as a fish" (as she would be in Italian); why the idiomatic expression *togliersi un sassolino dalla scarpa* can't be translated (as a passive IT>EN translator did) with "take out the little rock from the shoe" but rather as "get something off one's chest." It's why *portali internet che hanno implementato una vendita diretta al pubblico attraverso il sistema di vendita per corrispondenza denominato e-commerce* becomes "online stores." It's why *I signori viaggiatori sono pregati di fare attenzione allo spazio vuoto tra il binario e la banchina* can be unimpeachably translated as "Please Mind the Gap."

The Nontroversies

In translation, I begin with the premise that the purpose of a written text is to transmit a communication from the writer to known or unknown recipients. The author of the text initiates the communication in her or his language, launching the message in the direction of an audience. In the case of a recipient who would otherwise be excluded because he does not understand the original language, the translator's task is to intercept that message and carry it forward. Between launch and landing, however, an additional operation is required—one that takes place entirely within the intellect of the translator. The translator, that is, having understood the original message, transcribes and re-encodes it—with appropriate words and terminology, certainly, but especially with the grammatical, syntactical, vernacular, and cultural strategies that ensure that the communication is able to serve the recipient without reassembly, modification, or further treatment. In a certain sense, then, every translation is a "localization."

What logically follows is that the translator's most essential skill is the ability to write in her or his native language—not "adequately," not so the reader "can figure it out," but superbly. Writing skills come *before* language skills. The fact that translator-training programs and professional associations tend to ignore this reality is only one of the best reasons to tear down the Tower of Babel and start over.

In 2008, when I began to circulate my petition, "Professional Standards for Written Translations in English"—which included such subversive proposals as the suggestion that translators provide written translation services only into their native language and that agencies employ solely qualified translators who are native speakers of the requested target language—I immediately began to receive incensed responses. In general, the criticisms fell into two categories: the "There's No Universally Accepted Definition of a 'Native Language'" camp and the "Native Fluency Isn't Sufficient to Qualify Someone as a Translator" camp.

To both of which I can only say: I wholeheartedly agree.

As I mentioned at the outset, native fluency does not, standing alone, qualify a translator. At least in the case of translations from “wide diffusion” (especially European) languages into English, however, it is a qualification without which a translator should not be called professional.

With regard to the definition of “native speakers,” I have two reactions. First, I have yet to meet this person of whose existence I am continuously assured, this non-native speaker whose writing skills are identical to those of a native speaker with equivalent education, training, and expertise; who is capable of producing clear, substantially flawless written translations in English; and whose linguistic, cultural, media, and literary acuties leave nothing to be desired with respect to the native who is born, raised, and educated with English as a mother tongue. My view of so-called perfectly bilingual, bicultural, “bidirectional” translators is that they’re a lot like Sasquatch: Many people are convinced they exist, but how many of us have actually seen one?

To take bilingual writers as a sort of transverse example (and translators are writers, first and foremost), the most commonly cited examples nonetheless remain highly scattered cases. Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Conrad, Sybille Bedford, and Li Yiyun are exceptional because they are *exceptions*; in each writer’s case, his or her personal and cultural history is unique and irreproducible. Thus, when people attack “native-speaking-translators-only” policies because “there are exceptions,” they are essentially making an argument of this variety: If 5 out of every 1000 smokers never develops a smoking-related malady, we should therefore conclude that smoking is safe. Outliers are intriguing, but they are largely irrelevant to the development of a response to central tendencies.

Most important of all, however, the question of how we should define native speakers or native languages is a red herring, a genuine nontroversy. The issue isn’t policing native speakers; it’s policing unqualified translators. The vast majority of the passive translators I’ve encountered, in fact, don’t necessarily even argue that they have native-speaker skills; they argue that *it doesn’t matter*. In 2007, when the topic of translating into a “foreign” language was raised on LangIT, the online Italian-language translators’ forum, literally scores of passive translators wrote in over a two-week period to defend their work, often quite indignantly, arguing that their clients didn’t even want high-quality translations. Is there any other profession in the world whose practitioners would be so eager to boast, “I provide mediocre service, just the way my clients like it”?

Let’s at least be honest with ourselves: Translation remains a profession without guidelines, without a true code of ethics, without a genuine deontology, without any reliable way to distinguish people who have a good reason to call themselves professional translators from those who don’t. I continue to believe that we need to stop being so reluctant to say that many people who hold themselves out as professional translators don’t have the competence to do so. And passive translation is one area in which that lack of competence is glaring.

If professional translation providers were adequately monitored, licensed, and tested; if a shared set of genuine professional ethics and standards existed; and if translator-training

programs discouraged rather than encouraged L1>L2 translation, the profession would correct itself and passive translations would decline. Instead, the opposite is true. When Proz.com, perhaps the largest online translator clearinghouse, published its “Professional Practices for Language Service Providers” guidelines in 2008 and began asking site members to endorse them, it failed to include any mention of native-fluency or >L2 translation.

It comes as no surprise, then, that of the 7127 translators in the Proz directory who say they are professionally qualified to translate from Italian into English, 39% report that their native language is Italian—only 35% indicate English.⁶ Among other things, what these figures tell us is that 65% of Proz’s “qualified” IT>EN translators are not native English speakers. Fully one-fourth (26%), moreover, are neither native English speakers nor native Italian speakers and thus translate into or from second or third (or other) languages. An average of 59% of Proz translators into English from Spanish, German, or French are not native-English speakers. I consider that a problem.

10, 8, 6, 4: What in the World Are You Fighting For?

I have only one question to pose to those who are affronted by my proposal to regulate passive translations into English: *What are you really against?*

If only for the sake of consistency, I could hardly object to a non-native-speaking translator who genuinely demonstrated “mastery of the target language equivalent to that of an educated native speaker” (as the American Translators Association’s Code of Professional Conduct and Business Practices phrases it).

In almost all countries that represent the world’s major languages, in fact, nationally recognized certification or testing of language skills exists for non-natives. In the United States, there’s the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language); with regard to most European languages, the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) contemplates six levels of language competence, from A1 to C2; and individual EU countries administer tests of their home language and evaluate language learners on the CEFR framework (the Swedex in Sweden or the CELI in Italy, to name just two). In China, the Business Chinese Test (BCT) and the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), both state-level standardized tests, are offered to non-native Chinese speakers who want certification of language proficiency for business, employment, or educational purposes.

In other words, objective testing already exists to demonstrate “native fluency” in the most common language combinations. If non-native-target translators have mastery of a second or other language that is equivalent to that of an educated native speaker, they should have no difficulty certifying it.

⁶ As of January 12, 2010. Of the native English speakers, 991 live in Italy—hardly a shortage of IT>EN translators “in country,” especially considering that these figures represent the members of only a single online forum.

In my experience, however, quality, accuracy, and cultural *and* linguistic mastery are rarely equivalent. Rather, it's a question of incompetence, of gross errors, and of bad (inaccurate, goofy, misleading, embarrassing) translations. It isn't clear to me why anyone would want to defend the kinds of translations I've mentioned in this article—or the thousands of others that one can find with a few mouse clicks. (The site <http://www.english.com/> is a good place to start.) Moreover, in high-competition combinations (major European languages into English, e.g.) where native-English-speaking translators are plentiful, non-native translation constitutes an unfair business practice, and it strikes me as foolish not to safeguard our profession and our livelihoods against it.

My proposals thus remain simple ones: professional translators should provide written translation services exclusively into their native language; translation educators should discourage students and instructors from providing or promoting passive written translations; professional translators should not falsely claim to be native speakers of a second or other language; any entity that uses or sells written translations should exclusively employ professional, qualified translators who are native speakers of the requested target language; and associations and online clearinghouses should require members to demonstrate native-level written competence in their claimed target languages.

Recently, I received a call from an Italian editor who said he was in “desperate straits.” He had hired two different Italian translators to translate book projects into English for his publishing house but, when the manuscripts arrived, he realized they were (in his own words) “a shambles.” As we discussed revising the books, he struggled to understand how such a thing could have happened. “Both of them have lived in the United States for at least ten years!” he said over and over. I'm sure it was true: they'd lived for ten years in the U.S. No doubt they got along fine in English at work and at home. But they weren't native speakers. And that's the point.

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An earlier version of this essay first appeared as a featured article in the May 2010 number of *Translational*, the magazine of the Northern California Translators Association and was later republished in two parts in *Le Linguiste* (Chambre Belge des Traducteurs, Interprètes et Philologues), 57, 2011, No. 2 (Part I, pp. 25-34) and No. 3 (Part II, pp. 25-34).

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