CHAPTER 2

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROSE TRANSLATION

Translating from the mother tongue into a second language (traducción inversa, thème) has become the Cinderella of translating among translators, translation theorists, and teachers of "real" translation (traducción directa, versión). It is so consistently ignored that it is difficult to know what to call it in English. The traditional English expression "prose translation" is not well known or often used. The 1964 edition of The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines prose as "expressing or translating in a foreign language, 1805."

Most British and American translation exchange students and Spanish graduates in English philology have never heard of this definition. If they attempt a definition of prose translation, they assume that it means translating ordinary written language, as opposed to poetry. The Collins Cobuild Dictionary distinguishes between "prose (uncountable)—ordinary written language in contrast to poetry" and "a prose (countable)—a piece of writing in a foreign language done by a student in a language class; used mainly in British English." There is no reference to prose translation. There are few references to translating into a foreign language in recent literature on translation, and no agreement as to terminology: prose translation, translation from the mother tongue, inverse translation, service translation, translation AL → BL. "Prose translation" is the expression that has been chosen in this book.

According to the Code of Professional Conduct of the Institute of Translating and Interpreting, "a member shall translate only into a language in which he has mother-tongue or equivalent competence." In international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Community, translators are expected to translate into their A language, or mother tongue. This attitude is a natural reaction to the non-texts, or nonsense texts, that are sometimes produced as prose translation. This sign was found in the window of a Majorcan shop: "English well talking. Here speaking American." This one was in a Paris hotel: "Please leave your values at the front desk." The following was posted at the entrance to a camping site in Germany's Black Forest: "It is strictly forbidden on our black forest camping that
people of different sex, for instance, men and women, live together in one tent unless they are married with each other for that purpose." However, the shopkeeper in Majorca, the manager of the Paris hotel, and the owner of the camping site in the Black Forest do not have easy access to international "high fliers" with English as their A language. There is no reason that local translators cannot be trained to transfer this kind of message from their AL to their BL: "English spoken. Americans welcome"; "Please leave your valuables with the receptionist"; "Unmarried couples are not allowed to share a tent."¹

The general public makes no distinction between translating from BL to AL and from AL to BL, and assumes that a translator will have no problem translating in both directions. In popular belief, linguistic competence is symmetrical. In 1989, candidates for a translation post with TVL 2 (San Cugat) were tested not only on their translation from English into Spanish and Catalan, but also from these languages into English. Those in charge were unaware of the problems involved in translating into the foreign language and expected a level similar to that reached in Spanish and Catalan. They assumed that anyone who "knows" Spanish and English should be able to translate in both directions. Translators know that linguistic competence is rarely symmetrical. True bilingualism (in which both languages are equally developed) is a rare phenomenon. Catalonia is a bilingual society, and most people speak both Catalan and Spanish. However, in individual speakers one language is always more developed than the other.

Very few authors have written about prose translation. Ladmiral wrote about it only to deny its existence—"Le thème n’existe pas." He recognized it as a pedagogical exercise to test performance, but as a professional aim it was "une espérance démesurée et de plus une exigence absurde" (1979: 40–50). In fact, in France, a metaphor for a brilliant student used to be "un élève fort en thème."

No one would deny the difficulties involved in translating into a foreign language, and yet it is a possibility. Newmark admitted that "brief translations from native to foreign language are useful for the consolidation and testing of spoken and written utterances" (1981: 184). Later, he introduced the term "service translation, i.e. translation from one’s language of habitual use into another language. The term is not widely used, but as the practice is necessary in most countries, a term is required" (1988: 52).

The practice is necessary in most countries. This has always been the case, and it is a growing trend in most parts of the world, particularly with the predominance of English as an international trade language. Translators of "exotic" languages often have to work into their B language. This is true of the Japanese and Chinese translators in Barcelona, because there are too few native Spanish speakers with high enough levels of Japanese and Chinese. (All of Mishima’s novels have been

¹ These examples were suggested by second-year Spanish students.
translated into Spanish from English translations.) It is a common practice in the Scandinavian countries, where English standards are very high and there are few native English speakers with adequate competence in, for instance, Finnish or Swedish.

The importance of English as an international trade language means that many Spanish translators sometimes have to work into English. English is so widespread that translation clients are likely to have passive competence in English and expect their linguistic experts to offer active competence. Many businesspeople, technicians, scientists, and politicians know enough English to be able to read and understand texts in their own fields. However, they need professional help to write a text in English, whether it is a letter, a speech, an article, an advertisement, the presentation of a research project or new technology, or instructions on how to use a new product. In 1985, teachers at the School of Translators in Mons, Belgium, said that market conditions had forced them to insist on near-native performance in English.

Furthermore, rapid changes in international relations and technological development require flexibility on all levels, and rigid labour markets are doomed to failure. Translator trainers have an obligation to improve their students' performance in prose translation in the areas where they are most likely to be working. These include many oral situations, such as customer relations, public relations, conversation interpreting, and non-intensive conference interpreting, where less-than-perfect pronunciation and syntax are acceptable if they do not interfere with the communicative situation. Written translations usually include work in restricted registers—business letters, contracts, and so on.

Translating for a local or central government is another area of work. Whereas the translation of legal documents, laws, and legal texts from Spanish to English presents considerable difficulties and should not be attempted in the prose class, interpreting for the police and the courts does not involve the same difficulties. The language has to be accessible to the woman who is reporting the theft of her handbag and to the witness in the courtroom. Because a large number of tourists visit some parts of Spain every year, many police stations and courts have interpreters and translators on the payroll. For example, the police chief of Rosas, the popular Costa Brava resort town, hired a translator with English and German to solve the daily communication problems involving tourists. The translator is expected to work as translator and conversation interpreter in both directions: English ↔ Spanish and German ↔ Spanish. Court interpreters are also expected to do work toward both languages, and at present in Spain there are no specific exams or qualifications required of court interpreters. Work in this field will probably increase as mobility within the European Community and immigration pressures from outside Europe grow.

2. Pym (1991) refers to these situations as non-100% situations.
Traductores jurados (official translators who have passed a state exam) are also often expected to translate in both directions. The kinds of texts they translate include those related to foreign trade (such as exportation documents, business letters, business reports, accounts, bills, banking and insurance correspondence, telegrams, and faxes) and to the government (such as birth, marriage, and death certificates, changes of nationality, academic certificates, social-security documents, and tax returns).

In a questionnaire answered by seventeen traductores e interpretes jurados in Barcelona in 1991, twelve offered multidirectional translations. Here are the language combinations offered by three of these translators:

a) From: Italian, Romanian, Spanish, Catalan
   To: Italian, Romanian, Spanish, Catalan

b) From: French, English, Italian, Portuguese, Catalan, Spanish
   To: French, English, Spanish

c) From: English, German, Spanish
   To: English, German, Spanish

The work market obviously exists. The question remains whether translators are born (spring fully armed from the Collins Bilingual Dictionary), mature on their own over a very long period of time, like a good Rioja, or can be taught.

---

3. Faculty of Translators and Interpreters, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona.