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## Professional translators' self-concepts and directionality: indications from translation process research

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### ABSTRACT

Translation into a second language (also called inverse translation or L2 translation) is a widespread professional practice in many language communities. However, it is still fraught with prejudice and believed to result in work of low quality, and is therefore widely under-researched. This paper investigates whether the self-concepts of professional L2 translators differ from those of professional L1 translators. The translator's self-concept, which can loosely be defined as the self-perception of professional roles and responsibilities, is a key aspect in certain well-known cognitive models of translation competence. The present article reports on a study of a group of bidirectional translators and a group of unidirectional translators whose self-concepts are investigated by means of retrospective verbal protocols. Results suggest that there are no substantial differences in the self-concepts of the two groups.

### KEYWORDS

Self-concept, translation competence, directionality, L2 translation, professional translators, translation process research, retrospection.

### 1. Introduction

Dam and Koskinen (2012) state that "business translators seem to have come to occupy center stage. They are responsible for the bulk of translation in today's globalized business world, and [...] focus in the translation literature and in conferences [...] has shifted from literary to business translation over the last decades." They argue that despite this fact, the recognition and therefore professional status of business translators may still lag behind that of literary translators who once represented translation studies' focus of attention. Of course, business translators as such are not a homogeneous group and can be distinguished according to, for example, field of expertise, employment situation or, as is the topic of this paper, translation direction.

On the one hand, translators engage in L1 translation (or translation into one's so-called native or first language), which has been the default translation direction in most of the Western world for the last few hundred years (Pokorn 2000). On the other hand, translators engage in L2 translation (also called inverse translation or translation into one's second language), which in many contexts is the less common practice of the two and often fraught with negative connotations and prejudice (Kearns 2007). One of the most commonly held beliefs is that L2 translation produces work of inferior quality (see Durban 2011). This perception is mostly based on anecdotal evidence provided by translation professionals, teachers and researchers alike, but it has been perpetuated by translation service providers, many of whom advertise their exclusively native speaker translations. This seems to have become an easily recognisable indicator of a provider's assumed integrity and quality of work. However, being 'native' in a language is not necessarily a quality criterion per se (Pokorn 2000, Prunč 2000).

One consequence of the prejudice towards L2 translation is that L2 translators may only have restricted access to professional bodies. In Switzerland, for example, professional translators can generally only become members of the two professional associations if they translate into their L1 (ASTTI 2006, DÜV 2012). With regard to practice, an international online survey initiated by *The International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters* shows that over 50% of the 772 respondents translate into their L2 (IAPTI 2015: 13). Country-specific surveys show that L2 translation is practised in, for example, Slovenia (Pokorn 2008), Croatia (Pavlović 2007), Poland (Whyatt and Kościuczuk 2013) and Spain (Kelly *et al.* 2003). In Germany, more than 25% of all members of the Federal Association of Interpreters and Translators with German as their L1 offer translation services from German into English as well as from English into German (BDÜ 2014). This probably reflects professional practice: translators who work into their L2 may also tend to work into their L1; in other words, they are bidirectional translators. In 2001, the European Commission (EC) started to recommend and foster the practice of bidirectional translation within their translation services and the candidate countries in order to prepare for the 2004 enlargement (EC 2001). In 2009, L2 translation, which had up to then been performed on an *ad hoc* basis, was permanently introduced for certain document types owing to the EC's need "to make the most efficient use of all the resources at its disposal" (EC 2009: 29).

For end clients, the question of whether translators work into their L2 seems to be of minor concern (IAPTI 2015). For the Polish-English translation market, Whyatt and Kościuczuk (2013: 73) suggest the following three reasons why clients commission L2 translators: firstly, they are easier to recruit and work at a more competitive rate. Secondly, clients believe that professional translators are competent enough to work into both directions. Thirdly, clients ask their regular and trusted translators to work into their L2 if required. These suggested reasons probably also make sense in other translation contexts where English is the target language. As English is the persistent *lingua franca* in the business world, the demand for translations into English will probably remain high for years to come. Since this demand cannot be met by native English translators working into their L1, L2 translation is likely to become an increasingly important translation practice that deserves to be recognised as such, also in Translation Studies (TS). The tendency in TS so far has been to either implicitly subsume L2 translation under L1 translation, to simply ignore it or to treat it with some contempt. As a consequence, the history of research into directionality can only be described as: short (Apfelthaler 2013).

Hence, research on L2 translation and especially on professional L2 translation is scarce. An exception is a study by Lorenzo (1999), who examined the processes and products of L2 translators and linked their effort to degree of uncertainty regarding the successful outcome of the communicative act. In a later article, she argues that this uncertainty may stem from L2 translators' potential difficulty identifying with the (L1) target audience (Lorenzo 2002). Interesting for the purpose of the present study, Lorenzo (2002) examined effort as indicated by the number of keystrokes, task time and number of pauses longer than three seconds, and found that the L2 translators who produced the most acceptable target texts also had the most labour-intensive processes.

Other measures of effort were used by Pavlović and Jensen (2009) in an eye-tracking study comparing professional translators' L1 and L2 translation processes. Whereas some measures confirmed their hypothesis that L2 translation is cognitively more demanding than L1 translation, others did not. They concluded that "it is certainly intriguing to find that L2 translation may not necessarily be 'more difficult' than translation into L1, as is widely assumed" (2009: 107). Alves *et al.* (2009) reported in a study with bidirectional translators that total and relative task times, which can also be used as indicators of cognitive effort involved in a translation process, were not significantly different with regard to directionality.

As the studies on cognitive effort suggest, there may be little difference between professionals' L1 and L2 translation processes when they are used to working in both directions. The present study is also interested in differences and similarities between L1 and L2 translation, but it focuses on how translators see themselves when translating, how they perceive their roles and responsibilities as professionals in connection with an actual translation task — in other words, on translators' self-concepts. It investigates whether professional L2 translators' self-concepts differ from those of professional L1 translators. In order to gain insights into translators' self-concepts,

data was collected through cue-based retrospection following a translation task, a method that is used, for example, in translation process research (see Saldanha and O'Brien 2013).

In section 2, self-concept and its links to translation competence are discussed in more detail, and section 3 contains information on data collection. In section 4, I report the findings, and these are discussed further in section 5.

## 2. Translators' self-concepts and translation competence

The translator's self-concept is a key aspect in certain well-known cognitive models of translation competence. In Kiraly's psycholinguistic translation process model, it takes central stage as it includes:

a sense of the purpose of the translation, an awareness of the information requirements of the translation task, a self-evaluation of capability to fulfill the task, and a related capacity to monitor and evaluate translation products for adequacy and appropriateness (Kiraly 1995: 100).

This definition suggests that self-concept is related to translation competence, namely to what the PACTE group calls *strategic sub-competence*, which forms the central part of their competence model (PACTE 2003). Interestingly enough, Kiraly developed his model based on a study with student translators and professional translators who worked into their L2. However, the issue of directionality was not taken to the fore in his study.

Also Göpferich (2008) suggests that translators' self-concepts have an influence on how they perform when translating: self-concept forms part of the base of her translation competence model and is related to the translator's education as well as aspects of social responsibility and role (Göpferich 2008: 155). However, as pointed out by Muñoz Martín (2014: 28), self-concept is not a rigid and fixed image one has of oneself, but rather a dynamic and adaptive image that depends on and is activated by the task at hand, i.e. a "working self-concept". According to Muñoz Martín (2014: 31), "[w]e understand and handle situations and face difficulties in ways coherent with our current activated self-concept and avoid courses of action that are not consistent with it".

Ehrensberger-Dow and Massey (2013: 106) "loosely define translator self-concept as the awareness of the multiple responsibilities and loyalties imposed by both the act and the event of translation". Their study included translation students at various stages of their training and trained translation professionals, with the former presumably having lower and the latter having higher translation competence. To be able to compare the participants' self-concepts, the researchers adopted Kiraly's notion of self-concept as a continuum "extending from the simple retrieval of spontaneous associations at the word level to a complex, multistage, problem-solving process in which extra-linguistic factors are taken into consideration" (Kiraly 1997: 152). They then determined which kind of focal points along this continuum their participants focused on while translating. As the present study also uses this approach, details are given in section 4. Ehrensberger-Dow and Massey (2013) report that students' attention and responsibilities tend to centre on issues that are related with a lower level of translation competence such as word-for-word transfer, whereas professionals tend to spread their attention and responsibilities along the whole continuum with a focus on textual and pragmatic issues. These are indications that the level of translation competence may indeed be related to the level of development of the translators' self-concepts.

The present study is based on the above assumption that translation competence and self-concept are related. Thus, if L2 translation produces work of lower quality than L1 translation, as critics of L2 translation may claim, L2 translators must have a lower level of translation competence than L1 translators — a difference that should be reflected in their self-concepts as professional translators.

## 3. Data

Data was collected from two main groups of professional translators. The first group consists of bidirectional translators who regularly translate from German into English (i.e. from their L1 into

their L2) and from English into German (i.e. from their L2 into their L1). The second group is the comparison group and consists of unidirectional translators who translate exclusively from their L2 into their L1, that is either from German into English or from English into German. Translators were considered professionals if they earned at least part of their living from translating. In the following, the two groups are described in more detail.

### 3.1 Participants

The first main group of participants (see Table 1) consists of six bidirectional translators (referred to as BiDir), who were recruited in Switzerland and Germany in the context of the author's PhD project on professional L2 translation. In order to qualify for the present study, participants needed to have done their primary formal education in either Germany, Austria or the German part of Switzerland. Furthermore, they needed to have started to learn English only at secondary school level and none of their parents should have English as their L1. Three of the bidirectional translators have Swiss German and three have Standard German as their L1. One of them was raised bilingually with Croatian as her second L1, whereas all the others were raised monolingually. Four of the six bidirectional translators have a translation degree; two have another degree at university level. Three translators work freelance, one is employed, one works both as a freelancer and staff translator, and one is the co-manager of her own translation agency. Their self-estimated engagement as translators ranges from 40% to 100%, and their translation work into L2 ranges from 20% to almost 100% of the total workload. Their experience as professionals extends from 10 months to 13 years.

The second main group of participants (see Table 1) consists of twelve unidirectional translators (UniDir). They were selected from the pool of participants recruited within the longitudinal study *Capturing Translation Processes*<sup>1</sup> to match the BiDir group as closely as possible with regard to experience, training, age, and job situation. They all live in Switzerland, except one who lives in Singapore. Of the six UniDir German-English translators (in the following referred to as UniDir\_GE), all are staff translators. All work full-time and have a translation degree except one, who has another degree at university level. Their experience as translation professionals ranges from eight months to eleven years. Of the six UniDir English-German translators (in the following referred to as UniDir\_EG), five are staff translators and one is a freelancer. They have worked as translators between two and eleven years and currently work full-time, except for one who works part-time (0.5). All have a translation degree.



**Table 1. Participant groups and translation tasks**

### 3.2 Source texts

The German source text *Wale* and the English source text *Whales* (see Table 1) used in this study were both short extracts of about 100 words from articles that had appeared in daily newspapers in the source culture (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *The Observer*), and which had to be translated for a similar publication in the target culture. The texts were of comparable types and on a similar, general topic, i.e. the stranding of whales.

Although the translation of newspaper articles may not be very common in professional practice, the texts were chosen so as not to favour any of the participants. The unfamiliarity of the subject field suggested that the translators would need to do some background reading, but it was ensured that such material would be easily accessible on the internet. As none of the translators rejected or interrupted the task, it was assumed that the translators handled it in a way similar to their usual approach.

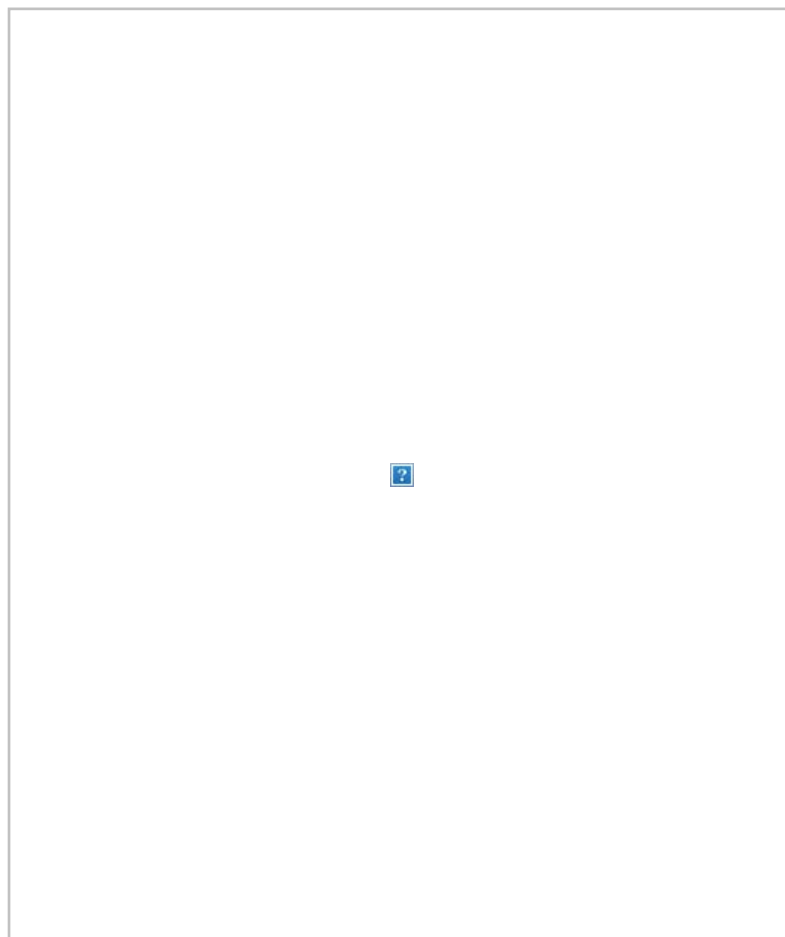
### 3.3 Procedure

Each participant performed the one or two translation tasks at a computer workplace at the usability laboratory of the Zurich University of Applied Sciences. The BiDir translators translated both the German and the English source texts; half of the group started with the German source text and the other half with the English one. The UniDir translators only translated one source text — the German one if they work from German into English (UniDir\_GE) or the English one if they translate into German (UniDir\_EG).

A program (Camtasia Studio) recorded all activities happening on the computer screen during the translation task. Additional programs logged keystrokes, mouse and eye movements separately, but that data is not considered in the present study (for some results from keylogging data, see Hunziker Heeb 2014). The participants were allowed to use online resources for research, just as they would normally do at their workplace. There was no time limit set for finishing the task. Afterwards, the screen recording of the individual translation process, which had been enhanced by visualised eye-tracking data (i.e. fixations as orange dots and saccades as lines), was shown to the participants, who were asked to comment in the language of their choice. The participants were not prompted to comment on anything in particular, but were encouraged to talk freely about what came to their mind when watching the video. If they paused for more than about a minute, they were requested to continue. These cued retrospective verbalisations were recorded, transcribed using the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI 2008) conventions, as suggested for example by Göpferich (2008: 78), and then analysed as described in the following section.

## 4. Analysis and findings

In the transcripts, the comments that indicated a meta-cognitive awareness of the translator's actions and decisions during the translation process, and which were therefore presumably related to the notion of self-concept, were identified. This was done in an iterative process, going through the utterances until all relevant comments had been identified. Simple accounts of screen events were not included. The identified comments were then coded with respect to their focus (see column *Codes* in Table 2)<sup>2</sup>. The resulting eight codes were subsequently allocated to five higher-ranking categories as suggested by Ehrensberger-Dow and Massey (2013: 109–110) and placed on a continuum based on Kiraly's (1997) notion of self-concept. The categories range from (1) focus on literal transfer of single words and phrases, (2) changes to sentence structure, (3) issues of target text quality and (4) loyalty to the source text to (5) awareness of the intended readership.



**Table 2. Continuum of self-concept categories derived from the retrospective commentaries. Utterances originally in German were translated by the author.**

In the left column of Table 2, the five categories representing the identified main focal points are listed as they would be on a continuum starting with a focus on micro-level concerns such as words and phrases (1) and spreading to a macro-level awareness of the targeted readership and its expectations (5). In the middle column, the eight codes that emerged from analysing the comments are listed. The right-hand column contains examples of participants' comments for each code.

As it was left to the translators to decide what they wanted to comment on during retrospection and as the length of the played videos correlated with the length of the translation processes, the amount of talk differed between individuals. The number of utterances that were related to meta-cognitive awareness, and hence coded, differed from participant to participant, too: it ranged from four to 24 (see Appendix for individual results). In order to make the results comparable between task-related groups, first, the proportion of relevant comments in each category per participant was calculated (see Appendix). Then, the mean per task-related group was determined. These proportions are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Mean proportion of comments in each category per task-related group<**

First, I shall compare the findings for the two groups of translators who commented on their task of translating the German source text (*Wale*), i.e. the BiDir\_GE translators and the UniDir\_GE translators. In their retrospective comments, both groups pay least attention to the level of words and phrases, with the BiDir\_GE group not making any comments within this category at all. This is noteworthy, since it seems to defy the claim that L2 translators are mostly concerned with their L2 language skills on the micro level when translating. For both groups, the focus was mainly on the remaining four categories, with issues of *sentence structure* and *loyalty to source text* appearing to attract about the same amount of attention. The results for the two categories *target text quality* and *readership* may indicate a trade-off between the focus on target text quality and readership from the UniDir\_GE group compared to the BiDir\_GE group. Possibly, the UniDir\_GE group's pronounced focus on concerns related to target text quality points towards a text-based approach, whereas the BiDir\_GE group seems to follow a more functional approach with a stronger focus on the intended target audience. This difference may be culturally based, related to the translators' training or to the fact that all BiDir\_GE translators are freelancers whereas all UniDir\_GE translators are staff translators. However, it does seem that the UniDir\_GE translators are more preoccupied with producing a perfect target text than the BiDir\_GE translators. The latter group seems to understand the translation task more as a communicative act, which needs to be tailored to the target readership. Possibly, their awareness of potential risks involved in L2 text production has led them to adopt a more balanced view of what translation involves.

Secondly, I shall compare the findings for the two task-related groups who translated the English source text (*Whales*), i.e. the BiDir\_EG translators and the UniDir\_EG translators. According to their comments, these two groups also seem to focus their attention mainly on the four upper-level categories and not dwell on the micro level of words and phrases. The BiDir\_EG translators spread their self-reported foci of attention quite evenly between the four categories. Both groups have a similar proportion of comments related to loyalty to the source text and the intended readership. The BiDir\_EG group, however, seems to be more concerned with issues of sentence structure. This seemed justified in the specific translation task since the English source text consisted of long and complex sentences, a text feature that needed some attention. Possibly, this could mean that the BiDir\_EG group acted in a more task-sensitive manner than the UniDir\_EG group. However, it may also be that the latter simply addressed the same text feature differently, that is by focusing more on loyalty to the source text and, subsequently, on ensuring target text quality. Overall, the BiDir\_EG group seems to have a more balanced awareness of its responsibilities and loyalties during the translation task than the UniDir\_EG group.

Thirdly, the BiDir\_GE translators' foci of attention will be compared to those of the BiDir\_EG translators. This is an intra-group comparison involving the same participants translating into their L2 (BiDir\_GE) and into their L1 (BiDir\_EG). Keeping in mind that self-concept is task-related, the comparison still shows a similar pattern of attention: on the one hand, equivalence at word level is only rarely mentioned and therefore seems to be of little concern to the BiDir translators during the translation act, irrespective of translation direction. On the other hand, the BiDir translators' attention seems to be distributed across syntactic, textual and pragmatic categories, again irrespective of translation direction.

Finally, I shall compare the BiDir main group to the UniDir main group. Overall, the findings are very similar for the two groups, but the BiDir translators seem to spread their focus a bit more evenly along the continuum ranging from sentence structure to readership, whereas the UniDir translators appear to be slightly more preoccupied with target text quality.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

As may be expected of professional translators who are aware of the complexity of translating, both BiDir and UniDir translators in the present study spread their attention across various focal points along Kiraly's continuum that represents the translator's task-related self-concept (1997). There do not seem to be substantial differences between the BiDir and UniDir translators studied, and the BiDir translators' self-concepts appear to be robust, irrespective of translation direction. In other words, both BiDir and UniDir translators seem to be proficient jugglers of multiple concerns and responsibilities. They show what Ehrensberger-Dow and Massey call a well-developed self-concept, which "might enable a translator to move back and forth along a continuum from words to readers as required by the particular task at hand" (2013: 107).

This ability can be seen as an indication of well-developed translation competence in both participant groups, irrespective of translation direction. If we accept the importance of self-concept as a component of translation competence, the results of this study fail to provide support for considering L2 translation inferior to L1 translation. The BiDir translation professionals studied are no more concerned with words and phrases than the UniDir translators are. Like them, the professionals translating into their L2 have a more or less balanced focus of attention on textual and pragmatic issues. From this it can be inferred that they see themselves as communicators embedded in a translation event that involves other partners. As business translation is mainly about meeting the target audience's needs, the BiDir translators seem to be well-equipped professionals.

In fact, the UniDir translators' relatively greater concern with target text quality may suggest that they see themselves more as wordsmiths (Katan 2009: 111) and multilingual text producers, which would appear to be a somewhat narrow role for business translators. In order to substantiate this hypothesis and the results of the present study, a larger sample would need to be analysed and other language versions included. It should also be kept in mind that the findings are based on self-reports elicited in laboratory settings. Additional approaches to investigating L2 translators' self-concepts could include analysing retrospective comments of actual workplace translation processes, interviews or ethnographic observations.

In conclusion, the results presented here suggest that the parameter of directionality deserves to be included in future studies to gain more information on differences and similarities between L1 and L2 translators, as well as the idiosyncrasies of L2 translation. More research will also help raise the visibility of L2 translation and strengthen L2 translators' position within the profession and, ultimately, lead to a more comprehensive and differentiated understanding of the work and status of business translators.

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## Appendix



**Table 3: BiDir\_GE: Proportion of comments in each category per participant, total number of coded comments and commentary duration**



**Table 4: UniDir\_GE: Proportion of comments in each category per participant, total number of coded comments and commentary duration**



**Table 5: BiDir\_EG: Proportion of comments in each category per participant, total number of coded comments and commentary duration**



**Table 6: UniDir\_EG: Proportion of comments in each category per participant, total number of coded comments and commentary duration**

### Biography

**Andrea Hunziker Heeb** has an MA in Translation from the University of Exeter and used to work as a staff translator. She is now a research associate at the Institute of Translation and Interpreting of the Zurich University of Applied Sciences. Her on-going PhD project is on professional translation into a second language.  
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### Endnotes

Note 1:  
Details on the study can be found at <http://www.project.zhaw.ch/en/linguistik/ctp.html>.  
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Note 2:  
The coding was done with Hyperresearch. For information on the program, visit <http://www.researchware.com/products/hyperresearch.html>.  
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