

Directionality

In brief



 SPA [Direccionalidad](#)

origins

There are centuries-old examples of translators working into a language other than their mother tongue, including translations into Latin by Greeks and St. Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin. However, it was not until the 16th century that reservations about the direction of translation were first expressed. They appear to have begun with Luther, who placed great importance on common people understanding and identifying with the word of God, leading him to question whether that would be possible with a translation performed by a non-native speaker of the target language.

other names

L1-to-L2 translation has been given many names, including theme translation, service translation, prose translation, reverse translation, forward translation, translation into a foreign language, and translation into a non-mother tongue. To avoid any negative connotations, there is currently a tendency to use the name L2 translation. In general, the term directionality is used to refer to the direction in which translation takes place.

abstract

Directionality refers to the direction in which translation or interpreting takes place within a language pair, in relation to what is considered to be the subject's first language (L1), second language (L2), and so on, according to the chronological sequence in which the subject acquired those languages, how far removed they are from the subject's native or mother tongue, or the subject's level of proficiency in them.

The need for L2 translation is often associated with translating from languages with relatively few speakers into lingua francas (such as English in the Western world or Swahili in certain African countries), although it also arises in other language combinations. L2 interpreting is a common professional practice, e.g., in dialogue interpreting and sign-language interpreting.

There is abundant evidence that L2 translation is an actual practice among both professional and amateur translators, as well as in translator training. However, the translation industry, in certain countries and contexts, and, to a greater extent, academia, associations and institutions have concerns regarding the quality of L2 translation.


There is a popular belief that being able to speak a language enables one to translate from and into it, and it is generally assumed that translation into one's mother tongue is easier and should be prioritized. However, this is not a clear-cut matter, and professional standards, international declarations, and the codes of ethics of various national and international associations of translators differ in their acceptance of L2 translation as a professional task. Research findings on the quality of L2 translation and the cognitive effort it requires have provided inconclusive data. Many more studies are needed to identify the elements truly affected by directionality.

This entry will deal with the concept of directionality from cognitive, market, and educational perspectives.

record

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Entry



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Introduction

Directionality refers to the direction in which translation or interpreting takes place within a language pair, in relation to what is considered to be the subject's first language (L1), second language (L2), and so on, according to the chronological sequence in which the subject acquired those languages, how far removed they are from the subject's native or mother tongue, or the subject's level of proficiency in them.

L1→L2 translation has been given many names, including theme translation, service translation, prose translation, reverse translation and, in psycholinguistics, forward translation, in reference to translating into a language acquired after one's mother tongue. It has also been called translation into a foreign language and translation into a non-mother tongue, names that may not always be entirely accurate, as an L2 can often be a national language, for example. Some of the terms used reflect the prejudiced notion that translating in the direction in question is "unnatural". To avoid such preconceptions, there appears to be a tendency at present to use the name *L2 translation*, where *L2* is understood to be a translation's target language, an acquired, non-native, non-mother tongue, a language other than that used habitually. Nonetheless, what constitutes an L2 (or an L3, and so on) is a bone of contention, especially in our



The 10 most spoken languages in the world. [Source](#).

increasingly multilingual and multicultural societies. There is even debate as to what actually constitutes an L1 and what problems the definitions of terms such as mother tongue and native speaker entail (Pokorn 2005).

The need for L1→L2 translation is often associated with translating from languages with relatively few speakers into lingua francas (such as Afrikaans, English, Hindi, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Spanish or Swahili), although it also arises in other language combinations, especially where the languages of neighbouring countries are concerned, and in business settings and scientific and technical contexts. L2 interpreting is a common practice, e.g., in dialogue interpreting and sign-language interpreting.

The fact that L1→L2 translation is a real professional practice in many contexts is not necessarily reflected in L1→L2 translation training, which can be difficult to come by and non-specific in nature. There is also a relative lack of research on directionality, although attention to the subject increased considerably in the first two decades of the 21st century (see [BITRA](#)).

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¶ Directionality in research

As controversial as various aspects of L1→L2 translation may be, there is general agreement that it is an area in which relatively little research has been carried out (Lorenzo 2002; Hunziker [2016](#); Whyatt [2019](#)). Although plenty of non-empirically based opinions as to the advisability or otherwise of the practice of L1→L2 translation have been expressed (e.g. Newmark 1981), most research findings on the quality of such translation and the cognitive effort it requires do not provide conclusive data. Some studies show there to be a positive correlation between cognitive effort and the quality of L1→L2 translation (Lorenzo 2002), while others show there to be no difference between L1 and L2 translation in terms of cognitive effort (Fonseca [2015](#); Hunziker 2019). The findings of other studies depend on the indicator observed (Pavlovic & Jensen [2009](#); Hurtado 2017) and on the individual traits of the translator (Ferreira [2013](#)). There are also studies that show L1→L2 translations to be less acceptable than L1 translations as far as end product quality is concerned ([PACTE 2009](#); Chodkiewicz 2016; Duběda, Mraček & Obdržálková [2018](#)).

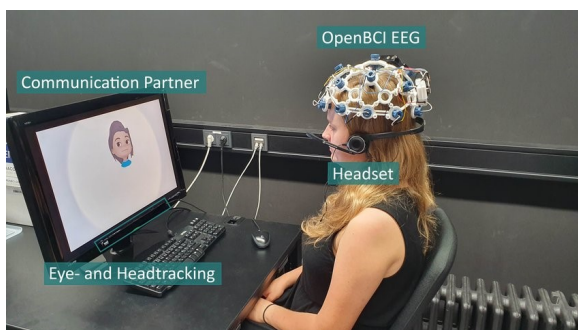


Image of a study using an eye tracker.

Source [Daniel Roth](#).

In research on the L1→L2 translation process, Pavlovic & Jensen (2009) used an [eye tracker](#) to measure the total gaze time, average fixation duration and pupil dilation of professional translators and students, working on the assumption that the elements in question would provide information on the subjects' cognitive effort. According to their results, both groups found L1→L2 translation more demanding than L1 translation, as the subjects spent more time on the former task and registered higher pupil dilation values while carrying it out.

In an empirical study with a group of professional translators, Ferreira ([2012](#)) observed that the subjects spent more time, paused for longer and worked with smaller segments when performing

L1→L2 translation.

The 26 professional translators who worked from Polish into English and vice versa in the study conducted by Whyatt (2019) did not take significantly longer to carry out an L1→L2 translation task than an L2→L1 translation task. Their translations were not of lower quality, in that the end products in both directions needed to be corrected by proofreaders who were native target language speakers. Nonetheless, close examination of the corrections revealed that directionality may affect different aspects of translation quality. A case study of the best L1→L2 translations showed the quality of the translation to be influenced by text type but not by directionality.

Hunziker's (2019) (PhD) in-depth study found that directionality did not significantly affect the processes of professional translators working from German into English and vice versa, the quality of their translations or the cognitive effort involved. Similarly, a study carried out by Pokorn (2016) with 580 master's degree students identified a strong correlation between the grades they obtained in L1→L2 translation and those they obtained in L2→L1 translation, leading to the tentative conclusion that directionality is not the most crucial factor in translation quality. However, the results of PACTE's experiment on translation competence (Hurtado 2017) showed some clear differences between L2→L1 and L1→L2 translation, one of which was that the translators who performed best in L2→L1 translation were not necessarily those who performed best in L1→L2 translation. PACTE's subjects felt that the L1→L2 translation task was more difficult; they spent more time on the development stage and less on the revision stage when carrying it out, and generally declared themselves less satisfied with the end product. Furthermore, the strategies related to instrumental competence the subjects used had some distinctive characteristics in the case of L1→L2 translation, such as much greater use of external support for the purpose of documentation, and more prolonged, intensive, varied and efficient use of instrumental resources. The above are just selected examples of studies on the process and product of written translation. For an in-depth review of research conducted on directionality in translation and interpreting in relation to cognition, see Ferreira & Schwieter (2017).

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Directionality in professional translation and interpreting

There are studies of different countries' markets and abundant evidence showing that L1→L2 translation is an actual professional practice, such as the existence in Spain of official exams for which translation must be performed in both directions. In the training arena, in Spain again, it was observed a few years ago that, for example, L1→L2 translation made up 20% of the tasks assigned to translation and interpreting students on placements in companies (Álvarez & Arnáiz 2017: 151).

Relatively recent market studies that reflect the real and widespread nature of the practice of L1→L2 translation in the Western world include those of Kelly, Martin, Nobs *et al.* (2003), Pavlovic (2007), Zimmerman (2007), Wimmer (2011), Whyatt & Kosciuczuk (2013), and Gallego (2014a). In that of Pavlovic (2007), as many as 70% of the full-time Croatian translators/interpreters surveyed said that L2 translation was a regular practice for them; some even felt that L2 translation was easier and many were able to charge higher rates for it. A survey that IAPTI conducted (Piróth 2016) with 780 respondents found that 44% of them regularly translated into their L2, which was English in 80% of the cases. It is especially notable that, acknowledging the current situation, the European Master's

in Translation ([EMT 2017](#)) network states that “market needs have also evolved, with the continuing expansion of English as a lingua franca creating new needs that can only be met by reversing the traditional ‘mother tongue’ principle in some translation environments”, although it subsequently adds “that the translator’s main target language should be mastered at CEFR level C2 or with native or bilingual proficiency”.

However, despite the evidence of L1→L2 translation being a widespread practice, the translation industry in some countries has many professional misgivings about it, particularly in relation to process efficiency and end product quality. That is mainly due to the prevailing opinion that L1 translation is always of better quality (Duff 1981; Newmark 1981). According to Pavlovic (2017: 247), the idea that L1 translation is the only possible natural activity stems from the “position and power of the globally dominant languages usually spoken by large monolingual communities”.

Another way of looking at the situation of L1→L2 translation is from the perspective of professional associations. The codes of ethics of some national and international associations of translators state that their members should only translate into their mother tongue or a language with the same level of proficiency as their mother tongue ([ATRAE](#)). Others also allow for translation into target languages for which they themselves have evaluated or authorized a translator ([AGIT](#), [CTPU](#), [ITI](#)), with the ITI also allowing its members to translate into a language of their habitual use. The [ITIA](#) accepts translators working into languages other than their mother tongue provided that they inform the client in writing about how doing so could affect the target text. Other associations appear to offer greater leeway by merely recommending that translators work with languages in which they have professional capabilities ([APTIJ](#), [BDÜ](#)), are highly proficient ([ASETRAD](#), [SFT](#)), or are qualified or trained ([AITI](#), [APTIC](#)); or by going no further than expressing a preference for translators working into their mother tongue ([ASATI](#)). The 1976 [Nairobi Recommendation](#) on translation (UNESCO [1977](#)) established that a translator could translate into a language other than their mother tongue if they were equally proficient in that language as in their mother tongue. Along similar lines, [FIT](#)’s Translator’s Charter (FIT [1994](#)) calls for mastery of the target language. What some organizations regard as constituting proficiency in or mastery of the target language is not clearly defined, however. Lastly, there are codes of conduct that make no mention whatsoever of directionality ([AGPTI](#), [APT](#), [FEBRAPILS](#), [TAC](#)).

In terms of professional standards, the [EUATC](#) quality standard for translation companies establishes that the translators they employ should only work into their mother tongue; that also appears to be the preference of the German [DIN 2345](#) standard. The [EN 15038:2006](#) and [ISO 17100](#) standards respectively call for mastery of and fluency in the target language, but do not go into greater detail.

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Directionality in translator and interpreter training

Despite the ongoing debate about the effort-to-quality ratio involved, L1→L2 translation courses are regularly and widely taught as part of translator and interpreter training in many countries, in both bachelor’s and master’s degree programmes. In Spain, however, where, according to a report by Rico & García ([2016](#)), L1→L2 translation has a significant role in the labour market, “[...] this translation modality is under-represented in the T&I curricula, where many universities do not even

include it in their study programmes (...)” (Álvarez & Arnáiz 2017: 155), a finding corroborated by Horcas-Rufián & Kelly (2020).

As mentioned previously, that state of affairs does not reflect the current demand for and practice of L1→L2 translation in professional circles, as corroborated, albeit only in relation to Spain, by a study in which Schnell & Rodríguez (2017: 176) sought language service providers’ opinions regarding the employability of translation and interpreting graduates. The respondents felt that training syllabuses ought to develop competences such as general L1→L2 translation (90%) and specialized L1→L2 translation (73.3%). In such syllabuses, L1→L2 translation is sometimes taught by native L1 speakers and sometimes by native L2 speakers; very occasionally, it is taught by a combination of the two. For data on and a discussion of the most suitable profile for L1→L2 translation teachers, see Pokorn (2010).

Each country has its own ideas and tradition where L1→L2 translation is concerned, and they influence its approach to teaching such translation. In China, for example, there is a long history of Chinese translators (or philologists, in many cases) translating the country’s literary classics into foreign languages, resulting in there being many university subjects/modules on that kind of translation.

The status of L1→L2 translation teaching is as varied as opinions about the L1→L2 translation market and the results of L1→L2 translation research are. The lack of consensus as to what L1→L2 translation really involves, what to teach and when to teach it means there is little clear guidance for L1→L2 translation teachers and learners. The general belief that anyone who speaks a second language can translate into it is false and leads to poor practices. As shown in an empirical study (Hurtado 2017), being capable of translating well into one’s mother tongue does not necessarily entail being capable of doing so into a second language, and the same principle applies to teaching. Being a native speaker of students’ second language does not necessarily make teaching L1→L2 translation easier; it can actually cause both the teacher and the students a range of problems, the solutions to which require different strategies.

According to Wimmer (2011: 104), most specific proposals for L1→L2 translation teaching consider L1→L2 translation to be merely the L1 translation process in reverse, and they advocate approaching training in translation in both directions in the same way, only with L1→L2 translation treated more as an exercise in language reproduction and second language acquisition than as an activity with great potential value for future professionals. L1→L2 translation “handbooks” to which the above applies tend to consist of a series of decontextualized, contrastive L1→L2 translation exercises that, while not without value, focus on purely linguistic elements and overlook the importance of a translation’s brief, function, target audience and directionality.

There are some works, however, that regard L1→L2 translation teaching not in such a reductionistic way but as something much more meaningful. As Gallego (2014b: 80, our translation) points out:

One of the first works to contribute to progress in L2 translation teaching is that of Hewson (1993), according to whom it is necessary to 1) rethink assessment

systems, 2) teach translation rather than the foreign language, 3) engage in true reformulation work that takes the communicative situation into consideration and requires the use of paraphrasing (avoiding *mot à mot*), 4) think of L1 and L2 translation as complementary, 5) treat equivalence as a concept that can be modulated according to the specific conditions of each situation, and 6) identify recurring problems characteristic of translation and promote systematic work.

Beeby (1996) views translation as a textual operation, an act of communication and a cognitive process, and her work represents a major step forward in defining specific L1→L2 translation learning objectives and teaching methodologies. Designed around types of difficulties, her proposal establishes a progression for the teaching of general L1→L2 translation. Its objectives include making students aware of their limitations and potential in relation to L1→L2 translation, and helping them learn to recognize which genres they will be capable of translating competently and how to prepare to do so. According to Beeby, the most suitable genres for written L1→L2 translation are probably those that are standardized and informative.

Kelly (1997) presents the design of a general L1→L2 translation subject, which is based on the premises that the most difficult part of L1→L2 translation is reconstructing the source text in the target language and that such translation should have a limited presence in training and professional practice. The main objectives of the training she proposes are to make students aware of L1→L2 translation's inherent difficulties and capable of identifying text types that can feasibly be translated into a second language and the differences between L2→L1 and L1→L2 translation. She recommends establishing a progression by selecting types of real texts, beginning with general-interest (basically journalistic) texts that are brief (approximately 70-100 words long) and free from cultural references (as far as possible), with text length and the need for documentation increasing as training advances.

Another proposal that aims to make students aware of their capabilities and limitations when deciding whether to accept L1→L2 translation work is that of Vildebrand (1997). It also highlights the advantages of L1→L2 translation, which can be seen not simply as more difficult but as an activity that encourages students to reflect on criteria for equivalence and suitability, because, according to the author, translating into a foreign language is a more conscious process, in which a more marked tendency to use problem-solving strategies can be observed.

The L1→L2 translation teaching methodology presented by Hansen (1997) primarily focuses on risk reduction, given that, according to the author and other studies (Hurtado 2017; Duběda, Mraček & Obdržálková 2018), translators make more errors when working into their second language. Hansen says that students translating into their L2 usually copy source language structures and appear to be uncertain when making decisions, so the main objective of L1→L2 translation teaching should be for students to learn to recognize errors and apply problem-solving strategies. With that in mind, her methodology is based on contrastive analysis.

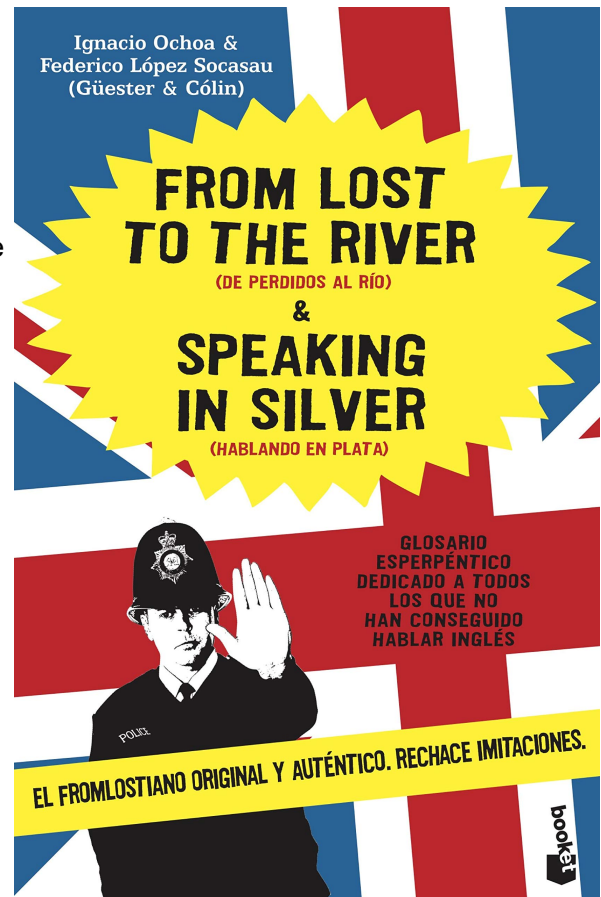
Weatherby's (1998) proposal sets out to generate awareness of the stylistic differences between Spanish and English in numerous genres and avoid

students only paying attention to lexical difficulties. Additionally, it focuses on aspects of professional practice, such as translation briefs. Nonetheless, it also attributes importance to having a theoretical model to give students a better understanding of how L1 and L2 translation differ. In that regard, and like the authors mentioned above, Weatherby emphasizes that reformulation is more difficult in L1→L2 translation. With regard to methodology, she underlines the importance of the contrastive study of texts and their conventions, and expresses the opinion that mixing practical translation activities with language study is inevitable in L1→L2 translation classes (Wimmer 2011: 109).

Martínez Melis (2001) argues that L1→L2 translation involves a specific kind of translation competence. Although her work is more oriented to research on assessment, she proposes a methodology based on competences and (methodological, linguistic, professional and textual) learning objectives. She adopts the PACTE group's translation competence model, and identifies the specific traits of L1→L2 translation within each sub-competence (2001: 178-182) and their pedagogical implications. Additionally, she emphasizes the importance of working with texts liable to be translated in a real situation.

There are also some publications on teaching specialized L1→L2 translation, such as Corpas (2001) and Cámara (2003), which look at scientific translation; Way (1997), which deals with scientific and technical translation and economic and legal translation; Espasa & González Davies (2003), which features texts on medicine and the environment; Zimmermann (2007) and Roiss (2008), which involve L1→L2 translation into German; and Rodríguez-Inés & Fox (2018) and Hlavac & Veselica (2019), which make proposals for various specializations.

A particularly noteworthy proposal is that of Neunzig & Grawinkel (2007), who consider risk management, content-level accuracy and equivalence, economy of effort, and linguistic suitability to be key aspects of L1→L2 translation. On that basis, they set out a five-stage model for the process of specialized L1→L2 translation and apply it to teaching. The model is based on PACTE's observations in relation to the time the translators who participated in the group's experiment on translation competence (Hurtado 2017) spent on each stage of translation (orientation, development, and revision). The experiment's results indicate that translators spend much longer on the development stage than on revision in L1→L2 translation, whereas the opposite happens in L1 translation. The five stages of the model proposed by Neunzig &



The potential problem of interference in L1→L2 translation.

Grawinkel (2007) are source text analysis prior to translation; source text preparation prior to translation; translation preparation; translation; and revision.

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Research potential

L1→L2 translation does not have a long-standing tradition of empirical research. Possibly owing to a general lack of knowledge of its characteristics and (cognitive, educational and market-related) implications, some countries' academic and professional communities continue to have misgivings about such translation.

There is still a need for studies on real L1→L2 translation practice in many contexts (countries with more than one official language; the subject areas and text types and genres tackled most frequently; official exams; target audience satisfaction; etc.), as well as for studies of a cognitive nature, so as to be able to better describe the L1→L2 translation process and the effect of directionality on the translation process and its product (e.g. the influence of time-related pressure, of the subject matter and text type and genre involved, of documentation skills, of command of the L2, etc.). While it goes without saying that any research that improves knowledge of L1→L2 translation could have an impact on training in such translation, there is also a need for studies on that training itself (e.g. the status of training in L1→L2 translation in each country, the origins of those who provide such training, the content and text types and genres used most often in training, progression in terms of objectives and content, the relative importance of the different competences involved, etc.).

Another area in which research is required is the use of L1→L2 translation in foreign language teaching, which has made a comeback in recent decades, as an increase in related interest, experiences and publications demonstrates (Laviosa 2014; Pintado 2018). In that regard, the sometimes-maligned use of L1→L2 translation in language learning, the sole purpose of which has always been language transfer, can offer major opportunities for research at the intersection between translation and interpreting studies and the teaching of second languages.

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