

Abnormal Norms: The Persistence of Deviant Solutions in Slovenian-English Translation

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Povzetek

Vsi prevajalci veliko dolgujejo svojim predhodnikom, ki so pomagali oblikovati rešitve za zahtevna jezikovna vprašanja pri prevajanju. Sčasoma so mnoge izmed teh rešitev – zlasti leksikalne rešitve, ki se navezujejo na kulturno in zgodovinsko specifične pojme – v praksi prevajanja iz slovenščine v angleščino dobile status norm. Po eni strani je to imelo pozitivno vlogo, saj je bila s tem ustvarjena določena mera konsistentnosti in posledično referenčna jasnost v skupnem zbiru tovrstnih prevodov, po drugi strani pa so se v nekaterih primerih tudi manj ustrezne rešitve spremenile v prevajalske norme, ki so se z leti prenašale z enega prevajalca na drugega. V članku avtor proučuje izbrane manj ustrezne prevajalske rešitve (ne samo leksikalne, ampak tudi morfološke, skladske in slogovne), ki so se nekako uveljavile kot norme, ter poskuša določiti dejavnike, ki so prispevali k njihovi vztrajni rabi v prevajalski praksi kljub odstopanju od značilne angleške rabe. Med temi dejavniki so povsem običajni vzroki, kot so lažni prijatelji in vzorci iz izvirnega jezika, kot tudi bolj institucionalni vzroki, kot so leksikografski viri, poučevalna praksa in vplivna besedila. Ironično pa je, da bi lahko zaradi današnjega enostavnega elektronskega iskanja in preverjanja tovrstnih norm te postale še globlje zasidrane v prevajalski praksi.

Ključne besede: slovenščina, angleščina, prevajanje, norme, odstopanje

1 INTRODUCTION

Every translator is the beneficiary of those that came before and helped create solutions to many challenging issues that arise when translating culturally and historically specific concepts from one language to another. Over time, many such solutions become established, and even rigid, assuming the status of norms. These norms create a conscious or subconscious expectation of which solutions are appropriate or inappropriate and what an acceptable translation should look like (Palumbo 2009: 79).

The operation of norms is probably as old as the practice of translation itself. However, the formal recognition and study of such norms started in the 1970s, best exemplified by the work of Gideon Toury and his landmark 1976 paper (published in 1978) “The Nature and Role of Norms in Literary Translation” (Lambert 2013: 12). These norms constitute standards of expected practice and are “central to the act and event of translating” (Schäffner 1997: 5).

Norms, however, are not rules in the sense of grammatical rules. Violation of grammatical rules creates texts that are objectively deficient. Instead, norms are sociocultural constraints that compel translators to make particular choices. Some may be very rigid, whereas other may have more of an idiosyncratic character (Toury 1995: 54). Here, I discuss issues in Slovenian translation that are explicitly norm-related. That is, they are not errors per se (i.e., something that can simply be attributed to “bad English” in terms of semantics or syntax), but there is nonetheless something fundamentally wrong with them. They are what one could call “abnormal norms” within the broader context of English usage.

This article presents a number of Slovenian translation norms that violate English normative practice. It is certainly not an exhaustive compendium. It starts by offering a perspective on translation norms as they relate to the Slovenian context. This is followed by a brief linguistic categorization with Slovenian examples. Some individual factors at work in maintaining or driving inappropriate norms are then examined, concluding with some reflections.

Many of the observations in this article are gleaned from my own experience in Slovenia, where I have been active as a translator and copyeditor for over fifteen years. In the course of this work, I have processed tens of thousands of pages of text: either translating it myself from Slovenian, correcting work produced by other translators, or copyediting English texts produced by Slovenians in an “internal translation” process. Throughout this article, my references to Slovenian translation norms are limited to norms observed in translations from Slovenian into English. I have little experience with translation into Slovenian or involving Slovenian and other languages, and cannot offer any opinion on those areas of practice.

2 THE SLOVENIAN CONTEXT

Every language exists in own unique sociocultural milieu and has a distinct history shaped by a constellation of historical, cultural, and linguistic factors. In some respects, the Slovenian context is not particularly distant from the English one: both share an Indo-European linguistic background, participation in major European historical events, western European Christian culture, and so on. However, Slovenian language and culture are also far from English in major ways. The languages are on opposite sides of the *centum-satem* dichotomy, rendering cognate vocabulary completely unrecognizable to the layman. Much of Slovenia's history has cast it in the role of an Other from the English perspective, either subordinate to German-speaking empires or later politically oriented toward the communist Eastern Bloc. Slovenian is therefore alien as well, and hence replete with historical and cultural constructs that often lack simple counterparts in English.

When translation delves into these difficult areas, certain solutions become established for resolving them. They are, in essence, behavioral patterns established to deal with regularly recurring situations (Gentzler 2001: 128). These shortcuts, instinctive responses, and well-worn habits become established among translators, offering solutions that the professional community agrees upon and accepts.

On the plus side, norms offer translators a consistent framework to operate in, resulting in a conventional style (Gentzler 2001: 128; Salguero 2014: 55). This makes the work easier because ready solutions are at hand, and the norms also become formalized through institutionalization in dictionaries and teaching (see Section 4.3). On the minus side, if a norm is suboptimal or defective, then the translators that follow that norm produce suboptimal or defective translations. Moreover, because language changes over time, any translation norm that becomes rigidly fixed will eventually become dated and will increasingly violate the norms of the target language (see examples in Section 3).

3 LINGUISTIC CATEGORIZATION

In my translation classes, students are encouraged to experiment with solutions to translation problems. Sometimes the solutions that they propose are the same as those I have in mind, occasionally they are even better, and sometimes they are simply wrong. However, none of these require much commentary beyond occasional explanations of syntax or morphology.

The difficult cases—and the most interesting ones—are solutions that lie somewhere in between: those that do not clearly violate any particular rule, but are

nonetheless disturbing. In psychological terms, they are equivalent to what Freud referred to as *das Unheimliche* ‘the uncanny’—something familiar, but nonetheless unsettlingly incongruous (Freud 1922: 229ff.). When such solutions become institutionalized (through factors discussed in sections 4.1–3 below), they become “defective” translation norms, ones that fall short of what a critical native speaker would comfortably accept.

To better analyze such cases—and for instructional purposes—it is useful to group them by categories. This makes it easier to identify the problem and, in the best of cases, also provides students with principals that they can apply to similar cases in the future. A few selected examples are discussed below.

In morphology, two common areas that show norm-like errors in terms of sheer frequency in Slovenian-English translation are denominal adjectives and quantifier patterns. In the first, the influence of the source language is obvious: in Slovenian, conversion (or zero derivation) is very rare, and a noun such as *kras* ‘karst’ or *turist* ‘tourist’ forms an adjective through suffixation: *kraški* and *turističen*, respectively.¹ This, in turn, creates some sort of incentive for Slovenians to derive the same adjectives in English with an *-ic* suffix, which is clearly not the norm in English (Figure 1). However, what is striking about the distribution patterns in Figure 1 is that the pattern *karstic*, while it violates the target language norm, is not derivationally impossible. Not only does somebody somewhere apparently use it some of the time, but at some point in the past (circa 1955) it was almost equal in frequency to the more standard adjective *karst*. Anecdotally, the frequency of *karstic* in Slovenian translation practice seems to have decreased over the last decade and a half, but it remains abnormally frequent in comparison to native English patterns. See also Section 4.3 below on dictionaries.

A similar morphological case of a “defective norm” in Slovenian translation involves pluralization of numerical units after indefinite quantifiers (e.g., *several thousands* instead of *several thousand*). While this does not directly reflect a source-language morphological pattern, it does show a morphological generalization from other nouns preceded by *several*, and judging from published English texts originating in Slovenia (browsed in a Google Books search) it also remains abnormally normal. Like *karstic*, it was also not markedly peculiar in the (more distant) past, but has become an increasing violation of a morphological norm in English to the point where it will probably soon be an outright error (Figure 2).

In terms of syntax, one of the most striking differences between Slovenian and English is that the former is able to use adnominal genitives to modify nouns, whereas English uses premodification to create what is best characterized as an open

1 Reference to karst is not peripheral in Slovenian texts, but in fact very common because of a focus on karst features as part of national identity and tourism promotion.

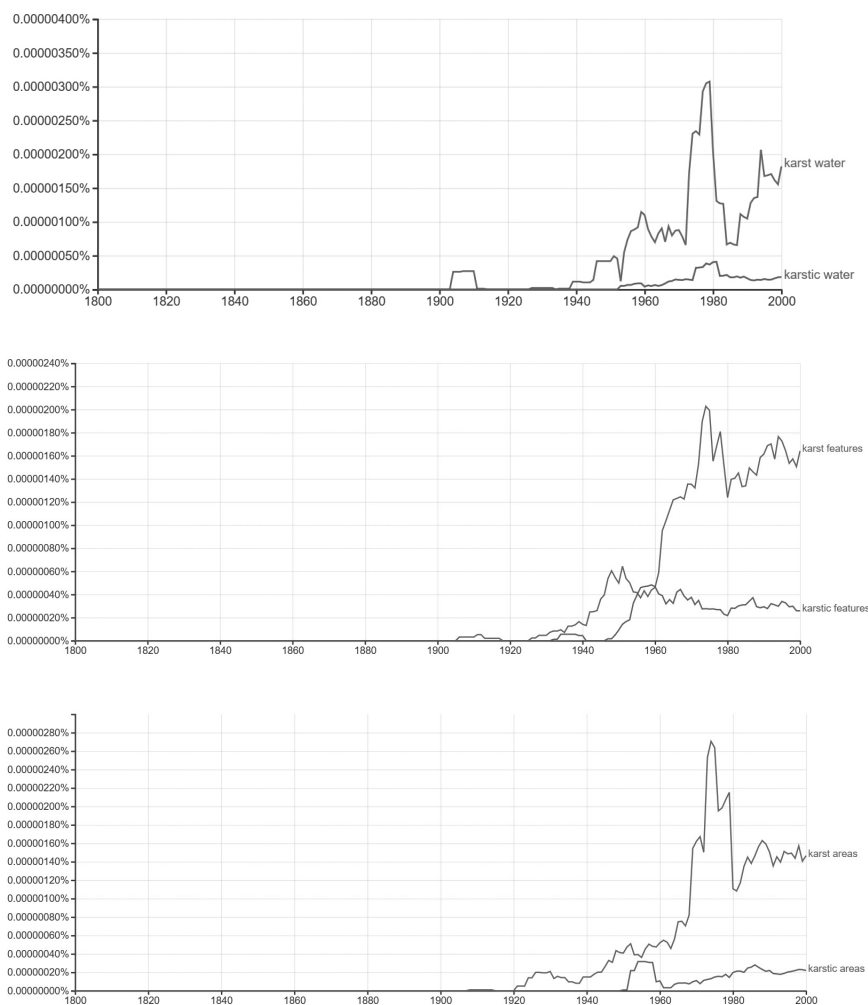


Figure 1: Various Google Ngram data for *karst* and *karstic*

compound (e.g., *cene nafte* ‘oil prices’, literally ‘prices-of-oil’). A defective translation pattern that is so frequent that it can be characterized as a norm among Slovenian translators is to string the elements together with *of*-phrases—any individual instantiation of which is not an error, of course. Taken to an extreme, one easily finds syntactic train wrecks in which even four elements (e.g., *the home of the Office of the President of the Republic of Slovenia*) or five (e.g., *the head of the Department of Archeology of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana*) are strung together.

In stylistics, two abnormal norms found in scholarly writing appear so often in copyediting work that they deserve mention. The first is excessively roundabout

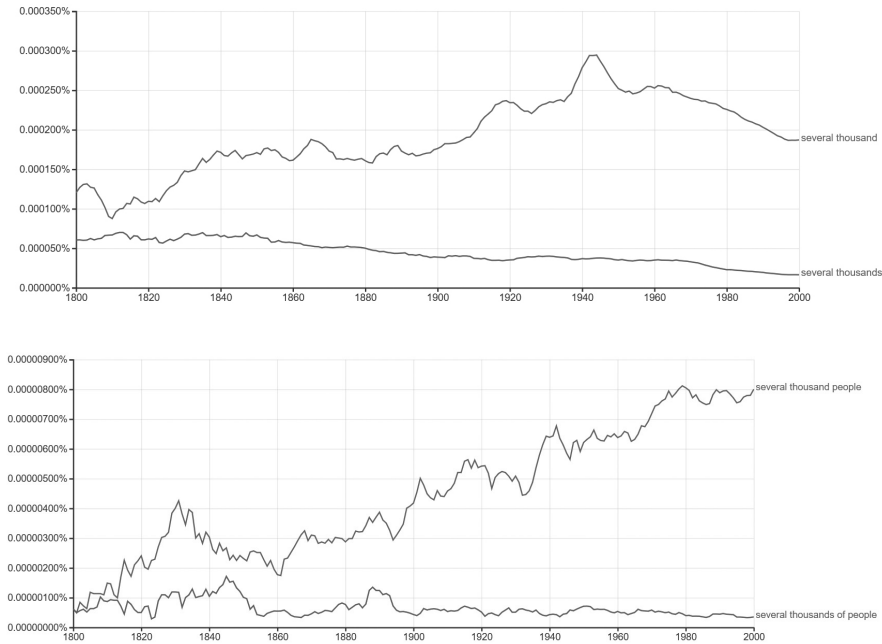


Figure 2: Various Google Ngram data for *several thousand(s)*

statements of purpose, such as “The paper attempts to suggest some possible solutions to the problem of how . . .” (Kos 1995: 139) instead of “The paper suggests how . . .” or “This paper attempts to explain some possible interpretations of . . .” (Kanduč and Pezdič 2005: 397) instead of “This paper explains . . .” and so on, reflecting a style prevalent in Slovenian. Although Kaplan’s well-known 1966 model of cultural thought patterns (see Figure 3) has been criticized for ethnocentrism or oversimplification (cf. Barron 2012: 24), it does reflect well-established norms. English has a markedly direct, or linear, pattern of expression, and the Slovenian counter-norm described here clearly conflicts with that norm.

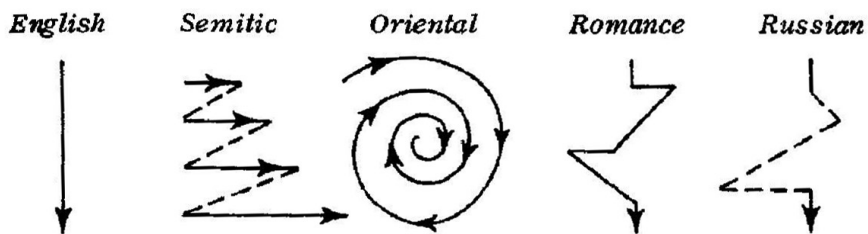


Figure 3: Cultural thought patterns (Kaplan 1966: 10)

A second stylistic norm in Slovenian translation into English is pervasive nosism, or the gratuitous use of *we*, *us*, and *our*. In fact, this practice is explicitly discouraged by English style manuals (e.g., Publication 1994: 30). It not only blurs the distinction between author(s) and addressees, but also creates confusion about whether an author is referring to some sort of research group or whether the work is coauthored. Unfortunately, Slovenian students continue to be incorrectly advised by some instructors that nosism is recommended or even obligatory in English, contributing to the persistence of this norm (cf. Section 4.3).

Finally, in the area of lexicon, entrenched translations of false friends are persistent “abnormal norms” in Slovenian translation practice. From “cottage cheese” for the ricotta-like product *skuta* to “cranberry” for the *brusnica* (i.e., the closely related lingonberry), such examples are too numerous to dwell on and have been covered extensively elsewhere (e.g., Limon 2001). The false friend *socialist* is examined in greater detail below in Section 4.1. In many cases, deficient bilingual dictionaries significantly contribute to maintaining defective lexical translation norms (see Section 4.3).

4 FACTORS

As seen in the examples above, misconceived translation norms often have source-language patterns at their root and are simply a failure to adapt to target-language patterns. The influence of the source language is often subtle. For example, Slovenian translators are prone to write *USA* rather than *US* (or *U.S.*) even though neither American nor British English favor this pattern (See Figure 4). Although some of the blame for this may be assigned to dictionaries (see Section 4.3), it is also reasonable to assume that the three-letter Slovenian equivalent *ZDA* (never shortened to *ZD*) creates pressure to use a three-letter abbreviation in English as well, regardless of the native norm. The same reason likely lies behind the predilection of Slovenian translators to write *UNO* instead of *UN* (e.g., “Slovenia becomes a member of the *UNO*”; Government) in imitation of Slovenian *OZN* ‘United Nations’ (which also appears as *ZN*). The abbreviation *UNO* is so rare in English that it is an outright error.

In addition to the source language, some other norms may originate in or be perpetuated due to politics, social issues, or entrenched authority. These areas are addressed below.

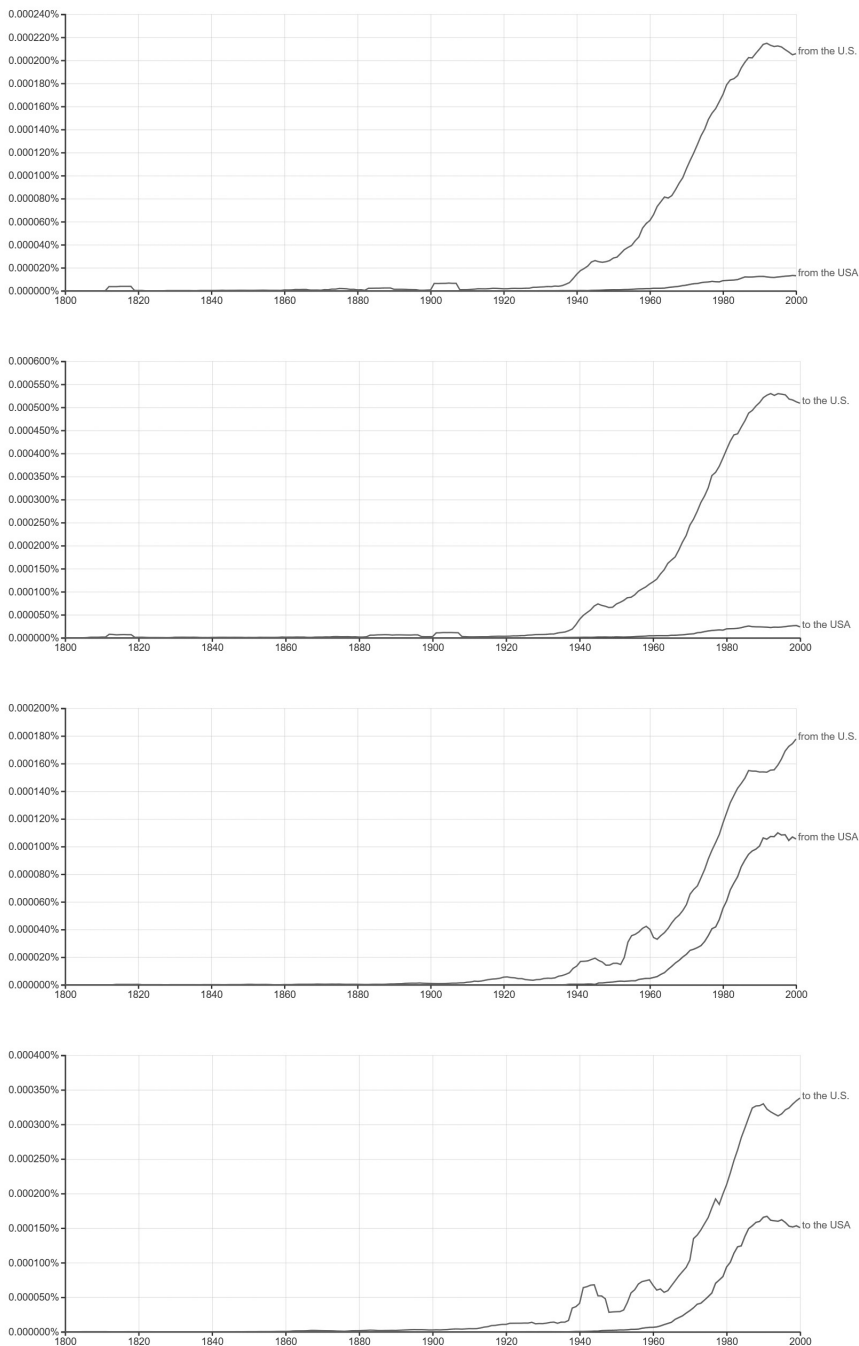


Figure 4: Google Ngram data for *U.S./USA* (top: American, bottom: British)

4.1 Politics

A particular political issue in Slovenian translation norms is the frequent avoidance of direct reference to communism or Yugoslavia. This is often accomplished through circumlocution or vagueness, and sometimes through euphemism.

It is common to encounter texts that obliquely refer to the “change in the social system” (*spremembe v družbenem sistemu*), “change in the political system” (*spremembe v političnem sistemu*), “socioeconomic changes” (*družbenopolitične spremembe*), and so on with reference to Slovenia’s transition from a republic in communist Yugoslavia to an independent multiparty democracy in 1991.² The motivation may be a conscious effort to avoid direct reference to a period that was painful for many or stepping on the toes of readers with different political persuasion, or it may simply be subconscious repetition of phrasing widely found in Slovenian texts.

If such a phrase is contextualized within a larger historical discussion, the reference is clear. However, these phrases are often encountered in more general texts—say, on geography or demographics—in which they are never contextualized. An English reader unfamiliar with the Slovenian “code” is likely to miss the intended meaning.

Slovenian is not unique in use a euphemism in referring to the political changes in Europe that occurred around 1991. The German expression *die Wende* ‘the turning point’ is in common use as a similar euphemism (cf. Hutschinson 2006: 12; Donahue 2010: 6). It would be fruitful for a separate study to examine whether the collapse of communism is referred to euphemistically in other former communist countries.

A similar circumlocution is frequent reference to Yugoslavia as the “former common state” (*bivša skupna država*). Like the reference to changes discussed above, the expression is certainly clear enough in a discussion of the disintegration of Yugoslavia—but, when it appears out of nowhere and without context, for most English readers the denotation is muddy at best. Like the German counterpart above, it would be interesting to examine the extent to which (and with how much clarity) the equivalent phrase is used by translators not only elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia (e.g., Macedonian *поранешната заедничка држава* is common), but also in former Soviet republics (e.g., Estonian *endise ühise riigi*, Russian *прежнее общее государство*, etc.)

A third political issue is the apparent norm in Slovenian translation practice to refer to the political system as of the former Yugoslavia (or other eastern European

² Such phrases may also refer to the changes implemented under the new communist system after the Second World War, especially with reference to property issues, civic matters, and so on.

countries) as *socialist* rather than *communist*. This pattern is contrary to the norm of English, as is clear from the data in Figure 5.

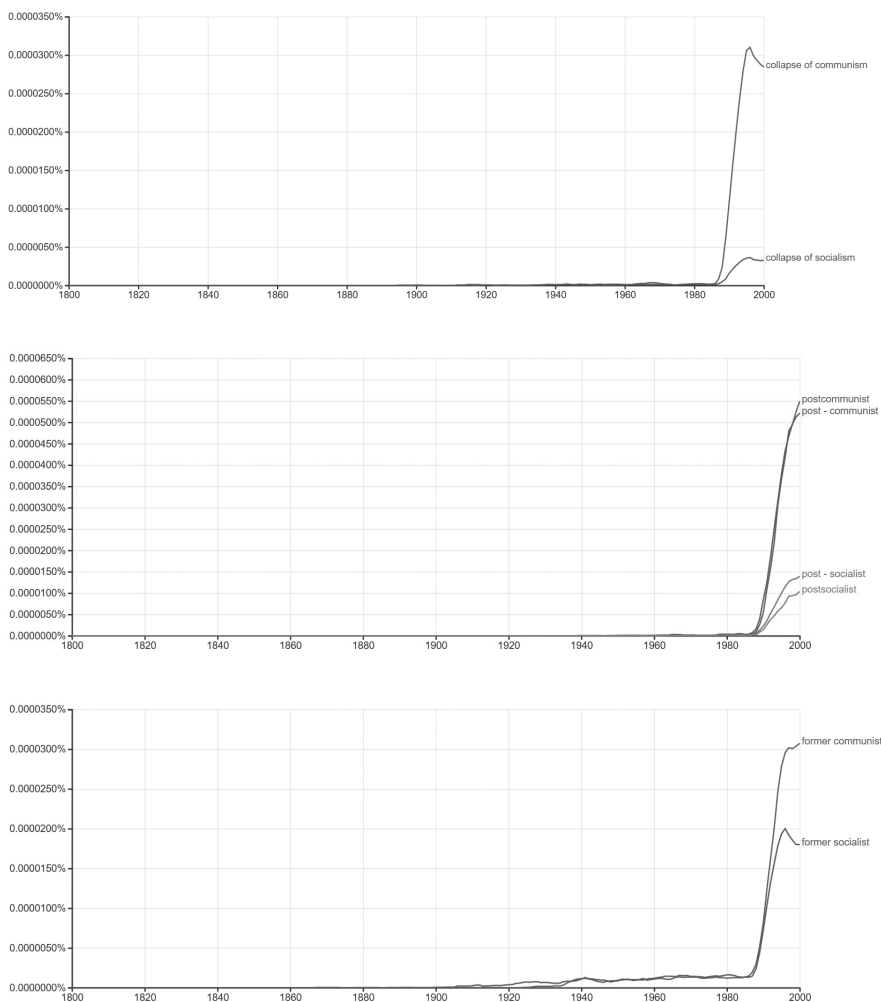


Figure 5: Various Google Ngram data for *communism/-ist* and *socialism/-ist*

Here, I am referring to the normative use of the terms *communist* and *socialist* in English texts, not technical definitions in the context of Marxist theory (in which communism is a utopian goal; cf. Wilczynski 2008: 21 among many other sources). Such a distinction would be irrelevant for most translations. In common parlance, the former refers to one-party non-democratic regimes (such as Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, or China), and the latter to political factions in multiparty democracies (such as France or Sweden).

Adding to the confusion are three additional factors. First, a simplistic “us versus them” mentality prevailed in Yugoslavia after the Tito–Stalin split in 1948, in which Titosim was viewed positively and Stalinism negatively, leading to frequently heard claims that Yugoslavia was “socialist, not communist like the Eastern Bloc” as a terminological nicety. Second, the official name of the country was the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, leading to the reductionist conclusion that the government was therefore socialist.³ Third, there has been a historical revision in Slovenian itself, with claims that *komunističen* ‘communist’ is inherently negative and *socialističen* ‘socialist’ inherently positive. That may be true now, in 2017, but was certainly not the case in the past (see Figure 6) and, in any case, is certainly as irrelevant as any other false friend for normative English usage.

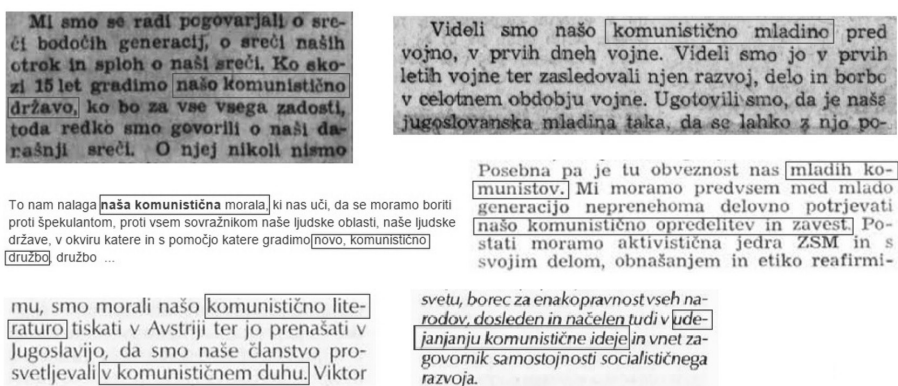


Figure 6: Slovenian clippings from various dates—1945, 1959, 1961, 1974, and 1989 (two)—using *komunističen* ‘communist’ in a positive manner

The reflection of political issues through translation norms described here exemplifies Gideon Toury’s observation that norms are “society’s way of regulating behaviour by saying what is accepted or tolerated, on the one hand, and what is disapproved of or outright forbidden, on the other” (1995: 55). Legally, of course, the Yugoslav constitutional ban on dissent (*verbalni delikt*; cf. Miller 2007: 250) is a thing of the past. Nonetheless, a translator may face social opprobrium for violating what has become accepted as a norm.

³ This *nomen est omen* perspective fails to explain why the National Socialist (i.e., Nazi) movement or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (i.e., Soviet Union) were not also embraced as fellow socialists. Moreover, no communist country ever referred to itself as communist in its official name. If official names were definitive, we would lament the human rights abuses under democracies—in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea), for example.

4.2 Social issues

Among the social issues affecting translation norms in Slovenia, here I discuss one relating to social stratification and two related to an emic perspective.

Social stratification in Slovenian is reflected in what English often calls being “title happy”—a predilection to affix academic credentials to names in situations that violate English social norms. Although title happiness pervades various cultures in central Europe, it is especially associated by English speakers with German-speaking culture (Anderson 1966), and often with Vienna in particular (Fleck 2011: 121), which directly informed the social system in Slovenia through its Austro-Hungarian heritage.

The unhappy result is that many Slovenian translations liberally sprinkle academic titles across book covers and in running text, creating a jarring effect for English readers. In fact, it is unusual for prominent authors in English to prefix their names with academic titles (see Figure 7). The prefixation of academic titles is more often encountered on covers of self-help books, as a promotional tool calculated to instill confidence in purchasers (see Figure 8). Thus, bowing to pressure from a Slovenian client to apply the Slovenian norm of flaunting an academic title in an English text may do more harm than good: stigmatizing the work as non-scholarly or even cynical hucksterism.

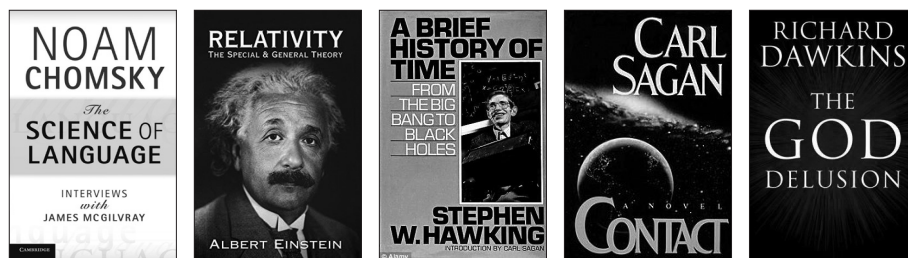


Figure 7: Typical books by prominent doctorate holders

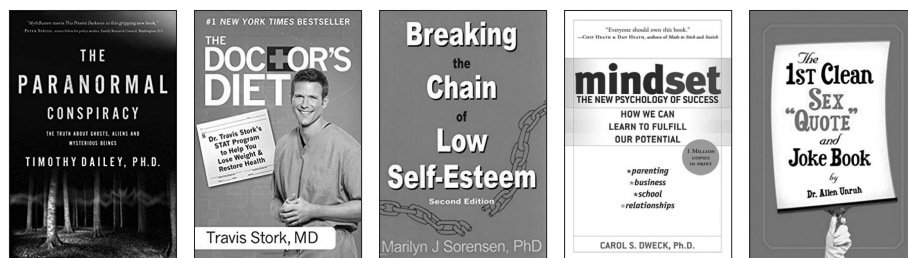


Figure 8: Typical books by non-prominent doctorate holders

An emic perspective is an insider's view of the world, which may not correspond to what outsiders perceive as objective (Fetterman 2008). Such a perspective is normal from inside a source language because it relies on identities and cultural narratives that those speakers share. However, when transferred to a translated text it can become jarring or misleading.

Slovenian texts discussing history often make casual emic reference to *naši predniki*—literally, ‘our ancestors’, but with the broader meaning ‘past generations’, ‘people in the past’, and so on. The Slovenian texts generally imply no genetic relation at all. On the one hand, an English reader might not find it overly odd to read that “our ancestors started developing agriculture primarily with annual plants” (*so naši predniki začeli razvijati poljedelstvo predvsem na enoletnicah*; Dolenc 2011: 70). However, it is disorienting to suddenly be told about “the remotest valleys of the Eastern Alps, settled by our ancestors” (Jaki 2004: 55) when the reader (and perhaps the writer as well) is not descended from such people.

Another emic perspective that constitutes a language norm (and thus erroneously becomes a translation norm) is the concept of *domovina* ‘homeland’ or *matična država* ‘motherland’. This is frequently applied to refer to Slovenia regardless of whether or not the subject at hand has any origin in Slovenia. For example, a text that I recently translated about the poet Karel Vladimír Truhlar (1912–1977) stated that Truhlar “nadaljeval tradicijo duhovno inspirirane slovenske poezije v domovini” ‘continued the tradition of spiritually inspired Slovenian poetry in [his] homeland’. In fact, although he is considered a Slovenian (of Czech origin), Truhlar was from Gorizia, and Slovenia was in no sense at all his homeland.

A similar emic example is Slovenia's August 17th holiday, officially known as *Združitev prekmurških Slovencev z matičnim narodom po prvi svetovni vojni* ‘Unification of the Prekmurje Slovenians with Their Mother Nation after the First World War’ and for which news coverage refers to union with the *matična država* or *matica* ‘motherland’ (e.g., Proslava 2014; 90 let 2009). Although it is mostly ethnically Slovenian, Prekmurje had never been politically part of a Slovenian state, nor did its population migrate there as colonists from other parts of Slovenia, and Slovenia is not Prekmurje's motherland in any sense of the English word.

4.3 Authority

A third factor perpetuating translation norms is authority, which may be manifested through teaching tradition and especially through dictionaries. The intention here is not to fault formal instruction and lexicography per se; both are vital activities and are performed with the best of intentions. However, from the

perspective of students as budding translators, these are probably also the most intimidating bearers of translation norms of all.

I have already addressed elsewhere the artificial norm of not translating traditional names of Slovenian regions (Reindl 2010), an idiosyncratic suggestion that made its way into teaching practice. Slovenian translation students have also displayed systematic incorrect articulation of toponyms as a result of being taught to do so based on examples from a guide published a generation ago and retained in teaching. It probably cannot be emphasized enough how much weight a printed source, backed by the endorsement of a well-intentioned instructor, has on students—who, of course, become the next perpetrators of translation norms.

The authority of dictionaries was already mentioned several times above. Evidence of the role of dictionaries in preserving the lexical choices that coalesced into these norms are evident from the corresponding entries (Figure 9). Even if a translator is aware that a dictionary contains certain deficiencies, it remains a central authoritative voice in guiding translation choices. A thorough analysis of such lexicographic shortcomings and the datedness of the leading Slovenian-English dictionary was carried out by Nina Smolar (2012).

brúsnica botanika (mountain) cranberry; red whortleberry; windberry	kráški karstic; (of the) Karst, karst; ~o jezero karst lake; ~o polje (karst)	skúta curd, curds pl; cottage cheese, ZDA pot cheese
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Figure 9: Sample dictionary entries (Grad and Leeming 1990, electronic edition)

5 CONCLUSION

This article has reviewed a small number of problematic translation norms in a small language. Nonetheless, the issues addressed surely go beyond the limited world of Slovenian-English translation. It would be particularly interesting for further research to investigate the extent to which other Yugoslav, Slavic, or (eastern) European translation practices share inappropriate normative patterns—and to identify which ones are possibly unique to Slovenian translation culture.

On a positive note, norms are not fixed concepts. Over time, their validity may grow or weaken, parallel to “changes of status within a society” (Toury 1995: 54). This is one reason why translations have what Clifford E. Landers termed a half-life of about thirty years; as certain norms become increasingly irrelevant or outdated, a translation correspondingly loses its ability to communicate to readers (2001: 10–11). A mature translator will realize that norms are “not permanent

laws either—they are socio-cultural constraints” (Palumbo 2009: 79) and ultimately “historical entities, and hence subject to change” (Xia 2014: 7). This perspective does more than explain why even once-valid translation norms (let alone misconceived ones) become abnormal norms. It also provides a license to challenge such norms and replace them with more appropriate ones for the benefit of both the creators and users of translations.

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