INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
PREREQUISITES FOR TRANSLATION EFFECTIVENESS

Titela Vîlceanu

Abstract: The paper is intended to raise awareness of some recurrent problems related to cultural and linguistic security in translation alongside strategies of achieving it. Globalisation means global thinking, individual accountability and the development of new sensitivities and capabilities. Different models of Intercultural Communicative Competence are scrutinised in an attempt to identify a common core of generalisable traits, which could be further applied to a wide range of translation situations. The (inter)cultural load is of paramount importance in translation being, more often than not, the cause of serious misunderstanding if the translator does not adequately equate the two cultures or bridge the cultural gap.

Key words: cultural diversity, intercultural communication, translation optimization

1. Intercultural communicative competence as a life skill

The notion of *life skill* is mainly connected to success in life via creating opportunities as ways forward, releasing potential and optimising performance. Broadly speaking, life skills constitute what literature calls *successful intelligence* by expanding the notion of *intelligence* beyond psychometric parametres. Sternberg (1999) launches a triarchic theory of *successful intelligence*, falling into *analytical*, *creative* and *practical abilities*.

If we equate successful intelligence to competence, it is because competencies should be envisaged as *working epistemologies* (Kegan 2001). The conceptualisation of competencies does not solely refer to internal mental structures (mental blueprints and resources), but also to proactive social behaviour:

A "competence" is defined as the ability to successfully meet complex demands in a particular context through the mobilisation of psychosocial prerequisites (including both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects). This represents a demand-oriented or functional approach to defining competencies. The primary focus is on the results the individual achieves through an action, choice, or way of behaving, with respect to the demands, for instance, related to a particular professional position, social role, or personal project. … a demand-oriented approach ... does require a typical or specific characterization of classes of demands, performance criteria, and indicators of competencies" (Rychen and Salganik 2003: 43).

It is a commonplace that language and culture are interdependent entities and that language learning and cultural learning overlap significantly, language socialisation presupposing the communication and instantiation of culture while also being contextually situated, i.e. shaped by culturally available patterns.

In what follows, we shall closely examine seminal models of *communicative competence* and of *intercultural communicative competence*. The starting point is represented by Hymes' (1980) and Canale's (1980, in Yalden 1987) models of *communicative competence* as offering guidelines not only for training in communication skills, but also, although these are not central or explicitly described, for personal and social growth. Nevertheless, these models envisage only intralingual communication making implicit reference to nativeness as the very guarantee for assessing communication success or failure.

A more comprehensive framework is endorsed by van Ek (1986). According to the author, the *communicative ability* of foreign language learners relies heavily on social competence, and autonomous language users have to develop social responsibility. *Communicative ability* is a multifarious concept, divided into:

- linguistic competence – defined in the very Chomskyan spirit "the ability to produce and understand meaningful utterances which are formed in accordance with the rules of the language concerned and bear their own conventional meaning" (van Ek 1986: 39);
- *socio-cultural competence:* the interdependence between language and society has long become axiomatic.The author takes a cognitive stand when stating that "every language is situated in a socio-cultural context and implies the use of a particular reference frame which is partly different from that of the foreign language learner" (van Ek 1986: 35);
- *sociolinguistic competence*: the choice of linguistic forms depends on "setting, relation between communication partners, communication intention, etc" (van Ek 1986: 41). Situational clues are of paramount importance in meaning generation and processing;
- *discourse competence*: in fact, dealing with text typology, more precisely with the understanding and production of a variety of texts formats;
- *strategic competence*: activated when it is difficult to get "our meaning across" or to find out "what somebody means" (van Ek 1986: 55). The list of communication strategies includes rephrasing, asking for clarification, etc.;
- *social competence*: making reference to "both the will and skill to interact with others, involving motives, attitudes, self-confidence, empathy, and the ability to handle social situations" (van Ek 1986: 65).

To our mind, the message model of linguistic communication, i.e. communication as mere exchange of information insofar as the hearer decodes the same message that the speaker encodes, is amenable to criticism. It is true that we start from the *Presumption of Literalness*: literal utterances have a certain communicative priority, i.e. a speaker is presumed to communicate a literal meaning unless there is some reason to suppose the contrary (Akmajian et al., 2001: 385). Practically, there are numberless cases of structural ambiguity and discontinuous dependencies, mostly referential ambiguity, which is not uniquely determined by the meaning of the utterance when used in isolation, and there is need to detect which of the meanings of the utterance is actualised under the circumstances.

In our opinion these components are not discrete items; there is a high degree of conceptual overlapping especially between *socio-cultural competence* and *social competence* even if from the definitions provided by the author we may infer that socio-cultural competence is restricted to schemata. By expanding socio-cultural competence, we may state that we need to bridge the gaps between different cultural cognitive systems as oftentimes such gaps are more likely to account for communication dysfunctions rather than linguistic gaps (alone). In other words, cultural learning is instrumental to communication.

Chen and Starosta's (1996: 358) conceptualisation of *intercultural communication competence* could be summarised as "the ability to negotiate cultural meanings and to execute appropriately effective communication behaviours that recognise the interactants' multiple identities in a specific environment". The authors promote complexity in the configuration of identity during the communication process; affective, cognitive, behavioural components intertwine. The salient affective factors refer to self-concept, open-mindedness, being non-judgmental and, finally, to social relaxation. From the cognitive point of view, the individual should possess self-awareness and (inter)cultural awareness. In behavioural terms, there is need for intercultural *adroitness* identified to communication skills such as message skills (encoding, transmission and decoding), appropriate self-disclosure, behavioural flexibility, interaction management and social skills.

Byram (1997: 2) highlights that "social groups informally and societies through their formal institutions have as first priority their own longevity and they ensure that their members acquire loyalty and group identity from an early age".

Next, Byram et al. (2001: 5-7) see *intercultural competence* as an agglutination of cognitive (*knowledge* and *skills*), psychological (*attitudes*) and ethical (*values*) parameters, laying the "democratic basis for social interaction". These sub-components are further developed into:

- *intercultural attitudes* roughly equated to "the ability to decenter", i.e. the ability to relativise one's own personal set of values, beliefs and practices breaking away from a narcissistic worldview or ethnocentric bias;
- *knowledge* focusing on the mechanisms of social groups and of social identities emergence and maintenance;
- *skills of comparison, of interpreting and relating* (*savoir comprendre*) – most likely in a cross-cultural management of information, alongside *skills of discovery and interaction* (*savoir apprendre / faire*) – referring to the ability to acquire and cultural knowledge and make it operational "under the constraints of realtime communication and interaction";
- *critical awareness* (*savoir s'engager*), i.e. critical thinking strategies and appreciation of examples of best practice (intuitively and on the basis of explicit objective criteria).

Gudykunst and Kim (1997: 17) synthetically define *intercultural communication* as "a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people of different cultures".

Stier (2006) warns against ″the absence of an exhaustive or unequivocal meaning of the term″, states that intercultural communication is a complex process, embedding an array of ideologies. The author is mostly concerned with policies of intercultural communication education, which should achieve the goals of internationalisation (eventually equated to social harmony). In his view, *intercultural competence* is a twofold concept, including *content-competencies* and *processual competencies*. The former category is static in nature and designates the *knowing that*, i.e. knowledge about the home culture and the other culture(s) in a rather stereotyped way. The latter category shows the dynamic character of intercultural competence as context-bound; it is about *knowing how* (to our mind, a kind of *technological intelligence* if we define the term *technological* as application of knowledge for practical ends). Moreover, processual competencies are subdivided into *intrapersonal competencies* and *interpersonal competencies*. *Intrapersonal competencies* designate awareness of the other's perception, i.e. perspective alteration, self-reflection, side rotating (insider, outsider), problem-solving strategies in intercultural encounters, cultural detection strategies, axiological distance, i.e. no automatic biased judgment of the other, emotional response (strategies for coping with uncertainty, ambiguity, ethnocentric views, etc). *Interpersonal competencies* refer to interactive skills, to the development of interpersonal sensitivity and situational sensitivity. Stier (2006) concludes that intercultural studies underlie *a six-i* model: *i*ntercultural themes and examples, an *i*nterdisciplinary perspective, an *i*nvestigative character by arousing curiosity for new cultural knowledge and experience, an *i*ntegrated approach – involving persons belonging to different cultural backgrounds, an *i*nteractive pattern facilitating communication, and an *i*ntegrative view – connection between theory and practice. Hence, *knowing that* and *knowing how* should be complemented by *knowing why*, i.e. by reflectivity.

2. Towards a unified and unifying definition of *intercultural communicative competence*

We have adopted Byram's (1997) denomination of *intercultural communicative competence* because we conceptualise it as an extension of the models proposed by Hymes (1980) and Canale (1980, in Yalden 1987) where the term *communicative* appears. We are fully aware that literature circulates parallel terminology: *intercultural sensitivity*, *intercultural communication competence*, *intercultural literacy*, *global literacy*, although these notions do not fully overlap.

The analysis of all the above models has at the core the following elements that could function as a checklist, securing the democratic basis for intercultural communicative competence:

- *linguistic proficiency* – a special mention at this point: learners of a foreign language do not acquire the language under the same conditions as the native speaker(s). Besides, we think that the bilingual, having perfect command of two foreign languages, is still an ideal. In this respect, *The Threshold Level* and the *Waystage* and *Vantage Levels* (van Ek and Trim 1991) show a communicative, action-based, learner-centred view of language learning, and a more nuanced vision is to be found in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001, as part of the European Year of Languages) as a valuable tool for setting / harmonising clear and transparent standards or levels of attainment at successive stages of formal, informal and non-formal learning, and for assessing linguistic performance, thus facilitating not only educational, but also occupational mobility by providing a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. Linguistic proficiency as underpinning a communicative, (inter)action-oriented approach to language, equally implies the ability to identify and switch between various communicative conventions (meet complex style and register requirements via short- or long-term accommodation work), and full development of meaning negotiation skills with full dialogical commitment.
- *intercultural literacy*: sensitivity to cultural diversity, appreciation of and respect for other cultural patterns, development of an intercultural background made up of a common core of cultural significance and of paramount cultural specificities: Plurilingualism has itself to be seen in the context of pluriculturalism. Language is not only a major aspect of culture, but also a means of access to cultural manifestations. … In a person's intercultural competence, the various cultures (national, regional, social) to which that person has gained access do not simply co-exist side by side; they are compared, contrasted and actively interact to produce an enriched, integrated pluricultural competence;
- *(meta)cognitive flexibility* and *intrapersonal dynamics skills*: the ability to discriminate among information items (relevant cultural knowledge) and to use such information creatively and interactively, mental alertness and curiosity about new cultural settings (via ethnographic knowledge discovery strategies), *nomothetic*[1] rather

---

[1] A generalised understanding of a given situation, of lasting usage.

than *idiographic*[2] capability, the ability to plan ahead and to hypothesize, problem-solving strategies;

-   *psychological adequacy* and *interpersonal dynamics skills*: extroversion, motivation, self-confidence, tolerance for ambiguity, conflict avoidance, openness (discarding the idea that the Other is a potential barrier in communication instead of a challenge to be dealt with in a constructive way), the ability to interrelate co-operatively and to empathise so as to fully match expectations, the ability to adjust to different more or less familiar circumstances, dealing flexibly with change and innovation, personal accountability, etc.

3. Translation as intercultural communication and beyond

Translation was a constant preoccupation in the history of humanity, but the translation and the translator's status varied in time. Up to the 20th century, translation was not officially recognised as a profession and the vast bulk of translations was represented by literary texts.

More often than not, translations were performed by writers, as the language-gifted people, reading, writing and translating across traditions.

Theory of translation emerged as a science in its own right (a hybrid science) due to the new social, economic and political realities, promoting the translation of texts that have real life relevance (the so-called *survival literature*). Starting from the second half of the 20th century, the translator has become a professional and mediator in the process of intercultural communication. S/he has become more visible, has lost his/her innocence being affiliated with a particular ideology and being allowed to interpret the original text and take charge of translation-related problems since granted intellectual property.

Accordingly, the translator, should develop sensitivity to the two linguistic systems and communicative competence in order to adequately function in the two languages and cultures. S/he should also promote networking and cooperation with monolingual specialists in different fields as s/he cannot rely solely on dictionaries, glossaries and workbenches.

Recent literature defines translation in more technical terms. The almost traditional pairing the *bilingual* and the *bicultural* translator is complemented by technicalities deriving from re-focusing. Thus, Robinson (2003) envisages translation from a twofold perspective: from an inward looking point of view, translation means professionalisation, i.e. the translator's active engagement in raising the status of the profession through institutional training, knowledge (specialized language) acquisition or versatility, development of an exploratory spirit and of his/her protocol of experience (encyclopaedic knowledge, real-world experience, immersion in different cultures), resource management, affiliation with professional organisations, networking (collaboration with peers and monolingual and bilingual specialists, which, however, do not possess translation competence), commitment to quality standards and to a code of conduct. According to Robinson (2003: 84), translation for the professional translator is a constant learning cycle that moves through the stages of instinct (unfocused readiness), experience (engagement with the real world), and habit (a 'promptitude of action"), and, within experience, through the stages of abduction (guesswork), induction (pattern-building), and deduction (rules, laws, theories)". Moreover, the translator is "at once a professional for whom complex mental processes have become second nature (and thus subliminal), and a learner who must constantly face and solve new problems in conscious analytical ways" (Robinson 2003: 84).

---

[2] A fully-detailed description of a given situation, which does not secure full intercultural adequacy.

From an outward looking point of view, translation is, eventually, a product or a commodity that must meet the receivers' / clients' requirements, including compliance with the agency policy (most translations are in-house ones), deadline observance, accomodation to particular needs and interests (the translated text may be a summary of the original text), globally equated to the loyalty factor.

Sales Salvador (2006) focuses on *documentary competence* or *information literacy* in translation - "the information retrieval and the evaluation of its quality, in the context of a multiplicity of formats", equating documentation to ethics. Documentary competence thus becomes a vital component of the 21st century translational know-how

Pym (2006) speaks of the translator's *re-marketing* skills, beyond *localisation*, i.e. target language and culture appropriateness. Localisation is preceded by internationalisation, i.e. production of an apparently culture-free text.

Titela Vîlceanu
University of Craiova
elavilceanu@yahoo.com

References

Akmajian, A., Demers, R. A., Farmer, A. K. and Harnish, R. M. 2001. *Linguistics. An Introduction to Language and Communication*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Byram, M. 1997. *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. London: Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M., Nichols, A., Stevens, D. (eds.). 2001. *Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice*. London: Multilingual Matters.

Chen, G. M., Starosta, W. J. 1996. *Intercultural Communication Competence: A Synthesis*. London: Sage.

van Ek, J. A. 1986. *Obiectives for Foreign Language Learning*. Strasbourg: Conncil of Europe.

van Ek, J. A., Trim, J. 1991. *Waystage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gudykunst, W. B., Kim, Y. Y. 1997. *Communicating with Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication*, 3rd edition, New York: McGraw-Hill.

Hymes, D. 1980. On communicative competence. In A. K. Pugh, V. J. Lee and J. Swann (eds.), *Language and Language Use. A Reader*, 89-103. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Kegan, R. 2001. Competencies as working epistemologies: Ways we want adults to know. In D. S. Rychen and L. H. Salganik (eds.), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies* , 192–204. Göttingen: Hogrefe & Huber.

Pym, A. 2006. On Toury's laws of translators translate. In A. Pym, M. Shlesinger, D. Simeoni (eds.), *Beyond Descriptive Translation Studies. Investigations in Homage to Gideon Toury*, 311-328. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Robinson, D. 2003. *Becoming a Translator: An Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Translation.* London: Routledge.

Rychen, D. S., Salganik, L. H. 2003. *Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-functioning Society*. Göttingen: Hogrefe & Huber.

Sales Salvador, D. 2006. Documentation as ethics in postcolonial translation. *Translation Journal* 10 (1) <http://accurapid.com/journal/35documentation.htm>.

Sternberg, R. J. 1999. Successful intelligence: Finding a balance. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* (3) 11: 436-442.

Stier, J. 2006. Internationalisation, intercultural communication and intercultural competence. *Journal of Intercultural Communication* 11: 1-12.

Yalden, J. 1987. *Principles of Course Design for Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.