WHAT MAKES A GOOD TRANSLATOR? A FOCUS ON THE INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION OF THE TRANSLATION COMPETENCE

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Abstract: In the context of today's globalized market, the success of a translator depends, to a large extent, on a number of skills which make up what is generally described as (inter)cultural competence. The present paper focuses on the complex nature of the translator's intercultural competence, examining it from various perspectives: theoretical, sociolinguistic, textual and interpersonal. The author relies on both theoretical and research evidence, with the ultimate goal of arriving at conclusions of relevance for the field of translator training.

Keywords: Cultural ability, intercultural competence, translation competence, intercultural mediators, translator training

1. Introduction

Translation competence has always been in the focus of translation theory and translation research, and, as a consequence, several scholars and institutions have made attempts at naming and defining this concept, as well as at identifying its sub-types and organising them into comprehensive models. Ever since the acknowledgement of the fact that translation activity involves not only two different languages, but also two different cultural traditions, the profile of a competent translator has necessarily incorporated the ability of identifying the culture-specific features of the source text and of selecting the best manner of rendering those features into the target language.

The important role played by the translator's cultural expertise for the effectiveness of the translation activity has been discussed by numerous approaches to translation competence, as it will be shown in more detail in the next section. However, quite frequently, translator trainers do not know what and how they should teach in order to help their students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills that underlie their role as intercultural mediators. Moreover, the future translators are often not aware of what exactly they are supposed to know and be able to do in order to properly perform this important role.

In my capacity as a translator trainer, I consider that the difficulties involved in the teaching and the acquiring of the (inter)cultural competence are, at least partly, caused by the complex nature of this concept. More specifically, in time, the cultural competence has come to include more and more constituent elements, the result being that the more recent models present this sub-competence as covering areas of knowledge and skills which are not only more numerous, but also more diverse than those described by the earlier approaches, as it will be indicated later. I consider that the lack of awareness and of real understanding with regard to the knowledge and skills that translators must

possess in order to function effectively in today's world might represent an impediment to the appropriate manifestation of the intercultural competence. Consequently, it is essential that (future) translators should get a clear representation of this concept, as well as of the manner in which it can be developed.

Starting from the assumptions mentioned above, the present study will focus on the complex nature of the intercultural competence, discussing it from both a theoretical and a practical perspective. In theoretical terms, the paper will briefly present the evolution of the concept of cultural ability in translation studies, with a special focus on the manner in which it is understood today. From a practical perspective, the study will analyse the "real life" implications carried by the complexity of this concept, analysing the results of a research study conducted among a group of Romanian students in translation, on the one hand, and offering some suggestions for the field of translator training, on the other.

2. The concept of cultural competence in translation studies

In its early years, when the new discipline of Translation Studies was closely connected to the field of Applied Linguistics, translation competence was generally perceived as the ability of putting together the linguistic competencies gained in two languages (cf. Pym 2003). However, once translation theorists started to shift away the focus from the language as an abstract entity and to place it on the manner in which language is used in actual situations of communication, culture became an element worthy of great attention in the various attempts at defining and framing the concept of the translator's competence. In spite of the relative agreement on acknowledging its importance, the exact definition of the cultural dimension of the translator's competence, and, moreover, the manner in which it is to be acquired represent issues that have never received a unitary treatment from the translation theory and research. In what follows, I will mention some contributions to the concept of cultural competence, in an attempt to illustrate its evolution in translation theory and translator training.

2.1. From cultural references in translation to the intercultural dimension of the translator's competence

One of the earliest cultural approaches to translation comes from Nida (1964: 159), who, referring to the readers' reactions to the Bible in translation, notes that "reader response can never be identical to the original due to different historical, cultural and environmental contexts". For the cultural gaps inherent in the Bible translation, Nida recommends the dynamic equivalence, which conveys the original message, without necessarily using the same type of wording. The treatment of the culture-specific elements in translation was discussed by many other theorists. Newmark (1988), for example, uses the concept of "cultural words", pointing out that the literal translation of such words would distort the meaning, while a solution might be the use of "an appropriate descriptive-functional equivalent" (Newmark 1988: 95). Similarly, Baker (1992: 31) suggests the strategy of "cultural substitution", which involves replacing a culture-specific item with a foreign element with a comparable effect on the target reader.

Such approaches entail a concept of culture as a fixed and rather structured entity which frames the original or the translated text (Katan 2012). This vision began to change

in the 1980s and the early 1990s, with the emergence of the so-called "cultural turn" in translation studies (cf. Lefevere and Bassnett 1990: 1), in which the emphasis was no longer on the word as the unit of translation, but on the text as part of a larger cultural context. The new manner of perceiving translation as an act of communication instead of a process of transcoding paved the way to the functionalist approaches, whose main focus was represented by the function of the translated text in the target culture, as it is specified by the client or the envisaged user-expectations (cf. Snell-Hornby 2006). In this context, Vermeer (1986 in Snell-Hornby 2006: 53) describes translation as a complex form of action in which information about a text is given under new functional, cultural and linguistic conditions. For Nord (1997: 34), translating means comparing cultures, i.e. interpreting source-culture phenomena in the light of one's own knowledge of that culture, from either inside or outside, depending on whether one translates from or into one's native language and culture.

The important fact is that, since the emergence of the cultural turn in translation studies and of the functionalist approaches, translation has been considered both a cultural and a linguistic procedure. This also meant that, in addition to culture-bound lexical items, the translator was supposed to consider other types of elements, such as culturally appropriate genres and norms. This new orientation led to a wide range of comparative studies whose focus was on models of appropriate writing style across languages and, in some cases, on the culture-bound motivations underlying such styles (cf. Katan 2012).

Starting from the assumption that cultural knowledge, important as it may be, "does not really tackle the element of 'inter', that is, the idea of moving between two entities or … being able to adapt fluently to situations with coexisting cultural influences from various directions" (Tomozeiu, Koskinen and D'Arcangelo 2016: 253), translation theorists and trainers have started to discuss cultural competence from the perspective of the intercultural communication. In Katan's (2002) view, for instance, the translator must, first of all, evaluate the distance between the source and the target cultural contexts, and, then, negotiate the level of tolerance for difference in accordance with both the initial and the new intentions. In a later contribution, the same author explains that "intercultural competence means being able to perceive and handle difference" (Katan 2009: 284). Similarly, Davies (2012: 380) considers that translation may be seen as intercultural communication when "both parties step outside their culture-bound perspectives and come together in some kind of no-man's land between the two". Tomozeiu, Koskinen and D'Arcangelo (2016: 256) conclude that the interculturally competent translator is "one who demonstrates a high level of intercultural knowledge, skills, attitude and flexibility throughout his or her professional engagements".

2.2. Training the translator's intercultural competence: insights from the competence-based research projects

More recently, the concept of the translator's (inter)cultural competence has been discussed in the context of the contributions coming from various research groups which have as main objective the establishment of translation competence models and of competence-based training program designs. One such model is provided by the EMT (European Master's in Translation) expert group, which was set up at the initiative of the

European Commission's Directorate-General for Translation with a view to increasing the quality and the availability of translators functioning on the European markets. This group, whose main task was to make specific proposals in order to implement a European Reference Framework for a Master's in translation throughout the European Union, defines six sub-competences making up the translation competence: translation service provision competence, language competence, intercultural competence, information mining competence, thematic competence, and technological competence. In this model, the intercultural competence has two dimensions, a sociolinguistic one and a textual one. The sociolinguistic dimension is responsible for recognizing function and meaning in language variation (social, historical geographical, stylistic), for knowing how to identify the rules for interaction relating to a specific community, as well as for producing a register which is appropriate to a particular situation. The textual dimension covers the ability to understand the macrostructure of a document, to grasp presuppositions, implicit allusions and stereotypes, to recognise culture-bound elements, and to compare cultural elements and methods of composition (cf. EMT 2009).

Another important contribution comes from the PICT (Promoting Intercultural Competence in Translators) research group, a group whose main objective was to offer a coherent framework for the teaching of intercultural competence in postgraduate translation programmes (cf. PICT 2012). Tomozeiu and Kumpulainen (2016) note that, while other translation competence models seem to focus on the types of cultural knowledge and skills needed to produce an appropriate target text, the PICT model considers the translator's overall intercultural competence which goes beyond text production. More specifically, in addition to knowledge and abilities pertaining to the theoretical and textual spheres, the intercultural competence also includes a set of attitudes, such as cultural awareness and empathy manifested in social exchanges, curiosity in all forms of contact with other cultures, sensitivity to affects and potential conflicts in communication, or social positioning (cf. PICT 2012). These interpersonal skills make an essential contribution towards the translators' status as professionals, who, going beyond rendering meaning from one language into another, perform their role as mediators between cultures.

As revealed by the approaches presented in this section, the continually changing manner of reflecting on the cultural competence can be described as an evolution from the cultural to the intercultural dimension of the translator's competence. This evolution is, actually, in line with the redefinition of the translator's role as an intercultural mediator, who, starting from a text meant to perform a certain function in the source language and culture, is supposed to create a new text that must function effectively in the target culture. Several questions arise at this point: Are translation students aware of the complexity characterizing the concept of the translator's (inter)cultural competence nowadays? Do they know what they must do in order to effectively perform their role as intercultural mediators? How can the field of translator training help in this respect? In

the next section, I will try to offer some answers to these questions, taking into account both research and theoretical data.

3. The trainees' perceptions of the intercultural competence: a research study

After highlighting the conceptual complexity of the cultural competence, I wanted to identify the manner in which my students perceive this phenomenon. To that purpose, I conducted a small-scale research study meant to identify the students' perceptions with regard to the nature of the translator's cultural ability, and to its contribution to the general translation competence.

3.1. Research methodology
As data collection instrument, I used a questionnaire, which was applied, between June 2018 and January 2019, to 58 students in the MA of Theory and Practice of Translation organized by the West University of Timișoara. The respondents offered their answers in writing, anonymously, and each of them was assigned a code number from 1 to 58. The questionnaire includes two questions, with sub-constituents of both open-ended and closed-ended (ranking scales) type: 1. Which is the role played by the (inter)cultural competence in the overall makeup of the translator's competence? Rank it on a scale from 1 (not important) to 10 (essential); 2. Which of the following elements represent, in your opinion, sub-constituents of the translator's (inter)cultural competence? Rank each selected item on a scale from 1 (not important) to 10 (essential). The main findings resulted from the analysis of my subjects' answers will be presented and discussed in what follows.

3.2. Findings

3.2.1. Question 1: on the importance of the cultural ability

For the first question, the subjects were supposed to rank the role of the (inter)cultural competence for the general translator's competence on a scale from 1 (not important) to 10 (essential), and, then, to offer details meant to explain the choice of that particular ranking. Given the bi-dimensional nature of this question, the interpretation of the answers offered by my subjects will be made in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

From a quantitative point of view, the most important finding is that my students all agree that the intercultural competence plays a major role in the context of the general translation competence, since their rankings range only from 10 to 7, never going below that level. To be more specific, in the case of 67% of the subjects, the ranks were between 10 and 9, while for the other 33%, the ranks were between 8 and 7. This finding is not entirely surprising, because, considering the status of my subjects as MA students, they possess a certain amount of experience both in the field of translation study, and in that of translation practice. However, as the other findings of my analysis will indicate, the subjects do not share the same kind of agreement with regard to all the aspects focused on by the present research study.

As mentioned above, the first question also required the subjects to describe, in their own words, the role of the (inter)cultural sub-competence for the translation activity, bringing arguments and offering details in support of their position. I analysed these

arguments from a qualitative point of view, because my intention was to determine my students' ability to reflect critically on the nature of the cultural competence and to express their personal views in this respect. A very general conclusion of my analysis is that the arguments offered by the subjects are quite varied in nature, even if, in line with the results of the quantitative analysis, they all have in common the idea that the intercultural competence makes a significant contribution to achieving a high-quality translation. What makes the difference is the perspective from which my students explain what this important contribution actually consists in. According to this perspective, three broad categories of answers can be identified, as illustrated below.

(1) The perspective of the translation error

Most of my subjects described their cultural ability as a gain which helps the translator avoid and overcome the errors that might be caused by the inherent differences between the cultural context of the source text and that of the target text.

Some students refer to this aspect in very general terms: "I consider that the cultural competence plays a very important role in translation in order to properly render the author's style and the character's cultural background" (4). More specifically, the cultural competence is important, because "without knowing the cultural background on a certain topic …, the translator may make mistakes" (13), or "the translation may not be a good one" (42). Other arguments of this kind make reference to the translator's role as "a bridge between the source and the target language/ culture" (9), and, consequently "if we don't know cultural issues related to the languages from which and into which we translate, we run the risk of compromising the transmission of the message we have to render" (29).

In addition to the general idea of rendering the message effectively, there are numerous arguments which go into more detail, presenting a series of elements that are considered to be very likely to raise cultural problems and, subsequently, to lead to translation errors. A few subjects describe these elements by means of the specific realities that they denote; here is one example in this respect: "I believe cultural competence plays a vital role because any language is developed in strong connection with the customs, history, and general culture of the nation". Most of the subjects, however, use terms like "culturemes", "specific terms", or ''cultural gaps" to refer to "terms, phrases, idioms, even slang words" (3) that might cause serious errors if the translator is not competent enough in this area.

I must stress that, even if relatively few, there were also students who pointed to the role played by the cultural competence in creating texts which conform to the norms of the culture in which they are supposed to function. One subject, for example, explains that being aware of the textual conventions specific to a particular culture is essential because "as a translator, you handle different types (genres) of texts or documents, which can be specialized or literary" (5), while another one claims that understanding the

close connection between texts and culture "allows the translator to interpret and deliver the message in an effective way" (53).

(2) The perspective of the translator's expertise

As opposed to the answers discussed so far, those in the second category tend to focus on describing the type of contribution made by the cultural competence to the translator's expertise, and, implicitly, to the translation quality, without bringing further arguments in this respect.

Thus, most of the subjects who formulated such answers consider that "having an idea of the cultural background of the text we translate is as important as the translation itself" (6), or that "the role played by the cultural competence … is essential because it can influence all the translating work" (8). In these students' view, having cultural knowledge and skills represents an essential requirement for any translator who wants to produce high-quality target texts.

However, among the answers in this category there are also some which stress the fact that cultural ability, important as it may be, should not be regarded as a sine qua non condition for a competent translator. One subject explains that "if the translator lacks cultural knowledge regarding a specific country, place, holiday, it does not mean he will not be able at all to translate the text" (2), while another one claims, in a similar vein, that "when the text does not contain any cultural references, the translator's cultural competence or lack of it does not necessarily influence the quality of the translation" (14). Such answers underlie a view of the cultural competence as a type of knowledge that comes into play only under certain circumstances of the translation process. The same view is supported by another student, with the only mention that he/she adds the possibility of improving this knowledge in time: "even if you don't have profound knowledge about a subject, in time you will acquire the needed information" (30).

(3) The perspective of the translator's effort

A very general comment regarding the answers in the third category is that they are far less numerous in comparison to the ones presented previously. Although, in line with the opinions presented so far, the subjects formulating these answers point to ways in which the translator benefits from the cultural competence, they do it from an interesting perspective. More exactly, if the answers in the first two categories discuss the cultural ability from the point of view of its contribution to the quality of the target text, those included here refer to the manner in which this sub-competence reduces the effort inherent in the work carried out by any translator.

Some subjects resort to general formulations, such as: "knowing the cultural elements ensures an easier and smoother translation process" (22), while others explain that, if the translator possesses cultural knowledge, he/she "doesn't have to do research" (2), "won't lose time" (46), or "will be more likely to respect the deadlines" (38). Even if they reflect a certain reality, it must be admitted that such answers reveal a narrow view of the cultural ability and of its contribution to the general translation competence,

pointing, once more, to the necessity that (future) translators should acquire a deep understanding of this complex phenomenon.

3.2.2. Question 2: on the nature of the cultural ability

As pointed out earlier, the open dimension of the first question was meant to give my subjects the freedom to express their own views on the concept of cultural competence, views which derive, on the one hand, from the formal or the informal training they may have had in this respect, and, on the other, from the translating experience they have gained up to that point. The second question comes to complete the image created by the answers discussed so far by requiring the subjects to select, from a limited range of elements, those which, in their opinion, represent sub-constituents of the cultural competence, and, then, considering the extent of its contribution to a good quality of this competence, to rank each of the elements they have selected on a scale from 1 (not important) to 10 (essential). More exactly, my students were invited to consider a range of twelve elements which are based on sub-constituents of the cultural competence mentioned by the EMT and the PICT models of translation competence discussed in section 2.

Table 1 synthetically presents the findings yielded by the quantitative analysis of the answers that my subjects offered for the second question. Column 1 lists the elements from which my subjects were supposed to select the sub-constituents of the translator's cultural ability, arranging them in the descending order of the overall rate of selection. The percentage representing the rate of selection for each individual element is listed in column 2. Column 3 lists the percentages resulted from the subjects' rankings of each of the selected constituents, thus offering an image of the students' perceptions regarding the manner in which each element contributes to a good cultural competence.

1	2	3				
SUB-CONSTITUENTS	**RATE OF SELECTION**	**RANKING**				
		10–9	**8–7**	**6–5**	**4–3**	**2–1**
recognising function and meaning in language variations	96%	76%	17%	7%	-	-
recognising values and references proper to the cultures represented	90%	81%	19%	-	-	-
grasping the presuppositions, allusions, stereotypes of a document	86%	65%	27%	8%	-	-
identifying the rules for interaction relating to a specific community	76%	48%	35%	13%	4%	-
knowing how to produce a register appropriate to a given situation	73%	73%	27%	-	-	-
being able to adjust to new situations and to adapt one's approach to best suit a particular translation project	73%	64%	26%	5%	5%	-
understanding the macrostructure and overall coherence of a document	66%	60%	35%	5%	-	-
being curious about the environment of ST production and/ or TT functioning	66%	55%	30%	15%	-	-

knowing how to compose a document in accordance with the genre conventions	63%	63%	26%	11%	-	-
knowing how to draft, rephrase, restructure, and post-edit (in SL and TL)	56%	59%	24%	17%	-	-
extracting and summarising the essential information in a document	56%	41%	29%	24%	6%	-
evaluating one's problems with comprehension and defining strategies for solving them	40%	42%	42%	16%	-	-

Table 1. The percentage representation of the students' views on the sub-constituents of the cultural competence

3.3. Discussion of research findings and some methodological implications

I consider that the most important conclusion yielded by my research study refers to the subjects' high level of awareness regarding the importance of the (inter)cultural competence in the context of the overall translation competence. However, the explanations and the arguments formulated by my students in this respect suggest that they seem to rely more on intuition, on common-sense perceptions, and on linguistic knowledge rather than on the theories or the research findings formulated by specialists in the field of translation studies. This idea is supported both by the quantitative type of evidence produced by my study, and by the qualitative one.

From a quantitative perspective, this tendency is reflected by the choices made by my subjects with regard to the elements which, in their opinion, represent sub-constituents of the intercultural competence, as well as to the rankings afforded to each of those elements (cf. section 3.2.2). I must mention here the high rate of selection manifested by my students in relation to elements which belong rather to the sphere of linguistic knowledge than to that of cultural abilities. "Recognising function and meaning in language variations", the element characterized by the highest percentage, represents a good example in this respect. Additionally, students place a high value on the presence of various types of culture-bound elements, this being the reason why elements like "values and references proper to the cultures represented", or "presuppositions, allusions, stereotypes of a document" have been selected as essential constituents of the translator's intercultural competence. The quantitative analysis also reveals the subjects' tendency to underestimate the role played by some skills specific to appropriate text comprehension and production (for example, respecting genre conventions). Attitudinal factors are considered to be relatively important, with more focus on adaptability than on curiosity. Surprisingly enough, awareness of the problems that the translators might have with the comprehension of a text produced in a different cultural context ranks lowest in my subjects' overall rate of selection.

The results of the qualitative analysis (cf. section 3.2.1) are also relevant for the subjects' relatively narrow view of the translator's cultural ability, one generally restricted to the ability to avoid errors that might be caused by the differences between the cultural context of the source text and that of the target text. The frequent references to "culture-

specific words and phrases" or to "cultural gaps" indicate that, according to most of my subjects, the concept of cultural competence covers a series of knowledge-based and skill-based elements which help the translator offer a proper treatment to the cultural references present in the original. Even if there were students who went beyond this level and pointed to the important role played by the translator's appropriate attitude when it comes to a good (inter)cultural competence, their number is relatively reduced.

All in all, the results of my research study seem to point to the students' insufficient level of awareness and of knowledge with regard to what exactly the (inter)cultural ability covers and to how it can be continually developed after the process of formal training ends. One explanation for this lack of awareness might be a reality which was also noticed by Tomozeiu, Koskinen and D'Arcangelo (2016: 252), namely that intercultural competence is generally taught implicitly rather than explicitly during the translation courses. It can be therefore concluded that, if the future translators benefit from explicit training in this respect, it is very likely that they will get a thorough understanding of their role as intercultural mediators.

What should this explicit process of teaching consist in? I will briefly mention here some suggestions offered by the field of translation theory and translation research. Katan (2009), for example, considers that, during the undergraduate cycle, translation courses should be focused on cognitive competences, with practical activities meant to train students, first of all, to write for the intended reader, and, then, to develop a toleration for difference. At postgraduate level, the focus should be on metacognitive competencies; this involves that, before translating the text, students must address a number of questions which will help them analyse, synthesise and evaluate the socio-cultural context of both the source text and of its target variant.

Examples of concrete activities that teachers can use with a view to developing their students' intercultural competence are offered by the PICT research group, These activities are designed in accordance with the group's basic belief that the translator as intercultural mediator must display knowledge, skills or attitudes in the following spheres: theoretical, textual and interpersonal. From a theoretical perspective, activities should contribute to the conceptual and terminological framework that must become part of the students' overall competence and critical awareness of the role they play in ensuring the transfer not only at linguistic, but also at cultural level. The activities specific to the second sphere regard the skills that students should be able to apply on the basis of their theoretical knowledge to the actual process or product of translating from one culture into another. The third sphere basically concerns the students' attitudes of openness and the ability to be non-judgemental in relation to both the source and the target cultures (cf. PICT 2012).

Starting from the essential role of curiosity and adaptability for a good intercultural competence, Tomozeiu, Koskinen and D'Arcangelo (2016) suggest that these attitudes should be devoted a significant amount of time in the classroom. In order to develop curiosity about understanding the environment in which the original was created or the environment in which the translation will function, translator trainers might resort to audience visualisation techniques, which will encourage students to consider and understand a different perspective. With regard to adaptability, teachers may use activities which require that the same text should be translated for different audiences, or that the students should consider what other forms of communication, besides the

text itself, could render the message of the source text in an appropriate manner for the target audience (e.g. drawings, short videos). In this way, the trainees are encouraged to reflect, and to adapt their approach to best suit a particular translation project.

Last but not least, I must stress that the development of the intercultural competence should not be perceived as being restricted to the context of the translation courses. Nowadays, students have various opportunities of contact with a foreign culture: reading foreign literary or non-literary texts, watching all sorts of videos, travelling abroad, etc. Translator trainers should take advantage of such out-of-class activities and find ways to incorporate them in the teaching process, because, in this way, they are very likely to create in their students habits that will help them continue the development of their cultural ability outside the classroom.

4. Conclusion

Even if the (future) translators have various opportunities of developing their cultural competence both in and outside the translation class, the role played by the translator trainer in this respect should not be underestimated. More exactly, the manner in which the translation teacher guides his/ her students during the process of increasing their cultural ability will exert a valuable influence on their status as professionals in the field of translation. I will mention here only two areas which are under this positive influence. On the one hand, an approach to the intercultural competence which takes into account not only the culture-specific elements which are contained by the original and must be properly reflected by the target variant, but also the translator as a person who has certain attitudes and who establishes relationships with various partners in the translation process, is very likely to teach the trainees how to behave like experts in their field. On the other, the types of activities proposed by the teacher with a view to increasing the intercultural ability will surely serve as very good models that (future) translators can use outside the classroom. And this is a very valuable lesson, because, as it is often said, the training process ends at a certain point, but learning must go on forever.

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