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## Cultural and Intercultural Awareness and Competence as Key Traits in Translation and Interpreting

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### Abstract

The role of interpreters and translators extends beyond language conversion. This article explores the importance of cultural and intercultural awareness and competence in translation and interpreting practices. Drawing on existing literature and empirical studies to argue for the centrality of these competencies in the field, a theoretical and conceptual approach is adopted to examine their role in effective translation and interpreting practices. This approach highlights the indispensable value of cultural and intercultural awareness and competence in avoiding unintended miscommunication that can cause irreparable damage. Moreover, suggestions as to what the education and training of translators and interpreters should include are made. Ultimately, this article positions cultural and intercultural awareness and competence not as secondary or supplemental skills but as essential for achieving effective and appropriate translation and interpreting.

**Keywords:** Translators/interpreters, cultural awareness, intercultural awareness, cultural competence, intercultural competence

### 1. Introduction

Interpreters and translators are indispensable agents in this increasingly interconnected and globalized world. They are critical mediators of meaning. They contribute immensely to the exchange of knowledge, information, values, and ideas. Spoken and written language is infused with cultural conventions. Their work goes beyond the mere linguistic conversion to serving instead as a form of cultural brokerage that mediates meaning across cultural contexts (Katan & Taibi, 2021). The latter role is heightened as migration, global developments, international commerce, and digital communication intensify. Interpreters and translators facilitate linguistic understanding, but they are also involved in complex processes of cultural negotiation, as they are expected to transcend cultural boundaries and facilitate mutual understanding in culturally diverse interactions (Tessicini, 2014).

Although various schools of thought within translation studies (e.g., British contextualism and the Prague School) have emphasized the significant role of the social and cultural context within which translation takes place, they still view translation mainly as a linguistic activity (Cook, 2010) or a language-focused process, thereby implying the secondary role culture plays in practice. However, a subsequent shift in the way translation and interpreting are viewed affirms the valid contribution of culture to interpreting and translation activities, thus giving it a centre-stage role or a co-star role (Armstrong, 2014; Bernárdez, 2013).

The premise that language is deeply embedded in the cultural context in which it is used highlights the importance of cultural and intercultural awareness and competence for interpreters and translators. Interpreting and translation are not merely the acts of converting words from the source language into the target language; they also convey meaning, nuance, and intent grounded in a particular cultural framework. Such awareness ensures that communication is accurate, appropriate, and respectful (Deardorff, 2009). The development of cultural and intercultural awareness and competence is also about seeking to achieve effective and appropriate communication between cultures. In this sense, translators and interpreters do not function only as language experts but also as cultural mediators, roles that are both fundamental to professional practice.

This article examines the pivotal role cultural and intercultural awareness and competence play for translators so as to create a target text that conveys the intended meaning clearly and concisely, but also suitably taking into account the cultural nuances. Likewise, for interpreters, these traits are important because they help to facilitate communication by relaying the information in a way that the message or utterance is received and understood with clarity, taking into account the social and cultural context the interpreting is taking place in. The process of translating and interpreting differs since translators can translate at their own pace, affording them time to research, revise, reflect, and make necessary adjustments, while interpreters have very little time to think and process the information and are often unable to revise. However, cultural and intercultural awareness and competence play an important role in both processes. Both are concerned with functional equivalence and by extension, both focus on how to convey meaningful messages across cultures.

In the section that follows, theoretical scaffolding by conceptualizing key terms is created, followed by a discussion of the importance of raising cultural and intercultural awareness and cultivating cultural and intercultural competence in both translators and interpreters. This article then presents some characteristic examples of mistakes made by these professionals due to the lack of understanding of specific cultural subtleties and overtones in a given context. Finally, it proceeds with suggestions regarding the necessary education and

training that translators and interpreters ought to have regarding cultural and intercultural awareness and competence.

## **2. Conceptual Considerations**

### **Cultural and Intercultural Awareness, Cultural and Intercultural Competence**

The key terms that need to be addressed herein to create a conceptual understanding and that are central to this article are cultural awareness, intercultural awareness, and overall cultural and intercultural competence. Each term will be discussed in relation to translators and interpreters.

Cultural awareness refers to one's understanding and appreciation of similarities and differences between cultures (Spencer-Oatey, 2012). Being culturally aware means being cognizant of value systems, thought patterns, and beliefs that are shaped by and grounded in a particular cultural milieu. Cultural awareness further implies understanding the characteristics of other cultures (Byram, 1997). It also involves recognizing and understanding that an individual's culture is one among many and that his or her culture is not superior to another. In other words, cultural awareness helps one move away from an ethnocentric perspective towards cultural relativism, which means withholding judgements based on his/her cultural norms and standards. Cultural awareness is, in essence, the first approach to effective and appropriate intercultural engagement.

Intercultural awareness refers to one's cognitive understanding of the role culture plays in the behaviors exhibited, the communication styles employed, and the overall skills used to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural settings (Byram, 1997). Intercultural awareness goes beyond cultural awareness and accentuates the powerful and dynamic interactions of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It also underlines one's ability to first perceive and then interpret the existing cultural differences when communication takes place between people who come from culturally different environments (Baker, 2015).

While the terms awareness and competence are often used interchangeably in the relevant literature as they are interconnected concepts, they do indeed carry distinct meanings. In a sense, "awareness" is more passive in nature in that it involves perception and understanding of the cultural nuances, whereas "competence" is more active and involves having the necessary skills to be able to act and behave effectively and appropriately in culturally diverse contexts. However, both awareness and competence are important since competence presupposes awareness, which is the foundation on which competence develops.

A further distinction is made between cultural competence and intercultural competence. Lustig and Koester (2010) state that "cultural competence" refers to various skills and behaviors that enable people to work appropriately and effectively in any given cultural

context, so the scope is more context-specific. "Intercultural competence," according to Deardorff (2006), is related to the broader capacity to deal with interactions across several cultural contexts in an adaptable, respectful, and empathetic manner. In other words, intercultural competence is more context-general.

One notices that the words "effective" and "appropriate" are used frequently, and this is not by coincidence. Their meaning is crucial as they relate to this particular context. "Effective" implies that the meaning of the message sent and received is the one intended, which presupposes recognizing various verbal and nonverbal cues (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). Recognizing these cues is the bedrock for clarity and accuracy. Delivering the message effectively is clearly important but will not suffice. "Appropriateness" in communication is complementary because being aware of the target audience, context, communication style, tone, and register will ensure culturally sensitive and respectful communication and subsequently reduce the possibility of unintended misunderstanding or miscommunication.

### **3. From Language Conversion to Active Cultural Facilitation**

Let us now see how the above concepts relate to translators and interpreters in particular and consider their importance in the work these professionals perform. In doing so, I will explore how and why cultural awareness, linguistic sensitivity, and contextual understanding work in tandem when they influence the quality and effectiveness of their practice.

Translation involves navigating and often negotiating meaning across diverse cultural terrain. Being merely linguistically competent will not suffice. Nida (1964) purports that translation goes beyond functional equivalence as it requires sound knowledge and understanding of the cultural context at hand. That said, cultural and intercultural awareness are not considered ancillary competencies but the *sine qua non* of professional translators and interpreters.

Pöchhacker (2022) accentuates the importance of intercultural competence in interpreting. Interculturally competent interpreters are able to convey the speaker's intentions and emotions more accurately, understanding the cultural nuances and subtleties that the message may contain. Similarly, Tipton and Furmanek (2016) claim that the interpreter's cultural awareness has a direct impact on the integrity and equality of the interpreted event, highlighting thus the importance of having deep knowledge and understanding of the source and target cultures they work between. This principle arguably forms the basis for translation as well.

In reference to interpreters, Wadensjö (1998) argues that they are co-participants in communicative events and uses this as the central theme in her work. Being a co-participant implies that interpreters move beyond linguistic conversion to cultural facilitation, which

involves the effective and appropriate interaction and understanding of individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds.

The importance of cultural and intercultural awareness and competence in reference to functional equivalence is especially evident and tangible in the areas of marketing and software, where the preferred term is localization. Localization is more than just linguistic adaptation; it is also about “adapting content culturally to suit the target audience’s norms, expectations, and conventions” (Esselink & Vries, 2000, p. 3). Esselink and Vries’ claim further underscores the importance cultural fluency has in producing translations that address the cultural nuances and adhere to the norms and conventions these audiences expect to see. For instance, in a pamphlet about diabetes and dietary requirements written in English and translated for an Arabic-speaking audience, a culturally competent translator would adapt words like “toast” and “bagels” to functionally equivalent terms relevant to an Arabic diet, such as “pita bread.” They would also reword any sensitive terms and adjust the tone and formality to align with Islamic traditions and cultural expectations.

The above example illustrates that successful translation is not merely a matter of linguistic substitution but a rather complex act of cultural negotiation. Without cultural and intercultural competence, even technically accurate translations risk confusing the target audience. In contexts like marketing, healthcare, and software—where clear, culturally resonant communication is required—the ability to localize content with cultural sensitivity can determine the success or failure of the message conveyed. Therefore, cultivating these competencies is not optional but compulsory for translators and interpreters who aim at equivalent and culturally appropriate translations across diverse contexts.

#### **4. Translators and Interpreters as Cultural Mediators**

In the literature, translators and interpreters are often referred to as “cultural mediators.” However, what does this characterization actually mean? A cultural mediator is someone who facilitates understanding and communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. They help build bridges across communication gaps that may result from cultural differences. Hatim and Mason (1997, p.147) explain that translators are “cultural mediators who must understand the values, beliefs, and assumptions of both source and target cultures.” Roy (2000) also highlights the added function of interpreters as mediators of power and identity. Along the same lines, Angelelli (2004) discusses the dual role interpreters have, that of communicator and cultural negotiator.

Compared to translators, interpreters face the added pressure of responding in real-time to culturally loaded communication, not only verbal, such as informing participants of culturally sensitive topics but also nonverbal, such as clarifying body language that may

become a cause for misinterpretation in communication that takes place between people from culturally different frameworks. Interpreters facilitate communication in various demanding and often high-stakes environments and sensitive contexts such as international relations and diplomacy, judiciary, and healthcare. A case in point is when an interpreter assists refugees in navigating the complex bureaucratic procedures often encountered when dealing with social services.

Despite the fact that translators and interpreters may operate in different modalities and contexts, they are both required to have cultural insight into both the source and the target cultures. In other words, they need to be culturally and intercultural aware and competent to be able to convey the message in an accurate, culturally sensitive, and respectful way.

### **5. Examples of the Importance of Cultural and Intercultural Awareness**

The importance of cultural and intercultural awareness and competence in the profession of translators and interpreters is exemplified through many succinct arguments. Intercultural awareness helps these professionals to avoid assumptions that stem from an ethnocentric viewpoint (Byram, 1997). Such ethnocentric assumptions may lead to irreparable misinterpretation or distortion of the original text or the original utterance. To be more concrete, essential meaning can be lost or misconstrued when the information has cultural overtones that have not been properly addressed or understood because they may not align with the cultural framework of the translator or interpreter. The translator or interpreter may appear disrespectful or even offensive when cultural nuances are lost, or sensitive content is miscommunicated due to differing norms and communication styles. Moreover, prejudice, biases, and stereotypes may be stumbling blocks in communicating the written or oral language and thus hinder the accuracy of the intended meaning (Ahieieva-Karkashadze & Lyman, 2023; Simo & Ahmed, 2022). Also, ethical standards of neutrality may be jeopardized or undermined when translators or interpreters make personal, often arbitrary, judgments or act in ways that go beyond their duty of impartiality (Ahmadova, 2025; Chesterman, 1997).

Taking the above considerations in mind, many examples can be drawn where the pivotal role cultural and intercultural awareness and competence play is put to the fore. In this section, a few such examples will be illustrated to highlight how translation and interpreting mistakes due to a lack of cultural and intercultural awareness led to unpleasant situations that cost companies and people money and their reputations, which unequivocally damaged the integrity of the translators and interpreters directly involved.

The first example used is that of the famous soft drinks giant “Pepsi” and, more specifically, Pepsi’s slogan in China. Pepsi’s initial slogan was “Come alive with the Pepsi Generation.” In preparation for the Chinese market, the slogan was translated into Chinese.

The translator, however, rendered the phrase "come alive" literally and thus translated into "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave." From a non-Chinese perspective, this mistake may even come across as nonchalant. Nonetheless, this mistake had far-reaching repercussions. In the Chinese culture, any reference to ancestors, death, and the afterlife can be controversial as they are spiritually sensitive issues. In the American culture, "come alive" connotes energy and liveliness, but taken literally in its translated form, it may mean some form of supernatural resurrection or resuscitation, which is naturally deemed inappropriate in such a context. Hence, many Chinese consumers possibly took offence to such a slogan as it may have impinged on their views of ancestral respect and their views of the afterlife, thereby derogating their cultural values. This mistake resulted in an unsuccessful advertising campaign, leading to subsequent costly rebranding. Naturally, it also damaged the image of the product being advertised as negative associations were created between the potential consumer and the product. This is a prime example illustrating that intercultural awareness is not of secondary importance but vital for translators to possess if they are to deliver messages that are linguistically and culturally effective and appropriate. Subsequently, this mistake underscores the importance of employing culturally aware and competent translators.

The following example comes from a medical context. The scenario showcases the imminent danger that comes with preconceived notions, biases, prejudice and stereotypes. If a patient who comes from a culture (e.g., Latin American, Turkish, Greek) that espouses the folk belief of the "evil eye" stemming from an envious look presents him/herself with a severe headache, they might attribute this headache to the "evil eye" and say so in his/her mother tongue. The interpreter who is relaying this information to the medical staff may disregard this information as being irrelevant to Western medicine and simply interpret it by saying that the patient has a severe headache. This approach reduces the intended meaning because the cultural reference is undermined, stripping it of its depth and significance. It ought to be noted that for the medical professional, such information may be of value as there may be underlying issues such as emotional distress, spiritual concerns, and so forth.

Another example put forward comes from the business world. An American and a Japanese businessperson come together to negotiate a pending deal. After much discussion, the Japanese businessperson states that he/she will consider the proposal carefully. The interpreter, assuming directness is universal, "misreads" this statement to mean "they are interested" and interprets it as such to the American party, potentially leading to false expectations or strained relations. The reason is because such statements uttered by Japanese people usually imply reservation or a less confrontational decline and not agreement.

Other more general examples (e.g., formality levels in legal documents, sensitivity to health beliefs in medical settings, brand voice in marketing content, user interface expectations

in software localization, and etiquette in diplomatic or political discourse) include the importance of adapting to the tone and values a given cultural context may dictate. In North American advertising campaigns (i.e., in Nike's slogan "Just Do It"), the imperative mood is often employed to instruct or command the consumer or audience to take a specific action, that is, to prompt them to buy a product or service. Nevertheless, in other cultural contexts, such as the Japanese one, such an approach may come across as unnatural and rather forceful. Therefore, the translator must bear this in mind and phrase the advertisement differently to be in line with the expectations, conventions, and values of the Japanese culture.

## **6. Educating and Training Translation and Interpreting Professionals**

Undoubtedly, education and training are both vital in helping future translators and interpreters prepare for the challenges of the profession. Obviously, a major part of the curriculum involves developing linguistic proficiency in various genres, such as literature, politics, law, technical, etc. However, it is also vital for the curriculum to include courses that aim at educating students in the cultural and social contexts in which the language operates.

While comprehensive global statistics on the curriculum offered by the university departments of translation and interpreting are not readily available, an overview of such departments reveals that to a lesser or larger extent, a significant number of them do indeed offer specialized courses, such as intercultural communication, sociolinguistics, cultural pragmatics, etc. Even a glance at university department names in various universities across the globe, such as in Spain, The United States of America, Italy, and The United Kingdom, show their commitment to the areas outlined above. Such names include "Translation and Intercultural Communication" (Princeton University), "Modern Languages Translation, Interpreting and Cultural Mediation" (University of Essex), "Translation and Intercultural Communication Studies" (University of Sheffield), "Translation and Cultural Mediation" (University of Udine), "Translation and Intercultural Studies" (Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona). These names clearly illustrate the importance of including such education and training in their programs.

By definition, any program that educates and trains translators and interpreters necessarily includes language courses to advance their language proficiency. As much as many language teaching experts underscore the significance of incorporating cultural knowledge into language education (Climent-Ferrando, 2016), one must have reservations about whether culture is always given the priority it deserves. Therefore, despite culture being addressed either directly or indirectly, it should be done so in a more systematic way.

In any case, suggestions of key elements are made as to what such education and training should include to help future translators and interpreters deepen their cultural and



intercultural awareness and competence. First of all, courses on cultural and area studies should be incorporated early on in the curriculum. Courses on the source culture, target culture, and global culture (e.g., arts, history, literature, customs, traditions, etc.) should be offered in abundance. In addition, courses that focus on comparing cultures are beneficial as addressing similarities and differences in values, norms, beliefs, and worldviews can help students gain a more in-depth understanding. Courses in sociolinguistics and cultural pragmatics can also prove very valuable, as students can understand how language shapes one's social identity and how it varies depending on the social context. Moreover, cultural pragmatics can help students understand how cultural values and norms influence the way people communicate in social interactions and in culturally diverse contexts. Obviously, courses in intercultural communication are needed. The content of these courses can stem from theories of intercultural communication (e.g., Ting-Toomey's theories on identity and face-saving) and cultural dimensions (e.g., Hall, Hofstede, Lewis, etc.). These courses can also help students, who are future translators and interpreters, address stereotypes and critically reflect on their own biases with the aim of cultivating their intercultural sensitivity, which is a predictive and determining factor of intercultural competence (Chen & Starosta, 1998). In other words, this positive correlation implies that the more interculturally sensitive a person is, the more likely he/she is to be interculturally competent.

Courses can be enriched by the use of various valuable tools. Case studies, for instance, are beneficial because they are realistic in nature and allow learners to critically reflect on diverse perspectives. Equally important is the use of critical incidents. Critical incidents are "brief descriptions of situations in which a misunderstanding, problem, or conflict arises as a result of the cultural differences of the interacting parties, or a problem of cross-cultural adaptation and communication" (Apedaile & Schill, 2008, p.8). Similar to case studies, critical incidents can help learners reflect on, for example, the subtle dynamics of culture as it relates to translating and interpreting. The program should also include courses in ethics and codes of conduct, as defined by international professional associations of translation and interpreting. Sensitizing learners to culturally respectful interpretation and translation helps ensure accurate, ethical, and context-aware communication across cultures. Interpreters, in particular, need to understand the fine lines between advocacy (be partial or promote a specific viewpoint) and neutrality (remain unbiased and impartial and refrain from projecting values) in intercultural contexts. They also need to be provided guidance to develop strategies to maintain neutrality and impartiality.

Aside from academic courses, learners should be given opportunities for study abroad programs and internships, which, apart from helping them develop their linguistic skills, will give them opportunities for deeper cultural understanding and intercultural learning and the

chance to cultivate a deeper global perspective. Such exposure to diverse worldviews and communication styles can encourage learners to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and develop the adaptability required for cross-cultural interaction. These experiences can also foster personal growth, independence, and a global outlook, which are key traits in today's interconnected world.

For the preparation of future translators and interpreters, education and training must go beyond technical proficiency and linguistic accuracy. The development of cultural competence requires pertinent pedagogical strategies that provide learner immersion in culturally rich content and reflective practice. This is why other essential components of training include exposure to several genres of texts with cultural nuances, be it political speeches or literature. Learners should also be given ample opportunities to take part in simulated interpreting sessions that, again, are loaded with cultural references. All this will be even more valuable if the learners are encouraged to practice self-reflection. Self-reflection is essential as it can help with withholding intentional or unintentional biases, it can support and encourage ethical practice, and it can help one better understand subtle or covert cultural cues. Self-reflection, in general, helps foster the learning of both languages and cultures. Self-reflection must start early in the education and training of interpreters and translators. Norberg (2014) discusses the importance for students to analyze their translation processes as it helps them develop self-awareness and a deeper understanding of the cultural and ethical aspects of their work. Baker and Maier (2011) also underscore the integral role self-reflection plays in promoting ethical awareness and accountability among interpreters and translators.

If all the above suggestions are implemented, learners will be given ample opportunities to help them raise their cultural and intercultural awareness and competence. It is hoped that through a combination of academic study, experiential learning, and direct engagement with diverse communities, learners will be able to develop an awareness of how values, beliefs, behaviors, and communication styles vary across cultures before claiming true intercultural competence for navigating diverse social contexts effectively. Such awareness, when matured into competence, is expected to enable learners to interpret meaning beyond words, respond effectively and appropriately to culturally specific cues, and navigate situations where norms and expectations differ from their own. And if avoiding offence, misunderstanding, or breakdown in communication can be claimed to be the direct result of cultural sensitivity and understanding, the importance of nurturing intercultural competence for fostering smoother, more respectful interactions cannot be emphasized enough.

## **7. Conclusion**

It is apparent that the role of translators and interpreters extends far beyond linguistic conversion to being able to navigate across cultural boundaries that pose communication

challenges. They are both important conduits of communication in culturally complex conditions. Apart from obvious language proficiency, translation and interpreting professionals should possess cultural and intercultural awareness and competence, as they are essential ingredients in performing their translation or interpreting events effectively and appropriately and minimizing the risk of distortion, misunderstanding, misinterpretation, disrespect, and offence. In an increasingly interconnected world, these traits have become indispensable, and universities must play their role in ensuring that the students majoring in such disciplines are equipped with the necessary tools and skills to meet the demands of the profession.

To meet professional demands, universities should plan the integration of cultural and intercultural competence into the core curriculum of translation and interpreting programs rather than treat it as an ancillary subject. Interdisciplinary coursework encompassing cultural studies, sociolinguistics, ethics, and communication theory can provide students with a thorough and sophisticated understanding of the cultural and social dynamics that underpin language use. Moreover, partnerships with international institutions, participation in study abroad programs, and exposure to real-world case studies constitute excellent experiential learning opportunities. On the same note, simulated interpreting sessions, reflective practice, and guided discussions around ethical dilemmas should also be integrated to foster critical thinking and cultural sensitivity.

To sum up, in order for future translators and interpreters to operate confidently and responsibly in multilingual and multicultural environments, they need to seek education and training whose curricula prioritize the integration of cultural awareness and competence, ethical training, interdisciplinary knowledge, and practical experience. By choosing to do so, these professionals will not only be linguistically skilled but also culturally attuned and ethically grounded in their practice.

### **Disclosures**

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