Translation Competence: Beyond Bilingualism

Megaptche Megaptche Yvan Rudhel [a, *], **Xu Wen** [a]

[a] College of International Studies, Southwest University, Chongqing China.
*Corresponding author Email: megaptchechasse@gmail.com

Abstract: According to some scholars of Translation Studies, bilinguals are in possession of innate translation competence. In the present research, aspects of bilingualism and translation competencies are investigated. The questions driving the research are: is being bilingual enough to be a translator? And what are the competencies a translator needs to perform a good translation? This article addresses these questions through a comprehensive literature review and a small-scale empirical study. First, the relevant literature on bilingualism and translation competence was reviewed. Second, an empirical investigation was carried out in which bilinguals and professional translators translated a source text to generate empirical data on using two languages and relevant translation competencies. The results have shown that being a translator is more than being bilingual, and going to a translation school is not a guarantee to be a good translator. The subject matter knowledge also matters. The research yields insights into the description and development of translation competence and provides potential avenues for translators' self-improvement.

About the Authors

Mr. Megaptche Megaptche Yvan Rudhel obtained his BA in Trilingual (French-English-Chinese) Studies Applied to Translation and an MA in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of other Languages. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Translation Studies at the College of International Studies, Southwest University, Chongqing, China. His current research focuses on cross-cultural communication, metaphor and figurative language translation, translation competence, and audio-visual translation.

Dr. Xu Wen is currently serving as a professor in linguistics and Dean of College of International Studies, Southwest University, Chongqing, China. He is the editor of the *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education* (Springer) and co-editor of *Cognitive Linguistic Studies* (John Benjamins). He has published numerous research articles in journals such as *Brain and Language*, *Metaphor and Symbol*, and books such as *The Routledge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, *The Cognitive Foundation of Language*, *The Pragmatics of Discourse Understanding*, and *A Cognitive-Pragmatic Study in Ironic Utterances*. His major research interests include cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, construction grammar, intercultural linguistics, and discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

1.1 Bilingualism approach to translation

The literature relevant to bilingualism reveals various views and concepts of bilingualism. At first sight, the concept seems to be non-problematic. Merriam Webster dictionary (1961 as cited in Harmers & Blanc, 2000) defines a bilingual as someone who speaks two languages with the same fluency as a native speaker, and bilingualism as permanent oral use of two languages. Generally, people view bilinguals as people who are perfectly fluent in two languages. It is similar to Leonard Bloomfield's approach (1935:56), which sees bilingualism as 'the native-like'

mastery of two languages. Unlike Bloomfield's definition, which only focuses on people known as 'perfect bilinguals', John Macnamara (1967) proposes a minimalist definition and argues that, can be called a bilingual anyone who possesses at least one of the five languages abilities: speaking, listening, reading, writing and comprehension in a language other than his/her mother tongue. This minimalist definition is opposed to the maximalist definition that suggests that, as far as bilingualism is concerned, one either possesses bilingual competence (completely) or one does not. If we base our understanding of bilingualism on the maximalist definition, bilingualism can be seen as a rare and exceptional phenomenon. However, according to the minimalist definition, any use of a second language for communicative purpose is considered as bilingualism, no matter how limited it is. In addition, even if someone's competence in a language other than his/her native language is highly bounded or limited to one language skill, the person will still be considered as a bilingual. The concept is so broadly defined that every person can say to be bilingual.

As mentioned earlier, Harris (1977) is one of the first proponents of the concept of 'natural translation'. Natural translation suggests that bilinguals perform translations on a daily basis without translation training (Harris, 1977:99). Harris and Sherwood argue that, the competence of bilinguals evolves and unfolds itself to the extent that the person's competence in the two languages involved develops. Furthermore, Harris emphasizes that all bilinguals have translation competence. In other words, except from the competence in two languages (i.e., L1 and L2) bilinguals also possess a third competence, which the ability to translate from L1 to L2and vice versa. Bilingualism therefore ceases to be a double competence and becomes a triple competence. Bilingualism is therefore not a double but a triple competence. As far as natural translation is concerned, translation competence is equal to bilingual competence.

1.2 Competence and Translation Competence

Although the term 'competence' is employed in various areas of study and contexts, it is still not easy to provide a definition that brings together the several ways in which it is employed. Moreover, Hurtardo Albir (2007) states that the term is still being developed. Besides, the understanding of the term relies on different conditions related to the culture, the language and the country. For instance, there are situations where this term is employed to describe the skills involved in the training processes, but axiomatically in professional and higher cognitive areas (Schneckberg & Wildt, 2006). According to Norris (1991), any attempt to define the term competence is considered a daunting task because theoretical confusion has overshadowed practical aspects of competence.

Over time, as Translation Studies have evolved as an independent field of inquiry, the idea that all bilinguals can translate has been rejected. Nowadays, we can say with no doubt that one's advanced knowledge of two languages is essential but not enough to do a successful translation. Hurtardo (2001) argues that ideally speaking, being bilingual is very important to be a translator, but not enough to be considered as a good translator since training in the translation process is needed. Scholars have proposed the following categories of translation competence:

1.3 Translation Competence as A Summation of Linguistic Competences

Noam Chomsky is one of the main scholars that have influenced this category. Chomsky's approach to linguistics was a ubiquitous linguistic theory throughout the 1970s. At this time, not much was required from translators. They were only required to translate. According to the proponents of this approach to translation competence, translation competence consists of the knowledge of two linguistic competencies (Lesznyak, 2007). It is a must for translators to possess competence in the source language (henceforth SL) and competence in the target language (henceforth TL) text-production (Wilss, 1976). Koller (1979, cited in Anthony Pym, 2003) argues there should be a distinction between linguistic competence and translation competence. While translation competence is a specific type of competence that deals with the use of language, linguistic competence varies depending on the tongue. Therefore, it can be said that translation competence is more of a performance than mere competence. It can also be considered as the capacity one has to operate matching between linguistic skills acquired in two languages.

1.4 Translation Competence as One Super Competence

According to research carried by scholars such as Krings, 1986; Pym, 2003; Gregory M. Shreve, 1997; Toury, 1995; Wilss, 1976, translation competence is the super competence that covers all the other linguistic sub-competencies from which the minimalist definitions of translation evolved afterward. Unlike Harris, who advocates for 'natural translation,' Toury (1995) proposes the expression 'native translator' alluding to 'transfer competence' instead of possessing bilingual and linguistic competencies. Consequently, according to Toury, 'transfer competence' results from the process of socialization, characterized by specific norms and acquired behaviors. In the same line of thought, Krings (1986) points out the different types of issues encountered during translation. These problems mainly relate to source text (hereafter ST) understanding, TL skills, and interlingual issues. Koller (1992, as cited in Pym, 2003) emphasizes the importance of a translator to be creative when discovering and choosing among potential equivalents and the skills in text production for a successful translation.

Shreve (1997) bases his analysis on cognitive psychology research findings to define translation competence as a special competence. As he does not consider translation as a 'native competence' he argues that translation competence differs from communicative competence that consists of two types of knowledge, namely: procedural and declarative. Pym (2003) argues that is it will be proper to use a minimalist approach to define translation competence. He describes translation competence as the skill one has in generating a series of more than appropriate terms for an ST and the skill one has in quickly selecting, with strong confidence, only appropriate TTs from a series of TTs.

1.5 Multicomponent Models of Translation Competence

The multicomponent models are grounded on research done in second language acquisition and linguistic performance. The multicomponent models suggest that translation competence includes various linguistic and extra-linguistic components. According to Hatim and Mason (1997), translation competence consists of three skills, namely: the ST processing skills, the TT processing skills and the transfer processing skills. Radegundis Stolze (1992, as cited in Lesznyak, 2007) emphasizes the importance of linguistics in translation and defines translation competence as the ability to comprehend and communicate. As he considers translation a conscious process of dealing with a text, Stolze strongly supports the idea that translation competence includes text understanding and text semantic transfer. These are competencies kept via an encyclopedic knowledge base that includes the declarative and procedural knowledge of language, culture and subject matters. Roger T. Bell's (1991) model is based on two main views of translation competence. The first one is the 'ideal bilingual' competence, which extends the 'ideal speaker-listener' competence developed by Chomsky. The second one is the translator's expert system.

PACTE (Process in the Acquisition of Translation Competence and Evaluation) Group is a group of researchers established in 1997 to investigate translation competence acquisition in written translation. According to PACTE (as cited in Lesznyak, 2007), there are 6 main translation sub-competencies which are the: (1) linguistic; (2) extra-linguistic; (3) transfer; (4) professional; (5) psychophysiological; and (6) strategic sub-competences. In the most recent version of the PACTE model (PACTE 2017), translation competence consists of five sub-competencies, namely: bilingual, extra-linguistic, knowledge of translation, instrumental and strategic.

From the review of the relevant literature, it is revealed that although some models of translation competence have aspects in common, only the latest models offer a comprehensive approach to translation competence. Early models such as translation as a summation of linguistic competencies and translation as a super competence are fuzzier when understanding translation competencies because they present translation competencies as macro-structures. The minimalist definitions of translation competence are an advantage for translation trainers because they can guide them, but a disadvantage for student translators because less elaborated. Moreover, neither classroom activities nor assessment instruments can be based on minimalist definitions, the reason being, they do not suggest what exactly should be assessed or investigated. In addition, some of the minimalist definitions seen above see translation competence as a transfer competence which is not the case with the multicomponent models except Beeby's model and the PACTE model. PACTE is the model that includes almost all aspects of the multicomponent models and makes translation competence understandable, adding other sub-competencies like the strategic sub-competence and the instrumental sub-competence.

2. Methods

The present research employs a qualitative method. The corpora used for this research are two texts. The first text is in French and the second in English. The French text is an extract of **Le dernier jour d'un condamné,** precisely the first chapter written by Victor Hugo and published for the first time in 1829. The English text is an extract and the first chapter of **the last day of a condemned man,** which is the translation of the 1832 edition's French version translated by Eugenia De B and published in 2014.

For this research, there were four participants divided into two groups. The first group consists of two bilinguals with a good knowledge of English and French and no experience in translation. The second group consists of two professional translators with two to four years experience in translation. In this study, the texts were given to the participants taking into account their first language to have accurate results. This means if the participant has English as the first language, the French version will be given to him/her to translate into English; if French is the participant's first language, the English version will be given to him/her to translate into French. It implies that the participants with French as their first language will be doing a back-translation because the original version of the corpora used is the French version.

The data collected are words, phrases, clauses and sentences, and the time and tools used to perform the translations. The qualitative method is employed to describe the results of the translations done by the participants in terms of time used to achieve the translations, the tools or facilities used to translate, the change of meaning and the change of form or style.

3. Results and Discussion

This part throws more light on the results of the translation test. The results will be discussed in terms of bilingual, extra-linguistic, knowledge of translation, and instrumental sub-competences.

3.1 Bilingual sub-competence

From the analysis of the translations, it results that, although the level of mastery of the languages differs a little bit from one participant to the other, all the research participants possess a good bilingual sub-competence in French and English.

3.2 Extra-linguistic sub-competence

Almost all the participants faced the main extra-linguistic issue of lack of literary knowledge. This is why, except for some parts in professional translator 2' (PT2) translation, the rest were literal translations. Their lack of literary style made the translations look like ordinary texts.

3.3 Knowledge of translation sub-competence

Possessing bilingual sub-competence is a good starting point. However, being able to switch from one language to the other, taking into account the linguistic and extra-linguistic features of the source and the target texts, is something different. Apart from PT2, all participants have poor knowledge of translation sub-competence.

The original text (French version) was made of 17 sentences. After translating, bilingual 1 (B1) had less than half of the sentences translated correctly; this can be noticed from the number of over translations and under translations found in B1's translation. Following are some of the over translations and under translations done by B1:

(1) *[…] J'habite avec cette pensée, toujours seul avec elle, toujours glacé de sa présence, toujours courbé sous son poids !* (French version)

I've been living with this thought for over five weeks now, always alone with her, always cold in her presence, always bent under her weight! (B1 translation)

[…] I dwelt with this idea: always alone with it, always frozen by its presence; always bent under its weight! (English version)

(2) *Chaque jour, chaque heure, chaque minute avait son idée*. (French version)

Every day, hour and minute had its own idea. (B1 translation)

Each day, each hour, each minute had its idea. (English version)

In (1), B1 translated *Elle* as 'her', but this was completely wrong. In French, it is possible to use feminine or masculine personal pronoun for animals, plants and things but English does not allow that and uses 'it' instead. This mistake created an under translation because there was a shift in genre, there is a shift from the neutral to the feminine, which implied now that the text is now talking about a 'girl' or 'woman' rather than a thing which is the 'idea'. (2) Also results in an under translation because there is a lost meaning. In the French and the English versions, there was an enumeration to emphasize the fact that the narrator is spending all his time thinking too much, but in B1's translation, that meaning was lost and the sentence became normal.

(3) *C'étaient […]des théâtres pleins de bruit et de lumière, et puis encore des jeunes filles et de 69 sombres promenades la nuit sous les larges bras des marronniers*. (French version)

They were […] drama theaters full of noise and light, and some more young girls and 69 dark walks at night under the large arms of horse chestnuts. It was always a party in my imagination.   (B1 translation)

Sometimes it was […] theatres full of sound and light, and then again, the young girls and shadowy walks at night beneath spreading chestnut-trees.

(English version)

In this sentence, there are three over translations. The first over translation is at the level of 'drama theaters' as the translation of *théâtres*. The use of the words 'drama' and 'theaters' creates an over translation, which completely changes the sentence's meaning. The second over translation is the use of 'some more' instead of 'again' as for 'encore'. This also changes the meaning of the sentence. The third over translation is the translation of 'marroniers' as 'horse chest nuts' instead of 'chestnut-trees'. Here there is a shift; it is no more the tree but the fruit of the tree.

Bilingual 2 (B2)'s translation is more acceptable than B1's translation, but some mistakes such as literal translation can still be found.

(4) *[…] La sombre figure du soldat de garde dont la giberne reluit à travers la grille du cachot, il me semble que déjà une voix a murmuré à mon oreille : – Condamné à mort*. (French version)

[…] The dark figure of the soldier of guard whose gibery gleam through the Dungeon's grid, seeming already that a voice whispered in my ear: sentenced to death! (B2 translation)

[…] The sombre visage of the sentry whose cap gleams through the grating of the door — it seems to me that already a voice has murmured in my ear: Condemned to death! (English version)

B2 translates the French word *figure* by the English word 'figure', which is a wrong match. In fact, the French figure in this case means the body part known as 'face' or 'visage', whereas the term 'figure' in English is a drawing, a diagram or a representation of any form. Besides, B2 also translates *soldat de garde* as 'soldier of guard'. B2 did a word for word translation '*soldat*=soldier; *de*=of; *garde*=guard'. Here the French expression *soldat de garde* simply means 'a soldier on duty' also known as sentry.

(5) *Je n'ai plus qu'une pensée, qu'une conviction, qu'une certitude : condamné à mort !* (French version)

I have only one thought, one conviction, only one certainty: sentenced or condemned to death! (B2's translation)

I have only one thought, one conviction, one certitude: Condemned to death! (English version)

In this sentence, B2 has made a mistake which cannot be tolerated in the professional translation. In translating *condamné à mort* by 'sentenced or condemned to death' instead of 'condemned to death' or 'sentenced to death', B2 gave a choice to the reader. In the translation activity, this is considered unforgivable.

Here are some discussions which can be made on professional translator 1 (PT1)'s translation:

(6) These five weeks have I dwelt with this idea: always alone with it, always frozen by its presence, always bent under its weight. (English version)

Ai-je vécu avec cette idée pendant ces cinq semaines : seul avec elle, paralysé par le simple fait d'y penser ; ployant sous son poids. (PT1's translation)

Voilà cinq semaines que j'habite avec cette pensée, toujours seul avec elle, toujours glacé de sa présence, toujours courbé sous son poids ! (French version)

In this sentence, the first mistake is the shift in style. PT1 has shifted from an affirmative sentence style to an interrogative sentence style by using *Ai-je* to start the sentence. The problem here is that the sentence doesn't show any interrogation, thus putting it on that form makes the translation completely wrong. The second mistake in this sentence is the translation of 'always frozen by its presence' by *paralysé par le simple fait d'y penser*. Here the noun 'presence' has been replaced or has been translated by a phrase. It is a transposition, which does not benefit the translation. On the contrary, it adds additional but unnecessary information and breaks the rules of faithfulness in translation.

(7) Formerly — for it seems to me rather years than weeks since I was a being like any other (English version)

Autrefois — car j'avais l'impression que de nombreux mois s'étaient écoulés et non des semaines depuis que je suis comme les autres. (PT1's translation)

Autrefois, car il me semble qu'il y a plutôt des années que des semaines, j'étais un homme comme un autre homme. (French version)

In this sentence, a vital mistake can be found, which is the translation of 'years' as *mois* the latter of which is a different word meaning 'months' in English. The use of an inappropriate word can have a serious impact on the translation.

The examples above clearly show that they possess a poor knowledge of translation sub-competence. This could be explained by the fact that translating involves more than linguistic performance, and to acquire transfer competence, the bilingual needs particular training or should often practice translation. Besides, PT1's translation cannot be considered acceptable because more than half of the text has been paraphrased, and the translation is also full of under translations. It thus reflects that PT1 possesses lacks the knowledge of translation sub-competence.

Unlike PT1, PT2's translation may be considered perfect. Compared to the English version of the text, there was no real difference. The only existing difference is in the writing style. PT2's translation looks less literary.

In a nutshell, it is very difficult for bilinguals and even some professional translators to possess the knowledge of translation sub-competence, which is one of the essential competencies involved in the translation process. Knowledge of translation sub-competence is not acquired by only going to a translation school, but it is acquired by constant practice.

3.4 Instrumental sub-competence

The bilinguals translated at the exact location and the time they used to achieve the translation was 1 hour

25 minutes for B1 and 1 hour 50 minutes for B2. As for the professional translators, PT2 had a record of 30 minutes for the translation and PT1 (professional translator 1) took 2 hours 30 minutes to finish the translation.

During this test, we expected the professional translators to achieve their translation within a concise period of time, which was the case for PT2. However, we are highly surprised to notice that it took 2h30 to PT1 to complete

the translation. In the professional world this is hardly tolerated, because a translation with the same length does not requires much time.

The tools or software used by bilinguals B1 and B2 can obviously show that they are not professionals. For the whole translation, B1 made use of 'Google translator' and 'dear translate'. B2 made use of 'Baidu', 'Baidu translate' and 'Bing translator'. The tools or software used by the professional translators were more professional and more reliable. PT1 used 'Antidite 9', 'Haraps' and 'TRADOS' (as CAT). Compared to PT1, PT2 used more tools 'Le Grand Robert', 'Collins électrique', 'Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary', 'Grand Dictionnaire Hachette', 'Google translation', 'Linguee Dictionnaire français-anglais' and as professional software he used 'TRADOS 2017'.

4. Conclusion

The bilingualism approach to translation shows the existence of 'natural translation'. According to the concept defined by Harris, bilinguals possess an innate ability which is translation. In other words, according to this concept being bilingual is enough to be a translator. In this paper, we aimed to show that having bilingualism skills is a good starting point to translate, but is not enough to make a good translator, and bring out the competencies a translator needs in order to perform a good translation.

In order to show that apart from bilingualism or being bilingual is not enough to be a translator, research has been conducted. The results revealed that the bilinguals, including one of the professional translators, failed to render a good translation. This shows that being bilingual is definitely not enough to be a translator because as far as translation competence is concerned, bilingual competence is just one of the sub-competences one needs. A good or modern translator also needs to possess extra-linguistic knowledge of translation and instrumental sub-competences. Falling in the instrumental sub-competence, specialized tools like dictionaries, glossaries and software like TRADOS and many other CAT tools are also essential because they make the translation process efficient and professional. We also discovered that a professional translator can also fail to achieve a good translation. Thus, translation competence is very important and should be emphasized. Being a translator is more than being bilingual and going to a translation school is not a guarantee to be a good translator. Going to a translation school is absolutely important, but the most important is to work and improve on each of the translation sub-competences.

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