

# On Interpreter's Intercultural Awareness

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Intercultural interpreting, which takes place in institutional settings such as work meetings, media talk, legal, political or economic proceedings, has attracted increasing attention in Interpreting and Translation Studies. The ever increasing demand for cross-cultural and cross-linguistic mediation in a wide range of settings has ushered in a new era of Translation Studies since the 80's and of Interpreting Studies since the 90's. Interpreting Studies are actually a combination of many fields, including linguistics, cognitive sciences, translation, and Cultural Studies. All these disciplines play an important role in achieving and understanding interpretation/interpreting, though none of them alone is able to fully explain exactly how the interpretation process works. The field of research of contemporary Interpreting Studies includes conference interpreting, which this has been the traditional focus of the discipline since WW II, and community interpreting or public service interpreting (PSI). A variety of new phenomena in the research of interpreting and translating was caused by the changing economic and political landscape. This is taking place at a time of a global financial crisis that started in 2006. PSI and training for PSI interpreters has been affected by significant cuts.

This paper aims to be a general introduction to the development of cognitive and linguistic strategies during the acquisition of skills overlapping areas in the transmission of oral discourse across languages and cultures. There are great differences between professional and non-professional interpreters not only from a viewpoint of their skills, but of competences and strategies too. Non-professional interpreting diminishes because the worldwide process of globalization has generated a new wave of interest in interpreting and interpreter training. Contemporary intercultural communication is a challenge to modern Interpreting Studies, for example all forms of cultural moderator interpreting as well as interpreting for the mass media give rise to new and stimulating research work. Francesco Straniero Sergio researched the entertaining function of talkshow interpreting coupled with the interpreting of culturally loaded idioms, humor and jokes, which are admittedly difficult. He said that “interpreters working in Italian television are usually conference interpreters

and their training does not envisage visibility and involvement. Therefore, in order to comply with the ethics of entertainment, they are required to take on a multifarious mediation role, which includes a certain acting ability to get into the part, played by the host or the guest”<sup>1</sup> The cultural identity of interpreters is that of other participants of talkshows (teachers, doctors, judges, police officers etc.). Talkshow interpreters can use acquired cultural awareness for entertainment purposes. Talkshows interpreters need an awareness of what the expectations of others might be. All ways to interpret talkshows provide interpreters the opportunity for practicing intercultural skills. The research of F. Straniero Sergio, focusing on cultural awareness, concerned the ethics of entertainment in terms of an interpreter's strategies to amuse the audience. In a broader sense it is the question of the status of interpreting and the role of interpreters. Contemporary research provides new insights into the relationship between interpreting and mediating culture.

Personality traits of interpreters must also include skills such as intercultural competence, the sociology and psychology of communication partners, and new styles of cognitive performance. The cognitive performance of interpreters is described in Zuzana Bohušová's *Neutralization as Cognitive Strategy in Transcultural Communication. Linguistic Analogues* <sup>2</sup> that the neutralization in the process of interpreting can be realized on the cognitive-psychological and semantic level. What Z. Bohušová calls neutralization, is for example a situation where the interpreter feels that the immigrant is talking about embarrassing things and simply leaves it out. The interpreter might do this as a conscious strategy in healthcare, if a doctor provides bad information to a patient. The translator can change bad information (i.e., cancer) and play cultural broker with words so that they are in accordance with a patient's education and cultural level. Linguistic analogues in the process of neutralization are very important in the interpreter's work in such societies where two or more religious groups live together, for example in Israel. The situation in the UK is almost same in many aspects. There are many different religious minorities from the former British colonies. There are Arabic, Pakistani, Afghan, Hindi, etc., communities in London and other important cities. Interpreters may be able to neutralize possible conflicts with new migrants from Asia and Africa. The coexistence of the Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism in the UK can be realized with help of interpreters in various

- 1 STRANIERO SERGIO, F.: “*You Are Not Too Funny*”. *Challenging the Role of the Interpreter on Italian Talkshows*. In: Baraldi, C. – Gavioli, L. (eds.). *Coordinating Participation in Dialogue Interpreting*. Amsterdam–Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing, 2012, p. 95. This very important article of F. Straniero Sergio was published one year after his untimely death.
- 2 BOHUŠOVÁ, Z.: *Neutralizácia ako kognitívna stratégia v transkultúrnej komunikácii. Lingvistické analógie*. Banská Bystrica, Vydavateľstvo DALI-BB, 2009, p. 55. To date no hers books have been translated into English or other Western language.

forms of intercultural communication.<sup>3</sup> A brilliant performance of legal, healthcare, media, community, etc., interpreting work requires not only knowledge of history, geography, human society, law, medicine, natural science, sociology, psychology, policy and likewise mass media policy, but knowledge of new language-related problems in immigration application procedures, social welfare institutions and prisons. Future prospects in Interpreting Studies, and in the interpreting profession, include the sociological turn in Interpreting Studies. Researchers in Interpreting Studies have begun to consider issues related to interpreting through the lens of the sociology of language, sociolinguistics, and historiography.

With regard to the immigration situation in Europe, Israel, Northern America and Australia may I paraphrase the well known controversial opinion of the current Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, that Hungary that doesn't need new immigrants since there are many gypsies for all sorts of menial job. At the same time that Hungary has established immigrant prison centres (Szeged, Röszke and Nyírbátor) a great wave of immigration has arrived in Mediterranean countries, above all Italy (Lampedusa), Spain (Ceuta and Melilla) and Greece (Lesbos). Both Italy and Spain, which have not hitherto been immigration destinations, now finding themselves receiving migrants escaping poverty and war. Not all immigrants from Latin America into the United States are in service of narco-barons from Columbia, also they are not mainly the part of the so-called "cimmigration". The economic crisis and political changes in the Arab world (the events of the Arab spring in 2010) have brought a variety of new phenomena in traditionally monolingual European societies in the Mediterranean countries in immigration destinations. Like other countries, Italy too has seen an increase in linguistically disadvantaged immigrants, who should be guaranteed their right to healthcare and education. A growing practical need of interpreting for immigration is only one of the social factors that permeate acts of interpreting. There is a practical need for qualified interpreters in research and communities throughout Western society and a new approach to the organization of interpreting for immigrants from all over Africa, Asia and Latin America. Interpreters might be refugees, asylum seekers or persons which left their country a longer time ago and so are integrated into the Western society. Also, a growing practical need of interpreting includes the organization of interpreting service by the Border Service of European countries, Israel, the USA, Canada and Australia, as these countries become more and more multilingual and multicultural.

The provision of healthcare to migrants requires professional immigration services to its clients: interpreters require above all cultural background and knowledge and in

3 TELLINGER, D.: *Der kulturelle Hintergrund des Translats – Kultur als Substanz der Kommunikation*. Košice, Typopress, 2012, p. 45.

the case of translating in educational system an awareness of pedagogical principles. These requirements contribute to the diversification of the interpreter's role and interpreter training more difficult and dependent on the challenge of identifying and measuring aptitude for interpreting. It is increasing the assessment the abilities of interpreters, personality traits and soft skills such as motivation, anxiety and learning styles to aspects of cognitive performance. Those are tools for good interpreting practice. Over time interpreters collect experience about different kinds of power relations, loyalties and responsibilities. Particular attention must be given to the changing profile of the interpreter's profession, as different modes of interpreting challenge the interpreter to find new ways to all forms of "dialogue interpreting" in terms of PSI. Interpreters engaging in the PSI profession must raise awareness that cultural skills as well as linguistic skills are requirements for the ability to correctly transfer a message from one language to another. Experienced and specially trained interpreters must have the highest standards in professionalism and know the rules of the game. Effective and accurate interpretation/interpreting can a priori exclude miscommunication, because every kind of interpreting is a balancing act between conveying and changing information in the process of verbal communication. Trusted interpreters focus on providing trustworthy communication and not sending the wrong message to the participants of communication. Even the slightest miscommunication can occur if the interpreter don't know important cultural background factors.

The cultural identification of each interpreter not only with his clients but with each participant of the communication is dependent on the development of cultural competence in given society. The perception of cultural competence has been developing over the past three decades in Western Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia. Books such as *The Arrival* of the Australian "good drawer's" Shaun Tan are helping in this process. This picture book fulfils the same role in Australia nowadays as was the role of horror comic book series *Dylan Dog* did with simple solutions to the weighty problems of the society in Italy since October 1986. The young Australian writer with an immigrant background captures the immigrant experience through images of fear, aloneness, isolation as each immigrant seeks familiarity in a new world, friendship, humanity and above all empathy. Behind each immigrant, there is a personal story. The research into such immigrants' basic needs can also raise awareness of immigration-related issues and awareness of the philosophical/ethical values. The empathy is central to the interpreting process: "The interpreter must convey *what* is said but also *how* it is said, that is, the state of mind of the speaker. This is only possible by identifying morally and culturally with each speaker. Further, the interpreter's bilingual and bicultural competence provide for a high degree of cultural and historical familiarity with each

speaker”.<sup>4</sup> Also very important is the fact that the culture in human communication is expressed in many different way: through spoken language, body language and other forms of expression such as silence, laughter, emotions etc. Thus, language is never culturally neutral. In cross-cultural communication we can see it on example of legal interpreting from Cantonese into English in Hong Kong where “in this data the Chinese interpreters often interpret in a rather monotonous tone and use statement – like intonation, rather than the contour that the situation would appear to demand”.<sup>5</sup> The difference between the tempo of temperamental vernacular Cantonese spoken by 95 % of the population in Hong Kong and English used in courtroom discourse is noticeable. Chinese interpreters can apply their background knowledge, if they want, in such way capture most of the factual information and at the same time not neglect the emotive information of Chantonese temperamental discourse.

The traditional view of interpreters as neutral language mediators and “translating-machine” does not fit reality anymore. Erik Camayd-Freixas argues in his articles after the 2008 Postville immigration raid on the basis of his own experiences as interpreter that *The Interpreter Code of Ethics of the Massachusetts Trial Courts*, once recommended as a model, must be revised because interpreters are no more neutral participants of a judicial process. The interpreter’s awareness of the legislative documents and rulings and their understanding is an inseparable part of his work and this knowledge predestines, who should work as an interpreter. The interpreters in the states along the U.S. border with Mexico have been confronting the ethical dilemmas of “cimmigration” on daily basis. The crimminalization of roughly 11 million migrant workers since the Postville, Iowa immigration raid has influenced the role of interpreters in such raids. If interpreters know individual life stories and social profiles of illegal workers (and their families at home) who were raided and charged with antiterrorism crime, the impartiality as the main pre-existing rule of their work can no longer applied in each situation. These difficult working conditions remained till the changes were made to official immigrants policy in autumn 2014. Also “cimmigration” proceedings were often part of interpreter’s work frequently against members of their own ethnic group.

Interpreters need to become aware to the range of participant behaviours. One way to foster such awareness and behavioural flexibility may be to incorporate into interpreter training more perceptivity for non-verbal communication and

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- 4 CAMAYD-FREIXAS, E.: *Court Interpreter Ethics and the Role of Professional Organizations*. In: Schäffner, Ch. – Kredens, K. – Fowler, I. (eds.). *Interpreting in a Changing Landscape. Selected Papers from the 6th International Conference on Interpreting in Legal, Health, and Social Service Settings*. Aston University, Birmingham, July 2010. Amsterdam–Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing, 2013, p. 24.
  - 5 LEUNG, E. – GIBBSONS, J.: *Interpreting Cantonese Utterance – Final Particles in Bilingual Coutroom Discourse*. In: Setton, R. (ed.). *Interpreting Chinese, Interpreting China*. First published as a Special Issue of *Interpreting* (11:2, 2009). Amsterdam–Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing, 2011, p. 103.

hence for different levels of interpreter participation in both non-verbal and verbal communication. The interpreting process is a constant interaction between strategy and creativity, the bricks and mortar of interpreter training and lifelong work. In the forefront of such training is the development of verbal and figurative creativity among student interpreters. It exists as a broad interface between creativity and strategy/tactics based on models and rules and used by various modes of interpreting as described in the Italian research of the 90th with regard to pedagogical principles: “strategy is planned in advance, is based on certain rules and has to be assimilated. Creativity comes in at a later stage, once the translator/interpreter can handle the basic cognitive and linguistic tools of his profession”.<sup>6</sup> The literature on interpreter strategies and creativity is boundless but the practice of interpreting today requires a new insight into the complexity of the nature of creativeness which makes the interpreter able to produce something unique and remarkable. In the two decades since the research of Laura Gran globalization and migration in Italy and worldwide has increased. New models of interpreter training have been adapted to global application of cultural brokering. These models provide opportunity for practicing intercultural skills. Translators as ideal cultural brokers may gain experience with a flexible bridging role which incorporates language and cultural mediation. Cultural and linguistic diversity of interpreter work today should be perceived as a unique opportunity for the development of culturally competent lifelong praxis in multicultural and multilingual societies.<sup>7</sup>

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- 6 GRAN, L.: *In-Training Development of Interpreting Strategies and Creativity*. In: Beylard-Ozeroff, A. – Králová, J. – Moser-Mercer, B. (eds.). *Translator's Strategies and Creativity. Selected Papers from the 9th International Conference on Translation and Interpreting*. Charles University, Prague, September 1995. Amsterdam–Philadelphia, Benjamins Publishing, 1998, p. 146.
- 7 The process of cultural and linguistic diversity of interpreter's activities is noticeable in the Slovak society after the turn in Eastern Europe since 1989.

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