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Christina Schäffner and Beverly Adab (eds.)

*Developing Translation Competence*

001

# DEVELOPING TRANSLATION COMPETENCE

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## Bilingual Competence and Translation Competence

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### Introduction

Any teaching process involves three fundamental elements: the knowledge or skills to be acquired, the learners who will acquire this knowledge or these skills, and the teacher who will guide the learners in the learning process. In translation teaching we have temporarily foregone debating the characteristics of the ideal teacher and have concentrated on formulating learning objectives and on determining how best to achieve them. In other words, our focus has been on methodology and the search for a definition of translation competence. It is undoubtedly true that during the past decade interest in how learners learn has grown, and the resulting studies have shed much light on the problems faced by novice translators and on the strategies they employ to deal with them. However, it may well be that not enough attention has been paid to the root of the problems they experience, nor to the bases of translation competence. I would suggest that both might stem from their bilingualism.

Since Harris (1977), for many authors a bilingual is a *natural translator*, because the bilingual, in addition to acquiring competence in both languages also acquires the ability to translate from one language to the other. From this point of view and perhaps developing Harris' line of reasoning a bit further, the acquisition of translation competence would require little more than a brushing up of this bi-directional bilingual competence.

While the existence of bi-directional competence cannot be denied, the abundance of bad translations and the problems highlighted in the studies by Krings (1986), Lörcher (1991), Kussmaul (1995) and many others have shown that bilingual competence, while a necessary condition, is not in itself sufficient to guarantee translation competence, at least not in the academic sense of the term.

In this paper I shall try to outline the psycholinguistic profile of the bilingual as revealed by current studies on bilingualism, and I shall try to make some suggestions as to how we might better harness bilingualism in developing translation competence.

### Bilingual competence

#### *What is a Bilingual?*

The first question we must answer concerns the notion of bilingualism itself. In fact, the concept of bilingualism would seem to be well established, both in everyday and in specialised language. Nevertheless, close observation of many of the definitions reveals them to be overly general and very often contradictory. For example, Weinreich, one of the pioneers in the study of bilingualism, offers us the following synthesising definition: "The practice of alternately using two languages will be called *Bilingualism*, and the persons involved *Bilinguals*." (Weinreich 1968: 1). However, this apparently clear-cut definition is not at all clear since it can be applied to a wide range of different situations, ranging from a two-year-old child who speaks (or is beginning to speak) French with his father and German with his mother, to a Dutch scholar who has devoted much of his life to the study of the Latin classics, or a Spanish legal expert who can understand specialised legal texts in German, a Czech engineer who translates engineering manuals from German or a Polish graduate in Hispanic Studies who teaches Spanish in Warsaw, etc.

The vagueness of Weinreich's definition is a result of his ignoring such factors as the age at which each of the languages was acquired, the context in which they were acquired (whether in a bilingual or a monolingual medium, at home or at school, etc.), as well as the order of acquisition, the range of use and the social prestige of each language; but more importantly, Weinreich's definition ignores the level of mastery achieved in each of the skills (oral and written reception, and oral and written production).

Bloomfield (1933: 55-56) had offered the following contribution: "In [...] cases where [...] perfect foreign-language learning is not accompanied by loss of the native language, it results in 'bilingualism', native-like control of two languages." This definition was to have a decisive effect on the objectives of second language teaching and the concept of bilingualism in general. Nevertheless, the author himself added: "Of course, one cannot define a degree of perfection at which a good foreign speaker becomes a bilingual: the distinction is relative" (*ibid*).

The difficulty of establishing clear levels of linguistic mastery leads to Mackey's admission that, "It seems obvious that if we are to study the phenomenon of bilingualism we are forced to consider it as something entirely relative." (Mackey 1970: 555).

With regard to bilingualism as a stage that is preliminary to the development of translation competence, I would make just one general affirmation: the translator must achieve *sufficient* mastery of his or her working languages. Likewise, I will not discuss such questions as the age at which the languages were acquired or the context of acquisition, etc., since it is the *outcome* of the learning process that interests me, more than the learning process itself. More specifically, there are two aspects of that outcome that interest me here: the skills mastered by the bilingual in each one of the two languages, and the cognitive effects of the learning process (that is, the structure of bilingual memory, and the two features considered to be specific to bilingual speech, i.e., interference and code-switching).

#### *The Bilingual's Skills*

In terms of language skills, the notion *bilingual* is generally associated with someone capable of *expressing* himself or herself in two different languages, that is, bilingualism is identified prescriptively with the active or productive use of both languages. However, Baetens Beardsmore (1982: 13-17), adopts a descriptive criterion when establishing a distinction between the "receptive bilingual" and the "productive bilingual" depending on whether the individual has mastered the skills of reception or of production.

Now, when we attempt to determine the linguistic skills of the translator we can approach the question with prescriptive criteria; we must ask what is the most desirable combination of skills in which a translator must be specialised. There are three factors in play here: (1) directionality (i.e., direct translation [L2>L1] versus inverse translation [L1>L2]); (2) the modality (oral or written translation); (3) the specific language combination. In the following Figure 1 have outlined the languages and skills in which the translator and interpreter must be competent for the respective tasks of translating and interpreting.

The terms *reception* and *production* refer specifically to the reception and production of *texts*. Translation cannot ignore the *communicative* function in favour of purely linguistic considerations.

	Oral reception	Oral production	Written reception	Written production
Direct Translation			L2	L1
Inverse translation			L1	L2
Direct interpreting	L2	L1		
Inverse interpreting	L1	L2		

Figure 1: Specialised skills in the translator and interpreter

### Bilingual memory

The second question we must take up if we are to understand the basic cognitive mechanisms underlying translation is whether the bilingual possesses independent memories for each of his or her languages, or whether he or she has interdependent memories. That is to say, we are interested in the relationship between the linguistic signs of each one of the languages and the mental representations which the speaker associates with these signs. In this regard, we must bear in mind Weinreich's typology (1968: 9-10) which distinguishes between *coordinated bilinguals* (the speaker associates the verbal signs of each language with separate mental images), *compound bilinguals* (the speaker possesses the same mental image for the signs of both languages) and *subordinated bilinguals* (the speaker associates the verbal sign of one language with the verbal sign of the other and associates this in turn with a mental image). This is represented in Figure 2.

The hard line between the three types of bilingualism has since been called into question (Taylor 1976, quoted by Hornby 1977: 5). The conclusion reached was that these conditions were pure abstractions which do not exist in reality, and that any bilingual individual would *tend* to be either compound or coordinated.

What I would like to emphasise here is that psycholinguistics has tended to deal with bilinguals as *language users* rather than as *translators*. This would explain why compound bilingualism is normally considered to be the ideal condition towards which coordinated bilinguals tend or should tend (López García 1991: 94).

Psycholinguistic studies have shown that mental images and memory in general constitute an essential part of the processes involved in the production and reception of language. Therefore it would seem that the kind of bilingual memory in play would necessarily condition the process of reception-production in translation.

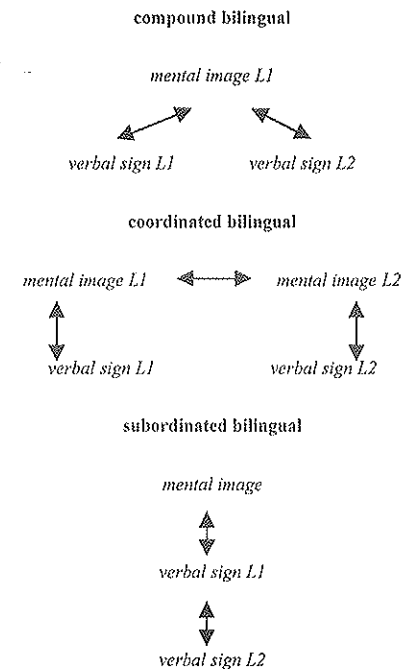


Figure 2: The types of bilingualism

By expanding on the typology of bilingual memory postulated by Weinreich we could characterise four types of translator according to his or her reception-production process. The *associative translator* simply assigns lexical elements or textual features of one language to lexical elements or textual features of the second language;<sup>1</sup> since this process is based purely on linguistic elements and does not associate them with any mental content, it does not represent a true process of comprehension or reception (cf. Figure 3).



Figure 3: The Associative Translator

The *subordinated translator* associates mental content with just one of the two languages; the process of reception involved here assigns lexical elements of one language to lexical elements of the other, and then associates the latter with mental content; in other words, "translation" is prior to comprehension in this case (cf. Figure 4).

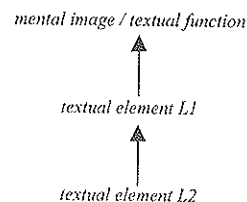


Figure 4: The Subordinated Translator

The *compound translator* associates lexical elements of one language with a single repertory of mental content from which associations with lexical elements of the other language are found; in this case the reception-production process is fuzzy because it does not distinguish between the mental content of each language (cf. Figure 5).

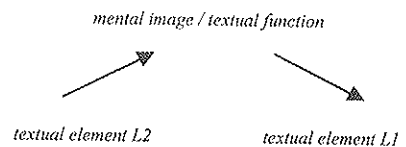


Figure 5: The Compound Translator

The *coordinated translator* associates lexical elements of one language with their own repertory of mental content and then associates the specific mental content of this first repertory with specific mental content of a second repertory, which is associated in turn with lexical elements of the other language; in other words, each language has its own repertory of mental content and the reception-production process clearly distinguishes between the mental content of each language (cf. Figure 6).

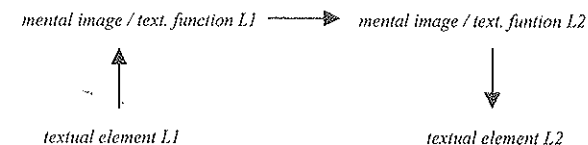


Figure 6: The Coordinated Translator

We cannot rule out the possibility that more than one of these four types could be operative in any given translator, nor that one type or another could be dominant at different stages of a translator's training process. I would suggest that the ideal type for expert translation competence is the coordinated translator. As a result, we can draw the conclusion that, as far as translation teaching is concerned, students should acquire the translation mechanisms of the coordinated translator. I would also suggest that the concept of the compound translator, and even more so of the subordinated and associative translator, could help to explain the phenomenon of interference.

#### *Two Specific Features of Bilingual Language Use: Interference and Code-switching*

##### *Interference*

Weinreich (1968: 1) defines interference, to the extent that it is an individual phenomenon, as the kind of deviation from the norms which occurs in the language use of bilinguals. In contrast, Mackey (1970) defines interference as the use of features of one language while speaking or writing another. We should note that in the latter definition the negative connotation of *deviation from norms* has disappeared. In both definitions, however, interference is seen as affecting production, and in general it is assumed that it is the mother or dominant language which has a negative effect on the acquisition and use of second languages.

In the field of translation, interference also has a negative connotation and is similarly seen as a distinctive feature of the translation process, at least of the process of translation as practised by novice translators. This is also the case with inverse translation, where L1 interferes in the production of the text in L2.

However, it must be said that interference also occurs in direct translation, where it has two specific features. The first interference occurs in reception. L1 interference in L2 comprehension underlies the phenomenon of *false friends*, especially (but not exclusively) among novice translators. I do not intend to explore this matter in depth here, but the phenomenon can be explained from

the psycholinguistic point of view as the association of lexical elements from different languages without any adequate consideration of their corresponding mental content. Or it can be seen as confirmation of Weinreich's hypothesis of the subordinated bilingual, since the subject does not have an adequate reception mechanism and omits the representation of mental content associated with the lexical element of L2. In either case, bottom-up processing is not completed by adequate top-down processing in the comprehension process.

Secondly, in the field of direct translation, L2 interference affects the production of the L1. This is undoubtedly one of the most studied phenomena of the translation process. Indeed, in translation theory, the possibilities of interlingual interference and the procedures to be followed to solve this problem constitute the core of comparative stylistics. Nevertheless, while interference has often been described and classified from the linguistic point of view, there are still no convincing hypotheses from a psycholinguistic point of view to explain the hypnotic power which the L2 source text seems to exert on the translator, even when he or she is highly proficient and is translating from L2 into L1. I would tentatively point to the prevalence of mechanisms of the associative type at the lexical level, which preclude the relevant stage of mental content analysis.

If this were true, then one possible solution for both types of interference would be the acquisition by the student of coordinated translator type reception-production mechanisms.

#### *Code-switching*

Code-switching is understood to be the alternating use of two languages in the same proposition or within a single conversation. This phenomenon also has negative connotations for some authors, since it is seen, like interference, to confirm the stereotype of bilingual speakers as being unable to separate the codes of both languages consistently. The difficulty of marking a clear dividing line between interference and code-switching has been noted. Baetens Beardsmore (1982: 110) establishes an interesting distinction: the difference lies in the mechanisms involved in each phenomenon. Whereas interference is involuntary and would seem to take place on a subconscious level, code-switching is both conscious and voluntary and takes place in situations that are relevant for the speaker and his or her audience.<sup>2</sup>

This definition of code-switching from the field of psycholinguistics can be applied to translation, although there are some important differences that must be borne in mind. The translator uses two languages *consciously* and *alternatively*, but the skills used are different: he or she receives in one language and produces in another. At this point the notion of code-switching

could be made synonymous with the third competence of the bilingual, as postulated by Harris, and thus be identified as the basic mechanism underlying transfer operations. To carry out these transfer operations, the translator must establish *bridges* or linking mechanisms between his or her working languages. In this specific aspect, therefore, translation competence would depend on the bridges or linking mechanisms which he or she has established. I would suggest that the acquisition of translation competence consists precisely in this *reorientation* of bilingual competence towards *interlingual* competence.

On the other hand, studies carried out with novice translators reveal that their transfer mechanisms are extremely rudimentary: frequently consisting of automatic 1:1 associations, almost always restricted to the lexical level. As a result, I would suggest that the acquisition of translation competence consists in the improvement of these bridging mechanisms.

#### *Cognitive features*

Finally, comparative studies of monolingual and bilingual individuals reveal that the acquisition of a second language involves the development of certain cognitive features which are of interest for translation teaching.

In contrast to the studies carried out in the 1920s and 1930s which claimed that bilingual children made slower progress in school, had lower intelligence quotients and were less socially well-adapted than monolinguals, contemporary authors such as Ben-Zeev (1977) and Appel and Muysken (1996) present bilinguals as cognitively more flexible and with a more highly developed faculty for lateral thinking and remote association than monolinguals. These capacities, which are precisely those believed to play a determining role in creativity, are combined with greater skill in handling the linguistic code, due to the fact that bilinguals learn to separate the mental content of the lexical element from its graphic or aural form at a very early stage. It would seem then, that all of these faculties can only favour the development of translation competence. However, on the negative side, it seems that bilinguals have less mastery of vocabulary and certain grammatical rules, factors which can hardly be seen as favouring the development of translation competence.

#### **The Novice Translator versus the Expert Translator**

On the basis of the above-mentioned considerations, we could establish the psycholinguistic profiles of the *natural* or novice translator and of the expert translator as shown in Figure 7:

novice translator	expert translator
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•non-specialised linguistic skills</li> <li>•bilingual memory (compound or subordinated)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•unconscious interference mechanisms</li> </ul> </li> <li>•code-switching mechanisms (lexical level)</li> <li>•cognitive features: flexibility, lateral thinking, capacity for remote association</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•specialised linguistic skills</li> <li>•bilingual memory (co-ordinated)</li> <li>•control over interference in both reception and production</li> <li>•heuristic text transference procedures</li> </ul>

Figure 7: Psycholinguistic profile of the novice translator and the expert translator

Nevertheless, the psycholinguistic traits are only a partial aspect if we take into consideration the knowledge and skills that an expert translator must possess, which we combine in the concept of translation competence.

Translation competence could be defined as the system of underlying kinds of knowledge, whether declarative or operative, which are needed for translation. The simple observation of the translation process demonstrates that the translator effectively mobilises knowledge and skills of very diverse kinds: knowledge of the two languages, knowledge of the real world and of the material, the ability to use tools such as dictionaries and other sources of documentation, cognitive qualities such as creativity and attention, or the capacity to resolve specific problems. This diversity of kinds of knowledge has given rise to various componential models of translator competence (Bell 1991, Wilss 1992, Beeby 1996, Hurtado 1996, Presas 1996, Shreve 1997, among others), of which it must be said that although they are still speculative to a great extent, they do respond to the need to define didactic objectives in the pedagogy of translation.

For the purposes of this study I will use the model of translation competence that has been developed by the PACTE Group<sup>3</sup> of the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* (in press), which comprises six subcompetences. Four of these sub-competences (communicative competence in both languages, extralinguistic knowledge, the use of tools and documentary sources, psycholinguistic skills such as creativity or rigour) could be considered to be *peripheral* with regard to a central competence that we would call transfer competence. These five sub-competences interact in a very diverse way according to the directionality of the translation (direct or inverse), the subject

matter, the text type, etc. The competence which governs the interrelationships of these sub-competences is what we call strategic competence, since it is the one in charge of solving specific translation problems.

It is precisely in the case of transfer competence, as a central competence, that all of the specific psycholinguistic traits of the expert translator that I have pointed out above become relevant. Transfer competence requires specialised linguistic skills in accordance with the directionality of the translation (direct or inverse) and in accordance with the modality (oral or written), and a co-ordinated bilingual memory, in order to assure control over interference and interlinguistic mechanisms in the processes of reception and production of texts.

As opposed to the expert translator, we could say that in the case of the novice translator the sub-competences of translator competence are either nonexistent, or present, but not in an interrelated way.

### The Development of Translation Competence

Any kind of learning process necessarily implies two kinds of qualitative changes in the mental structures of the learner. On the one hand, learning is not just the integration of new kinds of knowledge into the network of already existing knowledge (accumulation of information), but rather a restructuring of already existing knowledge on the basis of this integration (elaboration of new kinds of knowledge) (Poza 1996). On the other hand, learning is not just the acquisition of rules and data (declarative knowledge), but in addition, the ability to apply these rules and data to the resolution of problems (operative knowledge) (Anderson 1983).

From this point of view, the development of translation competence consists basically of three kinds of processes: (1) the acquisition of previously non-existent competences; (2) the restructuring of already existing competences in order to facilitate transfer competence; (3) the acquisition of strategic competence.

If we pay special attention to the psycholinguistic factor, the acquisition and development of transfer competence would have to consist of three processes: (1) specialising in communicative competence in two languages (oral or written, reception or production); (2) restructuring, reorienting and broadening the mechanisms of code-switching and bilingual memory; (3) integrating a mechanism to control interference.

### Conclusion

In conclusion we could say that studies of bilingualism provide evidence that bilingual competence constitutes the psycholinguistic foundation upon which it is possible to develop translation competence, especially the transfer subcompetence. Even so, in this study we have demonstrated that neither the acquisition of the psycholinguistic skills of transfer competence, in particular, nor of translator competence in general, can be reduced to simply improving bilingual competence. The development of translation competence requires the specialisation of certain psycholinguistic skills of the bilingual person and the restructuring of certain mechanisms, on the one hand, but also the acquisition of other kinds of knowledge and skills beyond the purely linguistic ones, on the other.

### Notes

- 1 The existence of this type of association would seem to be implicitly accepted in experiments in which bilinguals are asked to translate from one language to the other lists of words out of context, and those in which the actual speed of association is measured.
- 2 This interpretation however, poses the problem of distinguishing between code-switching and the phenomenon of loan words and calques. Appel and Muysken (1996) while defining code-switching as an individual phenomenon and the loan word as a social phenomenon, point out, nevertheless, that the frontiers between the two are always hazy.
- 3 The PACTE Group includes A. Beeby, L. Berenguer, D. Ensinger, O. Fox, A. Hurtado Albir, N. Martínez Melis, W. Neunzig, M. Orozco, M. Presas and F. Vega.

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