

Beyond Bilingualism: Understanding Translation Competence as Professional Expertise

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Abstract:

Translation competence has long been recognized as one of the core concepts in Translation Studies, particularly in discussions of translator education and professional practice. While bilingual proficiency is an essential prerequisite for translation, it is often assumed that knowledge of two languages is, by itself, enough to produce a competent translator. This article revisits that assumption by examining how translation competence has been defined and understood in the literature, with particular reference to the work of PACTE, Neubert, Chesterman, Pym and other leading scholars.

The article argues that translation competence represents a form of professional expertise that goes beyond bilingual ability. Successful translation depends also on the ability to make informed strategic decisions, understand texts in their cultural and communicative contexts, and apply subject-specific knowledge to different translation situations. By bringing together the principal theoretical perspectives on translation competence, this article highlights the broad consensus that translation is a complex cognitive and professional activity whose competence is developed gradually through education, practice and experience. This distinction has important implications for translator training and for understanding what it means to become a professional translator.

Keywords: translation competence; bilingualism; translator education; translation studies; professional expertise; strategic competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Translation is often regarded as the natural extension of bilingualism (Cook 2016). Someone who speaks two languages fluently is frequently assumed to possess the knowledge and skills needed to translate between them. Although this assumption may appear intuitive, it overlooks the complexity of translation as a professional activity. A translator does more than transfer words or grammatical structures from one language into another. Every translation requires a series of decisions involving meaning, context, culture, genre, communicative purpose and audience (Hatim and Mason 1997). These decisions, not only language proficiency, are an important element that helps distinguish professional translation from bilingual communication.

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The distinction between bilingualism and translation competence has occupied an important place in Translation Studies for several decades (PACTE 2003; Pym 2003). Although scholars differ in the way they define and describe translation competence, they agree that it extends well beyond linguistic knowledge. Research has shown that successful translation depends on the interaction of several competences, all of which are developed gradually through education, experience and professional practice (Neubert 2000; PACTE 2005). In this sense, bilingualism should be understood as a necessary foundation for translation, but not as sufficient for becoming a competent translator. Understanding why it is insufficient requires examining how translation competence has been conceptualized in Translation Studies.

The growing interest in understanding translation competence follows new developments in translator education and the increasing professionalisation of translation (Király 2000). In this context, the European Master's in Translation (EMT) framework (EMT 2017) provides one of the clearest institutional definitions of translation competence as a set of professional abilities required for real-world practice. The EMT model views translation as a structured combination of linguistic, domain-related, strategic and personal competences. As translation has become increasingly specialised, translators are expected not only to demonstrate high levels of linguistic proficiency, but also to work with different text types, fields of knowledge and cultural settings, sometimes using a wide range of digital resources and technologies. These demands have prompted researchers to move beyond views of translation that place the focus on language alone, and to explore the knowledge, skills and decision-making processes that ensure expert performance (Göpferich 2009).

This paper examines how translation competence has been conceptualised in the literature and revisits its relationship with bilingualism. Instead of proposing another model of translation competence, it offers an integrative interpretation of the field by bringing together some of the most influential theoretical perspectives, including those of PACTE, Neubert, Chesterman and Pym, to demonstrate that, despite important differences in emphasis, these approaches converge on understanding translation competence as a form of professional expertise, not just advanced bilingualism. It argues that translation competence is best understood as the integration of linguistic, strategic, cultural and textual competences, and that its defining characteristic lies not in knowing two languages, but in the ability to make informed decisions that ensure meaning is communicated effectively across communicative and cultural contexts.

The discussion begins by examining the concept of competence and its development within Translation Studies before considering the relationship between bilingualism and translation competence. It then reviews the principal theoretical models proposed in the literature, discusses how translation competence is acquired, and considers the implications of these perspectives for translator education and professional practice. Although previous research has proposed different models of translation competence, relatively few studies have synthesized these models through the specific lens of the bilingualism–expertise debate. This paper addresses this gap by comparing key theoretical perspectives and identifying the conceptual principles they share.

2. COMPETENCE IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

Competence is a concept used in a variety of ways in linguistics, education, and professional training, and its meaning is not entirely uniform (Hymes 1972). In general terms, competence refers to the ability to perform a task effectively through the use of a

combination of knowledge, skills and experience (Lasnier 2000). In applied fields, it is typically understood as something that becomes visible through performance, not through knowledge alone.

In linguistics, competence has often been associated with underlying knowledge of language systems, particularly in the tradition of Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance (Chomsky 1986). While influential, this view is limited when applied to translation, since it treats language ability as an abstract system instead of apragmatic activity. Translation, by contrast, is always rooted in specific communicative contexts, where decisions are shaped by purpose, target, as well as different limitations.

Translation Studies has gradually developed its own understanding of competence, which exceeds purely linguistic descriptions (Wilss 1976). This is reflected in institutional frameworks such as the European Master's in Translation (EMT), translation competence is defined as an integrated, multi-dimensional professional construct, not just a matter of linguistic ability. In this field, competence is understood as a combination of abilities that allow translators to manage complex cross-linguistic and cross-cultural tasks under functional and situational constraints.

As a result, translation competence is usually described as a multi-component construct (PACTE 2003). As such, it involves the coordinated use of different types of knowledge, including linguistic resources, cultural awareness, textual analysis, and strategic decision-making. These components are not simply co-existing elements. They function as an interacting system in which cognitive processing and coordination play a central role in problem-solving during translation. What distinguishes this perspective is not only the range of the different elements, but the way they interact during the translation process. Competence is therefore understood as something functional, assessed on the basis of the ability to solve translation problems in context.

This understanding provides the conceptual basis for the models discussed in the following sections, which attempt to describe the nature of translation competence in more detail.

3. WHY BILINGUALISM IS NOT ENOUGH

The assumption that bilingual individuals are naturally equipped to translate becomes less convincing when translation is examined in practice (Campbell 1998; Tirkkonen-Condit 2005). Bilingualism primarily refers to the ability to understand and use two linguistic systems. Translation requires moving beyond comprehension and production to include interpretation and reformulation, in line with specific communicative goals. It is thus misleading to equate translation competence with general bilingual proficiency or linguistic fluency alone.

A bilingual speaker may be able to understand a source text accurately and produce grammatically correct sentences in another language, yet still struggle with decisions that stand at the very basis of the translation process. These include determining what counts as relevant meaning in a given context, how implicit information should be handled, how stylistic choices affect reception in the target language, and how cultural references should be adapted for a target audience (Nord 2005). These decisions are not determined by language knowledge alone, but by an ability to evaluate communicative situations and select appropriate strategies.

Another important difference is related to directionality and purpose. Bilingual communication often takes place in symmetrical contexts where meaning is negotiated

between interlocutors in real time. Translation, by contrast, is typically a unidirectional and mediated activity, where the translator is responsible for producing a stable text intended for readers who are not present in the communicative situation (Pym 2010). This shift introduces constraints that require planning, revision, and anticipation of reader response.

In this perspective, the distinction between bilingualism and translation competence cannot be explained just in linguistic terms. It points instead to a deeper involvement of cognitive processes that are related to attention, identification of problems, as well as decision-making.

For this reason, translation cannot be reduced to an extension of bilingual competence. It involves a distinct set of problem-solving processes that operate at textual, cultural and pragmatic levels (Chesterman 1997; Tirkkonen-Condit 2005). While bilingualism provides access to two linguistic systems, translation competence determines how those systems are used to produce functionally appropriate texts in specific contexts.

This distinction has been widely supported by research on the translation process, which shows that expert translators rely less on word-by-word linguistic transfer and more on strategically controlled decision-making routines. Early cognitive studies in Translation Studies show that translation involves managing competing constraints under time and cognitive load. As a result, successful performance depends significantly on the ability to prioritize problems and allocate attention dynamically (Jääskeläinen 1999; Tirkkonen-Condit 2005). This body of research reinforces the idea that translation competence reflects a developed form of expert cognition shaped through experience and practice.

The cognitive dimension of translation provides the basis for the models discussed in the following section, which attempt to describe the additional layers of knowledge and skill that distinguish translation competence from bilingual ability.

4. THEORETICAL MODELS OF TRANSLATION COMPETENCE

The acknowledgement that bilingualism is insufficient to account for translation has led to the development of several influential models of translation competence (Neubert 2000; PACTE 2005). While these models differ in terminology and in where they place the emphasis, they are all motivated by roughly the same question: what additional knowledge and abilities are required for successful translation beyond knowledge of two languages?

One of the earliest systematic attempts to give an answer is found in Neubert's description of translation competence as a set of interrelated competences. In this view, translation depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on textual awareness, subject-matter knowledge, cultural competence and transfer competence (Neubert 2000). What is particularly significant in this model is the idea that translation is not a purely linguistic operation but a process that requires the coordination of different types of knowledge contributing to the production of an adequate target text.

A similar multi-component view is developed in the PACTE model, which sees translation competence as a dynamic system of sub-competences (PACTE 2005). These include bilingual knowledge, extra-linguistic knowledge, instrumental competence, strategic competence and psycho-physiological components. Within this framework, bilingual knowledge is only one element among others, and strategic competence is identified as the element responsible for coordinating the translation process and

managing problems that arise during translation. Although the PACTE model has been highly influential, scholars have observed that its multidimensional structure makes it difficult to empirically distinguish and separate its individual sub-competences. Moreover, the dynamic interaction between them remains challenging to investigate experimentally (Alves and Gonçalves 2007; Göpferich 2009).

Chesterman's contribution focuses on the developmental aspect of translation competence. He describes how translators progress from novice to expert through increasing experience and proceduralisation (Chesterman 2000) instead of treating competence as a fixed combination of characteristics. This perspective emphasizes the evolving nature of translation performance without specifying detailed cognitive mechanisms.

Pym (2003), on the other hand, emphasises decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. From this perspective, translation competence is understood in terms of the ability to evaluate alternative solutions and select among them in context. This approach shifts attention toward the functional outcomes of translation choices, not so much their linguistic formulation.

Despite the different perspectives, these models converge on a common point: translation competence is seen as a multi-layered construct involving different types of knowledge and abilities that interact during translation performance. At the same time, differences remain regarding how translation competence should be modelled and investigated, particularly concerning the extent to which its individual components can be clearly distinguished and empirically verified.

5. ACQUISITION OF TRANSLATION COMPETENCE

Translation competence develops through a gradual process in which different types of knowledge and skill are increasingly improved through training, experience and reflection (PACTE 2005; Göpferich 2013; Kiraly 2000). Professional competence evolves as translators learn to coordinate linguistic, strategic and contextual knowledge in response to complex translation tasks.

Early stages of translator development are often characterised by a strong reliance on linguistic transfer, where attention is focused mainly on vocabulary and grammatical equivalence. Although this is a necessary stage, it does not yet involve the strategic or contextual awareness that characterises more advanced translation performance. With continued practice, translators gradually move beyond word-level decisions and develop a more text-oriented and purpose-driven approach (Chesterman 2000; Jääskeläinen 1999).

This progression has been described in different ways in the literature, most notably in models of translation expertise that distinguish between novice and expert performance (Jääskeläinen 1999; Shreve 2002). Besides the accumulation of knowledge available to the translator that happens over time, another thing that changes is the way in which that knowledge is organized and used during the translation process (Göpferich 2013; PACTE 2005). As expertise develops, translation becomes progressively less dependent on conscious linguistic analysis and increasingly characterised by proceduralised knowledge, strategic decision-making and experience-based judgement (Tirkkonen-Condit 2005; Göpferich 2009).

From a cognitive perspective, this development reflects a shift from controlled processing towards more automatised performance. Expert translators are able to direct their attention selectively to problem areas instead of processing every linguistic element

with equal effort. Research on the translation process suggests that experts develop more efficient patterns of problem recognition, filtering and decision-making, something that allows them to manage cognitive resources more effectively when working under constraints such as text complexity or time pressure (Jääskeläinen 1999; Shreve 2002).

Repeated work with authentic translation tasks plays a central role in this process. Through practice, translators gradually internalise strategic routines and develop procedural knowledge that enables flexible performance across different communicative situations that continues to improve. From the viewpoint of expertise, competence development is thus understood not as a simple accumulation of knowledge, but as a progressive reorganisation of cognitive processes and problem-solving strategies through experience (Göpferich 2009; Tirkkonen-Condit 2005).

This perspective provides the basis for understanding translation competence as a form of professional expertise, an issue explored in the following section.

6. DISCUSSION: TRANSLATION COMPETENCE AS PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE

In Neubert (2000), PACTE (2005), Chesterman (2000) and Pym (2003), translation competence is consistently presented as a multidimensional form of expertise. As such, it enables translators to respond effectively to the demands of specific translation situations. Despite the common ground, these models differ in the weight they assign to the cognitive, strategic and decision-making aspects of competence, as well as in how explicitly they model its internal structure. In this article, professional expertise is understood as the ability to perform complex, goal-oriented tasks through the coordinated and experience-based use of multiple interdependent competences. In this sense, expertise refers not simply to advanced knowledge but to the ability to coordinate multiple forms of knowledge efficiently and adaptively in response to complex communicative problems.

Besides the recognition that bilingualism does not suffice to achieve translation competence despite being an essential basis for translation, another point of agreement in these perspectives relates to the central role of strategic competence. Whether described as strategic competence (PACTE), transfer competence (Neubert), or decision-making ability (Pym), the various models emphasise the mechanisms that coordinate the translation process and regulate choices when translators are faced with competing communicative demands (PACTE 2005; Pym 2003). Thus, translation depends not only on possessing different kinds of knowledge, but also on being able to organise and apply that knowledge in context in the right way.

Thus, these perspectives agree in suggesting that translation competence is not just a collection of separate abilities. A better way to explain it is to understand it as an integrated form of professional expertise. Elements such as linguistic knowledge, cultural and textual awareness, strategic competence, cognitive processing, instrumental resources and professional judgement function as interdependent components of a single system. Bilingualism provides access to linguistic systems, but translation competence determines how those systems are used through strategically and cognitively organised decision-making under the professional constraints of real translation practice.

This understanding is reinforced by cognitive research on translation expertise. Studies comparing novice and expert translators indicate that increasing expertise is associated not only with greater linguistic knowledge, but also with more efficient problem representation, selective allocation of attention, and the gradual

proceduralisation of translation routines (Jääskeläinen 1999; Tirkkonen-Condit 2005; Shreve 2002). From this perspective, cognition is not only an additional component that supports translation competence; it is also one of the mechanisms through which its different dimensions are coordinated during translation performance.

Another aspect, particularly emphasised in Pym's later work, is the management of risk under conditions of uncertainty (Pym 2010; Pym 2015). Decisions made in translation inevitably involve evaluating and choosing between alternative solutions whose consequences cannot be known with complete certainty. Competent translators therefore minimise communicative risk by balancing the expectations of clients, readers and communicative purpose while at the same time maintaining the functional adequacy of the target text. This perspective complements cognitive models by emphasising that professional expertise involves not only solving problems, but also making informed decisions under uncertain conditions.

The European Master's in Translation (EMT) framework also reflects this multidimensional view. It defines translation competence as an integrated set of linguistic, intercultural, thematic, technological, personal and service-provision competences required for professional practice (EMT 2017). The EMT framework does not present a new theoretical model; it organizes many of the principles identified across the literature, and it translates them into a competence profile for translator education and professional training. In this sense, EMT functions not as a competing theoretical model, but as an applied operationalisation of competence frameworks developed in Translation Studies.

All these different perspectives reinforce the central argument of this paper: translation competence is not defined by bilingualism alone, but also by the ability to integrate linguistic, cultural, strategic, cognitive and professional resources in order to make informed translation decisions that adapt to each context.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSLATOR EDUCATION

Since translation competence is seen as a form of professional expertise and not just as an extension of bilingualism, its acquisition should not be separated from the conditions under which translators are trained into professional practice. This understanding should have direct implications for translator education (Király 2000; PACTE 2005; EMT 2017). Essentially, if translation competence consists of the coordinated use of linguistic, strategic, cultural, cognitive and professional abilities, then translator training cannot focus exclusively on language proficiency. Instead, it must create learning environments that foster the integration of these different dimensions of competence.

One implication is the need to move towards learning activities that reflect authentic translation practice (González Davies 2004; EMT 2017). This includes working with a variety of text types and specialised domains and requiring students to justify their translation choices in relation to audience, function and other elements of context (Nord 2005). Such tasks encourage learners to approach translation as a process of informed decision-making, not linguistic substitution.

A second implication relates to the development of strategic and reflective competence. Because translation requires the coordination of multiple forms of knowledge, students need opportunities to evaluate alternative solutions. They should also get a chance to explain the reasoning behind their decisions and reflect on the effectiveness of their translations (Chesterman 2000; Pym 2003). This process helps

develop the professional judgement needed to deal with uncertainty and competing communicative demands.

Professional competence also requires familiarity with the technological environment in which translators work. The EMT framework explicitly recognises technological, instrumental and service-provision competences as integral parts of professional translation (EMT 2017). Consequently, translation technologies, terminology management and digital resources should not be treated as supplementary technical skills but as essential components of translator education that support professional decision-making.

In recent years, this technological dimension has expanded significantly with the integration of computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools, machine translation systems, post-editing practices, and emerging AI-assisted translation environments. Contemporary research increasingly frames these technologies not merely as supportive instruments but as central components of translation competence itself, requiring translators to develop digital literacy, critical evaluation skills, and the ability to manage human-machine interaction in professional workflows.

Finally, the developmental nature of translation competence suggests that professional expertise cannot be fully acquired within formal education alone (Király 2015; Göpferich 2013). While training provides the conceptual foundations and opportunities for guided practice, competence continues to develop through professional experience, feedback and engagement with increasingly complex translation tasks (PACTE 2005). Translator education should therefore be understood as the beginning of a process of lifelong professional development rather than its endpoint.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the relationship between bilingualism and translation competence through a review of major theoretical perspectives in Translation Studies. The models discussed here agree that although bilingualism is a necessary prerequisite for translation, it does not in itself include the knowledge, skills and decision-making processes involved in professional translation.

The literature reviewed here demonstrates that translation competence is best understood as a multidimensional form of professional expertise. It involves the integration of linguistic, cultural, textual, strategic, cognitive and instrumental competences, which are coordinated in response to the communicative demands and constraints of specific translation situations. Translation competence develops progressively through education, practice and professional experience and is not a simple extension of language ability.

This understanding has important implications for translator education. If translation competence is viewed as an integrated professional competence rather than as advanced bilingualism, training must extend beyond language proficiency to help develop strategic thinking, reflective practice, technological competence and engagement with authentic translation tasks.

The theoretical models reviewed in this paper converge on a shared understanding: translation competence is not defined by bilingualism, but by the ability to integrate multiple forms of knowledge and judgement in order to produce effective translations within real communicative and professional contexts.

In conclusion, the distinction between bilingualism and translation competence highlights translation not as language transfer, but as situated expert decision-making under communicative and professional constraints.

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