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The Intercultural Question and the Interpreting Professions

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The meaning of accuracy and culture, and the rise of the machine in interpreting and translation.

A conversation between
Sandra Hale and Anthony Liddicoat

Hale: Maybe I should start by saying that the terms ‘translation’ and ‘culture’ are very complex and multifaceted and may mean different things in different contexts and settings. Let me start with the term ‘translation’. There is the major distinction between written translation and oral translation (Interpreting). I would like to concentrate on interpreting, as that is my main area of expertise.

Within Interpreting there are also many different types, which will in turn determine what an interpreter is expected to do and how interpreting tasks are approached. This is very much related to Skopos theory (Vermeer, 1978), where the skopos or the purpose of the ‘translation’ or ‘interpreting task’ will determine what accuracy means and how it is achieved and how culture will relate to achieving such level of accuracy. For example, conference interpreters concentrate on propositional accuracy, generally striving to improve on the delivery of the speaker by omitting repetitions, backtrackings, hesitations, mistakes, etc. – which are not important to the purpose of the speech being interpreted. Such editing will make for a more enjoyable conference for the delegates who are listening just to two people for the whole conference – the two interpreters.

On the other extreme, all those extra linguistic features are of utmost importance in court interpreting, where the witnesses are assessed based not only on what they say but also on how they say it (Berk-Selignson, 1990; Hale, 2004). In court interpreting, therefore, interpreters strive to achieve accuracy of content and manner. This requirement must not be confused with a ‘verbatim’, ‘literal’ or ‘word for word’ translation. The way I approach accuracy as an interpreter myself and as an educator of interpreters, is by looking at the task as a pragmatic reconstruction of the

original (House, 1977).

Liddicoat: I agree that we are dealing with very complex terms here and in this discussion we'll be talking across aspects of translation because my own area of interest has been much more in written translation than oral translation so some of the emphases will be a bit different just because of that. I'd also like to add 'language' to your list of complex terms as I think we often risk over simplifying what language is and focus more on it as code (grammar and vocabulary) rather than also seeing it as a meaning-making system. I would say that ideas such as 'verbatim', 'literal' or 'word for word' translation reflect such an oversimplified version of language where the code gets privileged over the complexity of meanings, so like you I would want to move beyond such views in looking at the idea of accuracy, which for me is also a complex term.

The idea of accuracy is one where there are quite different possibilities for determining what it means for a translation to be 'accurate' and the idea of accuracy has been a key area of debate in the linguistically based scholarship of translation. If we start to think about what makes a translation accurate, we need to move beyond a narrowly language-focused view of what a message is. This is where your idea of a pragmatic reconstruction of the original becomes a very powerful idea but also a complex one. In dealing with pragmatics, we need to bear in mind that pragmatics is the area of language in which language and culture most closely interrelate in creating meanings, but not the only area.

In a paper I wrote a couple of years ago (Liddicoat, 2009) I argue that this interaction between language and culture is potentially present at all levels of linguistic communication from the macro-level things like the ways assumed shared knowledge shapes how we speak and write to the very micro-level of linguistic forms. The problem that faces the translator or the interpreter is the need to recognize when something other than language forms influence what is being communicated. David Katan (2004) puts this quite nicely when he says that the translator needs to attend both to the explicitly expressed and the implicitly expressed. The explicitly expressed is relatively easy to identify, even if it can be hard to translate into another language. The implicitly expressed is often a lot harder to notice, if we are not used to looking for it and can be missed in translation. The implicitly expressed can even influence very basic levels of communication, for example the comparative level of politeness found between requests such as *ouvrez la fenetre s'il vous plait* and *open the window*

please in which the French is appropriately polite in situations where the English is not. This is a quite tangible example, but sometimes the complexity of the implicitly expressed can be much harder to identify.

Hale: Yes, I totally agree with everything you said above. As David Crystal said, the overarching aim in translation is "... to convey the effect of what would happen if the same situation arose in the other language" (Crystal and Jiang 2013). That aim will require many changes at the word and sentence levels in order to be accurate at the discourse/pragmatic level. So, accurate interpreting is for the most part very distant from the original words and structures used in the source language. And yes, pragmatic differences trickle down from the macro to the micro levels of communication, as you state above. Your example of politeness exemplifies the different ways languages and cultures express politeness. Unless the purpose of the translation is to show such differences, the translator or interpreter would change the utterance to match the level of politeness in order to be accurate. Another similar example that relates to court interpreting, is the way courtroom questions are understood and accurately rendered. A common question type used in court during examination-in-chief (direct examination in the USA) is the modal interrogative, such as "Can you tell the court what happened on that day?". Semantically, this is a question of ability, but pragmatically, it is an indirect speech act – an indirect polite request to tell the court what happened. When an interpreter is interpreting into a language for which such a question would not elicit the desired answer, then in order to be accurate, the interpreter will need to change it to the pragmatically appropriate question, which may be a direct speech act such as "Please tell the court what happened", otherwise, the answer elicited by a semantically translated question may be "yes" or "no". In fact I have research data showing this very result when interpreters interpreted at the semantic rather than the pragmatic level (Hale, 2014). This type of cross linguistic pragmatic difference is what Thomas (1984) calls "pragmalinguistic differences", which can be addressed by interpreters as a matter of course, without the need to explain anything to the audience. The difficulty for interpreters arises when "sociopragmatic differences" (Thomas, 1984) arise. These are extra linguistic cross-cultural differences that may lead to communication breakdowns, such as inappropriate social behaviours, taboos, etc. This is when interpreters are unsure about what to do and reluctant to offer any advice for fear of stereotyping (Hale, 2013a).

Liddicoat: It's this level of sociopragmatics that is one of those instances where the implicitly expressed become less tangible and may be overlooked in translation in ways that mean that the translated message is not the same as the original one. This for me is where the idea of the translator as a mediator is an important one. There is a need to intervene in some way in the text that is being produced in the target language but also a need to understand what is a legitimate intervention. As Jull Costa (2007) notes translators need to be selective in determining how and when they intervene in the text and to consider how consequential a concept, practice, etc. is for understanding the meaning that is being conveyed. If sociopragmatic or other knowledge is central to understanding what is being said, then reluctance to intervene can obscure what is being communicated.

Hale: Yes, that's right. Again, the approach to 'accuracy' will depend on the type of translation and its purpose. And I agree that the term 'accuracy' is also very complex for this very reason, but generally, the guiding principle for interpreters would be to alert the parties to a potential cross cultural misunderstanding when it is caused by a cultural issue that is understood by the interpreter because of shared sociopragmatic knowledge which would also be shared by other speakers of the source language but not by those of the target language. These are those issues that go beyond the pragmalinguistic level and cannot be conveyed through a pragmatic reconstruction of the original. In translation, translators would alert the reader via a translator's note or by explicitation in the body of the translation. And this leads me to the original point about the term 'culture'. Speakers of the same language can of course share cultural aspects with each other, but also differ culturally on many others depending on their background, social status, profession, education levels, religion, etc. So, it is risky to attribute any difference or any communication breakdown to a 'cross-cultural difference' (see Felberg & Skaaden, 2012).

Liddicoat: For me, culture is one of the most difficult concepts for the languages professions to work with and the ways we have talked about culture, especially in language education, have often been really problematic. In particular, the idea of culture as national culture or of culture being in some way co-extensive with language are especially problematic as they obscure the variability that exists within all cultures.

We need to move beyond seeing cultures as discrete, static entities and see cultures as varied, subjective and power-based constructions of lived experience. I also feel we need to be more skeptical about culture as the explanation for communication problems. Ingrid Piller (2011: 172) makes the point that “Culture is sometimes nothing more than a convenient and lazy explanation”. At the same time, culture is nonetheless present in communication and we need to be able to recognize it as consequential in shaping communication at various points. For me, this is not the same as saying culture is the cause of communication problems. Rather I am saying that the cultural frame in which we communicate shapes how and what we communicate. This idea is particularly significant for a translator of written texts as the reader and writer are not only separated from each other at the moment of reading a writing, but they are not knowingly involved in intercultural communication, as the original writer wrote in a particular language to address speakers of that language and had particular assumptions about what such readers know and how they understand meanings communicated in their shared language. A translator has to make a text comprehensible for someone other than the intended reader. I think that the problem exists to some extent also in interpreting, although the co-presence of the participants in the interaction introduces different possibilities and different dynamics. In each case the translator needs to get a message across to a recipient who does not share the same meaning-making resources.

Hale: Yes, in live interpreted situations, especially dialogue interpreting, the participants have the opportunity to ask for clarification if something is unclear or seems inappropriate, whereas in translation, the reader does not have that option. I have previously stated that in terms of accuracy translation can be seen as more ‘target reader-oriented’ and dialogue interpreting as more ‘source speaker-oriented’ (Hale, 2007). What I mean by that is that translation tends to require more explicitation to convey the intended message because of the reasons we discussed above. In dialogue-interpreted situations, the source speakers can take more responsibility because they can react immediately to what was said.

I agree with Crystal (Crystal and Jiang 2013: 41) that interpreters cannot be mind readers, and can only go by what they understand on the surface, which is of course complemented by their shared knowledge with the speakers for whom they are interpreting. The more interpreters know about the setting, the goals of the interaction, the backgrounds and

cultures of the speakers, and the subject matter, the better equipped they will be to understand and to produce an accurate rendition; but ultimately, interpreters can only be faithful to their own understanding of the source utterance. This is why interpreters will often ask for clarification, to ensure that they have understood correctly. A translator may have more trouble seeking such clarification, unless the author is still alive.

Liddicoat: I agree with the idea that an interpreter or any other translator can only be faithful to their own understanding gets to the heart of the nature of human communication. Meanings are complex and their interpretation (I'm using this word in the hermeneutic sense not in the sense of oral translation) is subjective – each interpreter brings his/her own resources to the interpretation. For me, it is this act of interpretation that is fundamental to the act of translation – there needs to be an awareness that the act of reading/listening for translation is a process of interpreting meaning in order convey this meaning to another. This idea of interpretation is at the heart of the way I understand the idea of mediation as it applies in translation and intercultural communication more generally.

Hale: Yes, and that leads me to mention the confusion surrounding the term 'mediation' in relation to Interpreting, which is sometimes used to mean 'advocacy', and I think these are very different concepts that should not be confused. In my view, there is no question about the fact that interpreters and translators are linguistic and cultural mediators, but I disagree with the suggestion that being a mediator makes the interpreter an advocate. The role of advocate for the minority language speaker has been proposed for community interpreters (see examples in Barsky, 1996; Kaufert, 1997), and research has found that many ad hoc interpreters act as advocates or gatekeepers, by deliberately editing the speakers' turns in an attempt to 'help' present a better answer or to avoid wasting time (Angelelli, 2004; Davidson, 2000), with serious implications, especially in medical or legal settings (Tebble, 2012). The question has been asked, why can't an interpreter advocate for both sides? One reason is because that is not part of the interpreting task, but another is that if you advocate for both, you advocate for none – so we're back to the original ethical requirement of impartiality. Professional interpreters are impartial mediators, interested in the communication process rather than the outcome of the interaction. Some have argued that impartiality is impossible and should not be expected of interpreters. For sure,

interpreters are humans and they will form judgments, but here again, I agree with Geertz's comment (1973/2000: 30): "I have never been impressed by the argument that as complete objectivity is impossible in these matters (as, of course, it is), one might as well let one's sentiments run loose... [It] is like saying that as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer". The more interpreters are aware of their own partialities and of their ethical obligations, the more they will be able to control how they interpret. There may be situations, of course, where it may be impossible for an interpreter to interpret; if there is a conflict of interest, that's when interpreters can withdraw. However, if I were to interpret only for those I agree with, I wouldn't be interpreting for many people!

Liddicoat: It is important to keep the ideas of mediation, advocacy and gatekeeping separate in the way we think about the roles of interpreters and translators as I think of these as quite different ideas, but the fact you raise these as a group points to something I believe is a key problem in how we think about intercultural mediation – the overlap of mediation into many different domains of activity. My starting point in thinking about mediation as a linguist working on issues of language and culture is language as a meaning making system; and for me, mediation is fundamentally associated with interpretation of meanings. This is what separates it from the other terms. I think Gohard-Radenkovic, et al. (2004) provide a useful way of thinking about mediation in intercultural communication when they argue that the mediator is a social actor who works to give someone who does not understand the capacity to understand. This is a way of thinking about mediation that places meaning at the centre of what mediators do and allows for the possibility of disentangling mediation as an element of intercultural communication from other ways of understanding mediation - for example as it is used in dispute resolution. Advocacy is not an interpretative act in the same sense as what I mean by mediation here, rather it assumes an adversarial context between participants that needs to be resolved. This is something that lies outside the mediation of communication, which is the translator's primary task.

Gate-keeping is even more removed from the idea of interpretation and meaning making. The fact that these terms come together in discussions of intercultural mediation is problematic as it shows how terminologies can obscure different ways of thinking about and through questions. As

language professionals we need to remain focused on mediation as a linguistic and communicative practice and to understand our roles and ethical responsibilities through this focus. At the same time, we need to recognize that this is mediational work and that there are complex issues of language and culture that we do need to engage with in a principled and mindful way.

Hale: Yes, I agree with you again.

Liddicoat: I think what this discussion has shown is that the issue of translators' and interpreters' agency is something that we need to give a lot of thought to. If we think of the translator or interpreter too narrowly as a 'language' specialist recasting language forms, then we are likely to miss the realities of the mediational process that is involved. To do so, is almost to reduce the translator to the role of a machine processing linguistic structures. The translator is an active interpreter of meanings, and of meanings that lie to some degree outside purely 'linguistic' forms. When we move the activity of interpretation to the heart of the translator's work we are forced to think in different terms about what is both possible and desirable for translation and to recognize the sophistication of this work. In particular we need to recognize the human dimension of translation work and to understand the ways in which translators are social actors within processes of border-crossing and intercultural understanding.

Hale: Saying that interpreters and translators only switch words from one language to another like machines shows a basic misunderstanding of the complex process of translation, as we've discussed above.

Liddicoat: The human dimension is fundamental to seeing how the field of interpreting and translating will be understood in the future. The developments in machine translation are sometimes taken as eclipsing or even replacing the human interpreter and translator. With the advent of easily accessible translation software on mobile phones gives the appearance that interlingual communication is unproblematic and independent of professional expertise, something that is emphasised in the promotion of such software. For example, Google Translate's latest upgrade claimed to be "one step closer to turning your phone into a universal translator and to a world where language is no longer a barrier to discovering information or connecting with each other" (Google 2015).

That is, Google claims a reality in which technology has replaced the human element in cross language communication. While such software is undeniable useful, the emphases in discourses about such software is ultimately problematic as it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the act of translation. Such software is based on a decoding of meaning at the level of word and grammar and is organized on structural principles such as collocation. What is missing here is the idea of the translator as an interpreter and rewriter on meanings as opposed to a simple decoder. Meaning is complex and is not located simply in the lexis and grammar of the language used to communicate. It also lies in allusions, connotations, and cultural conventions of language use; in the inherent heteroglossia of language as a mode of expression. This means that there are aspects of meaning-making that lie outside the competence of technology and which will not be the outcome of improved software.

Hale: I am no expert on machine translation, but I know that translation memories and other machine translation tools should be used only as aids to human translators, not as replacements. Although these tools are improving, I doubt they will ever replace humans, and so far nothing has come anywhere near producing adequate oral interpreting for anything other than very simple exchanges. I must say, that many humans who call themselves ‘translators and interpreters’ make the same mistakes as machines, translating at the word and sentence levels and ignoring the discourse pragmatic dimensions we have discussed so far. This has a lot to do with the theoretical underpinning of any translator’s and interpreter’s practical work, which is acquired mostly through formal education in translation and interpreting, which is something not everyone has had the benefit of. This leads us back to the argument that not all ‘bilinguals’ (another complex and loaded term) are automatically translators or interpreters, which is what many seem to believe.

Liddicoat: The ultimate issue, I believe, lies in the recognition of the ways in which translators and interpreters must and do act as mediators between languages and cultures. The sorts of machine translation envisaged by Google Translate throw the onus of mediation on to the end user of the translated text: that is by definition on to those without access to the language of the source text and its cultural context of production and consumption. It can create an illusion of comprehension without

ensuring the reality of that comprehension – or rather it creates of superficial comprehension of what a spoken or written text says but provide an interpretation of what the speaker or writer meant in producing the text. While in many low stakes contexts, this may not be a problem, in higher stakes contexts it is highly consequential.

Hale: Yes, I agree, and again I stress the same argument can be used for incompetent interpreters and translators. I have written a lot about the damage an incompetent interpreter can do, which for the majority of cases, will simply go unnoticed, except in the rare cases of appeals or complaints (Hale, 2010; Hayes & Hale, 2010). Many assume that all that is needed to ensure effective communication between two people who do not share a language is to have an interpreter present, regardless of their level of expertise and regardless of the speakers' coherence, speed of delivery, register, etc. One example I can cite is a government organization's requirement for interpreters to sign a form at the end of the interpreted interview certifying that the non English speaker had understood everything. It is not the interpreter's role or responsibility to ensure understanding, and in any case, there is no way the interpreter could guarantee someone else's understanding of what was said. I've often argued for the need for the speakers to take much of the responsibility for adequate interpreting (Ozolins & Hale, 2009). This includes briefing the interpreter, making sure the interpreter is well qualified and well prepared, ensuring that the interpreter has adequate working conditions, and is allowed to intervene when needed to ask for or make clarifications (Hale, 2011; 2013b). Even with expert interpreters, this type of interaction is crucial. With machines, that is impossible.

Liddicoat: The claims of organization such as the one cited from Google above create unrealistic expectations of what such software can do, especially among those who have little insight into or experience of cross language communication. Sometimes the consequences of this are highly problematic. For example, recently the Australian Department of Health started to use Google Translate to convey health information in a range of languages (see <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/Other+Languages-1>). The results are texts that are frequently ungrammatical and often difficult to comprehend; and the Department effectively distances itself from the information provided in a disclaimer at the foot

of the page. Although developments in the software may overcome some of the problems of such translation work, I see the larger problem as being one that fails to recognize the real nature and complexity of the information that is being communicated and the mechanization of human communication that underlies such initiatives. It is an un-nuanced and unsophisticated view of human communication that devalues not only the work of professional interpreters and translators, but also the texts being communicated and the audience receiving them. Such solutions are obviously much cheaper than professional work and so the ideologies that underlie the mechanizing of cross language communication support a powerful neoliberal agenda in government services.

Hale: This is really alarming. These solutions may seem cheaper on the surface, but they mask the many problems miscommunication can cause, which almost always translate into higher costs. I hope we can do something to convince this department to change its practices. As the new president of the national professional association AUSIT, I will put it on our agenda!

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