

## THE SPLENDOUR AND MISERY OF “INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION” TEACHING MODULES

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### Abstract

The paper examines in a critical light the approaches and theoretical grounds of certain educational projects seeking to promote “intercultural competence” in translators, both in Russia, the contributors’ home country, and in Western Europe, as exemplified by a European Union project. Some textbooks as well as teaching material and recommendations are placed under scrutiny for consistency, relevance and value to the training of professional translators/interpreters, especially at postgraduate level. It is shown that some guidelines presented as an improvement on current translation teaching practices repeat or repackage ideas developed decades ago by Russian and Bulgarian translato­logists. The paper argues that there is no special need for artificially implanting or isolating an “intercultural communication” module in translation teaching, as translation is itself a primary form of international and, therefore, intercultural communication, and the best practices of its teaching, at least in the leading translator/interpreter schools of Russia, have incorporated the cultural component in harmony with other essential translation competences for at least half a century.

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## How Intercultural Communication Came to Reign

Up until about 20 years ago, translation and interpreting in Russia had been taught as such, pure and simple, with “no artificial colorings added.” There seemed to be nothing wrong with it: the professional standard of the interpreters and translators trained by Russia’s (and, earlier, the Soviet Union’s) leading language schools, such as the Maurice Thorez Foreign Languages Institute or the Military University, was generally not only up to the mark, but often far above it.

Then, however, came a revelation: it turned out, according to education officials and some academics, that what aspiring translators were missing was the teaching of “intercultural communication skills.” In July 1996, the Russian Ministry of Higher and Professional Education issued Directive 1309 “On Supplementing and Partially Amending the Classification of Areas and Specialties of Higher Professional Education.” The directive replaced the university speciality ‘Foreign Languages’ with ‘Linguistics and Intercultural Communication.’

The decision had never been offered for discussion to higher education professionals. As Professor Svetlana Ter-Minasova, a leading exponent of intercultural communication and the author of the textbook ‘Language and Intercultural Communication’, wrote in its preface, the change was a surprise to just about everyone. She wrote:

‘Following the publication of this directive, Moscow State University’s Department of Foreign Languages was inundated with letters, faxes and e-mails. Anxious colleagues from all over this country, still a vast one [after the collapse of the Soviet Union], came to visit, all to ask the same questions: What is intercultural communication? Where do we get the information? Are educational texts available?’ (Ter-Minasova 2000, p. 3).

## Term Under Scrutiny

What *is* intercultural communication? It may now be too late to question the term, but isn’t communication (if understood as the transfer of information) always interpersonal, i.e. taking place between individuals or, at most, between groups of *people*, not cultures as such (which are highly generalized abstract inanimate concepts)? And if what is implied by “intercultural communication” boils down to communication between *representatives* of different cultures, should the cultural component be isolated

and singled out from all others—linguistic, logical, historical, geographical, ideological, social, generational, behavioural, psychological, stylistic, aesthetic, and so on—for purposes of translation teaching? After all, people never represent cultures alone; they also represent families, generations, age and gender groups, occupations, educational backgrounds, interests, social strata and many other things.

The translator's task is to facilitate the flow of information between communicants in its complex totality, based on an understanding of what pieces of information derivable from the source text are pragmatically relevant and must be carried across to the recipient for communication to be a success. The various aspects of the information put into the target text need to be carefully balanced in line with the writer's or speaker's intent and message, which need to be properly decoded by the translator. The science of translation and of teaching translation is exactly about that, and there seems to be no special need for the 'intercultural' label. Overemphasis on the 'intercultural' is both theoretically and practically unfounded.

By now, a number of textbooks and manuals on intercultural communication have been published, some of a broadly theoretical nature and others focusing on specific language combinations — mostly English-Russian, with one textbook on Russian-German intercultural communication, a joint effort by Russian and German scholars (Gruševickaja et al., 2003). We are aware that the interest in "intercultural communication" was not confined to Russia after it opened itself to other countries in the wake of the breakup of the Soviet Union, but was international in nature and took deep roots in Europe, perhaps as a side effect of the growing influx of guest workers and migrants, in addition to the accession of new countries with less familiar cultures to the European Union.

### **The Intercultural Mantra**

Textbooks came forth, preceded and followed by large-scale programs, "curriculum frameworks" and pan-European projects. Let us take a look at one of them, a project entitled "Promoting Intercultural Competence in Translators" (PICT)<sup>1</sup>. In the

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<sup>1</sup> [www.pictllp.eu](http://www.pictllp.eu)

project's explanatory material, the words "intercultural competence" are repeated many times, but with no precise definition of their meaning.

PICT's so-called "Good Practice Report"<sup>2</sup> states that

"a majority of the EU Higher Education institutions surveyed as part of the PICT project supported the inclusion of Intercultural Competence as part of the curriculum for postgraduate students of Translation. *At the same time many of them said that Intercultural Competence was not always explicitly taught at present. In other cases, whether it was taught depended on the preferences of the staff involved*" (emphasis added).

It appears that there still are some translation teachers who have not so easily succumbed to the charm of the words "intercultural communication" and appear to have taken a more critical approach to it. Some of them may have taken a closer look at the Emperor's new "intercultural" clothes and found their fabric to be far less material than education officials were telling them.

However, the report contains a very strong recommendation, "that postgraduate Translation programmes explicitly incorporate intercultural competence whether this is in the form of a stand-alone module, whether it is integrated across a range of translation modules or whether it is via both."

This is reminiscent of a directive, both by nature of its language and because it offers little reasoning other than the practice of a majority of the institutions *surveyed* (which, technically, may not even be a majority of *all* educational institutions).

The remainder of the report's recommendations is based on equally unsubstantiated reasoning, which boils down to the repetition of words like *important*, *key* and *crucial*. (As a side remark, we cannot help quoting some specimens of bureaucratic officialese from the report under discussion: "The EU *is and remains* a *key-player in exercising leadership and promoting synchronization across policy levels*." That can definitely serve as a useful teaching material to show students how clichés can obscure the meaning of what is being said. The formula is capable of giving rise to the question: if the EU is not *the* leader, but only a 'key player in exercising leadership,' how solid are its recommendations?).

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<sup>2</sup> [www.pictllp.eu/download/Good\\_Practice\\_Report.pdf](http://www.pictllp.eu/download/Good_Practice_Report.pdf)

Let us now look at the actual teaching materials PICT is offering<sup>3</sup>.

### **Proposed Exercises**

The plan for a session intended to introduce “**some basic intercultural terms**” suggests that “students write definitions of culture, then compare and discuss definitions in pairs.” This should be followed by a “brainstorming” session, during which they write ‘definitions’ of nationalities on their own, then compare them in pairs and identify the underlying overgeneralisations and stereotypes and disprove them.”

One wonders how this is relevant to teaching translation. The idea that stereotypes are not universally true and that one should not be guided by them is something university students (and especially postgraduates, for whom the study plan is primarily intended) are supposed to have learned in secondary school. On the other hand, such stereotypes sometimes underlie the texts to be translated; if relevant for the correct understanding and interpretation of those texts, they cannot be dismissed and have to be rendered in translation. It is up to the translator, therefore, to decide on the degree of their relevance for the target text, and that decision will not be based on any definition of culture, but on context/situation analysis comprising a multitude of factors specific to the text at hand and to the circumstances and actors of communication.

Let us turn to a more practice-oriented part of the PICT paper, session 4, “**Critical Incidents.**” This session “is designed to raise students’ awareness and sensitivity to potential intercultural clashes and ability to see intercultural situations in the eyes of the other and to negotiate successful ways of dealing with culture bumps.”

It is true that in their professional activities translators, and especially interpreters, sometimes have to find ways of dealing with ‘bumps,’ whether cultural or other. We looked for an example of such a ‘bump’ in PICT and found the following:

“Tanja, a young translation student from rural Finland, was visiting London for the first time. She had just bought a ticket to the underground but had never used the gates (or any underground) before. When she tried to insert her single fare ticket to the intended slot, the machine refused to accept it. This happened repeatedly, and Tanja got more and more anxious and aware of the queue behind her. Finally, in desperation, she cried for

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<sup>3</sup> [www.pictllp.eu/en/teaching-material](http://www.pictllp.eu/en/teaching-material)

help. “How does this machine work?!” she shouted frantically. Everyone around her turned their gaze away and moved quickly to use the other gates.”<sup>4</sup>

Here are the discussion points suggested by PICT:

“What is happening here? What kinds of issues seem to arise? Can we find explanations for them? What kinds of misunderstandings take place and why? Can you imagine yourself in the position of one of these participants? Who? Why? How would you feel?” (Ibid.)

The first question one is tempted to ask is—why is this incident called “intercultural”? If Tanja has never used the underground before, a similar incident could just as easily occur in the capital of her own country. Would such an incident have to be called *intracultural*? And what if she saw a microwave oven she had never seen before in the home of her cousin and didn’t know how to use it—would it also be a ‘cultural’ incident of some sort? In any event, whether labelled as cultural, technological or otherwise, the story has nothing to do with translation. The purpose it serves in postgraduate translation teaching is not clear. As university professors, we would consider this kind of student ‘activity’ as a pastime completely lost to the teaching of anything relevant to translation and good for a short relaxing intermission at best.

In the search of sections more pertinent to translation, the title of session 7, **“Translators’ Intercultural Competence and Translatorial Action,”** sounds more encouraging. Here is what the students are supposed to do:

“Browsing the web pages of the British translation agency Kwintessential to see what kinds of services they offer and searching for similar services in the home country. Are there many service providers? Do they also offer translation and/or interpreting? Did ideas emerge... that do not seem to be widely on offer yet? Presentations in groups... Each group selects one translatorial service that they think has innovative potential (preferably one they themselves brainstormed, but it may also be one they found while sourcing) and prepares a 5 minute presentation of it to the class, explaining what the service is and what kind of niche it fills in the markets.”<sup>5</sup>

There seems to be nothing wrong (apart from company name placement) with encouraging students to look at translation as a business, but, if it is to be taken seriously, this requires a special — and much longer and more profound — course of training. Secondly, one wonders again why this should be regarded as part of the

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.pictlp.eu/download/en/teaching-material/4-PICT-teaching\\_Critical-incidents.pdf](http://www.pictlp.eu/download/en/teaching-material/4-PICT-teaching_Critical-incidents.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.pictlp.eu/download/en/teaching-material/7\\_PICT-teaching\\_Translators-intercultural-competence-and-translatorial-action.pdf](http://www.pictlp.eu/download/en/teaching-material/7_PICT-teaching_Translators-intercultural-competence-and-translatorial-action.pdf)

concept of intercultural communication? Perhaps the authors of the project were influenced by entries from the "Culture Vulture" blog posted on the homepage of the agency they seem to advertise, such as "Idioms Across Europe: 25 Different Uses for the Color Yellow,"<sup>6</sup> citing idioms from various languages which contain the word meaning 'yellow.'

In our view, there is no special need to rebrand things like that as "intercultural": the study of idioms is called **phraseology** and has always been part of traditional language and translation classes.

Our search for reason and consistency proved no more fruitful in the case of session plan 11, "**Translating Face-to-Face Interaction.**"<sup>7</sup> We have pointed out before that communication is an interpersonal process, but here, too, the planners have not succeeded in showing how to take proper account of its cultural aspect in interpretation teaching.

According to the session plan, the focus of this exercise "can be limited to FTAs (face threatening acts)" and the "tu-vous" distinction non-existent in English.

FTAs are mostly associated with a speaker's misunderstood intentions. Although this is clearly a communicative problem, it may be intercultural, intracultural or non-cultural at all: the key factor here is not culture, but the communicative function the utterance plays, in interaction with others factors. This is about meaning and understanding, and is the subject of a discipline called **pragmatics**. Translation theory and teaching have always given a lot of attention to the pragmatic aspects of text and utterance. Why reinvent and, most importantly, rename the wheel?

As for the "tu-vous" distinction, it is primarily **a grammatical and stylistic issue** and, though not devoid of a cultural dimension, the latter is not key to the treatment of the phenomenon. Like many other incongruences between the vocabularies and grammatical systems of the source and target languages, translators should not look upon this phenomenon as a problem per se, but only in the light of its contextual and

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/read-our-blog/idioms-across-europe-25-different-uses-for-the-colour-yellow.html>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.pictlp.eu/download/en/teaching-material/11\\_PICT-teaching\\_Translating-Face-to-Face-Interaction.pdf](http://www.pictlp.eu/download/en/teaching-material/11_PICT-teaching_Translating-Face-to-Face-Interaction.pdf)

situational relevance. As a matter of fact, the tu-vous difference is irrelevant to the translation of many, if not most, conversations and dialogs. We feel that the traditional approach to it, based on Vilen Komissarov's breakthrough theory of **levels of equivalence**, presented for the first time more than four decades ago (Komissarov 1973), can successfully deal with this issue without special resort to any "intercultural communication" exercises.

### Old Ideas Repackaged

The PICT plan includes a session dedicated to **realia**, entitled 'Realia in Travel Brochures.' The following is a quote from the paragraph on suggested activities:

"The teacher introduces the concept [of realia] as a possible instance of non-equivalence in translation and provides a few definitions for them. Examples of realia are sought out among the items listed on the blackboard. At this point, students are encouraged to consider these items from a certain target culture's point of view."<sup>8</sup>

The plan then sets forth "potential translation strategies for realia," such as direct transfer, calque, cultural adaptation, superordinate terms, explication, addition, and omission.

These *techniques* (incorrectly labelled as "strategies" in PICT), some just under different names, is what one can find in the chapter "Realia Rendering Techniques in Translation" from the book by Bulgarian scholars Sergei Vlahov and Sider Florin (2006, 102–109), whose first edition appeared more than 35 years ago, in 1980. It should be added that the Bulgarian authors provide a much more detailed and consistent account of the possible techniques. In Russia (and, we believe, in Bulgaria), it has always been part of translation teaching programs and curricula.

It must be added that the above-listed translation techniques cannot be taught in isolation, but on the basis of a much broader and logically consistent concept of equivalence/non-equivalence.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.pictlp.eu/download/en/teaching-material/9\\_PICT-teaching\\_Realia-in-travel-brochures.pdf](http://www.pictlp.eu/download/en/teaching-material/9_PICT-teaching_Realia-in-travel-brochures.pdf)

As stated in the preceding contribution to this journal, the PICT project was “aimed at allowing any university *teaching Translation to improve the ways in which it developed students’ intercultural abilities*” (emphasis added). We simply do not see how a curtailed, downsized and oversimplified version of a time-tested theory and practice can be passed off as an innovative improvement.

Without going into a detailed analysis of other session plans in the project, let us just say that the rest of it has led us to similar conclusions. The least convincing was the part on the so-called “textual dimension,” which boils down to **cookbook recipe analysis**. In this exercise, students are “asked to have a look at a dozen recipes of meat dishes (similar to the source text recipe given to the students at a later stage). They are advised to pay attention to the layout, order of ingredients needed and actual cooking instructions. In addition, students are asked to determine the linguistic features that are—or seem to be—typical of a recipe text.

It appears that the trendy term “textual dimension” is no more than a shiny wrapping for a number of time-tested terms and concepts: “style,” “clichés” and “usage.” Hardly an improvement either.

### **Core of Culture Missing in “Intercultural”**

Different as various definitions of culture may be, no scholar would probably deny that the core of culture is constituted by literature and the arts. Ironically, there is hardly any trace of these areas of knowledge in the “intercultural competence” training plan, — in spite of the undeniable fact that familiarity with these and other creative activities of humankind is essential to the formation of a good translator/interpreter. Of course, if such familiarity is missing, no sixty-minute session can fill the gap. Only an extensive program combining instruction with independent student research can do the job, and this again is what the best translation schools have always offered to their students. As early as the 1950s, in-depth courses on the history, geography, literature, culture and politics of the countries where the foreign languages under study were spoken, running for several semesters, were mandatory for students of translation and interpreting at foreign languages institutes in Moscow and elsewhere in the Soviet Union.

We are definitely not saying that there is no room for improving the traditional translation teaching systems and practices. On the contrary, new developments to make them more efficient should be encouraged and welcomed. Can anyone, however, undertake to prove that the extremely superficial “intercultural competence” class outlines we have examined are really an improvement?

There is no question that the study and comparison of cultures may be of great value and use to language practitioners, in particular teachers and translators/interpreters. It is less clear, however, whether the current state of ‘intercultural’ studies and texts available for use in teaching translation are of much practical value.

Many of the ‘cultural’ differences discussed in texts on intercultural communication properly belong to the study of languages, rather than cultures. Problems related to equivalence/non-equivalence, ‘translatability’, *realia*, differences in colour schemes, etc. have been extensively studied and described in numerous books on translation theory by Soviet/Russian, French, German, Bulgarian and other scholars. However, to our knowledge, these books are not widely used in European “intercultural communication” projects, possibly because they are not written in English.

### **Diehard Stereotypes**

While criticizing the weaknesses of European projects, we cannot bypass the fact that current Russian literature on “intercultural communication” is far from offering anything more relevant to the teaching of translation. Much like their West European counterparts, Russian scholars of the subject (few of them being professional translators) reveal a tendency toward blowing the ‘intercultural’ dimension out of proportion and toward making grossly inaccurate generalizations.

Some textbooks published in Russia concentrate on cultural stereotypes as reflected in jokes, proverbs, anecdotes, manners, etc. Unlike the PICT project, which seems to seek to disprove them, one is often left with the impression that some Russian authors are fascinated with those stereotypes. Many of their conclusions and generalizations are extremely debatable and have little or nothing to do with real-life problems encountered by practicing translators/interpreters.

As an example, we regard as highly questionable attempts to include in the didactic material discussion of 'language and ideology' (as is, incidentally, the case with PICT Project's plan for session 1, "The Role of Culture and Ideology in Translating Political Texts"). Professor Ter-Minasova devotes a whole section of her book on intercultural communication to the comparison of ideologies. The chapter "Russia and the West: Comparison of Ideologies" (Ter-Minasova 2000, 196–214) contains the speculative assertion that 'from the standpoint of ideology, American English and Soviet Russian are the closest of the variants of Russian and English' (Ter-Minasova 2000, p. 197). The author believes that this is borne out by 'open, ostentatious patriotism,' 'the cult of sacred objects and symbols,' and 'slogans, appeals, billboards, and social street advertising' (Ter-Minasova 2000, p. 200).

The textbook also contains a wide-ranging discussion of 'political correctness' with examples that are sometimes absurd or ludicrous, rather than pointing to specific difficulties that translators and interpreters may encounter in rendering 'politically correct' terms and expressions in texts of different genres.

### **Conclusion**

We believe that success in the practical work of translators is achieved through good command of the languages, mastery of translation skills, and knowledge of the main areas of culture, such as the history, geography, arts, literature, political systems and traditions of particular countries. Students need to study all those subjects in their own right, rather than devote their time to a miscellany of 'intercultural' trivia.

The pragmatic aspect, i.e. assumptions about what and how much the recipient of the translation knows about the subject discussed in the act of communication, is also of great importance. It has been shown by Edward T. Hall (1976) that in certain cultures people tend to assume that their interlocutors must know 'a lot' ('high-context cultures', e.g. Arabic, Slavic) while in others ('low-context cultures', e.g. Scandinavian, British) the assumption is that the interlocutor has little prior knowledge and needs more 'explanation.' Such knowledge may be useful particularly for interpreters and calls for competent exercise of logic and judgment, which mostly comes with practice.

Most of the mistakes made by students are not the result of inadequate “intercultural competence” but rather of insufficient command of languages and translation techniques, often combined with limited general knowledge and interests and poor familiarity with fundamentals of most diverse branches of learning.

There is no special need to implant “intercultural communication” in translation teaching: translation is a primary form of international and, therefore, intercultural communication, so translation competence is intercultural communication competence. Comparative cultural insights are so organic to the teaching of translation that we do not believe they can or should be taught in isolated ‘modules.’ This should be evident to those who do not understand translation as mere substitution of words from the target language for those of the source text, and we would like to hope that no serious scholar shares such a simplistic view.

Finally, let us guess what happened with Tanja from the backwoods of Finland after she had that unfortunate mishap with the gate machine in the London underground. Could it be that she went home and started writing a book on the inclusion of intercultural competence modules in the teaching of translation?

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