

Interlingual and Intercultural Competence As a Component of Specialized Translation

¹**Bakirova Khilolakhon Botiraliyevna**, PhD in pedagogical sciences, assistant professor of English Applied translation department, Translation faculty, Uzbekistan state university of world languages, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5801-2472>, E-mail: ms.khilola@bk.ru

²**Dr. Maya Gola**, Professor Kumaun university, Nainital, Uttarakand, India

Abstract:

This article examines interlingual and intercultural competence as an essential component of specialized translation competence. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between linguistic knowledge, cultural awareness, professional terminology, communicative context, and subject-specific translation strategies. The study argues that specialized translation cannot be reduced to the mechanical transfer of terminology from one language into another. A translator must understand how professional concepts are structured in different linguistic and cultural systems, how communicative conventions vary across professional communities, and how culturally conditioned meanings influence the interpretation and production of specialized texts. The article also discusses the role of interlingual and intercultural competence in terminology management, pragmatic adaptation, equivalence, professional communication, and translation quality assurance.

Keywords: interlingual competence, intercultural competence, specialized translation, translator competence, terminology, professional communication, equivalence, cultural mediation, translation studies.

Introduction

Specialized translation occupies an important place in contemporary professional communication. It includes the translation of technical, scientific, legal, medical, economic, engineering, and other subject-specific texts. Unlike general translation, specialized translation requires not only a high level of language proficiency but also knowledge of professional terminology, genre conventions, subject-specific concepts, information resources, and communication norms.

Modern approaches to translator education increasingly emphasize that professional translation competence consists of several interrelated components. The European Master's in Translation Competence Framework identifies language and culture competence as one of the fundamental dimensions of professional translator competence [1]. This demonstrates that effective translation depends not only on linguistic accuracy but also on the translator's ability to understand cultural and communicative differences between source and target contexts.

Interlingual competence refers to the translator's ability to establish meaningful relationships between two or more linguistic systems. Intercultural competence, in turn, refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and mediate cultural meanings, norms, values, and communicative conventions. In specialized translation, these two competences are closely interconnected.

Interlingual competence includes the ability to understand lexical, grammatical, semantic, stylistic, and pragmatic differences between languages. A specialized translator must be able to identify not only direct lexical equivalents but also differences in conceptual organization. For example, a technical or legal term may appear to have a direct equivalent in another language, while in reality its scope of meaning, institutional function, or professional usage may differ. This is particularly important in legal translation, where terms are often closely connected with specific legal systems. Susan Šarčević notes that legal translation requires conceptual comparison rather than simple lexical substitution because legal terms derive their meaning from the legal systems in which they function [2].

The same principle applies to technical and scientific translation. A translator must understand:

- the source term;
- the corresponding concept;
- the target-language term;
- the professional context in which it is used;
- the degree of equivalence between the source and target concepts.

Thus, interlingual competence includes more than bilingual vocabulary knowledge. Intercultural competence refers to the translator's ability to understand differences between cultural systems and to mediate between them. Michael Byram describes intercultural communicative competence as involving knowledge, attitudes, interpreting skills, interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness [3]. Although Byram's model was originally developed in the context of foreign language education, its principles are highly relevant to translation. A translator constantly operates between different cultural frameworks. Even highly specialized texts contain culturally conditioned elements. For example, business correspondence may reflect different levels of formality, politeness, hierarchy, or directness. Legal documents may contain references to institutions that have no exact equivalent in another legal system. Medical communication may reflect culturally specific conventions concerning patient interaction, informed consent, or risk communication. Therefore, intercultural competence enables the translator to recognize differences that cannot be solved by literal translation. Specialized translation requires the integration of linguistic, terminological, cultural, technological, and strategic skills. According to the PACTE model, translation competence includes bilingual, extra-linguistic, translation knowledge, instrumental, and strategic sub-competences [4].

This multidimensional view demonstrates that professional translation involves a combination of language knowledge and problem-solving ability. Interlingual competence helps the translator compare linguistic forms. Intercultural competence helps the translator interpret their cultural and pragmatic functions. Together, they allow the translator to answer several key questions:

What does the source text mean?

What professional concept does it represent?

How is the same concept expressed in the target language?

Does the target culture use the same communicative convention?

Does the term have the same institutional meaning?

Should the translator preserve, explain, adapt, or reformulate the source element? These questions are central to specialized translation. Terminology is one of the most important areas in which interlingual and intercultural competence interact. Specialized terminology is often viewed as a set of technical words. In reality, terms are closely connected with conceptual systems.

A translator must therefore work not only with words but with concepts. For instance, a term in engineering may have several possible translations depending on the technical subsystem in which it appears. A legal term may have no full equivalent because the target legal system does not recognize the same institution. A medical term may have an internationally standardized Latin or Greek-based form but different usage conventions in different national medical communities. Terminology management therefore requires comparison at several levels:

linguistic level – form and grammatical behavior;

semantic level – conceptual meaning;

pragmatic level – professional use;

cultural level – institutional and cultural context.

This is why specialized translators increasingly use termbases, parallel corpora, professional dictionaries, standards, and domain-specific databases. Professional texts are not culturally neutral. Different professional communities follow different conventions for writing reports, instructions, contracts, research articles, technical documentation, and business correspondence. For example, the degree of directness in a request may vary across cultures.

A phrase considered polite and professional in one language may sound excessively indirect or unusually formal in another. Similarly, the structure of an academic article may vary across discourse traditions. These differences belong to what translation studies often describe as genre and discourse conventions. Christiane Nord emphasizes that translation decisions should be made according to the purpose of the target text and the needs of the target audience [5]. This functional perspective is particularly relevant to specialized translation.

A translator may need to adapt:

- forms of address;
- document structure;
- explanatory detail;
- terminology;
- measurement systems;
- institutional references;
- date formats;
- abbreviations.

Such adaptation is possible only when the translator possesses intercultural awareness. Pragmatic competence is closely connected with both interlingual and intercultural competence.

A translator must understand what a text does, not only what it says.

A technical instruction may warn.

A legal clause may impose an obligation.

A medical document may request consent.

A business email may negotiate.

The same sentence can perform different functions depending on context.

J.L.Austin demonstrated that language can perform actions through speech acts [6]. John Searle later developed this theory by distinguishing between different types of communicative acts [7].

In translation, the pragmatic function of the source text should usually be preserved even when the linguistic form changes. This is particularly important in professional communication. A specialized translator acts not only as a language mediator but also as a cultural mediator. This does not mean changing every culturally specific element. It means making informed decisions about whether a source element should be preserved, adapted, explained, or replaced. In some contexts, fidelity to source terminology is essential. In others, functional adaptation is more important. The translator must therefore balance several requirements:

- accuracy;
- clarity;
- professional convention;
- cultural appropriateness;
- terminological consistency;
- communicative effectiveness.

This balancing process represents one of the most complex dimensions of specialized translation.

Modern specialized translation increasingly relies on digital tools. These include: CAT tools; terminology databases; parallel corpora; electronic dictionaries; machine translation systems; AI-assisted translation tools; professional document repositories. Technology can improve speed and consistency, but it cannot independently resolve all interlingual and intercultural problems. A machine translation system may provide a grammatically correct equivalent while misunderstanding the institutional or cultural meaning of a term. Therefore, technology should support, rather than replace, translator judgment. The European Master's in Translation Competence Framework also emphasizes technological competence as part of professional translator training [1].

Translator education should integrate language and culture training with specialized translation practice. Students should not study terminology only through isolated vocabulary lists. They should work with authentic professional texts. Useful activities include:

- comparing parallel texts;
- analyzing terminology in context;
- identifying culture-specific professional concepts;
- comparing genre conventions;
- translating institutional names;
- solving non-equivalence problems;
- evaluating machine translation;
- compiling bilingual glossaries;
- analyzing pragmatic adaptation.

Such activities help students develop the ability to move between linguistic, cultural, and professional systems. Several difficulties arise when developing interlingual and intercultural competence.

The first challenge is **false equivalence**. Two terms may look similar but represent different concepts.

The second challenge is **culture-specific institutional terminology**. Some terms cannot be translated through a single equivalent.

The third challenge is **genre convention**. A structurally correct translation may still sound inappropriate if it violates target-language professional conventions.

The fourth challenge is **pragmatic mismatch**. A literal translation may change the level of politeness, authority, or obligation.

The fifth challenge is **overreliance on technology**. Automatic tools may produce fluent output while preserving hidden conceptual errors. These problems demonstrate why specialized translation requires complex professional competence.

Conclusion

Interlingual and intercultural competence constitutes an essential component of specialized translation. Interlingual competence enables the translator to compare linguistic systems, identify semantic relations, and select appropriate equivalents.

Intercultural competence enables the translator to understand culturally conditioned meanings, professional conventions, institutional differences, and communicative expectations. In specialized translation, these competences function together. A professional translator must understand not only how a term is expressed in another language but also whether it represents the same concept, performs the same communicative function, and fits the professional conventions of the target culture. Therefore, specialized translator training should integrate language, culture, terminology, pragmatics, and professional discourse.

The development of interlingual and intercultural competence improves translation accuracy, terminological consistency, communicative effectiveness, and overall translation quality. Thus, specialized translation should be understood not as mechanical transfer between two languages, but as a complex process of linguistic, conceptual, professional, and cultural mediation.

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