

# On Translation Competence and Its Acquisition

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## ABSTRACT

Translation Studies has yet to build up a generally accepted definition and model of translation competence. As a matter of fact, the concept of translation competence has been defined in several manners. As detailed models for linguistic competence have been developed, componential models for translation competence should also be proposed accordingly. This paper summarized different definitions of translation competence based on the existing literature, introducing linguistic/text competence, strategic competence, and self-monitoring competence. It also presented an overview of research on translation competence and its acquisition, with particular emphasis on the PACTE's models. It is possible to claim that translation competence is multifaceted, and the lack of either subtype will exert a negative effect on its integrity

**Keywords:** *Translation competence, Linguistic/text competence, Strategic competence, Self-assessment competence, Acquisition.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Competence is defined as “the ability to do something successfully or efficiently” (Oxford Online, 2012), which can be further divided into diverse categories depending on the nature of a certain task, such as the competence of judgement, determination, adaptation, action, organization, coordination, and innovation. Also, based on the content of the task, it would be classified into mathematical, writing, and translation competence. Therefore, competence suits the purpose of defining the act of conducting a skilful and productive translation activity. In recent years, the concept of translation competence has steadily gained acceptance up to the point where it has currently become the most extensively debated issue in the realm of translation pedagogy due to its complicated and multifaceted quality.

In this study, the various definitions of translation competence from the relevant existing discussion will be organized and investigated first. And then, the innovative one can be presented based on the previous research.

### 1.1. The Concept of Translation Competence

Different from the field of Applied Linguistics where numerous research has been conducted to determine the notion of and the ways to develop communicative competence, Translation Studies has yet to build up a

generally accepted definition and model of translation competence. As a matter of fact, the concept of translation competence has been defined in several manners, including transfer competence [1], translator competence [2], translational competence [3], and translation ability [4].

As detailed models for linguistic competence have been developed, componential models for translation competence should also be proposed accordingly. Since those theoretical models are established based on the observation of translators' behaviors, some basic components, such as transfer competence, bilingual competence, or the relevant knowledge gained. Therefore, this study will examine and analyse two explicit definitions of translation competence defined by Hatim and Mason in 1997 and PACTE in 2000 respectively together with their componential models so that the innovative definitions can be explored subsequently [5][6].

The study intends to explore the parameters of translation competence and to provide an overview of research on the definition and acquisition of translation competence, with particular emphasis on the PACTE's models. It aims for the convenience of relevant research and description.

### *1.1.1. Hatim and Mason (1997)*

Four affirmations can be demonstrated from the explanation of translation competence provided by Hatim and Mason, including (1) translation competence manifests itself differently in diverse situations; (2) it is primarily composed of operative knowledge; (3) strategies would be widely used; (4) the acquisition of translation competence is, to some extent, automatic according to certain kind of expert knowledge [5].

Through the combination of Bachman's communicative language model and the specific translation-oriented characteristics, Hatim and Mason synthesized and proposed translating capacities [7]. As they rightly suggested, the translation process involves three stages: source text processing, transferring, and target text processing. Different individual skills will be required at different stages, yet during the translation process, these skills can interact and integrate into a unified functioning agent. Correspondingly, it appears that word processing is the primary emphasis of translating competence.

### *1.1.2. Process in the Acquisition of Translation Competence and Evaluation (PACTE)*

According to the PACTE group, translation competence is defined as "the underlying system of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes required to be able to translate—a system of competences that interact, are hierarchical, and subject to variation" [8]. Different from the translating performance, competence is clearly the underlying system of knowledge in which strategies automatically play a significant role in nurturing this expert and procedural knowledge. Therefore, the two components (the underlying system of knowledge and procedural knowledge) are added to already existing models of translation studies because of the empirical studies carried out by PACTE [8].

## **2. PARAMETERS IN TRANSLATION COMPETENCE**

According to the existing work on translation competence, linguistic/text competence, strategic competence, and self-monitoring competence will be introduced.

### ***2.1. Linguistic/text Competence***

As Chomsky suggested, competence in theoretical linguistics refers to a native speaker's knowledge of phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse on the one hand; and their ability to skilfully apply that rational knowledge into translating context on the other [9]. In the case of the translation between English and Chinese, competence refers to the linguistic awareness and practical application of those two languages. It is widely

acknowledged that this bilingual competence plays a fundamental part in accomplishing the translation process. Despite the vital importance of bilingual proficiency, translating competence that requires using words properly in reality is heavily reliant on the contextual aspects [10]. In this case, the term text competence can be created to primarily address the issue of the register, which indicates the language variations used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting. Therefore, translation requires the translators to be aware of the contextual effect and other aspects that reflect the use of language in the source text.

In addition, register also refers to a certain communicative manner suitable for its individual subject. In this situation, the translator may properly employ the corresponding language variety either in the formal or informal way [11]. Also, it may, to some degree, be mediated between the language and the situation. Translators should clarify the genre of the textual information in the source translation as differences can be identified in words, structure, and the figure of speech of different genres.

### ***2.2. Strategic Competence***

Given the fact that linguistic/text competence enables translators the appropriately locate the equivalent language usage in the targeted language in terms of the contextual factors, translation strategies would be applied to make the translated texts more communicative.

According to Vermeer, "a source text is usually composed originally for a situation in the source culture; hence its status 'source text', and hence the role of the translators in the process of intercultural communication" [12]. Therefore, when making translating decisions, translators are supposed to not only examine the conflicting requirement of the source text and source culture but also achieve the communicative and interactive purpose of the translation. A number of translation techniques are frequently employed, including transference, indigenisation/domestication, specification, generalisation, and mutation [12].

In 1813, Schleiermacher claimed in a lecture regarding translation methods that there were only two applicable techniques available: one is to place a higher emphasis on the author over the readers, and the other one is right opposite to it [13]. This theory has been employed by a majority of translators throughout the history of translation. However, Lawrence Venuti innovatively proposed the notion of "foreignizing" and "domesticating", with each concept being corresponding to each other until the transfer of culture-specific terms had come into being in the research of translation [13]. According to Venuti, the domesticating method is "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home",

while the foreignizing method is “an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of foreign text, sending the reader abroad” [14].

Even though foreignization and domestication are considered the extension forms of literal translation and free translation as they may overlap in certain ways, they are not interchangeable. Basically, the translation should be faithful to both the author and the source text, but it becomes increasingly controversial to explore the extent to which the translators should be faithful. Some people hold the view that translators must translate word for word in order to be absolutely faithful to writers and source texts, whereas others believe that free translation can ensure the clearness and coherence of the target texts. The rest assume that the translation should be faithful to the information rather than the words, implying that the intended text should be meaningful to the target audience. Because of limited time for reading, high market demand for publications, information explosion, copyrights issues, efficient communication across different cultures, and the various text genres, translators would reduce the lengthy word-for-word translation accordingly in order to highlight the main point, cater for a special readership, and save time, space, or cost effectively.

### **2.3. Self-assessment Competence**

Strategic competence mainly focuses on not only the translation as an activity with a specific purpose but also on the intended readers or audience of the translation. Considering the function of both the source and target text, translating strategies enable translators to produce a target text in a target setting for a target purpose in target circumstances. Even though the status of the source text in strategic competence theory is lower than it is in equivalence-based theories of translation, linguistic/text competence might compensate for the deficiency. Furthermore, as an effective intervention, self-assessing competence could not only repair the translation deficiency resulting from the aforementioned two competences but improve the quality of target texts at the same time. This is primarily because rather than an effortless activity switching the source texts to target texts, translation indicates the transformation between languages during which constant amendment and polish will be required critically and accordingly. According to Campbell, the higher one's self-assessing capacity, the stronger one's translation competence, which is a feedback process [15]. The process demonstrates diverse manifestations in different translating contexts, such as pausing, omitting, and rephrasing in interpretation; or revising by paragraphs or chapters in translation according to personal preference, which is, to some extent, an effective way of self-assessment.

## **3. THE ACQUISITION OF TRANSLATION COMPETENCE**

In comparison to other disciplines, the study of translation competence and its acquisition is relatively new [16].

### **3.1. Conducted Studies**

There have been few models for acquiring translation competence proposed to date, the majority of which are based on observation and experience, as well as research from other domains. Some notable examples include Harris's natural translation ability [17]; Toury's process of socialization regarding translating process [3]; Shreve's process of development from natural to constructed translation [18]; the five-stage model from novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, to expertise proposed by Chesterman [19], which draws on Dreyfus and Dreyfus [20]; the connectionist approaches to nurturing translating competence described by Alves and Gonçalves [21]; and Kiraly's four-dimensional model of the emergence of translator competence [22].

### **3.2. PACTE's Research on the Acquisition of Translation Competence**

PACTE (2000) defined the acquisition as [6]:

- A dynamic and spiral learning process evolves from novice knowledge (pre-translation competence) to translation competence which necessitates various learning strategies. During the process, knowledge of declarative and procedural types is integrated, developed, and restructured;
- A process in which procedural knowledge growth, and, consequently, the cultivation of strategic sub-competences is vital;
- A process in which sub-competences are developed.

In November 2011, Amparo's group conducted an experiment with 130 translation and interpreting students, and the findings are now being analyzed [23] [24] [25]. Based on the information they have gathered thus far, [16]:

- Translation competence is an acquired ability that may improve over time;
- The acquisition of translation competence has an effect on both the translation process and its output;
- The acquisition of translation competence entails a transition from a static notion and approach to a dynamic one;
- Procedural knowledge demonstrate the highest degree of dynamism in that progression;

- As translation competence gains, there is an increase in the effective combination of internal cognitive assistance and various types of external resources;
- When compared to Amparo's experiment, it appears that the current generations use documentary materials more frequently and effectively.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

My aim in this paper has been to explore the parameters of translation competence and to provide an overview of research on the definition and acquisition of translation competence, with particular emphasis on the PACTE's models. It aims for the convenience of relevant research and description.

I have sought to highlight that translation competence is described as the knowledge required for effective translation, and it is more efficient to divide knowledge into different essential subtypes.

I also looked to show that linguistic/text competence is certainly the most fundamental factor in ensuring that a translator possesses sufficient linguistic knowledge that he can be able to transform a source-language text into a target-language text [26]. Strategies competence can be obtained at one's disposal, which enables translators to provide sensible decisions and make target-language text more communicative. Self-monitoring competence requires translators to constantly revise and edit the translated products to improve the quality of the target-language text.

Lastly, I have endeavored to show that translation competence is multifaceted, and the lack of either subtype will exert a negative effect on its integrity.

I hope my proposals contribute to progress in innovative definitions of translation competence and its acquisition that place different essential sub-type knowledge in the centre of the translation operation so that they can be acquired comprehensively, as PACET taught us many years ago.

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