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Raising Cultural Awareness in Interpreting Students

Simona Simon^{a*}, Lavinia Suciu^a

^a Politehnica University Timisoara, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Traian Lalescu 2a, 300 223 Timisoara, Romania

Abstract

As we are living in a globalised society, frequent encounters among persons with a different cultural background take place. In such a context, it often happens that the communication partners do not share a common language. The communication process is thus hindered both by the cultural differences and by the incapacity of the speakers to transmit their message in a language that is mastered by all of them. In such a situation, the interpreter's role is obvious: s/he needs to take into account the cultural background of the communication partners in order to relay the message as accurately as possible and to facilitate the oral exchange effectively. The present paper draws attention on some cultural issues that should be taught to interpreting students in order to improve their intercultural communication skills.

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1. Introduction

Today's globalised society is characterised by frequent personal and professional exchanges between communication partners belonging to various cultural backgrounds. In such a context, it is often the case that the communication partners do not share a common language and therefore, in order to facilitate communication, they resort to a professional interpreter to get their message transmitted to the other party. The interpreter's role in such a multi-cultural environment is to relay the message as accurately as possible by taking into account the cultural background of the communication partners. So, the interpreter needs knowledge both of the languages involved in the communication process, and of the culture to which the communication partners belong.

* Simona Simon. Tel. +40 724 75 47 88.

E-mail address: simon_cristina@hotmail.com; simona.simon@upt.ro

Taking the above mentioned facts into consideration, we consider that drawing the interpreting students' attention on some cultural issues that might hinder or facilitate communication is compulsory. Thus, making students aware of the importance of culture in interpreting lays the foundation for future successful interpretations that they are going to give, in multi-cultural contexts, as professional interpreters.

2. Verbal and nonverbal cultural communication patterns affecting the interpreting process

Communication implies "a two-way process in which there is an exchange and progression of ideas towards a mutually accepted direction or goal" (Kaul, 2006, p. 2). Communication may be both verbal and nonverbal. While verbal communication is accomplished through language, i.e. words, nonverbal communication is accomplished through all the means "other than words themselves" (Wood, 2009, p. 131). A common trait of the verbal and nonverbal communication is that they both vary with culture (Chaney, & Martin, 2007, p. 99; Wood, 2009, p. 131). Culture, understood as a set of "shared perceptions and beliefs that determine the world view and the behavior of members of the cultural group" (Sadri, & Flammia, 2011, p. 42), is then the "structure through which the communication is formulated and interpreted" (Chaney, & Martin, 2007, p. 5). In other words, culture shapes the form of the human verbal and nonverbal message, that, in our particular case, needs to be interpreted orally from one language into the other. It is therefore of great importance for the interpreting students to highlight some verbal and nonverbal cultural communication patterns that might affect the interpreting process.

2.1. Verbal cultural communication patterns affecting the interpreting process

The way in which we organise our speech differs from culture to culture, and is also context bound, as E.T. Hall (1976) points out. He distinguishes between high-context and low-context communication or message. In the case of the high-context communication, very little information is to be found "in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1976, as cited in Hall, & Hall, 1990, p. 6). The communication is facilitated in such a situation by the shared knowledge of the communication partners, i.e. by the cultural values they share. To put it differently, the high-context verbal message is interpreted in terms of the cultural background of the communication partners. This type of communication appears among the Arabs, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Romanians, Middle East, Mediterranean, and Latin American peoples (Hall, & Hall, 1990, pp. 6-7; Rao, 2008, pp. 316-317, Serbănescu, 2007, as cited in Stoian, 2012, p. 33). Opposed to the high-context communication is the low-context one in which "the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1976, as cited in Hall, & Hall, 1990, p. 6). It means that what is said is more important than what is not uttered. In such a situation the message is explicit and clear, and does not particularly rely on the cultural background of the communication partners. The low-context communication takes place among the North American peoples, Germans, British, Swiss and other Northern European peoples (Hall, & Hall, 1990, pp. 6-7; Rao, 2008, pp. 316-317). To put it differently, the high-context messages are implicit, indirect and ambiguous, while the low-context messages are explicit, direct and clear. This means that the receiver, in our case the interpreter, has to know the communication context very well in order to decipher a high-context message, while in the case of the low-context messages the information is understood by the receiver also without knowing the communication context. In the first situation, the interpreter might need to ask for or offer clarification of the high-context message.

Besides being aware of the type of message that needs to be orally relayed from one language to the other, the interpreter also has to pay attention to the numbers that might be used in a message. For example, the decimal numbers are used differently across the world. The Anglo-Saxons write and spell 44.4, which in most European cultures means 44,4. In other words, decimal numbers are expressed by recourse to either a point or a comma, depending on the language. Another difference appears in the case of billions. A billion has nine zeros in English, but it is translated as *miliard* in Romanian, *miliardo* in Italian, *Milliarde* in German, *milliard* in French, and so on.

The use of acronyms may also pose some problems to the interpreter who should pay special attention to them. For example, EU is the acronym of European Union in English, but in Romanian European Union is translated as *Uniunea Europeană*, in Italian as *Unione Europea*, in French as *Union Européenne*, and then the acronym in these languages is UE. However, some acronyms originating in the technical field are borrowed as such: RAM (random access memory) or CD (compact disk).

The last verbal cultural communication pattern taken into discussion here is related to turn-taking. In the Anglo-Saxon cultures when the first communication partner stops, the second communication partner starts speaking. The Latins however often interrupt each other during a conversation, without considering each other rude, but interested in the topic. The Orientals wait until the communication partner stops talking, then they pause a little to think of the transmitted message, and only then they start talking. Such a pause in the conversation could be misinterpreted by an Anglo-Saxon or Latin as a failure in communication, when it actually shows consideration to the communication partner (Trompenaars, & Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 74). In other words, the interpreter has to take these verbal communication patterns into consideration when interpreting for persons belonging to different cultures, and even clarify them if necessary.

2.2. Nonverbal cultural communication patterns affecting the interpreting process

The nonverbal communication comprises the "nonword messages such as gestures, facial expressions, interpersonal distance, touch, eye-contact, smell, and silence" (Chaney, & Martin, 2007, p. 117). These can vary with culture and then we speak of nonverbal cultural communication patterns. The nonverbal cultural communication patterns may affect the interpreting process if the interpreter has to render the message between two different cultures with different attitudes towards the nonverbal communication elements, and if the interpreter is not aware of these differences.

Gestures are a type of body movement used to "add emphasis or clarity to an oral message" (Chaney, & Martin, 2007, p. 126). The "thumbs-up" gesture, for example, is a nonverbal signal indicating that *everything is OK/fine/all right* in North America and Europe, but in Australia and West Africa it is considered a rude gesture. The "OK" gesture made by joining the thumb and the forefinger in a circle has a positive meaning in the USA, but a negative one in Tunisia where it means *I will kill you*, and a totally different one in Japan where it symbolises money (Axtell, 1998, as cited in Chaney, & Martin, 2007, pp. 127-128) or in Belgium and Romania where it means *zero*. The head nod has also different meanings in different cultures. When one moves his/her head up and down, the person wants to show agreement, that s/he is paying attention, or that the speaker should carry on. This is the way in which the gesture is interpreted in most of the countries, but India and Bulgaria (Axtell, 1998, as cited in Chaney, & Martin, 2007, p.128; Samovar et al., 2012, p. 283) where it means negation. Agreement is signalled in India by "tossing the head from side to side" (Samovar et al., 2012, p. 283), which in most European countries and in North America means negation, disagreement.

Facial expressions and eye-contact may bear different meanings in different cultures (Chaney, & Martin, 2007, pp.122, 126). For example, a smile usually signifies happiness, but in Japan it may also hide anger or sadness. Koreans consider the people who smile shallow, so they seldom smile. The Thai people though smile a lot. In North America, Great Britain, Germany, Eastern Europe, and Middle East the eye contact shows respect and attentiveness. The persons avoiding the eye contact are perceived as disrespectful, insecure, inattentive. On the contrary, in other countries such as China, Japan, Indonesia, Latin American countries, and some African ones direct eye contact is avoided as it shows disrespect.

The interpersonal distance and touch vary across cultures. The interpersonal distance is larger in the case of North American peoples or Japanese as opposed to Latin Americans, Arabs, Greeks, and even Romanians who value smaller interpersonal distance. The persons belonging to the first group might consider the persons belonging to the second group as being too pushy or sexually harassing (Chaney, & Martin, 2007, p.121). In terms of touch patterns, the countries in which touching in formal settings is considered inappropriate are Japan, England, the North American, and the North European countries. The countries which favour interpersonal touches in formal settings are Latin American countries, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Spain, some Asian countries, countries belonging to the Russian Federation (Axtell, 1998, as cited in Chaney, & Martin, 2007, p. 125), and Romania. Besides the handshakes, which are largely perceived as neutral, attention should be given to touching various parts of the other person's body, to hugs. For example, in the Middle East, men should not touch each other with the left hand as this is used for personal hygiene. In the United States, the men that touch each other are often considered homosexual. In Thailand, India and some other Asian countries, the head should never be touched because it is considered sacred (Chaney, & Martin, 2007, p. 125).

Finally, the use of silence may be misinterpreted in oral exchanges taking place among communication partners with different cultural backgrounds. The Americans, Italians, Greeks and the Middle East peoples are not comfortable with silence, but the Japanese, and other East Asian peoples are. The latter consider it a sign of deference, of paying attention, of thinking thoroughly (Chaney, & Martin, 2007, pp. 131-132; Trompenaars, & Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 74). The Romanians interpret silence as a sign that something is wrong.

Such nonverbal cultural communication patterns might be misinterpreted during the oral exchange mediated by an interpreter unless the latter clarifies their different cultural perception. Therefore, it is highly important to make the interpreting students aware of the cultural variations in terms of the meanings transmitted by the nonverbal cultural communication patterns.

3. Conclusions

Raising cultural awareness in interpreting students is compulsory in today's society because now, more than ever, frequent encounters take place between persons with various cultural backgrounds, but no common language to facilitate the communication process. The oral communication is then mediated by interpreters who should be both bilingual and bicultural in order to be able to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap that might exist between the communication partners.

In order to prepare the interpreting students for their future professional success they should be made aware, among other things, of the verbal and nonverbal cultural communication patterns that exist in various countries. The present paper draws the attention on some of these patterns, maybe the most obvious ones. Thus, it points to some verbal cultural communication patterns such as the differences between the high- and low-context messages, the use of numerals in some countries around the globe, the use of acronyms and turn-taking. From the point of view of the nonverbal cultural communication patterns, some issues connected to gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, interpersonal distance, touch, and silence are approached. All the verbal and nonverbal cultural communication patterns discussed are relevant for the interpreter's training as proper arguments are brought to support the presented information.

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