Michał Ledwosiński   iD https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6187-2886
University of Humanities and Economics in Lodz
e-mail: michal.ledwosinski@ahe.email

Soft skills in the work of a translator in the context of new technologies

Umiejętności miękkie tłumacza wobec rozwoju technologii

Abstract

In this article, I address the topic of soft skills. These skills are discussed in the context of translation studies, and later in the article, their importance in working with new technologies is presented, particularly in the conditions for teamwork created by technology. The differences between hard and soft skills are also outlined.

Keywords: soft skills, social skills, competences of a translator, new technologies

Streszczenie

W artykule poruszono temat umiejętności miękkich. Umiejętności te są omawiane w kontekście przekładoznawstwa. W dalszej części artykułu przedstawiono, jak istotne są one w pracy z nowymi technologiami, w stworzonych przez technologię warunkach do pracy zespołowej. Zaprezentowano także różnice między umiejętnościami twardymi a miękkimi.

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencje miękkie, umiejętności społeczne, kwalifikacje tłumacza, nowe technologie

At first glance, it may seem that in the new era of technological advancement, the ability to communicate with others in a non-confrontational manner and to function effectively within a social group has become less relevant – or even unnecessary. In my view, however, the current trend ought to move in the opposite direction. In today's translation profession, interdisciplinary skills and social competences are equally important, even in technology-assisted translation work and in work environments with limited human interaction, such as remote work environments.

In the following article, I will begin by discussing the issue of social skills among individuals engaged in translation, encompassing both written translation and interpreting. Regarding the translator and the translation process itself, my focus will be on written translation from English into Polish. According to the PWN Dictionary, the term "translation," derived from Latin, literally means "transfer"; in this context, it refers to the transfer of content from one language into another. I use the term "content" deliberately, as written translation involves not only sequences of signs bearing specific meanings in the source language but also the necessity of conveying the cultural context of the source country. For this reason, many translators – particularly those at the beginning of their careers – find culturally determined vocabulary present in source texts to be a significant challenge.

The concept of a cultural carrier can be interpreted in various ways. Cultural transmission is conveyed not only through vocabulary but also through the morphological and syntactic structures of a given language (Sypnicki, 2000: 203). At the same time, Tomasz Górski points out that culturally marked elements in a text may be phonetic, lexical, or grammatical. Crucially, culturemes serve specific functions by drawing the reader's attention to the culture to which they refer. One must also acknowledge that their perceived foreignness is relative, as it depends on the recipient's competences (Górski, 2018: 358).

As the examples above illustrate, anyone wishing to engage in translation must possess not only linguistic knowledge but also a solid understanding of the culture from which the source text originates. It is also essential to mention another key factor in the translator's work: the target audience of the translated text. There are multiple types of audiences that must be considered when preparing a translation. This is particularly important in the case of specialized texts, as not every text written in a technical or expert language is addressed to professionals within the relevant field.

The translation process, which comprises numerous elements and sub-processes, requires the translator to possess a specific set of competences and skills. These can be categorized into linguistic, general, and broader intellectual competences. To illustrate the most fundamental of these, I refer to Justyna Fudala-Paszkowska's (2021: 30–31) definition of linguistic competence:

"By linguistic competence, we mean an innate knowledge of one's native language, which every person unconsciously acquires during the process of growing up. It enables us to use language freely based on certain linguistic norms that, as has already been noted, are innate and naturally function within our environment."

General competences play a crucial role in translation, as they encompass the ability to understand context, interpret meaning, and adapt the translation to the specific characteristics of the target audience. As Roman Lewicki observes, knowing a foreign language

is not sufficient to qualify as a translator; a deeper understanding of various domains of knowledge is also required:

"Individual declarative and procedural knowledge significantly influences the quality of translation, as it helps increase the degree of conscious control over the translation processes, and thus affects the final quality of the translated text" (Lewicki, 2017: 182). It is precisely these general competences that allow for an appropriate adaptation of the translation to the cultural and social realities in which the target language operates.

Among the essential competences of a translator, proficiency in both the source and target languages remains indispensable, as does the ability to create functionally equivalent texts based not only on linguistic knowledge but also on broadly defined cultural and social competence. Emphasis is placed particularly on the ability to perform a textual analysis of the original, interpret literary works, and possess extralinguistic knowledge necessary for understanding the source text (Hlebec, 2008: 19). As indicated above, a translator must not only know and understand the language used by the author but must also be able to analyze the author's style and the intentions embedded in the text.

In the context of translation strategy, which I will address shortly, it is important that the translator not only thoroughly familiarizes themselves with the source text, but ideally with the entire body of work of a given author. Acquiring knowledge about the author's interests and the environment in which they operate allows for a more accurate recreation of their style in the translated version.

Knowledge, combined with the personal integrity of the translator, can be considered two guiding principles that should form the core tenets of a translator's code of ethics (Parandowski, 1955: 13). In the classical approach, the translation strategy is divided into two stages: the collection of materials (which also involves the organization of knowledge), and the production of the translation itself. The first stage is usually the most critical for the quality of the final product, as the diligent gathering of various types of knowledge – or "contexts" – and of information about the author significantly facilitates the process. Familiarity with the author's style enables the translator to faithfully convey the intended meaning of the work in the target language.

According to Jerzy Bartmiński (2001: 111–120), the work of a translator involves several contextual dimensions:

1. Presupposed context – as the name suggests, it is assumed by the author and presupposed by the text.
2. Historical context – this can be reconstructed on the basis of historical data, which represent a complex of unique and unrepeatable circumstances conducive to the emergence of the given text.
3. Constructed context – the recipient creates this to achieve specific goals (e.g., typological or comparative).

While the process of gathering knowledge necessary for translation is relatively straightforward, the conceptual and more mechanical aspects of the translation process are considerably more complex. To better describe this part of the process, I refer to the methodological framework proposed by Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2017: 133–135), who conceptualizes the role of the translator as a profession composed of

three layers of competence: subject-transfer competence, organizational and managerial competence, as well as self-awareness and efficiency in content transfer.

Within the category of subject-transfer competence, we can identify the following sub-competences: linguistic, textual, domain-specific, cultural, and transfer competence (Neubert, 2004), as well as message realization competence, which can be most succinctly described as "linguistic fluency combined with the ability to link content embedded in the structures of the source and target texts, thereby enabling the realization of the semantic intent expressed in the original" (Fudala-Paszkowska, 2021: 32). Another important component is internalization competence, understood as the ability to incorporate into the translation those concepts that exist solely in the target language, which may facilitate the reader's interaction with the text.

As for the organizational and managerial competence, it encompasses:
– the ability to distinguish the structures of the source language and to select appropriate structures in the target language;
– the ability to make informed linguistic decisions;
– pragmatic competence, which involves the awareness of the appropriateness of using certain linguistic forms in different contexts.

In addition, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2017: 133–135) emphasizes the importance of the translator's linguistic self-awareness concerning both languages, as well as transfer efficiency, understood as the ease of transferring semantic material from the source text to the target text.

When discussing the competences of a translator, it is also worth considering the responsibilities that arise from this profession—namely, how one should approach each translation task, as well as what practices should be strictly avoided. The effort to formulate a comprehensive list of tasks and requirements for becoming a good translator has been ongoing since the early 1950s when Polish academia began to advocate for the recognition of translation studies as a distinct scholarly discipline, separate from more general fields of study.

Around the same time, a set of competences and practices began to emerge, intended for both novice translators and experienced professionals. Unlike many prescriptive regulations within this domain, Gabriel Karski's treatise does not seek to limit the translator's autonomy or to offer overly didactic guidance. Instead, Karski developed a kind of *catechism* – a code of conduct for translators – where he outlines several fundamental principles:
1. One should not rush the translation process, to maintain a certain distance and resist the influence of suggestions induced by the source language.
2. It is necessary to exercise moderation, both in literalness and in stylistic embellishment.
3. It is recommended to translate prose from only one language (though this principle does not apply to poetry, as shorter texts allow for more concentrated attention).
4. One must not translate from a second-hand version (i.e., a translation of a translation).
5. The translator must engage in continuous education and must not rest on their laurels – ongoing development of one's craft is a fundamental obligation.

6. Possessing at least a minimal degree of literary aptitude is essential (Karski, 1955: 268–270).

In my view, this list of traits, guidelines, and aspirations represents a specific image of the translator as conceived by the academic community of that era. Many of the above principles remain relevant for contemporary translators. Some, such as the prohibition against translating from second-hand versions, stem from common sense and should be instilled in every beginner.

However, it is important to emphasize that this canon lacks attention to "soft" skills, which are equally vital in the translator's professional life—namely, interpersonal abilities and broadly understood social competences. As the above examples and the general academic approach suggest, the translator's work was long viewed as limited to bilingual proficiency and lexical knowledge.

In early linguistic and translation theories, translation competence was understood as highly specialized knowledge, often confined to language and terminology within the translator's area of expertise. This view, rooted in the work of linguist scholars such as Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet (1958) and Roman Jakobson (1959), remained dominant for many years. However, the development of translation studies as a field independent from linguistics eventually challenged this paradigm (Kruk-Junger, 2020).

Thus, from the 1950s and throughout subsequent decades, the prevailing belief was that translation work involved little more than language skills, dictionary use, and editorial tasks – that is, so-called "hard skills." At the same time, as previously noted, the act of translation itself was largely conceived as a mere transfer of content from one language into another.

Over the years, and with the development of translation studies as a distinct discipline, this approach to the translator's profession has gradually evolved – both in terms of how translation knowledge is conveyed and within the academic community itself. The community of translators, which initially emerged from broader disciplines such as Political Science, began developing its tools and methods for gathering data specific to this new field.

With the cultural turn that began in the 1990s, the translator (as well as their interaction with extratextual participants in communication) was placed in a new light. The translator started to be viewed as a real agent, no longer subordinate to the author or the source text in the name of fidelity. This new perception significantly influenced changing views of the profession, including the perspective that "the translator is the most important factor determining the nature of the translation" (Osadnik, 2010: 213).

Data collection and analysis have allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the skills required in translation, and highlighted the necessity of placing greater emphasis on the social dimensions of the translation process—namely, communication with others and the ability to gather relevant information. One of the first scholars to point to the importance of soft skills emphasized that "translation" primarily entails the ability to perform a social role – that is, to fulfill a function assigned by society to this activity, to those who perform it, and/or to its products, in a manner deemed appropriate. The acceptance of a set of norms that determine the adequacy of such behavior, and the ability

to navigate among all factors that may constrain it, thus becomes a fundamental condition for becoming a translator in a cultural environment (Toury, 1995: 53).

In terms of the evolving view of translators' work and competences in the years that followed, particularly noteworthy is the approach of scholars who conceptualized translation not merely as linguistic transfer between nations and cultures, but as a form of cultural transfer – encompassing the conveyance of concepts, modes of thinking, and stylistic nuances specific to the author. In this context, David Katan's contribution is significant; he expands the role of the translator as a "cultural mediator" (Katan, 1999), who, in the course of their work, may – and even should – intervene in the source text to ensure that the final translation conveys and elucidates the cultural context present in the original.

For this reason, Katan argues that soft skills, especially effective communication (both general and with the intended audience), are the most crucial traits of a good translator. He incorporates Ronald Taft's (1981) framework of four groups of competences for cultural mediators: knowledge about society (i.e. cultural knowledge), communicative skills (verbal and non-verbal), technical skills necessary for performing the translation, and social skills enabling the individual to function within society (Katan, 1999: 12). These competences may broadly be divided into "soft" and "hard" skills.

Hard skills include editorial, linguistic, and socio-cultural competences. In contrast, soft skills focus on the ability to interact effectively with the social environment, independently acquire knowledge about the nature of the translation task, and gain insight into the author's intent or background. For the purposes of identifying these competences, I will refer to materials from Daniel Gile's *Basic Concepts and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training* (1995), as well as research conducted by the PACTE group at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Although Gile's model primarily applies to interpreting, many of its proposed competences are relevant to the broader field of translation. In addition to cognitive competences – such as world knowledge, disciplinary knowledge, and proficiency in both languages – he also lists technical skills (for text-related work), and familiarity with disciplinary conventions. Moreover, Gile (1995) underscores the importance of competences most commonly associated with soft skills, emphasizing the ability to act professionally, which he argues contributes to enhancing the *social status* of the profession. Gile takes an optimistic stance, suggesting that most of these competences can be developed through education, and thus translator training should be optimized to support this goal.

Additional insight into soft competences comes from a 2007 study conducted by the PACTE research group, which examined professional translators and language learners. Based on their findings, the following competences were identified as essential for translators – both written and oral. This comprehensive and in-depth research helped to establish a list of necessary translation skills:

— **Bilingual sub-competence** – active proficiency in two languages;
— **Extra-linguistic sub-competence** – domain-specific, cultural, encyclopedic, and general world knowledge;
— **Translation knowledge sub-competence** – familiarity with professional translation practices;

– **Instrumental sub-competence** – knowledge of resources such as dictionaries and other reference tools;
– **Strategic sub-competence** – the ability to solve translation problems using all other sub-competences;
– **Psycho-physiological components** – personal characteristics of the translator that affect the translation process, including cognitive traits (memory, perception, attention, emotions), attitudinal traits (intellectual curiosity, perseverance, discipline, critical thinking), and general abilities (creativity, logical reasoning, analysis, synthesis) (Beeby et al., 2009).

It is important to emphasize that the above overview does not exhaust the full range of competences that a translator should possess, nor does it clearly distinguish between soft skills and more general competences. However, it provides a general insight into the potential areas in which these competences can be identified. Among the areas listed, this study finds that strategic and psychophysiological subcompetences are most closely aligned with the domain of soft skills.

The strategic area refers to the ability to integrate elements from all competence domains to solve problems, including the ability to think creatively and to apply competence elements beyond textbook definitions. Meanwhile, the psychophysiological area focuses on the individual approach of each translator, excluding memory – whose quality should be relatively consistent across professionals – but encompassing traits such as critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and emotional responses, which vary significantly from person to person.

Given this individual variability, a deeper analysis of translator competences would require the creation of a personalized catalog for each professional translator.

While discussing these final competences and subcompetences, I would also like to touch upon the topic of new technologies applied in the field of translation. In terms of specific examples, I will examine the importance of competences responsible for interpersonal relationships and cognitive abilities (i.e. soft skills) in technology-assisted translation work, particularly in the context of computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools. These are software solutions that support translators in producing efficient and consistent translations.

At the same time, I will contrast CAT tools with Machine Translation (MT). First and foremost, it is necessary to differentiate the role and significance of these two technologies. CAT tools do not perform translation autonomously; rather, they serve as support mechanisms for human translators. They include the following key features:

– Translation Memory (TM): This stores previously translated segments (e.g. sentences or phrases) alongside their equivalents in the target language. When the translator encounters similar or identical fragments in the future, the tool suggests pre-existing translations, thus accelerating the process and ensuring terminological consistency.
– Terminology Databases: These enable the creation and management of glossaries containing specialized terms and their translations, which helps maintain consistent terminology throughout a translation project.
– Text Segmentation: This function divides the text into smaller units, such as sentences or paragraphs, thereby facilitating the translation process and the use of translation memory (Mikrut, n.d.).

Machine Translation (MT), in turn, refers to the process in which a computer program automatically translates text or speech from one natural language to another, without direct human intervention. It is a research domain situated at the intersection of computational linguistics and artificial intelligence, aiming to enable computers to understand and process human language in a manner that approximates human capabilities. The process of machine translation comprises the following main approaches:

– Statistical Machine Translation (SMT): Based on the analysis of large bilingual data sets (corpora), SMT statistically predicts the most probable translation of a given text segment. This model was prevalent in the 1990s and the early 21st century.

– Neural Machine Translation (NMT): Utilizes artificial neural networks to model the translation process. NMT is capable of considering the context of entire sentences, which leads to more fluent and natural translations compared to earlier methods (*Machine-Translation*, 2001).

As can be inferred from the definitions above, computer-assisted translation (CAT), which relies on the collaboration between human translators and machines, generally yields higher-quality results than fully automated machine translation – albeit at the cost of longer production times. At the same time, human-generated translations enhance the capabilities of CAT tools, as these tools can draw upon increasingly rich datasets and vocabularies, further improving translation quality over time.

It must also be acknowledged that translation work today is no longer strictly an individual endeavor. With the advancement of technology and the widespread adoption of remote work, enabling simultaneous collaboration among several or even dozens of translators, **social skills** have become more crucial than ever. Soft skills now play a more significant role than in the past, allowing translators to effectively use technological tools and collaborate efficiently with clients and project teams.

To demonstrate that soft skills have a critical impact on the quality of a translator's work, as well as on their functioning as professionals in their work environment, I will present three examples from different spheres of translation practice.

The first example is closely related to the competences identified in the PACTE model, particularly strategic and psychophysiological subcompetences. Translation work often requires managing multiple projects simultaneously and meeting tight deadlines. The ability to manage time effectively, prioritize tasks, and cope with stress is essential for maintaining high quality and timeliness. As Katarzyna Kruk-Junger (2020) points out, time and stress management, along with self-assessment and the application of development strategies, are vital personal and interpersonal competences for translators.

Alongside technological progress and the globalization of the translation industry, international collaboration has also expanded. In today's globalized world, translators often work in multinational teams, where effective communication and teamwork skills are invaluable. Interpersonal competences such as assertiveness, empathy, and conflict resolution enable the building of strong relationships with both clients and colleagues. Additionally, the ability to negotiate and articulate expectations leads to a better understanding of client needs and more tailored services. As Aleksandra Brożek-Sala (n.d.) notes, a translator with well-developed soft skills is better equipped to build

relationships with both clients and fellow translators, which facilitates negotiations on rates and deadlines.

The final point concerns the need for continuous professional development. The translation industry is constantly evolving, introducing new technologies and methodologies. Translators must be prepared to continuously improve both their technical and interpersonal skills. Openness to feedback, participation in training programs, and independent knowledge acquisition are crucial for maintaining high-quality services and adapting to changing market demands. As Anna Gajewska observes, it is essential to cultivate an approach oriented toward the needs of both clients and collaborators, which requires ongoing self-evaluation and a willingness to learn (Gajewska, 2013).

In today's world, where technology increasingly permeates all areas of life, professionals need to remain as competitive as possible. One pathway to this goal is the integration of new technologies in a non-invasive way. The computer-assisted tools discussed in this article represent precisely such an approach. However, for these tools to reach their full potential, they must be supported by uniquely human attributes. Adaptability to new technologies, effective communication, creativity, time management, and a commitment to continuous improvement are competences that not only help translators meet the demands of the modern market but also allow them to stand out from the competition. These competences are inherently human traits – something machines are unlikely to replicate in the foreseeable future, if ever. However, these skills are not innate. An individual entering the translation profession does not possess them from the outset; many must be cultivated through a demanding developmental process. Therefore, in today's labor market, it is crucial not to rely solely on machine potential, but to remain committed to personal and professional growth.

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