What skills should translators have, and when and how should they acquire them? The following analyses descriptions of translation competence and particularly how the translator’s role has evolved.

The attempt to define translation competence can easily result in the compilation of extensive skills lists that seek to reflect the multidisciplinary nature of the role of the translator (who may also act as a mediator, typesetter, editor, proof-reader, writer, or localisation expert for example) yet fail to identify the core competencies that set translators apart from other professions. Indeed many models of translation competence “combine a number of different sub-competencies that seem to include the world, the universe and everything and are intricately interrelated” (Beeby 2000: 185).

The traditional model that saw translation competence as simply a form of bilingualism and dominated the Translation Studies field (TS) until the 1970s was not sufficient to meet the ever-expanding skill set demanded by the translation industry. It was therefore gradually supplanted by the all-encompassing multicomponent model that went beyond purely linguistic requirements recognising the need for additional skills and knowledge such as IT, mediation and analytical skills and specialist subject knowledge for example. This reflected the move away from linguistic to more functional approaches to translation acknowledging the important role of the translation brief and of mediation between the various partners involved in the process. This model however is criticised by Pym for being driven by institutional interests and unable to keep up with the pace of change. He proposes a minimalist model that “might define translating and nothing but translating” (Pym 2003: 488) and serve as a more useful guide in the orientation of translators seeking to improve their performance. This essay will examine some of the key definitions of translation competence and discussions on its acquisition in order to reflect on how this has evolved over the last few decades.

The view of translation competence as simply a summation of linguistic competencies in two or more languages is today considered anachronistic by most people working in the translation industry. The extraordinary technological developments over the past few decades have enabled radical changes in the way people do business and consequently in the skills required to succeed in this new professional landscape. The advent of functionalism in the 1980s was reflected in a move to more pragmatic definitions of translation competence taking into account the evolution of the translator’s role into that of intercultural mediator. Hence the corresponding evolution of a multicomponential model of competence that is more representative of the sheer complexity of tasks required in this new role. Albrecht Neubert’s model for example identifies five key parameters of translation competence: language, subject, cultural, textual and transfer competence and he posits that “it is the interplay of these kinds of competence that distinguishes translation from other
areas of communication.” (Neubert 2000: 6). This takes account of the need to develop strong skills in both source and target languages (many students underestimate the importance of an excellent understanding and command of their mother tongue), knowledge of specialist subject areas (or the ability to research them), the ability to carry out textual analyses to determine key features such as genre, register and function for example as well as sufficient knowledge and understanding of the cultural differences between the two languages in question. He argues however that it is transfer competence that is the distinguishing domain and therefore the ultimate goal of the translator. In other words all other competencies are meaningless if at the end of the day the translator cannot effectively convert a source text (ST) into a viable target text (TT).

Other models also seeking to define broad parameters of translation competence identify different areas of interest. The study by the PACTE group for example defines translation competence as “an underlying system of knowledge and skills needed to be able to translate” (PACTE 2000: 100) and proposes the inclusion of a strategic component and a psycho-physiological component in recognition of the importance of problem-solving capabilities and certain psychological qualities and skills such as creativity in translation. However it also maintains the notion of transfer competence as a key component echoing other models that highlight this aspect as specific to translation only.

Indeed it is this element that is focussed on in Anthony Pym’s minimalist definition of translator competence which he proposes as a means to “help orient translator training in times of rapid technological and professional change” (Pym 2003: 482). He thus defines translation competence as:

- The ability to generate a series of more than one viable target text (TT₁, TT₂ ...) for a pertinent source text (ST)
- The ability to select only one viable TT from this series, quickly and with justified confidence (Pym 2003: 489)

He claims that it is the union of these two abilities alone that pertains to translation and nothing but translation and therefore offers a simpler and clearer framework on which to focus translator training. He recognises however that the ability to make informed decisions means that theory also plays an important role in translation competence (Pym 2003: 490) and therefore one wonders whether components such as strategic or textual competence for example would not find themselves added to the minimalist toolkit upon reflection of theoretical paradigms such as skopostheorie for example. Indeed Pym accepts that “translation competence may often be a minor component in the range of skills required of intercultural professionals” (Pym 2003: 491) in recognition of the multifaceted role performed by the translator in today’s world.
Despite the appealing simplicity of Pym’s model the multicomponent model has nonetheless continued to dominate the TS field in recent years. An example of this approach that seems to draw many elements of other models together is the EMT expert group’s\(^1\) proposed competence profile which comprises six key areas (language service provision, language, intercultural, thematic, technological and info mining) each of which are divided into more specific sub-competencies that cover a comprehensive and detailed range of skills and knowledge. Interestingly this model identifies “translation service provision” as the central most important competence with language competence one of five peripheral competencies thus reflecting the move away from the notion that “an innate ability parallel to bilingualism plays the most prominent role in the translator’s development” (Rothe-Neves 2007: 130) towards a more business oriented model where interpersonal and project management skills are more highly valued. Equally there is no specific mention of “transfer competence” in the EMT model although many of the sub-competencies identify knowledge of strategies and procedures required in order to achieve it. It therefore specifies considerable procedural knowledge in addition to the declarative knowledge and skills usually specified by employers. Ultimately this model sets out what is to be achieved, acquired and mastered but it does not detail how such competence is to be acquired leaving it to the training institutions themselves to design and deliver programmes in line with the designated competences.

In this respect a common metaphor in discussions on the acquisition of translation competence is that of learning to drive. Andrew Chesterman views the growth of translation competence (or “expertise” as he calls it) as “a gradual process of automatisation” (Chesterman 2000: 79) whereby the learner begins by studying each element separately and gradually progresses to an intuitive stage in which the translator effortlessly combines all of the different aspects learned and is able to operate as though on “automatic pilot”. Such a view implies that language competence and translation competence should be acquired separately and indeed this is the training path currently followed by many translators who learn to “walk” first (gain linguistic competence) and then to “run” (pursue specific translator training) afterwards. However Christina Schäffner questions this paradigm arguing that language learners would have much to gain from the inclusion of specific TS elements in their language training programme. Indeed she suggests that it “is advisable to develop some initial translation competence well before [students] are fully competent in their two languages” (Schäffner 2000: 154) and cites encouraging results from the introduction of a Modern Languages with Translation Studies undergraduate programme at Aston University Birmingham as evidence to support this claim (Schäffner 2000: 143-156). Ultimately such a holistic approach could

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\(^1\) EMT = European Masters in Translation. The expert group was set up by the Directorate General for Translation (DGT) in 2007 to make proposals for the implementation of a common European reference framework for translator training in Europe.
theoretically be extended to other competencies required by translators. The area of specialisation for example is currently viewed as something to be developed towards the end of the training cycle after the acquisition of linguistic and core translation competence or even separately via a different qualification and/or experience in a particular field. However in the field of legal translation for example Prieto Ramos advocates “comprehensive tailor-made training ... rather than presuming expert performance only from a double parallel qualification in translation and law” (Ramos 2011: 19).

Ultimately there is still no consensus on the definition of translation competence and how it is to be achieved. The dichotomy between the minimalist and multicomponent approaches continues to be a feature of TS particularly with regards to the design and implementation of translator training programmes. However the evolution of the translator’s role into that of intercultural professional has been accompanied by the expansion of the multicomponent model of translation competence that seeks to encompass both declarative and procedural knowledge and skills and maintain sufficient flexibility to attempt to keep up with the rapid pace of change. The minimalist approach has been subsumed into a multifaceted approach that, as predicted by Pym himself, reflects the multicompetence required of many translators today who “must also work as documentalists, terminologists, writers, etc” (Pym 2003: 491). Nevertheless the emergence of more specialised roles in the translation industry may see the resurgence of the minimalist approach as translators are gradually relieved of the extra-translational tasks accumulated in recent years and return to focus on what they do best: translation and nothing but translation.

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