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# Cross-cultural communication explored through the lens of translingual writers

## 1. Introduction

The concept of culture has been addressed in many different disciplines with the result being that the definitions offered vary according to the frame of reference. Nevertheless, two basic views of culture seem to have emerged: the humanistic conception of culture and the anthropological one.<sup>1</sup> The humanistic perspective focuses more on cultural heritage, understood as a collection of fine arts, literature, music, etc. On the other hand, the anthropological concept of culture refers more to the way of life (traditions, habits, preferences, and values) of a given community or society. The main focus of this article is on the anthropological conception, as we are here concerned less with the analysis of literature and more on the cultural norms and values of translingual writers – writers who either write in multiple languages, or write in any language other than their mother tongue. When it comes to defining the concept of communication, we are fully aware that this is not an easy task, as once again, there is a plethora of different definitions to choose from,<sup>2</sup> with this wide variety being explained

<sup>1</sup> Juliane House, “What is an ‘Intercultural Speaker?’” in *Intercultural Language Use and Language Learning*, eds. Eva Alcón Soler and Maria Pilar Safont Jordà (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 7–22.

<sup>2</sup> Emory A. Griffin, Andrew Ledbetter and Glenn Grayson Sparks, *A First Look at Communication Theory* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2019).

by the multidisciplinary origins of communication theory. However, for this chapter, we will define communication as “the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response.”<sup>3</sup> Defining communication as a process where both understanding and interpreting a given message, as well as the elicitation of a response, is of crucial importance, seems to be a natural choice when discussing the complex interplay of factors pertaining to various aspects of cross-cultural communication, as it allows for an understanding of the multilayered character of such interactions, as well as the role of culture in the process of encoding and decoding messages.

## 2. Culture, language, and communication

The evolution of human cultures is closely associated with the evolution of the ability to use language, as human cultures are constructed from an understanding of shared intentionality, which is largely facilitated by the use of language. Consequently, it is impossible to understand human cultures without acknowledging the contribution that language makes to them, as language is at the very core of the creation and maintenance of culture. Through the use of language, an individual is transformed into an agent of a given culture<sup>4</sup>. Native speakers of a particular language normally choose the most appropriate way of delivering their message because they have the same knowledge of history, the traditions of their community, social norms, and/or cultural rules. These cultural rules allow members of a common culture to modify their linguistic behavior according to the requirements of a given situation<sup>5</sup>. The situation changes when speakers of other languages, who likewise follow their own set of cultural rules, communicate in a foreign language where the culture rules differ greatly. In such situations, some problems of intercultural communication might arise. Since culture influences language, it also influences our thoughts, feelings, motives, and perceptions<sup>6</sup>. People of different cultures share basic concepts

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<sup>3</sup> Griffin, Ledbetter and Sparks, *A First Look at Communication Theory*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> David Matsumoto and Linda Juang, *Culture and Psychology*, 5th ed. (Canada: Wadworth, Cengage Learning, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Eddie Ronowicz, *Poland: A Handbook in Intercultural Communication* (Sydney: National Center for English Language, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Anna Wierzbicka, *English: Meaning and culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Anna Wierzbicka, “Language and metalanguage: Key issues in emotion research,” *Emotion Review* 1 (2009): 3-14.

but view them from different angles and perspectives<sup>7</sup>. Wierzbicka<sup>8</sup> notes that profound semantic differences between languages could result in perceiving different languages as bearers of different cognitive perspectives or different worldviews. She further explains that:

complex meanings codified in separate words may differ from language to language because each language may choose a separate word for a different combination of simple ideas. But [the] ‘simple ideas’, on which human speech and human thought are based, are presumably the same for all people on earth.<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned above, languages differ in many ways across cultures but in this paper, we are to focus mainly on pragmatics, which considers the use of language in context, and the context-dependence of various aspects of linguistic interpretation. Pragmatic information is extralinguistic in nature as it arises from the act of utterance and is relevant to the listener’s determination of what the speaker is communicating. Davis<sup>10</sup> explains that pragmatics mostly highlights speakers’ communicative intentions, the uses of language that require such intentions, and the strategies that listeners employ to determine what these intentions and acts are, so the meaning the speaker intends to communicate will be understood. Culture affects the way we use and understand the rules governing communication in different social contexts and this plays an important role in how humans perceive language. There are cultural variations in the degree of formality in one’s speech or body language, the significance of paralinguistic cues like tone of voice, intonation, pitch, rate of speaking, use of silence, offering apologies, the expression and perception of emotions, gestures, and visual attention. Cultural differences in communication practices have been researched by many scholars, among which we may enumerate Edward Hall and Geert Hofstede, who are particularly prominent in the field of cross-cultural communication. They have developed much of the theoretical foundation

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<sup>7</sup> Scott Jarvis and Aneta Pavlenko, *Crosslinguistic Influence in Language and Cognition* (Routledge: New York, 2008); Aneta Pavlenko, *Bilingual minds: Emotional experience, expression, and representation* (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Anna Wierzbicka, *Semantics, Culture and Cognition: Universal human concepts in culture-specific configurations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Wierzbicka, *Semantics, Culture and Cognition*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Davis, *Pragmatics. A reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

on which cross-cultural analysis has been built as their ideas provide a basic theoretical and methodological approach to an understanding of the relationship between culture and communication<sup>11</sup>. Hofstede<sup>12</sup> proposed four crucial dimensions on which to compare cultures: Power distance (the extent to which societies accept and deal with inequalities in power and wealth); Masculinity (which examines gender roles in society); Uncertainty avoidance (the extent to which society is able to tolerate uncertainty); and Individualism (which describes the relationships through which an individual is integrated with other members of society). Later, he added a fifth dimension, describing the difference in thinking between East and West, which he called Long-term orientation (more importance is placed on the future and concern with setting long-term goals and persistence or perseverance in their achievement), which is contrasted with Short-term orientation (where people expect rapid feedback from decisions, quick profit, and frequent job evaluations and promotions). More recently, a sixth dimension has been added<sup>13</sup>, which is called Indulgence versus Restraint. This dimension contends that people in societies that possess a high rate of indulgence are able to freely satisfy their basic needs and aspirations. However, people in societies which display restraint are less happy as they follow strict norms of social behaviour. This dimension is very much concerned with the degree of general well-being and happiness experienced by people<sup>14</sup>. Many researchers agree that Hofstede's distinction between individualism and collectivism is the most crucial dimension of cultural variability.

The cultural anthropologist Edward Hall<sup>15</sup> was the first to label the communication style of collectivistic cultures as high-context and that of individualistic cultures as low-context. The designation divides groups of people on the basis of how they interpret messages.

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<sup>11</sup> Brian Hurn and Barry Tomalin, *Cross-Cultural Communication: Theory and Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Geert Hofstede, *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, Rev. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Hurn and Tomalin, *Cross-Cultural Communication*.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Hall, *Beyond culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit part of the message. A low-context communication is just the opposite, i.e., the mass of information is vested in the explicit code.<sup>16</sup>

A high-context communicator is one who gives instructions and comments indirectly, through suggestions. Therefore, high-context people tend to rely heavily on an elaborate system of symbols, body language, intonations of speech, and hidden, culturally based meanings. Such communication contains a high degree of allusion and indirectness as well as politeness. This means that the person receiving the message or instructions is required to read between the lines to work out the real meaning of the message. What is of key importance here is the fact that people in high-context cultures tend to be more accustomed to interpreting meaning in accordance with such factors as personality, rank, and body language. A low-context communicator does exactly the opposite and requires more explicit communication. The message itself carries meaning, so information and details must be spelt out as the context is less important or relied upon. The message is clear, direct, and detailed so that there can be no mistaking what is intended, as ambiguity is disliked<sup>17</sup>. Halls' second conclusion about different cultures concerned the organization of time, which could be sequential, linear, monochronic, synchronic, or polychronic. The third dimension is linked to territoriality (space) as this can be perceived from two perspectives: the space around people, that is, territoriality in general, and the space between people, which is called proxemics<sup>18</sup>. According to Hall,<sup>19</sup> there are four different levels of interpersonal space depending on the type of social relationship: intimate, personal, social, and public. People of all cultures appear to use space according to these four major distinctions, but they differ in the spaces they attribute to them<sup>20</sup>. Since interpersonal distance helps to regulate intimacy and social coordination, the violation

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<sup>16</sup> Hall, *Beyond culture*, 91.

<sup>17</sup> Hurnand Tomalin, *Cross-Cultural Communication*.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences*(Maine: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Edward Hall, *The silent language*(New York: Anchor, 1973).

<sup>20</sup> Matsumoto and Juang, *Culture and Psychology*.

of this space might bring about an aversive response. Hoffman,<sup>21</sup> who immigrated with her family from Poland to North America at the age of 13, writes of her cross-cultural experiences between Polish and English:

I'm learning to be less demonstrative. I learn my new reserve from people who take a step back when we talk, because I'm standing too close, crowding them. Cultural distances are different, I later learn in a sociology class, but I know it already. I learn restraint from Penny, who looks offended when I shake her by the arm in excitement as if my gesture had been out of aggression instead of friendliness. I learn it from a girl who pulls away when I hook my arm through hers as we walk down the street—this movement of friendly intimacy is an embarrassment to her.<sup>22</sup>

Different cultures have different cultural norms concerning proxemics, which is also reflected in national personality types, as highlighted by Lewis<sup>23</sup>. He assigned different nationalities to three broad types of culture based on their behaviour concerning various categories and theories, as well as the abovementioned by Edward Hall and Geert Hofstede. Lewis<sup>24</sup> presented what is essentially a practical guide to understanding different cultures by identifying three types of culture: Linear-active, Multi-active, and Reactive. Linear-active cultures (for example German, British, and Swiss) tend to be introverted and exhibit limited body language; they are highly organized, task-oriented, and do one thing at a time. Time, for members of a linear-active culture, is clock-related as they are basically monochronic. Information is most likely to be made explicit and imparted in sequential blocks. Emphasis is placed on getting things done and personal space is appreciated. In contrast, Multi-active cultures (Spanish or Italian, for instance) could be characterized as extroverted with extensive use of body language and limited expectations of personal space. They are characterized by flexible planning to deal with frequent or sudden changes. They are polychronic and like to develop and acquire information polysynchronously. They are comfortable with interruptions and are less interested in schedules or punctuality. They build a network of contacts

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<sup>21</sup> Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A life in a New Language*(Vintage: London, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*, 146

<sup>23</sup> Richard D. Lewis, *When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures*(Boston: Nicolas Brealey International, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Lewis, *When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures*, 65.

and tend to adapt to circumstances rather than appearing anxious about change. Reactive cultures (Chinese, Japanese, Finnish, for example), are characterized as introverted with very subtle body language. They prefer to listen first, make sure of the other person's position, and then react. They do not speak in a direct manner as they rely on an elaborate, implicit system of symbols and culturally-derived meanings. As a result, they often prefer to know their counterpart's position before exposing their own. These cultures are reflective and value silence and contemplation. They are skilled in non-verbal communication as in reactive cultures; communication often takes the form of a monologue, with pauses for reflection, as opposed to with both linear-active and multi-active cultures, which prefer a dialogic mode of communication, with interruptions, comments, and questions, all of which indicate interest in what is being said.

A brief overview of the most important cross-cultural theories shows that some national characteristics can be identified, and that these characteristics have an influence on communication patterns. At the same time, it needs to be remembered that describing a national culture does not mean that everyone in that culture will display the same cultural traits, or display them to the same extent. It instead suggests an average pattern of beliefs, personality traits, and values, but individuals do not necessarily all conform to this average. Another important thing that needs to be borne in mind is that it is extremely difficult to send a message that does not have some cultural content, whether it is in the words themselves, in the way they are said, or in the nonverbal signals that accompany them. It is even more difficult to receive a message without passing it through the filter of one's own cultural conditioning. According to Snow<sup>25</sup>, language use is tied closely to personal factors, cultural identification, and national or ethnic pride, as well as to a set of attitudes and beliefs. Thus, we strongly believe that analysing the process of communication, at the cross-cultural level as well as at the mono-cultural level, through the lens of the perceptions of translingual writers, might shed some light on the underlying basis of the individual differences that serve as the backbone of understanding the complex interplay of factors influencing the very process of communication.

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<sup>25</sup> Catherine Snow, "Social Perspectives on the Emergence of Language," in *The Emergence of Language*, ed. Brian MacWhinney (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999), 213-256.

### 3. Translingual writers' perceptions of cross-cultural communication

Culture reflects all the facets of the life of a group of people: their social rules, their behaviors, beliefs, values, customs, and traditions<sup>26</sup>. Since language is a part of culture, learning a new language may sometimes mean acquiring a new culture, offering the learner the opportunity to truly understand a given language. Some translingual writers point to the importance of immersion in a foreign culture, by means of which they were able to understand the second language better and even to change their perceptions of the world around them. A common point of reference in all such cases is the acknowledgement of differences in languages both at their lexical and mental levels of representation. Hoffman<sup>27</sup> writes about the differences in the expression of emotional experiences in Polish and English, highlighting the fact that according to Anglo-American 'cultural scripts,' whatever the emotion is, it should not be allowed to express itself in uncontrolled physical behavior. On the other hand, Polish 'cultural scripts' allow their users to express their emotions openly<sup>28</sup>. If we take into account the fact that the most common Polish terms used concerning one's own current negative state appear to be "zdenerwowany", "zły", "wściekły", "zmartwiony", "przykro mi", all of which imply a lack of control over one's emotional state, the accurate expression of such emotions in the foreign language that does not allow the expression of any emotion through uncontrolled physical behavior seems to be impossible. Polish users of English might face a great deal of difficulty trying to express emotions in the L2 (second language) that does not allow expression in a similar manner as the L1. Wierzbicka<sup>29</sup> writes:

It is important to bear in mind that the two languages of a bilingual person differ not only in their lexical and grammatical repertoires for expressing and describing emotions but also in the sets of "emotional scripts"

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<sup>26</sup> Conf. François Grosjean, *Bilingual life and reality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Conf. Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A life in a New Language*, 146

<sup>28</sup> Conf. Anna Wierzbicka, *Emotions across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and universals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Anna Wierzbicka, "Bilingual lives, bilingual experience," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 25(2004): 94-104.



regulating emotion talk. (...) The testimony of many bilingual people who have reflected on their own experience shows that for bilingual people, living with two languages can indeed mean living in two different emotional worlds and also travelling back and forth between those two worlds. It can also mean living suspended between two worlds.<sup>30</sup>

I never describe myself in English in a way similar to Polish (...) as the interpretation put on our experience shapes that experience, the experience itself is different. In a sense, then, I do not only project a different persona but am in fact a different person in my Anglophone and Polophone relationships.<sup>31</sup>

Another example of how the expression of feelings might differ in different languages could be Polish experiences comparable to “joy,” “sadness,” or “anger,” which are often conceptualized as inner activities with which one engages rather than as states which one passively undergoes. Expressing emotions by means of verbs refers to processes such as “to worry,” and most often, there are no adjectival counterparts available,<sup>32</sup> which makes the concept difficult to translate. Similar problems with translation have been addressed by many researchers and it has even been argued that some concepts like “amae”<sup>33</sup>, “fago”<sup>34</sup>, “perezhivat”<sup>35</sup>, “stenahoria”<sup>36</sup>, and “tęsknota”<sup>37</sup> may not in fact be translatable into other languages when their cultural manifestation is taken into account<sup>38</sup>. In the same line, Wierzbicka<sup>39</sup> demonstrates that the meanings of cognates from

<sup>30</sup>Wierzbicka, “Bilingual lives, bilingual experience,” 101–102.

<sup>31</sup>Wierzbicka, “Bilingual lives, bilingual experience,” 99.

<sup>32</sup>Aneta Pavlenko, “Bilingualism and emotions,” *Multilingua* 21, no.1 (2002): 45–78; Wierzbicka, *Semantics, Culture and Cognition*.

<sup>33</sup>Takeo Doi, “The cultural assumptions of psychoanalysis,” in *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development*, ed. James Stigler, Richard Schweder and Gilbert Herdt (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 446–453.

<sup>34</sup>Catherine Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and Their Challenge to Western Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>35</sup>Pavlenko, “Bilingualism and emotions.”

<sup>36</sup>Alexia Panayiotou “Translating guilt: an endeavor of shame in the Mediterranean?” in *Bilingual Minds: Emotional Experience, Expression, and Representation*, ed. Aneta Pavlenko (Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, UK, 2006), 183–209.

<sup>37</sup>Wierzbicka, *Semantics, Culture and Cognition*.

<sup>38</sup>Katarzyna Ożańska-Ponikwia, “Emotional expression in a foreign language. What factors influence the choice of a non-native language while expressing emotions?” *Linguistica Silesiana* 33 (2012): 201–218.

<sup>39</sup>Wierzbicka, *Semantics, Culture and Cognition*; Wierzbicka, *Emotions across Languages and Cultures*.

different languages do not directly correspond with each other and that they reflect and convey ways of living and ways of thinking characteristic of a given society, as valuable clues to the understanding of culture. What also needs to be highlighted is that language is a tool for expressing meaning. We think, we feel, we perceive; and at the same time we want to express our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, mainly because we want to share them with other people. We also need language to record and organize our thoughts, but different languages provide us with different means to do so as there is a very close link between the life of a society and the lexicon of that society's language<sup>40</sup>. There is empirical evidence that knowledge of two or more languages might influence the thought processes of their speakers<sup>41</sup>. A number of studies have demonstrated that bilinguals with languages that differ in their grammatical and lexical categories may shift their cognitive representation of those categories towards that of monolingual speakers of their second language. Athanasopoulos<sup>42</sup> suggests that the acquisition of an L2 with different concepts from the L1 can serve to reorganize the cognition of bilingual speakers and that the degree of that reorganization is linked to the acquisition of specific grammatical categories which are present and obligatory in the L2 but absent, or optional, in the L1. This demonstrates that concepts in the human mind are not stable and fixed, but flexible and changing, susceptible to both linguistic and cultural influences. But is it just the knowledge of a given language that influences cognitive change or rather the combination of linguistic and sociocultural competence? Pavlenko<sup>43</sup> claims that all the possible changes take place only in the situation of contact between language and culture, which might suggest that the knowledge of a foreign language and socialisation into its culture is an essential factor in the process of becoming a bicultural bilingual- a common feature among translingual writers. Pavlenko<sup>44</sup> shows that studies in psychoanalysis, psychology, and linguistic anthropology demonstrate that bicultural bilinguals may exhibit different verbal behaviours in their two languages and may be perceived differently by their

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<sup>40</sup> Anna Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, Japanese* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>41</sup> Aneta Pavlenko, *Emotions and multilingualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> Panos Athansopoulos, "Effects of the grammatical representation of number on cognition in bilinguals," *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 9, no. 1 (2006): 89–96.

<sup>43</sup> Pavlenko, *Emotions and multilingualism*.

<sup>44</sup> Pavlenko, *Bilingual minds*.

interlocutors, depending on the language they use in a particular context. For these bilinguals, the two languages may be linked to different linguistic repertoires, cultural scripts, frames of expectation, and levels of proficiency and emotionality<sup>45</sup>. Translingual writers' memoirs about learning a second language offer an interesting illustration of the duality embedded in bilingualism. Parks<sup>46</sup> notices 'becoming a little bit more Italian' when he portrays himself as changing under the influence of the language and the culture in which he lives. Ye<sup>47</sup> writes that in some situations she remains fundamentally Chinese, whereas in other aspects of public interaction, including politeness, she has gradually changed under the pressure of foreign language practice and sociocultural competence. Harbsmeier<sup>48</sup> notes that a language change brings with it a change in behavior.

#### 4. Conclusions

Language and culture are closely tied to one another and have a profound influence on both verbal and non-verbal communication. It has been suggested that "language use is tied closely to personal identity, to cultural identification, to national or ethnic pride, to specific communicative tasks or situations, and to a set of attitudes and beliefs."<sup>49</sup> Some components of communication are culturally-dependent and the knowledge of sociolinguistic and socio-cultural factors would not only broaden the knowledge of cultural and social norms present in every society (and as a result facilitate communication processes) but also enlarge the emotional repertoire by means of which the acquisition of new concepts takes place. Thus, the testimonies of translingual writers of how they perceive different aspects of communication in different languages might help us to better understand the complexity of cross-cultural communication that is based on encoding or decoding messages while using different cultural codes, which is very often more uncertain and ambiguous because of the differences in the 'ground rules' of the interaction.

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<sup>45</sup> Pavlenko, *Bilingual minds*, 27.

<sup>46</sup> Tony Parks, *An Italian Education* (London: Vintage, 1996), 165.

<sup>47</sup> Veronica Zhengdao Ye, "La Double Vie de Veronica: reflections on my life as a Chinese migrant in Australia," *Mots Pluriels*, accessed March, 2023, <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/motspluriels/MP2303vzy.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Christoph Harbsmeier, "Portrait," *Epok* 43 (2004): 50–51.

<sup>49</sup> Snow, "Social Perspectives on the Emergence of Language," 468.

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the paper is to explore cross-cultural communication through the lens of translingual writers. In order to do so, we will present a short overview of the key theories concerning cross-cultural communication. Next, we will add some testimonies of the translingual writers into the equation by describing their personal perspectives related to writing in a foreign language. Adopting the translingual writers' point of view while reflecting on the concept of cross-cultural communication is of crucial importance as it might shed some light on the complex interplay of the different factors that pertain to successful communication in different cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural communication, translingual writers, bilingualism

**Słowa kluczowe:** komunikacja międzykulturowa, translingwalne osoby piszące, dwujęzyczność