

UNRAVELING NATIVE THINKING IN AN INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether Albanian native thinking influences the work of Albanian interpreters in intercultural professional settings, particularly when interpreting in English. It explores how cultural awareness impacts the interpreting process and whether linguistic proficiency alone is sufficient for interpreters. The study specifically addresses the extent to which Albanian interpreters must be familiar with the cultural backgrounds and native thinking of the speakers they interpret for, in order to avoid cultural misunderstandings and clashes.

This research employs an empirical approach using a case study method, conducted on a sample of approximately 40 Albanian interpreters working with various languages. Through interviews and real-life interpreting scenarios, the study gathered data on how native thinking and cultural attitudes affect the quality and accuracy of interpretation, particularly in simultaneous and consecutive interpreting contexts.

The results reveal that Albanian native thinking significantly impacts the interpretation process. Interpreters who solely focus on linguistic proficiency, without considering cultural nuances, are more likely to encounter misunderstandings and cultural biases in their work. The findings emphasize the importance of minimizing native thinking and adopting a global mindset to achieve culturally sensitive interpretations.

The conclusions drawn from the study suggest that successful interpretation requires interpreters to transcend their native linguistic and cultural frameworks. To deliver accurate and effective interpretations, especially in international settings, interpreters must be deeply aware of both the language and cultural contexts of the speakers they interpret for. Based on the results, the recommendations suggest that interpreter training programs should include a focus on cultural competence and global perspectives, beyond linguistic mastery, to prepare interpreters for the challenges of intercultural communication.

Keywords: native thinking, interpretation, intercultural communication, language proficiency, cultural awareness, Albanian interpreters.

1. INTRODUCTION

Native thinking, deeply rooted in the cultural and social context in which we are born, accompanies individuals throughout their lives. This mindset is shaped not only by one's intellectual and educational background but also by the cultural characteristics of their nationality. Much like a child inherits traits from their parents, individuals unconsciously reflect the cultural peculiarities and social norms of the nation to which they belong.

However, in an increasingly globalized world, the boundaries between nations are becoming ever more blurred. The ease of travel, free movement, and cross-cultural exchanges have contributed to a growing sense of international connectedness. As a result, the differences that once separated us are diminishing, while commonalities between cultures are becoming more pronounced. Yet, native thinking remains a significant element that distinguishes individuals from one another.

This raises an important question: should language interpreters, whose primary role is to convey the message of international speakers as accurately and swiftly as possible, strive to minimize native thinking in their work? In contexts such as public events, international conferences, project workshops, legal proceedings, political meetings, academic forums, business negotiations, and even small-scale family gatherings with international participants, the role of the interpreter is pivotal. This paper seeks to explore the hypothesis that, to function effectively in international environments, interpreters must consciously minimize the influence of native thinking.

Beyond linguistic proficiency in both source and target languages, interpreters must cultivate a range of soft skills and a deep cultural awareness. By doing so, they can avoid potential cultural clashes and uphold the professionalism required in various interpreting settings.

In this paper, the term "native thinking" is utilized to describe the cognitive and perceptual frameworks shaped by an individual's cultural and geographical origins. According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), "native" denotes "belonging to a particular place by birth" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/native>). Similarly, the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines "native" as "relating to or describing someone's country or place of birth, or someone who was born in a particular country or place"

(https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/native#google_vignette). Both definitions underscore the notion that individuals born in a specific location are deeply influenced by the traditions and cultural norms of that region. Consequently, individuals often exhibit a strong reflection of their country of origin in various contexts, particularly within international environments. In a paper about stereotypes and country images Ingenhoff, D., Segev, E., & Chariatte, I. (2020) emphasize that country image is an essential construct in international communication. It serves not only capitalist goals (like trade or tourism relationships) but also peace-building and social cohesion (Browning & Ferraz de Oliveira, 2017).

The concept of country images has faced significant scrutiny in recent years. Scholars argue that the traditional notion of nation-states, and consequently country images, has diminished in relevance amidst globalization and migration (Somerville, Hargie, Taylor, & Toledano, 2017). People increasingly identify not merely as citizens of states, but as "global citizens." However, the resurgence of nationalism highlights ongoing tendencies toward segregation between countries. National prejudices and stereotypes are frequently employed to define foreigners (Arendt, Marquart, & Matthes, 2015).

Examining how citizens perceive individuals from other nationalities is also of interest. Stereotypes associated with certain nationalities, which may often be inaccurate, can lead to misconceptions about individuals. Ingenhoff, Segev, and Chariatte (2020:14) further this discussion by referencing various scholars, emphasizing that the study of country images is as crucial as the study of national identity. Walter Lippmann (1922) famously posited that our perceptions of others reflect our own identity. Indeed, individuals often define their national and social identities through their interactions and attitudes toward other groups (Bouchat & Rimé, 2018).

The role of interpreters provides an additional layer of complexity. Certain skills are required by simultaneous interpreters to perform well. Nolan (2005: 18) emphasises that consistently good performance in conference interpreting depends on sustained mental alertness. Interpreters, originating from specific countries, inherently reflect the values, mindsets, and characteristics of their home countries. Besides, Robinson (2004:54) goes even further by saying that interpreters have to be able to work everywhere, requiring them to develop a mental state regardless of external conditions. Despite this, their profession requires them to operate within an international context, continuously engaging with foreign cultures through the perspectives and realities expressed by speakers. Interpreters are tasked with conveying these elements as accurately as possible, regardless of their familiarity with the target audience

Amor, M. I., Tinedo-Rodríguez, A.-J., & Osuna-Rodríguez, M. (2023) highlights the interaction between linguistic skills and cross-cultural competence, which is critical when interpreters navigate native thinking and international contexts.

Pokorn and Južnič (2020) underscore that interpreting is defined in line with the international standard "Interpreting –Guidelines for community interpreting" (ISO13611:2014), which refers to the activity of "oral and signed communication that enables access to services for people who have limited proficiency in the language of such services."

They make a difference between the terms intercultural mediator and community interpreters. They clarify that "Community interpreters may also be called public service interpreters, interpreters in institutional discourse, dialogue interpreters, or liaison interpreters) (Pokorn & Južnič 2020: 81) They differentiate between community interpreters and intercultural mediators, noting that community interpreters may also be referred to as public service interpreters, institutional discourse interpreters, dialogue interpreters, or liaison interpreters (Pokorn & Južnič, 2020:81). Furthermore, interpreting may be performed by either professional or non-professional interpreters. In this context, "professional interpreters" are those who have received formal training in oral or signed translation and adhere to the profession's ethical codes and conduct.

The demand for qualified interpreters has been increasing sharply over the past two decades due to the wide variety of events and the political, economic, and social activities occurring daily in different countries. These activities cover a broad range of issues and topics that may be of international or national interest. Simultaneous interpreters are expected to be skilled and adept in performing the tasks for which they are hired to the best of their ability. Above all, in our opinion, the smooth and successful proceedings, as well as the outcome of a major conference or event, depend on the interpreters. Despite remaining in the background and not being in the focus of cameras or live events, except for their voice, their role is crucial (Kanani & Taraj, 2021, p. 959).

In Albania, the demand for interpretation services has grown over the past 30 years, particularly following the political system change and the country's opening to global influences. This period of integration and democratization has necessitated the employment of many "self-made" interpreters. While these individuals have generally pursued studies in the Faculty of Foreign Languages and completed post-graduate programs in Translation Studies, their professional development has been significantly influenced by practical experience in interpretation (Kanani & Birsanu, 2017).

In Intercultural communication: Negotiating identities across cultures, Zhu, H. (2019) highlights how interpreters must manage cross-cultural identities and cultural thinking, aligning with the need for Albanian interpreters to understand native thinking when interpreting in international environments.

Noja (2015) comments on Albanian cultural studies, noting that they often focus on national celebrations and the concept of nationalism. He observes that debates on Albanian “psychology” and the “national soul” frequently intertwine with discussions of the nation's historical past, cultural heritage, folk culture, ethnic territory, and racial traits.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a case study approach, drawing on empirical methods based on the authors’ extensive experience as certified interpreters in Albania. The materials used in the study were carefully designed by the authors, who crafted a series of questions aimed at eliciting responses from a broad sample of accredited interpreters. The questionnaire sought to examine the extent to which native thinking influences Albanian interpreters who frequently work in international environments.

Although the study faced limitations due to the relatively small sample size of 40 Albanian interpreters, the data collected still provides valuable insights into the emerging trends regarding the avoidance of native thinking in interpreting contexts.

This study primarily employs a case study methodology complemented by an empirical approach, drawing upon the authors’ experiences as certified interpreters in Albania. The research instruments were developed by the authors through a process of formulating specific and relevant questions designed to engage a substantial number of accredited interpreters. The objective of the questionnaire was to assess the extent to which native thinking influences interpreters operating within international contexts.

A notable limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size of Albanian interpreters, which consisted of only 40 participants. Despite this limitation, the study provides valuable insights into the trend of minimizing native thinking in interpretation practices.

Survey: Albanian interpreters versus international speakers

A questionnaire was developed to evaluate the impact and adaptability of Albanian interpreters in international environments (Kanani, 2023, p.150). This instrument was specifically targeted at professional Albanian interpreters across various languages, who were recruited via social media and email invitations. Participants were asked to share their personal experiences through both structured and open-ended responses.

The survey comprised 15 questions, with a focus on minimizing the use of open-ended questions, which were primarily employed as follow-ups to structured queries. The questionnaire was organized into distinct sections: the first section addressed *the interpreter’s profile and job specifics*; the second section *explored professional experience and problem-solving capabilities*; and the final section examined aspects related to *cultural fit in international contexts and soft skills*. The overarching goal was to assess *the extent to which interpreters exhibited native versus global thinking in their professional tasks*.

The online questionnaire was disseminated through accredited interpreters, freelancers, mailing lists, social media groups dedicated to interpreters, and interpretation-related blogs. This approach aimed to reach a broad spectrum of Albanian interpreters beyond individual contacts. A notable challenge in this phase was ensuring sufficient participant engagement to achieve representative results. Despite the limited response of 40 professional interpreters, the sample size is considered adequate for observing trends and making informed assessments regarding the adaptability and avoidance of native thinking in interpreting practices in Albania.

3. RESULTS

The study’s results provide new insights into the challenges faced by Albanian interpreters working in international contexts. When asked whether they found it difficult or uncomfortable to interpret offensive or inappropriate language, interpreters consistently referenced the principle of accuracy and completeness from the interpreter’s code of ethics. This standard requires interpreters to render an accurate and complete interpretation without omitting or altering any part of the message, regardless of the content’s potentially offensive nature. This is particularly critical in legal contexts, such as courtrooms or police stations, where every word must be faithfully translated, no matter how uncomfortable or inappropriate it may seem. For instance, an interpreter recalled a case of sexual abuse in which a British woman was providing detailed testimony at a police station. The interpreter experienced personal discomfort due to cultural taboos around discussing sexual matters in Albania, but was obligated to translate the testimony fully, despite the Albanian police officer’s discomfort and request to avoid explicit details.

Regarding the impartiality required in the profession, interpreters were asked whether they ever felt inclined to intervene or modify their interpretations based on personal values or beliefs. The dominant response indicated that

interpreters aim to facilitate communication between parties without altering the meaning of either party's words, even when the content conflicts with their personal values.

Another key question asked whether interpreters sought to establish a relationship with the speaker or preferred to maintain a formal, detached approach. The majority of respondents stated that, while interpreting in consecutive settings, they often attempted to build rapport with the speakers to enhance the interpretation process. This tendency was less pronounced in simultaneous interpreting, where direct interaction with the speaker is limited. However, many interpreters highlighted the importance of developing a connection to better understand the speaker's accent, coherence, and speed of delivery.

Handling stress is another significant challenge faced by interpreters in Albania. Many interpreters reported the stress of receiving last-minute requests, often without access to preparatory materials or adequate compensation. Moreover, interpreters frequently found themselves as the sole professional for entire events, adding to the strain. Nonetheless, the interpreters emphasized their ability to remain professional under pressure and employ problem-solving skills to navigate these difficulties (Kanani & Birsanu, 2017:103).

The most critical questions pertained to cultural misunderstandings and how interpreters maintain cultural sensitivity when working with clients from diverse backgrounds. While interpreters strive to minimize native thinking and conform to professional standards, many noted that it can be difficult to determine what is "correct" in intercultural interactions. For example, one interpreter described working with British speakers who defied the common stereotype of being "cold and reserved." The interpreter responded in a friendly manner, unsure if this was appropriate but believing it facilitated the interaction.

Cultural misunderstandings also arose in situations where Albanian social norms conflicted with those of international clients. In one case, an interpreter invited international colleagues for coffee, a customary gesture in Albanian culture. The offer was politely declined, with the colleagues commenting that the interpreter was "too kind," highlighting a cultural disconnect. Similarly, another interpreter recalled a case in which he attempted to bid farewell to an American client by kissing him on the cheek, a common gesture of respect in Albanian culture. The American refused, explaining that such gestures were reserved for women in his culture, leading to an awkward and embarrassing moment for the interpreter.

In yet another example, an interpreter struggled to explain Albania's legal procedures to a Belgian client arrested for driving under the influence. The client found the process absurd, requiring multiple explanations of the Albanian legal system, which mandates pre-detention in such cases.

These examples underscore that, despite efforts to avoid native thinking, cultural clashes are often unavoidable. Both interpreters and international speakers bring their cultural frameworks into the interaction, which can lead to unintended misunderstandings.

4. DISCUSSIONS

Native thinking is becoming smaller in the present world as far as people are traveling faster, easier and more and more wherever they want and this has made them more open-minded. The differences between nationalities are consequently their stereotypes are narrowing, and this is valid as much as we are living in a global village where the distance between countries is becoming insignificant due to the development of technology and transport traveling and cultures are coming closer and closer each day.

Still, we are unique and sometimes it is native thinking that contributes to this uniqueness, but when it comes to interpreting in an international environment, in our view, native thinking should be avoided or minimized, especially when it comes to culture-specific or sensitive topics. The interpreters should be neutral and above parties, and by doing this they can avoid cultural clashes.

The results of this study provide a nuanced understanding of the influence of native thinking on Albanian interpreters working in international contexts. While the findings indicate that interpreters generally strive to maintain accuracy and impartiality, native cultural perspectives continue to influence their work, sometimes leading to subtle cultural clashes. This research highlights the significance of these clashes, as they have implications for both the interpreter's role and the broader success of cross-cultural communication.

One of the key takeaways from the study is that native thinking, while often unconscious, can surface during critical moments of interpretation, particularly when cultural taboos or sensitive topics are involved. The example of the sexual abuse case at the police station demonstrates that Albanian interpreters, while trained to follow professional standards of accuracy and completeness, may still experience discomfort when confronted with topics that conflict with cultural norms. This reinforces the idea that interpreters must not only be linguistically proficient but also culturally adept, equipped to navigate the challenges posed by differing cultural expectations.

Moreover, the study suggests that Albanian interpreters tend to establish personal rapport with speakers, especially in consecutive interpretation settings. While this can be seen as a strength—facilitating smoother communication by

fostering trust and understanding—it can also lead to potential missteps if the interpreter's behavior is overly influenced by native customs. For example, the interpreters' natural inclination to engage warmly with international clients reflects Albanian hospitality but may not always align with the expectations or cultural norms of the speakers they are interpreting for. This observation underscores the need for interpreters to balance cultural sensitivity with the professionalism required in international settings.

Stress management also emerged as a significant theme in the research. Albanian interpreters often face high-pressure situations due to last-minute assignments and inadequate preparation. While interpreters reported employing problem-solving skills to handle such stressors, the challenges they encounter may impede their ability to deliver the highest quality interpretation. This suggests a need for more structural support for interpreters in Albania, including better preparation materials, reasonable fees, and sufficient team resources to manage lengthy events.

Cultural misunderstandings, though not always overt, are a persistent theme in the study. Despite efforts to avoid native thinking, the examples shared by the interpreters reveal that cultural norms influence both sides of the communication process. Whether it is the misinterpretation of a simple social gesture, like the refusal of a coffee invitation, or a more significant cultural clash, such as misunderstanding legal procedures, these incidents demonstrate the complexities of cross-cultural interactions. They also emphasize the need for interpreters to continuously refine their cultural competence to avoid unintentional bias or misunderstandings.

Overall, the findings suggest that while Albanian interpreters are largely successful in minimizing the influence of native thinking, there are still areas where cultural differences can inadvertently affect their work. Interpreters must, therefore, be vigilant in maintaining a balance between cultural sensitivity and the neutrality required of their role. This research contributes to the broader field of interpreting studies by illustrating the intricate ways in which native thinking and cultural awareness intersect in the interpreting profession. Further research with a larger sample size and more diverse case studies could provide additional insights into how interpreters from different cultural backgrounds manage these challenges in international settings.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is imperative for interpreters who act as mediators between speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds to adopt a "global" perspective rather than a "local" one. Despite their best efforts to mitigate the influence of native thinking, interpreters inevitably encounter situations where their cultural upbringing—manifesting in social norms, personal values, punctuality, body language, and other behaviors—can subtly influence their interpretations. This inherent cultural imprint, shaped by their upbringing and national context, remains a challenge even for highly skilled professionals.

Nonetheless, the primary objective for interpreters is to uphold both professional and personal integrity while executing their duties. They must strive to demonstrate the highest standards of professional competence and ensure that their interpretations are as accurate and culturally sensitive as possible. By focusing on these core values and skills, interpreters can effectively navigate the complexities of intercultural communication and fulfill their role as impartial facilitators in a globalized world.

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