

## Cross-Cultural Analysis of Lost In Translation

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**ABSTRACT:** *In the globalized world, there are many people who live in two different languages and thus in two different cultures. The coming-closer of the world has faded the linguistic and cultural borders. This cultural inter-mingling is what Eva Hoffman's novel 'Lost In Translation' talks about. This essay will look at the cross-cultural aspects with reference to different theories from Ruben (1976), Bennett (1993), Byram (1997), etc. The focus would mainly be on the key intercultural challenges faced by the author and the forms of intercultural competence the author shows in dealing with these challenges.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Intercultural Competence, internalized culture, culture, sub-cultures, intercultural challenges, cross-cultural communication, tensions.*

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In the globalized world, there are many people who live in two different languages and thus in two different cultures. The coming-closer of the world has faded the linguistics and cultural borders. This cultural inter-mingling is what Eva Hoffman's novel 'Lost In Translation' talks about. Eva Hoffman's memoir is a tale of her immigrant life and success. Her journey, from Cracow to Vancouver; from a lost, isolated and confused child to a successful journalist; from a Polish speaker to an English editor; from an immigrant to an American; from feeling nostalgic to feeling at home, is much richer and worth celebrating. Her interaction with the new world is a quest of finding a reality that is equal to her life in Cracow, Poland. There is, however, a realization that the new world is not a replacement of her past but only a supplement to her life. This story is actually the celebration of the unique humanness that is not lost in translation. It analyses the eternal alienation of an immigrant in a new country that comes as a cultural shock. The significant crossing is definitely the linguistic crossing, where she points out the loss of images, meanings and emotions when she utters English words as signifiers for the different signified objects. She calls the words "without an aura". This loss is what she laments. Her assimilation into the American culture is representation of Bassnett's (1991) crossing borders that talks about Hoffman's cultural crossing. This essay will look at the cross-cultural aspects with reference to different theories from Ruben (1976), Bennett (1993), Byram (1997), etc. The focus would mainly be on the key intercultural challenges faced by the author and the forms of intercultural competence the author shows in dealing with these challenges. For this purpose pp. 102-108 of the novel will be analyzed.

According to Lustig and Koester (2013, p. 25) and Holliday et al(2010, p. 65) culture is a learned set of interpretations about values, norms, beliefs and social practices, which are shared by a large group of people and thus affects their behavior. Hoffman's behavior seems to be influenced by the culture she learns from her days in Cracow. Lustig and Koester (2013) say that culture is learned through interactions and socializing with families, friends, relatives as well as strangers. Her interactions with her friends, for example, Krysia, or the maid, Bronia, her Jewish parents, her dialogues with her elders regarding the war escape, her life as a child in Poland, all these build up to form her cultural identity. Lustig and Koester (2013) add that cultures provide the members of that group with a set of interpretations that can be used as filters to make sense of the messages and experiences. They further argue that culture is important but not the only explanation for people's behavior. For example, immigration of people from one country to another, whether for academic or professional reasons, occurs frequently. This, however, does not mean that all immigrants would develop the same behavioral patterns as the Wydra Family. Even within the family, Eva's mother, her father, her sister and she have different attitudes towards their new culture. The cultures and sub-cultures prevalent in this extract are the 1950s Poland and Canada, Jews in Poland, few Jews, who survived the war and escaped to Poland, Jewish Polish immigrant communities in the 1950s, the government school in Vancouver that taught English to new comers, the Rosenberg's enormous one-story house with a large garden, Canada in those times, families in Canada, Polish Jews in Canada.

Lustig (2013, p. 126) suggests that taxonomies offer us understanding of cultural variations and enables us to appreciate the differences rather than negatively evaluate or disregard the differences. On the base of a survey

conducted in 1970s of IBM employees, Hofstede (2011) developed a model for comparing cultures. Though the validity of the dimensions is highly criticized by many researchers, as he selected only one company to collect and evaluate samples, many others use it for cross-cultural comparisons (Schmidt, 2014; McSweeney, 2002). Schwartz's values (2007, cited in Lustig, 2013, p. 117) give motivationally distinct values and explain their interconnectedness.

Hofstede (2010, 2011) and Schwartz's (2007, cited in Lustig, 2013) taxonomies can be used as a framework for cross-cultural communication. However, this cannot be said to be the culture of the country that they stay in or come from, because cultural values can be completely individualistic, transmitted from generation to generation or country-to-country, thus Hofstede's claim of a culture being unique to a country cannot be taken at face value (Ly, 2013). It can be argued that taking these taxonomies into consideration can give us a possible understanding of the differences in attitudes, values and norms of characters in this novel, but cannot be said to be the only explanation for the characters' behavior.

The earlier parts of the novel show that the among the Schwartz's value types, values prevailing in Poland are tradition (as they all seem to follow and respect and show commitment towards their culture), conformity, security and benevolence. There is stability, safety and harmony in their society, they liked to be in close groups and works towards everyone's welfare and try not to harm each other.

Considering the extract we can talk about Hofstede et al. (2010, pp. 60-62) and Schwartz's (1992, 1994, 2007, summarized in Lustig, 2013, p. 117) power distance. Considering Ruben's (1976, cited in Humphrey, 2007) display of respect, Mr. Rosenberg is given a lot of respect among the community of immigrants. They seek his valuable advice in most matters (p. 102) and there is a large-power-distance seen here. Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 61) defines power distance as "the extend to which the less powerful members of the institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept the power distributed unequally". This value seems to have come from the Polish Jew culture that they have all internalized. Mr. Rosenberg can also be said to be demonstrating 'achievement' value type, according to Schwartz's Taxonomies (2007, cited in Lustig, 2013, p.117). He is successful, the richest amongst the immigrant community and very influential too. As compared to the other Polish Jew immigrants, Mr. Rosenberg is the most popular and considered the wisest of all.

As opposed to the above values, Eva does not seem to be affected by this power distance or achievement values that her community reflects. She does not see Mr. Rosenberg the way her father or other Polish Jew immigrants see. She can be said to be showing Schwartz's self-directional value. She further adds that they got gifts for the Rosenbergs, which they consider to be quite handsome and in addition to that had to pay for the train tickets too. This shows that this is something in contrast to what she would expect as a Polish Jew from the quests. She did not see probably asking for money as a proper gesture, in spite of it being completely normal in the Canadian culture that Mr. Rosenberg seems to have internalized.

Mr. Rosenberg also displays the 'individualistic' dimension given by Hofstede et al. (2010, pp. 89-94). He seems to have acquired the Canadian culture of being individualistic and emphasizes on independence of the Wydras when he tells them not to be dependent on his charity after a week's lodging with him. On the contrary, the Polish Jews had seen this act of his as kindness and not charity. Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 103) brings our attention to the inversely co-related dimensions- power distance and individualism. The larger the power distance, the more collective the society. This can be clearly seen here, as the Canadian culture of Mr. Rosenberg seems to be less hierarchical and more individualistic as opposed to the other Polish Jew immigrants for whom the power distance is larger and thus collectivism is important. Another example of individualism being a dimension of the Canadians can be seen as the teachers leaves the two girls on their own with a file card to find their way home in an unfamiliar country.

Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 140) talk about the 'Masculinity' versus 'Femininity' as a dimension that refers to the differences in roles between genders. This difference is seen in the extract when Mrs. Rosenberg is responsible for the food and clothing of the Wydra family, shows generosity, where as Mr. Rosenberg is strong and takes all the other important decisions. Mrs. Rosenberg, as Hoffman puts it, has no right to intervene in her husband's decisions (p. 104) when, for example, the Wydra's were asked to leave or show more generosity (p. 103) towards the Wydras. This distribution of roles between the genders becomes a fundamental aspect of the society then.

It can be argued that the fact that the Polish Jews migrated to Canada for a better living and most of them made good for themselves (p. 102) can be treated as an example of 'uncertainty accepting culture' as opposed to the uncertainty avoidance cultures that try to minimize the possibilities of uncertain and ambiguous situations that makes its members feel uncomfortable or threatens them. (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 188-191)

According to Holliday et al. (2010, pp. 59-65) culture and identity often goes together. A concept of culture is said to be internalized if one follows it without any conscious efforts. This in turn influences behavior. This internalization is evident from the sentence that “people from the community (and not any American in general) come to him for business advice...” (p. 103). Money is often equated to power and this is also an internalized culture that the text points out (p. 102).

Due to differences in the internalized cultures of the individuals in the novel, there are tensions that are created. Eva has problems of language. Her nightmares, talking to herself before falling asleep, her hate towards the Rosenbergs, and identity crises that she faces when her name is changed to an American version are all tensions that Eva goes through. This keeps her at a distance from her new country and surrounding and delays her adjusting and accepting. Eva seems to be quite ethnocentric in her approach. She has stereotypical views about USA and right from the beginning there is a lack of motivation to assimilate and adjust.

Tensions that are generated between Eva and the school atmosphere do not let her move upward in the developmental stages of intercultural sensitivity. She does not seem to make peace with the fact that she would now encounter new faces in the school (p. 105). For her, her name gives her an identity. The changing of names of her sister and her does not seem to affect the teacher in any way. Eva, on the other hand, clearly is against this “careless baptism”. Strumper – Krubb (Pearson-Evans & Leahy, 2007, p. 245, cited in Eriksson, 2009, p. 6) says in her essay: “The problems she faces are much more than simply linguistic ones; they cut straight to the core of her identity and self-definition”. Changing their names to a more American version is considered as a direct attack on their identity.

Language is something that one often associates one’s culture with. The language one speaks often connects one well with the culture in which that language is spoken (Eriksson, 2007, p. 7). It is the medium of expression and distancing from the foreign culture may happen if one does not feel comfortable expressing in that language. This distancing is natural for Eva, as she does not feel one with the English language. Risager (2007, cited in Norris et al., 2007, p. 6) talks about linguistic competence as one of the elements to be considered while assessing an individual’s intercultural competence. The word “Shut up” that Eva hears from her fellow schoolmates. She says, “I can’t imagine wanting to talk their harsh-sounding language” (p. 105). She shows complete disconnected feeling towards the language and thus towards the culture (p. 106). She further says, “It is the loss of a living connection” (p. 107). The English words drain out and hold no significant existence for her. These signifiers have not yet penetrated in her psyche and the thread does not exist. Her fear of getting away from her Polish Jew culture is not completely a myth. We understand this by her disconnection from the objects as opposed to the feeling that the words first arose in her mind. “The process, alas, works in reverse as well” (p. 106). The signified objects do not cling to her or remain absolutely blunt. The distinction between English ‘kindliness’ and Polish ‘kindness’ is hard for her to absorb. Her cultural unconscious influences her conscious state, as she says.

A conversation of the “Nice weather we’re having, isn’t it?” (p. 108) with a Canadian family is odd for her. This way of saying “Hi” is not something she must have seen in Poland. She tries to make them fit into her framework of understanding people but ends up saying, “They’re a different species...”. She does not find the appropriate words to describe them, thus feeling no connection again. She tries to put them into definite compartments with labels, not understanding that there can never be such watertight compartments.

She also reminds her ego where her id was. She has to continuously negotiate with her instinctual drive (p. 107). The new world is beyond her comprehension sometimes and there are words and actions and faces that she cannot translate in her mind. She ends up with complete closure and says, “...in this dark and empty state, I don’t really exist”. Through language she loses her identity and through language she tries to get it back. She cannot get away from her prejudices.

Considering these tensions, Eva seems to be showing very minimal level of intercultural competence. She is only comfortable with her familiar Polish Jew culture and maintains a separation from others who are different from her own culture. She cannot even be said to be completely at the ‘denial’ stage that Bennett (1986, 1993, 2004, cited in Humphrey, 2007, p. 24) gives as a representative set of perspectives. She is perhaps a stage below the denial stage that Bennett’s model lacks. According to the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC) (Koester and O’Lebe, 1988; Ruben and Kealey, 1979, cited in Norris et al., 2007, p. 13), Eva is Type III individual, with low interaction management, low group maintenance, low empathy, low tolerance for ambiguity, low interaction posture and low orientation to knowledge. Thus, suggesting that she faces difficulties when attempting to communicate cross-culturally. Considering Spitzberg’s (1988, cited in Humphrey, 2007, pp. 19-20) notion, Eva seems to have knowledge of her new surrounding, because she points out the differences, but lacks motivation and skills. She neither has any desire, nor shows the appropriate behavioral patterns.

Ruben (1976, p. 336, cited in Humphrey, 2007, p. 22) talks about intercultural competence as the ability to function in a way that can be said to be consistent with the needs, capacities, goals and expectations of the society that one lives in while satisfying one’s own needs, capacities, goals and expectations. Ruben (1976, cited

in Norris et al., 2007, p. 4) tried to link the gap between what individuals actually do and what they know should be done in intercultural situations. He identified eight behavioral elements of intercultural competence. The problem however, is that these elements can be learned at any moment and lack the emotional aspect.

Being grateful for used clothes that the Rosenbergs pass on to the Wydras is something Eva does not feel happy about. Her mother shows understanding of the new culture but Eva still stuck to her culture feels “no real gratitude at being the recipient of so much mercy” (p. 104). This is another cultural difference that can be seen in both cultures as Eva says she begins to learn the trick to thank.

This understanding of the new culture by the mother displays the task role behavior element given by Ruben (1976, cited in Humphrey, 2007, p. 22). The mother wants them to learn the normal ways of the other culture in order to being able to fit in “Say, thank you”. The mother can be said to be showing ‘Knowledge’, one of the five-factors proposed by Byram (1997). She shows knowledge of the rules of social interaction in the other culture. Eva also acknowledges this by saying, “In the next few years, this is a skill I’ll have to use often”. This would make her more competent by displaying qualities and actions that are seen as ‘normal’ ways in the normal culture.

Eva Hoffman lacks to show any amount of Empathy (Ruben, 1976, cited in Humphrey, 2007) with the Canadian culture and disregards it as being one of hers. Example: “I can hardly bring myself to say it (You’re Welcome)- I suppose because it implies that there’s something to be thanked for, which in Polish would be impolite” (p. 106). She lacks the skills of interpreting and relating (Byram, 1997), that is the ability to interpret, explain and relate to the other culture. Eva can also be said to be lacking Communicative Awareness (a dimension defined by the INCA assessor’s manual, given by Byram and other European researchers, cited in Norris, et al., 2007, p. 7), that is the ability to establish relationships between linguistic and cultural contexts.

Eva’s nightmares of drowning in the ocean and getting away from her parents is symbolic of her fear of getting away from her internalized culture and getting drowned in the Canadian culture. It is the fear of separation and ‘othering’ from the world that she considers to be hers. Her birth into the new world is seen as being a negative change.

Eva lacks the tolerance of ambiguity when she addresses to milk, for example, as bearing little resemblance to the milk found in her country. She also shows lack of tolerance of ambiguity when the signifiers in her language and in the American culture are not the same, the signified object being the same. (Ruben, 1976, cited in Humphrey, 2007)

The dressing of her fellow schoolmates comes as a shock for Eva. She is perhaps at the defensive stage of the developmental model at that moment (Bennett, 1986, 1993, 2004, cited in Humphrey, 2007, p. 24). She shows a strong commitment towards her culture and point out differences in the ways the girls dress up and has strong negative feelings towards them.

Mrs. Rosenberg can be said to have shown some relational role behavior (Ruben, 1976, cited in Humphrey, 2007), in an effort to create positive relation with the Wydra family by offering them food and milk. But Eva sees it as an artificial act and thinks it as a ritual ‘learned from television’.

We cannot even say that the readers can actually make any comments on her competence as we are not fully aware of any of the two cultures, but these theories can help us analyze her behavior to some extent.

To conclude, considering the extract one can say that Eva still needs to feel one with the English language and the culture. She needs to use the knowledge of her surrounding not as defensive as she does, but to fit into and feel motivated. Though the theories or taxonomies cannot be taken at face value as each of them have some aspects missing, a combined and overall general reviews can help us evaluate Eva’s intercultural competence.

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