Tolerance of ambiguity in advanced language learners and language professionals

Alexandra Rosiers, June Eyckmans
Ghent University, Belgium

In recent years socio-psychological language research has influenced the fields of translation and interpreting studies resulting in a growing interest in personality traits such as extraversion, emotional stability, self-efficacy and risk-taking as relevant constructs of translator competence and interpreter aptitude (Hubscher-Davidson, 2009; Jiménez Ivars, Pinazo Catalayud, & Ruiz i Forés, 2014). In an earlier study, we looked into personality differences in student interpreters, student translators and students in multilingual communication. Our investigation of five personality dimensions – social initiative, open-mindedness, flexibility, cultural empathy and emotional stability –, showed that student interpreters are more likely to take initiative in social encounters than the other two groups and that they also have a higher degree of emotional stability (authors, submitted). In this follow-up study, we focus on tolerance of ambiguity (TA). TA is generally described as the ability to manage situations that are new, complex or insoluble. These types of situations seem to be inherent to the translation and interpreting practice. In this study we used the Tolerance for Ambiguity Scale (Herman, Stevens, Bird, Mendenhall, and Oddou, 2010) to measure the TA of the three student populations (n=60) and two professional populations of interpreters (n=22) and translators (n=20). The results indicate a significant difference between interpreters and translators at the professional level. In this presentation, we will discuss these results and consider their relevance for training.


Keywords: advanced language learners, language professionals, tolerance of ambiguity.