

Bohdan Vasylenko

*Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design
(Kyiv, Ukraine)*

Kseniia Kugai

*Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design
(Kyiv, Ukraine)*

MACHINE TRANSLATION AS A MEDIATOR IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Machine translation has become a familiar part of everyday communication. It is used in messaging, travel, education, business, and online communication between people who do not share the same language. In this sense, machine translation is no longer only a technical instrument for converting words from one language into another. It increasingly functions as a mediator in intercultural contact, because it often shapes how people understand foreign messages, respond to them, and form impressions of speakers from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Busch, 2025).

The growth of artificial intelligence has made machine translation faster, cheaper, and more accessible. As a result, users can now participate in multilingual exchanges that would previously have been impossible without an interpreter or advanced language skills. It creates new opportunities for cross-border communication and expands access to information in different languages. At the same time, recent research shows that the growing presence of translation tools changes the very conditions of intercultural interaction, as communication no longer relies solely on direct human linguistic competence but also on algorithmic mediation (Busch, 2025).

One of the main strengths of machine translation is its practical usefulness. It can reduce communication barriers in international education, cross-cultural surveys, and multilingual digital environments. J. R. Kunst and K. Bierwiazzonek (2023) showed that AI-supported translation can, in some cases, produce results that are relatively close to human translations, especially when the source and target languages are structurally related. Their study suggests that translation technologies can support intercultural and

cross-cultural communication in contexts where speed, scale, and accessibility matter. This is especially important in global academic and professional spaces, where communication often needs to happen quickly and across multiple languages simultaneously (Kunst & Bierwiazzonek, 2023).

However, efficiency does not automatically mean intercultural adequacy. Machine translation still struggles with contextually appropriate translation, especially when language contains ambiguity, idioms, culturally marked expressions, or domain-specific meanings. A recent review emphasizes that high-quality translation is not only a matter of lexical replacement. It also depends on the ability to interpret context, disambiguate meanings, and preserve culturally sensitive nuances that are often crucial for successful understanding (Naveen & Trojovský, 2024). For this reason, the role of machine translation in intercultural communication remains double-sided: it enables contact, but it can also simplify, distort, or flatten cultural meaning.

This problem becomes especially visible when communication involves values, humor, politeness norms, or implicit social references. In such cases, a formally correct translation may still fail to communicate effectively. A sentence may sound grammatically acceptable, but pragmatically inappropriate. In intercultural communication, this matters because misunderstandings are not always caused by incorrect vocabulary. They often result from differences in tone, intention, or cultural expectations. D. Busch (2025) argues that AI translation tools create new intercultural situations that raise ethical and interpretive questions. In other words, the tool does not merely transmit meaning; it actively participates in shaping the interaction.

For this reason, machine translation should not be treated as a full replacement for intercultural competence. It is better understood as a support tool that can widen access to communication while still requiring critical human control. Research on machine translation in language education also supports this view. P. Urlaub and E. Dessein (2022) note that such tools may be useful in educational contexts. However, they should be integrated carefully, with attention to their limitations and the socio-cultural

complexity of language. Their argument is important not only for language classrooms, but also for broader intercultural practice: users need not only access to the tool, but also the ability to evaluate its output critically (Urlaub & Dessein, 2022).

Thus, modern machine translation plays an important but limited role in intercultural communication. It helps people communicate across languages more easily, opens new forms of interaction, and supports multilingual participation in digital environments. At the same time, it cannot fully reproduce cultural nuance, pragmatic intention, or contextual depth. Its most productive role is therefore not substitution, but mediation. Machine translation is most effective when it is combined with human awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and a critical understanding of what automated translation can and cannot do.

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