

INTERPRETARIAT ÎNTRE PRACTICĂ ȘI PROFESIE

INTERPRETING BETWEEN PRACTICE AND PROFESSION

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Abstract

Against the background of the twentieth century professionalization of interpreting, with a particular regard to the increasing academization of training, the paper reviews several stages in the evolution of interpreting studies. Completing the theoretical cornerstones of inquiry it outlines the fundamental issues in methodology focusing on the deductive-vs.-inductive and quantitative-vs.-qualitative distinctions.

Cuvinte cheie: *interpretariat, pregătire, aptitudini, standarde, condiții de lucru*

Keywords: *interpreting, training, skills, standards, working conditions*

The aim of this paper is to provide students and practitioners of interpreting with an accessible overview of interpreting studies as an academic field of study. In writing this paper I relied on my experience as a teacher of translation theory and practice and on my professional background as an interpreter in international conference and media settings.

The field of interpreting studies, which began to form a disciplinary identity of its own in 1990s, has been strongly shaped by conceptual and methodological approaches from other, more established disciplines. Analyzing its main ideas and theoretical frameworks presupposes an awareness of the disciplinary perspectives from which the phenomenon of interpreting has been seen and studied.

History of interpreting, despite the fact that it has never been a priority, has received increasing attention ever since the early 1960s. It all started when FIT (Federation Internationale des Traducteurs) envisaged a project to enhance the profession by revealing the contribution of translators to the history of humanity. Any attempt to present a historiography of interpreting is encumbered by some fundamental problems. Chief among them are the 'evanescence' of the activity, which does not leave any tangible trace, and its often low social esteem. For the most part, interpreting was a 'common' activity, in several respects, which did not merit special attention. The first book to be mentioned was written by Edmond Cary (1956) entitled *La traduction dans le monde moderne* in which he offered much information of historical interest in his chapter on what he called 'official' translation and interpreting, including military, diplomatic, administrative and judicial settings. Among the many articles and essays on the topic of interpreting and its history I would like to highlight the one written by Egyptologist Alfred Herman whose references on Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome had a great influence on further studies in the field.

But the most detailed and extensive study on the history of interpreting to date was undertaken in the late 1990s by Jesus Baigorri Jalon, a UN staff interpreter. Based on personal files and administrative records in the Archives of the League of Nations, Baigorri Jalon (2000) gives a detailed description of interpreting and interpreters at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Working with original documents found in these archives, he also reconstructs the origins of simultaneous interpreting and provides a step-by-step account of the way the idea for a 'telephonic translation system' was first implemented in the mid-1920s. Baigorri Jalon's history also covers the time between the wars and 'the interpreters of the dictators' and leads up to the Nuremberg Trials, when simultaneous interpreting is generally said to have come of age. That crucial event is also the topic of an in-depth study by Francesca Gaiba (1998) who used both judicial records and interviews with

interpreters to give a comprehensive description of the trials with the focus on interpreting arrangements and their effect on the proceedings.

Professional interpreting is situated in a particular social context, which places certain constraints on the activity. It is the dialectic between institutional requirements and expectations on one hand, and interpreters' performance standards on the other that gives rise to the level of professionalism prevailing in a given institutional setting. The emergence of interpreting as a recognized profession is closely associated with international conferencing in the first half of the twentieth century. The first paper on the subject described the work of interpreters at multilateral conferences on the basis of observations and personal interviews. Herbert's (1952) Handbook consolidated the professions' profile and AIIC (International Association of Conference Interpreters), founded in Paris in 1953, embarked on a successful drive to establish uniform standards for interpreting at international conferences, first in Western Europe and then throughout the world. The AIIC Code of Professional Ethics established standards of practice that became a widely accepted yardstick for consecutive and simultaneous interpreting in what remained loosely defined as conference-like settings. And it was these generic standards rather than the requirements of particular institutional settings that came to define the profession, and work in such diverse settings as international tribunals, private talks between heads of state, or television broadcasts.

The uniform approach to conference interpreting standards may explain why the role of institutional constraints in international settings has received very little systematic attention. Among the few exceptions is an effort by Carlo Marzocchi (1998) to highlight the specific of interpreting in the European Parliament. Work on use expectations also points out to setting-related constraints particularly for interpreting in the media. But media interpreting, while typically involving international input, is essentially set within the institutional context of a specific socio-cultural community and is therefore community-based as well as international.

The most explicitly constrained community setting in which interpreters have played a significant role for centuries is the courtroom. Legal provisions establishing standards of practice for court interpreting in Spain's colonial empire were enacted as early as the sixteenth century, and there is a long, if problematic, tradition of interpreter use in English courts. The constraints placed on interpreters in the legal system are often at odds with the standards promoted by the interpreting profession. Efforts have been made only recently, especially at Europe level, to bridge the gap between unrealistic institutional demands for 'verbatim translation' by 'invisible' interpreters on the one hand and a widespread lack of specific training and commonly accepted performance standards for judicial interpreting on the other. However, given the diversity of institutional settings in the legal domain (from police interrogation and asylum hearings to guardianship and domestic violence proceedings), the unique features of national legal translations, and the great variety of languages involved, the goal of uniform professional standards comparable to those prevailing for international settings is not likely to be achieved so easily.

More or less constrained by legal provisions, institutional requirements, educational opportunities, and mutual agreement, an 'occupation' takes shape as a 'profession' as the values and principles underlying expected and accepted behavior are codified and reaffirmed collectively by its practitioners. While most professional codes also specify performance levels, for example in terms of 'fidelity', 'accuracy' and 'completeness', their main concern is with practitioners' ethical conduct as members of the interpreting profession.

Written standards of conduct for interpreters can be traced back at least to the fourteen laws enacted by the Spanish Crown between 1529 and 1630 to regulate the behavior of interpreters in contacts between colonial officials and the native population. In contrast to such rules imposed by higher authority, international conference interpreters forging their profession acted autonomously when they adopted the AIIC Code of Professional Ethics in early 1957. At the core of this professional conduct and practice is a "Code of Honor" which consists of five articles, chief among them the principle of professional secrecy. The remainder contains detailed provisions concerning

“Working Conditions”, and these interrelate with the more specific “Professional Standards” formulated by AIIC to regulate the exercise of the profession.

For a practice or occupation to be acknowledged as a profession, it must be perceived to rest on a complex body of knowledge and skills, mastery of which can only be acquired by specialized training. Competence in interpreting can thus be defined as the relation between task demands (performance standards) and qualifications, and an understanding of the latter is crucial in general and interpreter training in particular.

Interpreters and psychologist have long pointed to a number of psychological prerequisites for those who would exercise the profession of interpreter. Based on interviews with twenty conference interpreters, whose performance he observed, Sanz (1931) listed a dozen qualities, including cognitive abilities (e.g. intelligence, intuition, memory) as well as moral and effective qualities (e.g. tact, discretion, alertness, poise). The list of personal prerequisites given by van Hoof (1952) for court, military, and liaison as well as conference interpreters includes physical qualities such as stamina and strong nerves, intellectual qualities, in particular language proficiency and wide general knowledge, and mental qualities such as memory skills, judgment, concentration and divided attention.

Several attempts to profile interpreter personalities with the help of standard psychological instruments have yielded little conclusive evidence. In a more recent line of investigation, psychological tests have been applied to discriminate between typical translator and interpreter personalities. Thus it was noticed that the dominant orientation for translators was towards ‘process’ and ‘people’, the typical interpreter was found to be ‘people-oriented’ and ‘action-oriented’, that is focusing on social interaction and ‘getting things done’.

The crucial starting point for the development of interpreting proficiency is bilingual skills which, according to the theory of translation imply a rudimentary ability to translate. It has been suggested that expertise in simultaneous interpreting is not a function of discrete processing abilities (such as working memory capacity) but a task-specific skills (selective processing, efficient output monitoring and allocation of working memory resources) which are acquired through extensive time-on-task training and, in particular, real-life experience. Beyond cognitive processing and task performance as such, expertise in interpreting also includes assignment-related insurrectional skills (e.g. in briefings and negotiations of working conditions) and strategies for knowledge acquisition, with or without the use of technological tools.

Technological advances since the early twentieth century have fueled the emergence of new forms of interpreting and extended the range of applications of interpreters’ skills. Since 1990, the confluence of telecommunications and digital data processing systems has had a major impact on professional practice, particularly in multilingual conference settings.

Spoken language interpreting in multilingual conference settings was revolutionized by the application of electro-acoustic transmission systems to carry speech streams simultaneously and over a distance, but essentially ‘on site’, to the respective recipients. Whereas the electric circuitry involved in SI was still a novelty worth detailed description in the early 1960, it drew little further attention in subsequent decades. And yet, soon after the establishment of international standards governing signal quality in SI equipment, the first experiments with sound and picture teleconference interpreting, carried only by UN bodies in the late 1970s, heralded the fundamental challenge of remote conference interpreting that was to confront the profession two decades later. Thus problems with signal quality in videoconferencing via terrestrial (rather than satellite) links have lead to renewed interest in transmissions quality and the evolution of technological standards. Aside from technical reasons, conference interpreters have mainly cited psychological grounds for opposing ‘tele-interpreting’ or ‘distance interpreting’ – that is ‘off site’ videoconference interpreting, without direct view of the speaker or the audience. In surveys of conference interpreters to elicit response to remote interpreting arrangements, problems like eye strain, fatigue, nervous tension and a sense of alienation, associated with a lack of motivation, are among the most common findings.

Ever since the 1920s, conference interpreters working in the consecutive mode have made do with such 'tools' as a notepad and a pen. A variant of the simultaneous mode involving the conversion of source-language speech into target language writing on an overhead projector was described by Paneth (1990), who suggested that projection from a PC might enhance the potential of this technique. While such "projected interpretation" has received little attention, it bears a relation to both the technique of 'live subtitling' and the ideas of employing interpreters for the on-line rendition of messages in multilingual Internet chats.

A radical innovation involves the use of digital recording technology to replace note-taking for consecutive interpreting. In what has been called "consecutive simultaneous" mode, interpreters use portable PC equipment to record the source speech on digital tape and then, replaying it into a headset, render it in the simultaneous mode. Similarly, digital memory has been employed for short-term processing support in the simultaneous interpreting booth. A repeat function included in some SI consoles allows the interpreter to replay the previous seconds of the source speech from a buffer memory and then catch up with the speaker's real-time delivery. More than digital speech processing, though, PC-based word processing, particularly of terminological and textual data, has been changing the working environment and techniques of simultaneous conference interpreters in their booths.

Interpreters are essentially involved in interaction and are therefore subject to a variety of constraints arising from the communicative situation and the environment in which they perform their work. Interpreters' working conditions, which are increasingly shaped by technology and involve a number of stressors, have given rise to concerns about occupational health. In the broader sense of 'employment conditions', investigations of professional practice focus on such industrial issues as level of compensation, treatment by employers, and amount of work—both in the sense of workload and underemployment. In conference interpreting, such issues have been addressed rather effectively by AIIC, which was after all conceived as a hybrid between professional body and a trade union.

In a more specific sense, interpreters' working conditions in a given assignment are shaped by the physical environment, including time and place; by task-related factors such as preparation, cognitive workload, and various input variables, and by inter-personal factors such as relations with team members, client feedback. Many of these have been the subject of further investigation, particularly among international conference interpreters. Jane Altman (1990) surveyed both Brussels-based staff interpreters and freelance AIIC members on factors which have an impact on performance quality, including the quality of sound transmission, availability of documents, density and delivery of the source speech, and visual access to the proceedings. The AIIC Workload Study, which addressed physical as well as physiological and psychological parameters in the professional practice of conference interpreting, was fundamentally concerned with sources of occupational stress and their impact on professional performance. As part of their more complex investigation the authors of the Workload Study surveyed some 600 AIIC members, whose responses indicated high levels of work-related fatigue, exhaustion and mental stress, and pointed to difficult source texts and speaker delivery, poor booth conditions and insufficient preparation as the most important stressor. The perception by interpreters that theirs is a highly stressful occupation was matched by objective measures such as blood pressure and heart rate. However, the feeling expressed by some of them that work-related stress causes a drop in performance quality, was not substantiated by an assessment of interpretation samples for meaning correspondence, linguistic correctness, and delivery.

The most "primitive" conception of interpreting, and of translation in general, is that of a process in which words in one language are converted into words in another language. The underlying assumption captured in the phrase *verbum exprime e verbo* is that words contain meanings and serve as the elementary building block of a language. Thus a speech made up of words in one language will be reassembled by the interpreter using target-language words with corresponding meanings, and the ease or difficulty of the task would essentially depend on the

nature of the verbal material. It is this conception which formed the basis of the dichotomy between translation and interpreting. It distinguished between the (written) “translation” of scholarly and artistic works on the one hand, and oral as well as written translational activity in the world of commerce (“interpreting”) on the other. The theory held that the language used in transacting business was so straightforward as to make interpreting “a merely mechanical task that can be performed by anyone with a modest proficiency in both languages, and where, so long as obvious errors are avoided, there is little difference between better and worse renditions.” (Schleiermacher 1997:227)

The idea of interpreting as a language-switching operation performed more or less naturally by any bilingual was held by Julius Wirl, a professor of English at the Vienna School of Business who was one of the first linguists to theorize about the practice of interpreting. Basing his explanation on the phenomenon of automaticity and inter-idiomatic relations, Wirl claimed that in the truly bilingual and thus perfect linguistic mediator, the two languages were inter-convertible at all times, thus enabling the interpreter to perform the task as an automatic reflex rather than an act of volition.

At a time when experimental psychologists were only beginning to explore the intricacies of cognitive processes, pioneers of conference interpreting describing their task started to place it in its communicative context. They stressed the interpreter’s function of enabling mutual understanding in the service of international communication. The interpreter’s task within a particular communicative situation was characterized as combining the activities of a listener and a speaker. Understanding (‘making sense of’) what had been expressed in a source language, and expressing the ideas grasped i.e. the ‘message’ appeared as the main pillar of the interpreter’s work. In the words of Seleskovitch and Herbert “to interpret one must first understand” and “each part of each idea should be expressed in the way it would normally be expressed by a good public speaker”. They also viewed translation as an analytical code-switching operation while they considered interpreting as a spontaneous and synthetic grasping and conveying of sense. The apparent antagonism expressed in phrases like ‘interpreting is not translating every word’, is still very much in evidence in the professional world.

In a broader translation-theoretical context, the sense-making vs. transcoding distinction, for which Seleskovitch also offered the simile of representing an object by a painting (= an interpretation) vs a photograph (=translation), also echoes the old-age dichotomy of literal vs free translation, and the preference for a meaning-based approach. Thus the idea of interpreting as ‘making sense’ does not capture an aspect unique to the interpreter’s task; rather its innovative force lies in the prominent role attributed to knowledge. Surely, the role of knowledge in making sense of an utterance is no less important in the target audience than in the interpreter. What is more, while the interpreter shares, to a sufficient extent at least, the socio-cultural background of the speaker whose message he or she needs to understand, the target audience does not. If the interpreter’s mission is to enable understanding, he or she must adapt the message to the audience’s prior knowledge, or cultural frames of reference, so as to ensure that it makes sense.

From the earliest writings on interpreting, imparting the requisite knowledge and skills to the next generation of professionals has stood out as an overriding concern. For most of the twentieth century, nearly all training programs and institutions were geared to spoken-language interpreting in multilingual international settings. With the clear goal of developing professional skills in consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, first-generation teachers of interpreting, themselves accomplished professionals, established a lasting tradition of training by apprenticeship; that is, transfer of know-how and professional knowledge from master to student, mainly by exercises modeled on real-life tasks.

Most interpreter training courses established since 1940s have featured roughly similar curricular components: basic concepts of language and communication, language enhancement (e.g. specialized terminology), ‘area studies’ (i.e. socio-cultural background knowledge), skills training in consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, and professional ethics. In addition to a focus on

international institutions and their terminology, conference interpreting training has also involved specialized subjects like law, economics, science and technology, either explicitly or indirectly through the choice of source texts.

The selection of suitable candidates for training has been a prime concern to interpreter educators across the different professional domains. In line with the widely accepted competence profile of professional interpreters, knowledge (of languages and of the world), cognitive skills (relating to analysis, attention and memory) and personality traits (including stress tolerance and intellectual curiosity) are expected of candidates for interpreter training to varying degrees, depending on the level and duration of a given training program. For conference interpreting, the basic principle is that language acquisition must precede training in interpreting, which makes the would-be interpreter's degree of bilingual or multilingual competence a fundamental criterion for admission. Although given less explicit attention, cultural knowledge and competence are generally considered equally indispensable and indeed viewed as closely interrelated with high-level language proficiency. Subject to legal provisions governing access to higher education in particular countries, a variety of procedures have been adopted by different institutions to test candidates for the knowledge, skills and personal qualities considered necessary to successfully acquire professional competence in interpreting.

For conference interpreting, traditional methods include holistic communicative tasks such as bilingual or multilingual interviews, impromptu speech production, and oral summary rendition in another language. Notwithstanding their validity for ascertaining a candidate's general knowledge and communicative language use, such aptitude tests have been criticized for their strong subjective component and, hence, lack of reliability. On the other hand, the use of translational tasks such as written translation, sight translation and written summary in another language, have been challenged for lack of validity as well as poor reliability.

In line with the overall teaching and learning goal of developing task-specific expert skills, interpreter training falls into three main subdivisions: consecutive interpreting with note-taking; simultaneous interpreting for international conferences; and dialogue interpreting in the community. While there is no clear cut distinction between short consecutive (as used in dialogue interpreting) and the 'classic' form of consecutive implying the rendition of at least five to ten minutes of uninterrupted discourse, consecutive interpreting skills are usually taken to be synonymous with the latter and thus closely linked to note-taking skills. All teaching approaches to this topic usually stress the need for preliminary exercises to enhance 'active listening', message analysis, and recall, including such techniques as 'clozing', 'chunking' and visualization.

Another area of emphasis has been public speaking skills for the production phase of consecutive interpreting. The most practical suggestions include sight translation and the use of videotapes for feedback on student performance. In an effort to test the effectiveness of public speaking exercises an experimental study has been carried out. Focusing on frequent faults of presentation, the study found clear evidence that specific training in public speaking (including breathing, voice control, and eye contact) raised students' awareness of their delivery and enhanced their presentation in consecutive interpreting.

In the complex skill of simultaneous interpreting preliminary exercises represent much more than training. It is imperative to introduce students to the crucial task demand of simultaneity, perceived as the skill of listening and speaking at the same time, by way of 'dual-task' exercises. These involve a listening task in combination with a second, different task, such as simultaneously counting backwards or reading aloud. A specific exercise in simultaneous verbal processing is shadowing, which is the immediate repetition of auditory input in the same language with either minimal delay ('phoneme shadowing') or at greater latencies ('phrase shadowing'). This type of exercise has both fervent advocates and staunch opponents. Much less controversial than shadowing have been preliminary exercises with a focus on content processing, such as simultaneous paraphrasing, shadowing tasks combined with close exercises, or simultaneous interpreting of well-known fairy tales.

Beyond the first stage of training designed to familiarize students with the techniques of SI, didactic proposals have emphasized the need to focus on the process rather than the product: to teach strategies, particularly for coping with lexical and structural difficulties and to create a training environment that is as close to real-life conditions as possible. The teaching of sight translations a specific form of interpreting in the simultaneous mode has received little attention despite the fact that, as in the case of a speaker reading a text that the interpreter has available in the booth, involves a high degree of complexity.

The skills required for dialogue interpreting ('liaison interpreting', bilateral interpreting') which may be practiced in the short consecutive or simultaneous modes have more to do with the dynamics of interpersonal interaction than with 'content processing' as such. The teaching methods developed for consecutive and simultaneous interpreting apply only to a limited extent. Areas of shared ground include note-taking, whispered simultaneous interpreting, and intercultural communication. A more specific, and unique, didactic focus has been the management of interactive discourse, with particular regard to turn-taking and role performance. On the theoretical foundation provided by discourse analysis and descriptions, role plays and simulations of interpreting scenarios have emerged as the key method for developing interpreting and discourse management skills which are sensitive to the purpose of the interaction and the constraints of a particular communicative context.

In addition to 'primary' interpreter training, educational effort which go beyond the focus on would-be interpreters' professional skills have emerged as important complementary pathways toward the goal of professionalization and improved professional standards. These include continuing education for practicing interpreters, training for teachers of interpreting, user education and training in research skills.

Concluzii

Looking back over the development of research on interpreting since the mid-twentieth century, one easily appreciates that the field has expanded in various ways and developed a more broadly shared sense of identity. As in many other fields, the use of a common language for academic communication and exchange, together with world-wide electronic access via the Internet, has opened up new channels for networking and cooperation. This communicative linkage has been essential to turning quantitative progress – more centers, theses, domains, approaches, countries – into qualitative changes in the field's structure and interrelations.

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