

## INTERPRETING FOR... ROMANIA THE CURRENT CHALLENGES OF THE INTERPRETING PROFESSION

### INTERPRETARIATUL PENTRU... ROMÂNIA PROVOCĂRILE CURENTE ALE PROFESIEI DE INTERPRET

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#### **Abstract**

*The interpreters are not supernatural individuals with outstanding skill and a perfect memory, however they are extraordinary in the manner in which they coordinate their efforts and push their limits in order to perform better all the time. The recurrent question in the literature of interpreting is to clarify the distinction between interpreting and translating. This article shall discuss the extent to which this is applicable to Romania, and shall focus on the loose distinction the local market makes between the two, affecting the status of the interpreting profession. We shall also deal with the topic of interpreting in general in all the modes as well as the challenges interpreters face in Romania today. We shall dwell on the realities of today's market and the manner in which the latter and the professionals manage to adapt to each other. We shall base our in-depth analysis from the provisions of a contract for interpreting services, and analyze the provisions that are most likely to be violated according to the authors' experience.*

#### **Rezumat**

*Interpreții nu sunt indivizi supranaturali cu talent extraordinar și memorie perfectă, totuși ei sunt extraordinari pentru maniera în care aceștia își coordonează eforturile și își dau silința pentru a fi întotdeauna mai buni. Întrebarea recurentă în literatura interpretariatului este de a clarifica distincția dintre interpretariat și traducere. Acest articol va discuta extrema în care acest lucru este valabil în România, și se va concentra distincția liberă pe care piața locală o face între cele două, afectând statutul profesiei de interpret. De asemenea vom trata subiectul interpretariatului în general în toate felurile precum și provocările pe care interpreții le întâlnesc în România astăzi. Ne vom opri și asupra realităților pieței actuale și maniera în care ultima și profesioniștii reușesc să se adapteze unul altuia. Ne vom concentra studiu pe analiza aprofundată a clauzelor unui contract pentru prestare de servicii de interpretariat, și vom analiza clauzele care sunt mai probabil de a fi încălcate conform experienței autorului.*

**Key words:** *interpreting, training, professional challenge, translator vs. interpreter*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *interpretariat, instruire, provocare profesionala, traducător vs. Interpret*

## **Introduction**

The aim of our paper is to present some of the challenges the interpreters in Romania have faced for the past years. Our aim is to emphasise the market and the clients' behaviour in relation to the hired interpreters as well as to raise their awareness alongside with the awareness of interpreter trainers and professors on the existing challenges. We selected the criteria analysed in this paper from the interpreting contract the authors normally use in their everyday business relations. Moreover the clients' approach vis-à-vis the interpreter is also supported by evidence from the theoretical literature in the field.

### **Perspectives on the profession: a translator an interpreter, or both?**

Translation and interpreting are commonly defined as the rendering of a message produced in the source language into the target language. Translation only refers to the rendering of written texts. Interpretation on the other hand is usually defined as oral translation. From this perspective, one of the most notable differences is that during the interpretation process the professional is not allowed to several attempts when producing a message in the target language, i.e. he/she cannot refer back to his/her text as the translator does. Another criterion differentiating between the two processes is the immediacy of interpreting, as the source language text is conveyed in another language "as we speak". The interpreters alternately use two languages at the same time and in the same place to broker communication. (Valdés, 2003, 58) In this context, the interpreter differs from the translator by the immediate manner in which he/she mediates between monolingual individuals.

In practice there are several types of interpreting carried out in different settings (court, meeting, conference) and there are different modes of interpreting, namely simultaneous, consecutive, liaison-interpreting and whispering. The interpreted discourse / speech is a continuous flow for which the interpreter must use and abuse his/her memory in order for the message to go be conveyed. (Cornea, 2011, 242)

Having highlighted the basic differences between the translation and interpreting process and pinned down the manner in which interpreting is performed, we shall deal with interpretation as a process and profession practiced in Romania focusing on some of the challenges of the professionals working in this field.

One of the most obvious issue when it comes to the profession is that although translation and interpreting are two different professions entailing two distinct sets of skills (Greere, 2010, 792), it appears that the authorization body licensing sworn translator/interpreters does not recognize the difference between the two occupations in Romania.<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Justice licensing the translators and interpreters keeps the record of 36886 translator-interpreters.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, other sources such as [www.traducatoriaautorizati.ro](http://www.traducatoriaautorizati.ro) contain lists of registered translators. In most cases the translators indicated that they performed interpreting activities, too. However the term *interpreting* (interpretariat) used could presumably refer to liaison.

Furthermore, the 2014 Classification of Occupations in Romania includes several occupations in interpreting and translation: one group includes a set of 4 interpretation activities and the other 3 translation-related professions with a somewhat blurry choice of words (Fazakas, 2015, 142). The nomenclature of economic activities in Romania also makes a difference between the two, calling interpreting "oral translation", and assigning one code to both.<sup>3</sup> Laypeople would propagate these vague differences, and would find it hard to pin down the difference between a translator and an interpreter.

This issue underlies one of the most common challenges the professional interpreters face: that of being mistaken for translators although the required skills are different. Either if born or

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<sup>1</sup> See the text of the license, which reads: autorizează pe .... ca traducător și interpret pentru limba/limbile ...

<sup>2</sup> Available on the website of the Ministry of Justice:

<http://old.just.ro/MinisterulJusti%C8%9Biei/Listapersoanelorautorizate/Interpretisitraducatoriaautorizati/tabid/129/Default.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> NACE code 7430: Activități de traducere scrisă și orală (interpreți)

made (Gile, 2009, 7), according to the literature in the field any interpreter besides solid language skills should have certain inborn abilities that the individuals outside the profession, i.e. the clients do not seem to grasp: quick reaction time, extroversion, good social skills, self-confidence, good presenting skills etc. (Válóczi, 2010, 29). All these skills make him/her different from a translator or a regular language-speaker. Interpretation as such and simultaneous interpreting even more so is a stressful adrenaline-filled profession requiring a set of linguistic and non-linguistic skills. The professional shall master all these skills in order to achieve his/her professional goals. He/she is no supernatural being but rather an outstanding individual coordinating his/her efforts and pushing his/her limits in order to fulfil a professional task successfully. (Cornea, 2011, 245)

The aforementioned convergent aspects, differences and vagueness in the choice of words and definitions are reflected in the manner in which the daily/hourly rates for simultaneous, consecutive interpreting, whispered-interpreting and liaison are negotiated and set. The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC)<sup>4</sup> bringing together 3,000 professionals from around the world published a list of rates to be observed by its members. On the other hand, in Romania due to the looseness and the interchangeability of the translation and interpretation concepts as well as the translator and interpreter professions, the lack of a comprehensive list of professional interpreters (performing simultaneous, consecutive interpretation and liaisons in any setting and context) and a representative professional organization similar to the AIIC prevent the professionals from setting a somewhat unified price range for their services. What is more, the rates charged on the Romanian market can be even as six-seven times smaller than the international rates set by the AIIC.

Furthermore due to these challenges the interpreters find it hard to enforce most of the provisions of the interpreting contract they sign with the clients. The latter generally consider the service overpriced and fail to pay any penalties that would normally be due for extra working hours.

### **Who needs a team anyway?**

*Team Interpreting* (TI) is defined as the use of more than one interpreter to provide communication effectively. When TI is used correctly, it prevents the premature exhaustion of the working interpreter. The TI approach is ideal for tasks lasting more than two to three hours performed primarily in the simultaneous mode but also for longer consecutive or liaison assignments.

Interpreting in general and even more so simultaneous interpreting implies *team work*, which must always be taken into account in the training process (Cornea, 2011, 245). Consequently a “made” interpreter would always be a good team player. When forming a team one should have in mind both certain objective and subjective criteria. Among the objective criteria we would mention the interpreters’ technical skills and the topic of the event, while an important subjective criterion is the relationship between the two interpreters (Toader qtd by Cornea, 2011, 245).

Although lately most clients seem to have understood the idea and the need for a team interpreting in a conference, there are still some who do not see the reason behind this need. Promoting TI in any interpreting context and for all modes is one of the hardest things a Romanian interpreter will have to learn to do as the practice in Romania differs from the practice in international institutions. When negotiating their assignments interpreters should support the idea of TI even though the views are not convergent on the matter. Some professionals who consider that TI should be applicable only to simultaneous interpreting<sup>5</sup>, there are others who support this concept for all the other modes: consecutive, liaison and whispering. Both clients and certain professionals believe that consecutive and liaison interpreting assignments can easily be performed by one interpreter. Although whispered interpreting is essentially simultaneous interpreting without a booth and is appropriate only for short meetings, the practice in Romania seems to challenge this

<sup>4</sup> <http://aiic.net/>. See also rates.

<sup>5</sup> See debates on the matter on [www.proz.com](http://www.proz.com) and [www.atanet.org](http://www.atanet.org). The latter support TI for court assignments, too.

idea. So, in some cases one could be required to perform whispering *alone* for a longer event (one or two days). Some clients consider liaison and whispering as means of saving precious financial resources as they would not pay for equipment, technical staff or a team of interpreters. We consider that another reason for this common practice would be the fierce competition among interpreters: some are open to accept any assignment for fear they might lose the job to other colleagues. This leads back to the lack of unified policy and a representative national association as mentioned in the previous subchapter.

In the light of this, the biggest challenge of the local interpreters is to have the client and the professional environment understand that interpreter fatigue is the most crucial element in the interpreting process. The literature abounds with statements about stress and consequently fatigue as being intrinsic to interpreting (Kurz, 2003, 53). The interpreters' brain will tire after constant use without proper rest irrespective of the mode. In all modes, the interpreters must comprehend complete thoughts, correctly rephrase sentences, identify ambiguities, take notes, preserve register, and block out background noise. All in all, as Gile put it "interpreters have to listen to speakers with much more concentration than is usual in everyday life", which leads to considerable stress.

Studies have shown that significant errors in meaning occur after 30 minutes on task in simultaneous interpretation.<sup>6</sup> After 30 minutes interpreters would need their break while they take place passively in the conference still paying attention to the discourse. This 30-minute rest is of the outmost importance for the interpreter to be able to provide acceptable quality further on.

The fatigue, the mental wear and the need for passive "work" in all modes are the issues that clients and professionals should become more aware of in order for TI to become a natural reality on the Romanian interpreting market.

In the following we shall present another challenge of the Romanian interpreters working on the local market, which is closely related to fatigue and stress. We shall focus on the working conditions the local interpreters encounter so many times, and the relationship between environmental factors and stress as well as how they can affect the interpreters' performance.<sup>7</sup>

### **Environmental factors – stress - performance**

Stress consists of the psychological processes caused by a perceived threat or danger. From a psychological point of view the phenomenon involves two components: (1) the experience of a threatening situation and (2) the uncertainty whether one will be able to cope with this situation. (Kurz, 2003, 59) Furthermore stress depends on the relation between the individual and the environment. It also depends on the subjective evaluation of the event, which is also linked with past experience.

Several empirical studies have confirmed that simultaneous interpreting is a stressful occupation in itself. Further studies have listed concrete figures and data on job stress and their close relationship with environmental factors.<sup>8</sup> Although there are significant individual differences in perceiving stress, scientific evidence suggests that certain working conditions are stressful for most people (e.g. heavy work load, long hours, lack of breaks, and the complexity of the job, unpleasant physical conditions or ergonomic issues). According to the NIOSH (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health) working conditions play a primary role in causing job stress. (Kurz, 2003, 51)

In spite of this most Romanian conference interpreters have faced hard working conditions at least once in their career. This is a source of stress that can hinder performance and accuracy of

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<sup>6</sup> The study conducted at the University of Geneva on court interpreters, providing further evidence to support the position that accuracy is directly related to the length of time one interprets.

<sup>7</sup> The authors themselves faced situations in which they had to interpret from pantries among boxes of food, in the hallway in noisy conditions without a booth, holding the console on their lap or in rooms without any visibility.

<sup>8</sup> Research project carried out by Ingrid Kurz at the University of Vienna on the psychological stress during simultaneous interpreting.

the work just as fatigue does. In our context poor working conditions would mean inappropriate setting, location, long tasks, fast or incoherent speakers, and faulty equipment.

What is more, the task of interpreters performing consecutive or liaison-interpreting is even more stressful from this perspective due to his/her position in the conference/meeting room. Another major cause of stress would be audibility, i.e. the position he/she sits/stands in and if he/she can hear the speaker well of he/she can be heard properly by the audience. If there is a sound system installed, it will generally be directed towards the audience and not the speaker, who does not need to hear his/her voice. Thus, the interpreter will find it hard to hear what the speaker says although he/she sits next to him/her.

Another issue is that no one seems to realize that the interpreter's hearing is further obstructed by the sound of his or her own voice overlapping the original speaker's at all times, creating an additional acoustical impediment. (Vidal, 1997, 6) The more experienced interpreters will interrupt to insist that the parties repeat their idea or sentence to improve the conveyed translated message. But in most cases the atmosphere does not allow for such interventions on the part of someone who should not obstruct the discourse.

In spite of all that Romanian interpreters do not seem to refuse to work in conditions which, to the observer at least, do not appear particularly stressful as interpreters in other countries would. (Grever, 1974, 161) In our opinion this is mostly due to the harsh competition on the local market, and the lack of awareness on proper working conditions.

For any interpreter irrespective of the mode he/she interprets in, a proper working environment also means to hold control over the events as uncontrollable or unforeseeable events are more stressful than controllable events. If we assert that interpreters have control over their working environment, certain prerequisites have to be met in order for them to be able to master the events around them. One of these requirements is to send out the conference support materials to the interpreters soon enough so that they can prepare for the assignment. This is a provision set forth by all contracts of interpreting the authors have seen. In the following subsection we shall address this issue as a challenge on the Romanian interpreting market.

### **Do we know it all?**

“The reason why conference interpreters manage to cope with the high demands of their profession is that they are experts in their domain. Through their training and experience they have acquired sufficient expertise.” (Kurz, 2003, 60) Expertise manifests itself, among other things, in the ability to process larger segments and allows the interpreter to react quickly.

However there are situations in which even experienced interpreters experience greater stress because they are confronted with unknown factors that might differ from what they have envisaged. Nevertheless the clients and the audience in general think that the interpreters either have got the script, the speeches of the event translated before hand and they simply read them or they know everything in any field (or at least they are supposed to).

What it is mostly ignored on the local market is that any interpreter no matter how experienced is supposed to prepare on the topics of the conference / meeting. He/she should read the documents the clients send out, make notes, write glossaries, try and memorise as much jargon as possible, which will help his/her work in the booth. (Cornea, 2011, 243)

Despite that, as Cornea also put it in Romania the interpreters receive the speeches on the day of the conference. (Cornea, 2011, 243) Or, as it happened to us, the speakers considered that if they had sent out their speeches beforehand, the interpreters had translated them in writing, which would entitle them to speak nay read as fast as they can. In many cases the interpreters are happy if they receive at least the agenda and the list of participants but there are also cases in which the agenda comes as a surprise factor, too. Nonetheless the clients' expectations are high as the interpreters must know it all. (Cornea, 2011, 247)

Interpreters are no super humans. They are but well-trained professionals who, like in any field, get better in time with experience and a lot of solid background preparation. The local clients

should understand that interpreters do not know it all but rather all they know is the result of though research work. Normality would be if the client took time for shorter or longer briefing sessions in which its representative would go in depth into the topic of the event for which the interpreter is needed. This way the latter could become more acquainted with the subject he/she is going to interpret about.

### **Conclusions**

The studied literature on interpreting emphasises that interpreters are highly proficient bilinguals in two or more languages who developed proficiencies, in combination with other attributes and characteristics allow them to carry out very difficult tasks under conditions of extreme stress. (Valdés, 2003, 68) In the light of this concise definition, this study lists a number of challenges the Romanian interpreters currently face on the market. In our article we have correlated personal and empirical evidence with bibliographical references as well as contractual provisions. In conclusions, we can ascertain that there is a set of key issues that the interpreters must tackle and solve in Romania in order to harmonize the status of the profession with the status of the practice abroad. As mentioned before the profession is not very well defined, translating and interpreting skills and competences are not well differentiated, which basically leads to all the challenges we have dealt with. Unfortunately this has also given rise to a certain lack of prestige. All the other challenges we have dwelt on are, in our opinion, a result of the blurriness of the concepts.

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