

## Towards Better Simultaneous Interpretation

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Interpretation is a (form of the translation) process whereby messages encoded as discourse in one language (source) are recorded as discourse in another language (target). At international conferences where delegates do not share a common language, two types of interpretation services are offered — simultaneous interpretation and consecutive interpretation.

Simultaneous interpretation conveys a message into another language (TL) at virtually the same moment in time as it is expressed in the first language. The interpreter begins speaking once he has heard a chunk or prepositional phrase in the stimulus passage in the source language (SL) and translates or interprets it simultaneously into his mother-tongue (ML) or target language lagging at most a few seconds behind the speaker. As he does this apparently simple task, he is in fact involved in a very delicate act of dividing his effort of concentration among a number of physical and mental activities namely listening, speaking, recall and monitoring of output to ensure its correctness.

Consecutive interpretation on the other hand is the re-expression of a speech into another language with the help of notes after it has been wholly or partially presented by the speaker, that is, when the speaker chooses to pause. The interpreter listens to the speaker delivering a message in a source language at the same time taking notes in the target language. In the world of conference interpretation today, the consecutive mode is rapidly losing out to simultaneous interpretation in popularity, being retained only at small gatherings where there is no booth equipment available and/or where the material treated is confidential and/or highly technical and where the number of working languages is restricted to two or at most three.

Simultaneous interpretation, the more dominant mode of conference interpretation today, is a recent phenomenon though the latter has been in existence for some time. It only really came into its own after its debut at the famous Nuremburg trials, with the increase in organisations of international cooperation and the ever increasing number of international conferences on cultural, social, political and scientific themes. Today simultaneous interpretation is almost synonymous with conference interpretation. Basically an oral communication process it differs from the normal process of oral communication in that the speaker, that is, the interpreter, who is a party to a trilogue does not initiate his own ideas but faithfully echoes those of his principal. At any one moment he has to cope in the most efficient way with the two parallel activities of receptive and productive linguistic functioning, something which is normally unknown in communication processes. A speaker in normal circumstances

is at any one moment either only listening or speaking. In the triangular communication process which is interpretation, the interpreter is the vital link, the channel through which people speaking different tongues arrive at an understanding of one another. The success or effectiveness of the communication process therefore depends on how well he performs, which in turn is determined by a number of factors. A good interpretation is the result of a careful balance between the effort at listening and analysis, the effort at reconstituting the speech and the effort at recall. Any perceptible increase in attention in favour of any of these efforts upsets the delicate balance and influences or jeopardises the quality of the interpreter's performance. An improvement in quality can therefore be brought about by reducing the problems at their source.

Most people are under the misconception that anybody who knows two languages can be an interpreter. This may be so in the early beginnings of interpretation when there were no trained or qualified interpreters around so that those in need of such a service were more tolerant. Today as the world shrinks to uneasy dimensions and competition gets stiffer as more professionally trained interpreters enter the market, there is an increasing demand for only the best. However, as Seleskovitch sees it, (Seleskovitch: 1978) even the best interpreter cannot perform his best if adverse circumstances prevent him from doing a first-rate job. Simultaneous interpretation is 'a complex form of human information processing involving the perception, storage, retrieval, transformation and transmission of verbal information.' (Gerver 1976: 107). It requires not only interpreters but also a good deal of equipment. Despite the progress in technology in the last decade or so, the sound quality of electronic equipment is still in a state which leaves much to be desired as far as the profession of interpretation is concerned. Many an experienced interpreter feels this is one factor which can make or break a good performance.

The replay of a recording often excellent to the ear may prove inadequate in simultaneous interpretation when the sound is reproduced to reach the ear through a headphone. Besides the interpreter speaks and listens at the same time which means his voice cannot drown out the voice of the speaker which he hears coming through his earphones. This means that he should be able to turn up the volume without distorting the quality of sound.

Claus Cartellieri in his article 'The Inescapable Dilemma. Quality and/or Quantity' (*Babel*, 1983) remarks that people have yet to look into the practical implications of the fact established by workers in the fields of physiology and psychology that, in general, information that comes into the right ear will be processed more effectively than information that comes into the left ear as it is mostly the left cerebral hemisphere that processes language input. He feels that interpreters could be helped by providing them with earphones that could be separately adjusted to the left and right ears as in some stereo headphones. To him an interpreter's

hearing is different. He has to concentrate more intently on vocal input and combine this with scanning the face of the speaker as 'the face-to-face contact is vital for finding out whether a native speaker of English for example, is giving a straightforward account of things or whether he is adopting a tounge-in-the-cheek attitude' (Claus Cartellieri: 1983). Optical feedback is vital to gauge the audience response, an important element in effective communication, the ultimate aim of the interpreter

'The interpreter needs to hear without having to listen'. (Seleskovitch 1968: 129). Poor technical conditions mean the interpreter has to make a deliberate effort to listen. Forced to listen closely, his attention is automatically diverted away from the analysis of the meaning while his attempts to piece together the sounds that make up the words prevent him from perceiving the semantic relationship between them and cause him to lose parts of the meaning. As soon as he has to make a conscious effort to perceive what is being said, his attention is diverted, his technique upset and he begins to give a literal translation instead of re-expressing the meaning of the message. He is no longer working up to par and the irritation he feels is a further source of interference which affects his concentration. Intellectual or emotional apprehension of a message depends on the ease with which it is perceived: instant comprehension only occurs if auditory perception is effortless.

Besides the interpreter's auditory perception has a dual focus: the speaker's voice as well as his own, which is why the quality of the sounds transmitted must be very good. He needs to hear his own voice in order to monitor the meaning of what he says. Sound helps to a certain extent in remembering. While interpreting the interpreter stores the meaning of an idea while expressing the previous idea. There is a short lag between the time the speaker speaks and the time the interpreter starts on that part of the speech. Often he has to retain words such as intranslatable terms, numbers, chemical formulae, proper names etc. during this short interval without actively memorising them or even attentively listening to them as such distraction would seriously impede the analysis of the meaning. Such short-term retention is no problem if sound quality is optimal. Human beings are endowed with an auditory system which has the faculty for preserving sounds for a brief period before transferring them to the mind or erasing them. With defective sound reproduction, this short term memory is completely lost. The interpreter is forced to reduce the time lag between his words and those of the speaker and tends to translate literally. The meaning of the speech becomes less clear to him, the task more difficult and fatigue soon overcomes him. Poor sound quality which prevents unconscious auditory recording from taking place is thus one of the causes of difficulty.

International conferences are places where all too often participants are unable to speak their native language because it is not one of the conferences' working languages. The interpreter's problems are com-

pounded by strange regional accents and unfamiliar pronunciations. Understanding and making out unfamiliar accents and pronunciations may be just a matter of time in face-to-face communication where there is no loss in transmission between the words leaving the mouth of the speaker and reaching the ear of the listener. And words become recognizable in spite of their unfamiliar pronunciation after some exposure. But the situation is different when those sounds are transmitted via electronic equipment. Some of the sounds may be lost altogether while those that do come through are pronounced so typically that they do not lend themselves to auditory reconstruction, an unconscious reaction of the human mind in its attempts to understand. It takes place whenever sounds are partially lost in transmission. Over the telephone, for instance, many of the words heard are, in part, reconstructed. One factor which speaks in favour of very high standards in sound transmission is thus auditory reconstruction. If the quality of transmission was better, simultaneous interpretation of a speech given in a language foreign to the speaker would pose relatively little problem.

The blame is not always entirely imputable to poor sound reproduction. Sometimes human factors play a contributory role too in rendering listening comprehension difficult and interpretation almost impossible. Ambiguity, confusion or lack of logic in the speech content, which can be regarded as a camouflaged form of linguistic interference reflecting differences in the conceptual orders and reasoning sequence, can be serious obstacles to listening comprehension. Ambiguity arises because the interpreter's knowledge, whether linguistic or topical, is not adequate to enable him to work fast enough through the polysemy of the language or the labyrinth of a complex idea. Complete linguistic competence must be taken for granted in interpretation: it is basic even though an interpreter needs to possess other qualities as well. An inadequate knowledge of working languages can affect his interpretative capacity with serious repercussions on the quality of his interpretation. He may fail to understand or even misunderstand the speaker's intention/message with the disastrous result of a misinterpretation. "For the interpreter, knowledge of language is not an end in itself, but the essential prerequisite for interpretation. . ." (Seleskovitch 1978: 73). As such he must know his languages thoroughly before he begins to practise the profession. Knowing a language means knowing it intuitively, with a feel for its structure, its oral expressions, its grammar, vocabulary, idiomatic expressions etc so that it is possible to understand a message from its inner logic even when a specific word has been left out. It means also being able to understand the language on the first hearing, to make out the language when it is spoken with an unfamiliar accent or intonation, for example, Bahasa Malaysia when it is spoken by a Frenchman or an Englishman as well as being aware of subtle differences within it, for example, the

differences in British English and American English, Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Malaysia.

A knowledge which is less than perfect would only spell disaster as the speed with which interpretation takes place makes it impossible for word-for-word translation. Besides, languages do not have an objective existence of their own, at least not in speech performance. Language such as described in grammars and dictionaries may yield many varied meanings under the scrutiny of the scholar, speech performance yields but one meaning to the initiated listener: the thing meant by the speaker. Interpreting which encompasses in the first place comprehending an oral message and secondly, restating it in another language requires constant creativity. To a great extent it is the 'verbal expression of things and ideas accompanied by the nondeliberate creation of temporary equivalents' (Seleskovitch, 1978). Interpretation is, in other words, the art of actual manipulation of languages. The goal of the interpreter is to transmit the message with total accuracy, i.e. to have his listeners understand it as well as it was understood by those who heard it directly from the speaker himself. To accomplish this he must do more than just understand the message in its entirety. Even the best analysis is worth nothing if it cannot afterwards be expressed in the appropriate words. Thus to be able to do a proper job the interpreter must be completely proficient in both the source language (comprehension) and the target language (expression hence communication).

According to Gerver there is a speed/accuracy trade-off in interpreting. (Gerver: 169, 162-183). When an interpreter is forced to cope with a very fast speaker he will intensify his coping behaviour to a certain limit over and above which the quality of his output will have to suffer. The interpreter will be aware of his coping behaviour because it is believed that he constantly monitors his output, matching it against input.

The effect of speed on quality brings us in fact to the next category of problems in this discussion. This category of problems impedes interpretation in the true sense of the word. They are problems arising from a speech being read instead of spoken. A read speech is often one that has been re-read, corrected and revised, that is the result of a succession of mental processes which began with an intuitive intent and resulted in the final version read at the meeting, and as such, is dense in content and delivered at a speed that makes no allowances for pauses, changes of pace, of repetitions which normally help to convey meaning and which give the spoken language its immediate intelligibility. A speech which is read is delivered at a much more rapid pace than a statement made off the cuff (approximately 200 words per minute as opposed to 150 words per minute in extemporaneous speech). In spontaneous speech a speaker needs to perform three mental operations at the same time: think about the thoughts to be conveyed, express each idea aloud and organize and shape the following thought on the basis of what has just been said.

The interpreter has to try and make sense of a speech regardless of the speed, mode and style of delivery of the speaker. But comprehension of a speech is to a large extent dependent on the way it is expressed. Hence a fast speaker or one who reads his text at an incredible speed is likely to have his speech poorly interpreted, that is, with substantial consequential loss in information/content as omissions on the part of the interpreter become unavoidable with errors occurring at various linguistic levels such as semantic and syntactic. Interpretation becomes literal as the speech is rendered at a pace too rapid to permit accurate perception, analysis and understanding. The interpreter cannot pause to think as it only means losing out on the following segment of stimulus input. Thus his interpretation cannot be expected to be complete or even accurate much as he would like or want it to be. Errors in perception are also likely to occur as the interpreter has to catch up with the speaker and does not have the luxury of a time lapse to register/recognise a particular message component. Having to keep pace with the speaker he might also misregister/misrecognize a particular message or message component (Cokely: 1982, 7). While producing the target language equivalent of the original message he either makes production errors at the semantic or syntactic level or adds extraneous information to the interpreted message. Interpreting a read speech is in fact a special kind of interpretation activity as the interpreter is generally given a copy of the written text which means he is expected to do an 'on sight' translation. This type of 'simulated' interpreting is justified by practical demands and calls for special methods to prepare the text. The problem is not so much a case of overloading the memory but of a time lag between the original and the interpretation that is getting increasingly longer. To narrow the gap the interpreter gives up trying to understand the speaker, he leaves his sentences unfinished, becomes breathless and frustrated and is happy to translate a word or two correctly here and there or he may simply switch off the microphone. It is a generally recognised fact that the quality of interpreting suffers at higher input speed levels. In her doctoral thesis entitled 'Lectures et Improvisations' Karla Dejean-Le Feal made an analysis of the differences between simultaneous translation of a read text and that of spontaneous speech; the conclusion was that read speeches are more difficult to interpret simultaneously than spontaneous speech because of their density in terms of content and complexity in structured thought, the rhythm at which they are delivered and the absence of *ideation*, that is to say, the elaboration and structuring of reasoning accomplished by the speaker as he improvises. (Karlal Dejean-Le Feal: 1978).

Simultaneous interpretation is not completely simultaneous. A variable time lag exists between the interpreter's perception of the source language message and his subsequent production of the target language version. This time lag (also known as *decalage*, ear-voice span or phase shift) varies anywhere from several hundred milliseconds to as much as 10

seconds 'depending on the individual interpreter's manner of working and depending also on the nature of the material and the rate of speech of the original speaker.' (Chernov: 1978, 78).

The duration of the time lag is determined by a number of factors, not the least of which are differences in the grammatical structures of the source and target languages. If an interpreter does not take the time to make the necessary adjustments in linguistic structure, the resulting interpretation is certain to seem unnatural and possibly even incomprehensible. On the other hand, the interpreter cannot afford to wait so long that he forgets part of the message. The capacity of his short-term memory is not infinite.

The only possible solution to this serious problem is to give the interpreter the opportunity of thoroughly reviewing the documents which are to be delivered at a conference, that is, sufficient preparation. Preparation is indeed the key word to successful interpretation whether it be in the case of a novice to the profession or an interpreter with years of experience behind him. The more prepared the interpreter the better are his chances of doing a job well. No interpreter in fact can afford to walk into a conference without prior preparation in terms of subject/area reading, previewing documents and prepared speeches, looking up terminology or a list of participants etc. Preparation should not be limited to conferences dealing with technical subjects because given the speaker's long years of work in his field, he will always be more knowledgeable than the interpreter about the subject at hand. Consequently, there are no conferences for which the interpreter does not need to prepare.

Furthermore, preparation is linked with another very important feature of successful interpretation which is anticipation. Interpretation of speaker intentions depends on adequate knowledge of the environmental, social, linguistic and conceptual background plus consideration of the speaker's goals and attitudes. Above all, interpretation which is language comprehension requires the integration of information from many different sources. Notwithstanding all these, the degree to which an interpreter/listener understands the oral message (perception of speech) depends not only on his knowledge of the original language and on the relevant knowledge he possesses of the subject under discussion but also on his awareness of what has already been said and what a given argument is endeavouring to demonstrate and to refute; this understanding of the situation will, in turn, modify the initial factors and enable him to predict the conclusion of an utterance before it is stated by the speaker. Anticipation also known as 'probabilistic prediction' (Chernov 1978: 114), 'probabilistic inferences' (Gerver 1976: 194) or the 'intelligent or educated guess' (J. Coughlin, *Babel*, Vol. XXXI No. 1/85: 20-26) is so important that certain circles even consider it the foundation of interpreting proficiency. Claus Cartellieri, for example, is of the opinion that successful anticipation ranks among the essential features of good interpreting and that an interpreter may be correct in 98% of his predictions, given some

plains the ability of an expert to immediately make out 'iron' or 'ion' in a discussion on corrosion, for example, where the two words occur in a similar a context and are pronounced identically. The sense understood by the listener/interpreter is thus based on his pre-existing knowledge on the one hand and indications given by the meaning of the words of the message on the other. However, even in the case of a listener who is an expert on the subject in question, physiological factors such as intellect, concentration ability and fatigue may limit the rapidity with which the ideas can be processed. The time that the listener/interpreter has for analysis of the speaker's meaning is thus an important factor in comprehension.

In the final  
tion process is that it enables the interpreter to cut down on his effort at listening and analysis and to devote his energy to the production of the message in the target language and to recall, without any loss or adverse affect on the overall balance of concentration. The question of better simultaneous interpretation is essentially a quality issue. Delineated here for closer examination are the major factors which can affect an interpreter's performance resulting in a job well-done or the reverse. An awareness of these factors can help an aspiring or trainee interpreter to realise where the dangers lie and what his strengths and weaknesses are so that he is better able to correct himself and improve upon his performance producing what could ultimately be considered good interpreting. Good interpreting has so far defied  
though people will readily offer judgement. Quality in interpreting may be said to be quantity determined, that is whether an interpretation could be regarded as good or satisfactory depends on how much of the input (discourse in SL) has emerged as the output (the message in TL). Obviously, if the quantity of information lost or not reproduced is substantial then the interpretation cannot be considered good. On the other hand, some people claim that to be really good one should maintain a certain speed and not be shaken out of it by whatever a speaker may come up with. This would entail dropping of the subject matter (quantity) in order to keep up external beauty of presentation (quality).

There is indeed a need to reconcile these two sides of the same coin in order to develop some kind of reliable quality criteria for assessing an interpretative performance.

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