



Interpretation: A tool beyond boundaries

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Abstract

Interpreters have existed for a long time in history and their work can be appraised today in international events all over the world. Thanks to them, leaders from different countries can communicate, make agreements, make war and peace. Still, this field of work seems to be unfamiliar to most people, as there are few opportunities to do actual professional services in real life situations in Chetumal. The proposal of this article is to provide the reader with the most important aspects of this type of work. In consecutive interpretation, the speaker says the speech in the source language for approximately five minutes, and then the interpreters provide an “oral translation” of the message into the target language in consecutive fashion. The topics that will be covered in this article are the following: the difference between interpreters and translators, some of the areas in which this kind of job is developed, requisites or aptitudes interpreters should have, and the Dos and Don'ts in this job. Some practical exercises for interpreters to help them with their work will be mentioned. These exercises were carried out as activities during the 2007 spring course of Translation IV. The authors of this article were part of this course as students of the English Language Major in which they obtained experience regarding the process of interpretation.

1. Translation ≠ Interpretation

When looking for the definition of translation and interpretation terms in dictionaries the first is the easier one to find. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, for example, translation is defined as “a rendering from one language into another”; in a translation journal the definition is clearer: “translation is, above all, an activity that aims at conveying meaning or meanings of a given-linguistic discourse from one language to another. . .”(Zaky, 2000). However, when it comes to finding the definition of interpretation the search turns into a difficult task, and the tendency is to describe it as “oral translation”.



For those who are not specialized in the area of interpretation, it is very common not to make a distinction between an interpreter and a translator. Even if it has been argued that an interpreter does an oral translation, the characteristics of this job clearly differ from that of a translator. The differences go from the cognitive skills to the use of distinctive tools. Despite the fact that some unusual individuals can perform both roles just as easily, it is not a rule that a translator could be an interpreter or vice versa. Each requires a specific set of skills and aptitudes, and most people are better suited for one or the other. Perhaps the main difference between them is the time available for performing; unlike translators, interpreters have to deal with fleeting messages which they have to convey orally under time constraints, with very little room for error repair or stylistic improvement. So, even though the two terms, translation and interpretation are often confused, they represent two distinct ways of working with language. (Zanier, 2006).

2. Crossing boundaries

Referring to interpreters as a tool is to talk about the importance of their role in the world. Throughout history, evidence of the great importance of the interpreter has been found. Since the beginning of social structures, like tribes, there have always been interpreters who became the unifiers among them. Their role has been essential and they have been present in the most important events in the development of civilization.

Nowadays, in an expanding globalized world, the need of communicating among cultures is more significant; therefore, there is an increasing demand of specialized people who can create a bond among people's languages. Along with the technological advances, the closer contact among nations is unstoppable; nevertheless, the variety of languages represents a barrier that should be broken with a tool that is careful of the fragility that it involves. This tool takes the form of interpreters who are the vital links in the vast chain through which knowledge is being transmitted between groups of people separated by language differences.



They build bridges between nations, races, cultures and continents; bridges between past and present, too. (Joly, 1995)

3. Types of interpreting

In order to understand this profession better and the responsibility it implies, some important points must be elucidated. Firstly, interpreting is not exclusive of a single form. As broad as the context in which it occurs, interpreting is divided into several types of carrying out the job. There are different ways to classify the types of interpreting; however, most authors agree with the following categorization: *Liaison* interpretation, Simultaneous interpretation and Consecutive interpretation. The last two are considered as the conference interpreting style. According to Mario León, a well-known Spanish interpreter, the definition for the first type could be as follows: “La interpretación de enlace la desempeña un intérprete para que se entiendan oralmente dos personas que hablen distintos idiomas, o una persona y un pequeño grupo o dos pequeños grupos. Los parlamentos son cortos y en forma de diálogo. El intérprete debe conocer los dos idiomas por igual, y su lenguaje coloquial debe ser fluido.”(León, 2000). The French word *liaison* which means “link” is used as equivalent for this type that has the function to unite two or more speakers in a more private setting.

Simultaneous interpreting needs ad hoc equipment and it is performed at the same time the speech is being given with the aid of electronic devices; there is no time to take notes. For some, this is the most appealing style, and it is widely known thanks to the image interpreters for international organizations like the UN, and UNICEF, among others, communicate to the outside world.

This paper is directed to consecutive interpreting, a branch of the conference interpreting type, whose characteristics are the following: it doesn't require specialized equipment, and the interpreter has the opportunity to listen to sections of the speech, take notes and reproduce the message in the target language with the interpreter's particular ability to link the parts of the speech. It is generally used in working dinners and official meetings at top levels. It usually makes meetings longer, since interpreters translate when the delegate or speaker



has finished speaking. However, there are occasions in which consecutive interpreting is really useful, such as in negotiations, court, press conferences, and small-scale technical meetings where both parties may wish to verify themselves that their messages have been properly understood by their counterparts. (Zanier, 2006).

It is worth mentioning that consecutive interpreting is the most frequently used because of its practicality. This type of interpreting does not involve high costs since the instruments used are affordable to everyone. Nevertheless, the interpreter who works in this area has to have speech production skills and the courage to speak to an audience.

4. Skills and tools

Any person willing to work as a conference interpreter must have some cognitive skills which would make the performance successful:

1. An excellent knowledge of the source and the target language (i.e. English and Spanish)
2. The ability to grasp rapidly and to convey the essential meaning of the discourse.
3. A memory which recalls the links between logical sequences of the speech.
4. The ability to convey information with confidence, coupled with a pleasant delivery.
5. Broad general knowledge and interests, and a curiosity and willingness to acquire new information.
6. The ability to work as member of a team.
7. Competence to work under stress for long periods because in certain cases the execution is affected by the workload.

Some of these characteristics can be developed through practice and training while some others are considered inborn skills which not everybody has.

In the long and generally stressful process of interpreting, it is necessary for interpreters to have certain means to help facilitate their job. A resource in the



consecutive interpreting style which relieves the short term memory is the use of notes. Note taking may sound like a simple and common process; however, for the interpretation area, it requires the appropriate materials to make it convenient and easy. A stenographer's note-pad is recommended, as well as some sheets clipped at the top; these should be written on only on one side. A ball-point pen is the best option to write notes; pencils are not recommended as they slow down the writing procedure.

In order to make the notes easily readable, the creation of a code is necessary. A code is a set of symbols and abbreviations that can be both created by the interpreter or adapted if the interpreter is part of an organization which has already developed its own code and asks the interpreter to learn it (especially if they are going to interpret as a team). The use of a code helps the short term memory to recall information that might be lost by the load of information the speaker is providing. It's important to keep in mind that the interpreter is in fact doing several intellectual activities in a very brief piece of time, and sometimes the attention can be affected by a minute factor. Therefore, note taking becomes a memory pill and a breath of fresh air to the interpreter's mind.

There is one thing the interpreter should not forget to do before a conference: requesting from the organizers the papers, the first drafts or at least, the summaries to be presented. This is of paramount importance as this facilitates the study of the topics to be covered in the conference or meeting.

Other practical tools for interpreters are glossaries. These can be personal ones, or obtained from colleagues who have worked in the area before. Nowadays, there are plenty of websites which have long lists of free glossaries in different fields. They make interpreters feel confident when dealing with new terms and the team works better and faster.

In general, one must take advantage of all the possible resources available. Technological devices such as laptops, electronic dictionaries, among others, might be stupendously helpful to the professional interpreters. If they develop a good management of the personal skills together with the adequate use of the tools mentioned above, then, an optimum achievement in the job will be achieved.



5. Professional Interpreters

Professional interpretation is a job that demands a lot from the performers, not only from their mental abilities, as has been mentioned before, but also from their physical appearance. In a conference, interpreters need to have a good, clean and neat appearance, but should also consider some proper behaviour; “en cuanto más extrovertido, y más seguro de sí mismo y más cuidado haya puesto en su apariencia, tendrá mayor credibilidad por parte del público”(Torres, 2005).

In general, some of the formal elements that must be taken care of are:

1. *Appearance*: Interpreters have to have a neutral image. Clothing has to be properly chosen according to the event. Nowadays, a suit is widely recommended for professionals in this area; nevertheless, a different image would be accepted if there is a conference about rap music. In general, discrete haircuts are advised. Avoid wearing distracting objects like piercings.
2. *Posture*: As interpreters become the speakers when they have to transmit the message delivered by the original speaker, audience attention is focused on them for periods of time. They have to sit straight, but comfortably, so as to be relaxed enough to take notes while listening to the speech. It is not acceptable to cross legs or sit at the edge of the chair.
3. *Behavior*: Gesticulation has to be none or little. When someone waves hands and arms while speaking, it distracts people’s attention; this is a resource that is used to reinforce arguments, but a good speaker should not need such. Some advice: do not play with a pen or move legs nervously. Tics can be imperceptible in many cases, but there are some like the foot tapping or knee movement that show that the interpreter is anxious, and as a result, these tics become distracters to the audience; more importantly, it looks as if the interpreter wants to run away from the job. Finally, one must try not to hide in the notes and should look at the audience when speaking.
4. *Diction*: This is the most important one: what is said and how it is said is the ultimate reason for the job of interpreters. Pet words or phrases must be



avoided. Full phrases have to be conveyed; the public cannot understand half ideas. The Interpreter's voice has to be clear and loud enough so that everybody in the room can hear; an appropriate tone of voice for each situation is a must. The interpreter should emphasize what the speaker emphasizes but should be careful to avoid getting more attention than the speaker himself. Do not try to make up information or give extra facts which are unnecessary, cough nervously, or use "uhum" constantly. One ought to know how to use the microphone in order to keep from making strange noises through it.

Apart from these last important considerations, there are others which are essential to the professional interpreter. It is strongly recommended to arrive an hour before the meeting in an attempt to get acquainted with the organizers and the speaker(s). Interpreters can take advantage of this precious meeting time to ask questions and clarify points. Moreover, the program of the conference and a list of the participants should be requested as well. Lastly, interpreters have to check the conference room to decide where the best place to stand is and do a sound check before starting.

6. Exercises

It is usually true that the interpretation ability is only developed through years of practice while in some people this is an inborn skill; however, there are plenty of exercises that are helpful to people working in this sphere of activity. For practical reasons, just some of them will be mentioned below. The categorization of these training tips is as follows:

6.1 Short-term memory exercises

There are several forms in which the interpreter can 'train' the memory. In order to activate memory, people usually resort to some techniques:

Associations: This strategy helps a person to remember by associating ideas with others. For instance, if we had to remember what we ate yesterday, we



would also have to remember where we ate and who we ate with; if we recall the last two, the memory we want will come more easily. For interpreters, the use of this strategy assists them to organize their ideas, so they can transmit them to the audience in the correct order.

Organization by sets: It consists of organizing the information by units; they could be small or big. An excellent example of this kind is trying to remember telephone numbers; some individuals create sets of two or three numbers to recall the whole number. Interpreters could store sets of parts of the speech instead of trying to remember it by individual units; this would make it easier to retain.

Visualizations: These could be mental images or real (symbols in note taking). These have to represent concepts to facilitate evocation and activate memory.

6.2 Diction exercises

The next are some ways to strengthen our speech skills:

Synonymy exercises: It is the substitution of parts of a text while reading it. In this excerpt from *Manual de Traducción e Interpretación* by Mario León the apprentices have to substitute the words in bold:

“Vivo hundido **sumiso** en el ritmo del día, cada vez igual al de **iguales** días, como en una carrera de etapas **constantes** en la que hace mucho quedó atrás el **fatídico** umbral del cansancio, en la que sigo corriendo **afanado** porque mis piernas ya no son mías, sino de la **maldita** carrera.” (León, 2000)

By forcing the mind to find the synonym for a specific word we help to make the speech process less difficult for the interpreter. It would be easier for them to find “the word” they were looking for when passing on the ideas to the public. This kind of exercise can be done orally while listening to other speakers.

Improvisations: This strategy consists of improvising speeches about any topic. The speech should be 10 minutes long, and it must be recorded. People become surprised when they listen to the way they speak and try to do interpretation of their own speech! It is excellent practice which helps us find out



how clearly we speak and what kind of pet words/phrases we have when trying to explain a subject.

There are other techniques that are aids for interpreters; even doing simple things like watching a TV show in a foreign language and trying to interpret the speech as accurate as possible could be definitely helpful. Also, there are other activities which might be of paramount assistance: being informed about the latest national/international events, doing regular reading in the working languages to enrich vocabulary, watching television and movies, going to the theater, etc. Interpreters need to have a constantly expanding knowledge of world affairs, and what can be loosely described as “general knowledge”, is an important component in their make-up. (Zanier, 2006)

7. Why are interpreters important?

“Interpreters can achieve astonishing results which inspire respect and admiration, given the many and complex factors with which they must cope.” (Seleskovitch, 1978). They can be the result of the signing of a million-dollar business contract, or the applause of the audience in a wonderful conference.

They should be appreciated by the work they do and represent. People who are not involved in this area tend to forget the amount of time that is spent in preparing for a conference and sometimes make fun of the little slips they have while performing their job. At the end, they are the voice of a speaker, the means to understand a topic. An interpreter is, more than anything else, a link. They are links that make communication possible not only among people, but among cultures, personalities, thoughts and projects. Their job can make the difference between war and peace in this world; they are a tool beyond all different kinds of boundaries.



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Biodata

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