

THE ROLE OF INTERPRETERS IN COMMUNICATION

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Interpreting in the globalised world

It is a fact that global communication becomes more and more intense, as time goes by; multinational corporations with their members travelling on a regular basis, international institutions like the EU or the UNO, people choosing to spend their holidays abroad, immigrants trying to integrate in foreign societies and so on. All such activities are motivated by or at least concern economic interests. These mobility flows desire to benefit from the economic advantage of a foreign country, which is scarce or not apparent in their own country, such as raw materials, agriculture, heavy industry, tourism, fishery or job opportunities. All these bring nations closer. But these unique characteristics on economic terms are also irrefutable parts of identity on cultural terms; they shape the particular mentality of the society and are obvious in the way of life. That is why we can conclude that globalization is both an economic and a cultural process that **implies the interrelation between economy and culture**.

The advent of the globalising era constituted part of the work of scholars, like S. Huntington (“The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order”)¹. These scholars referred to the new international order on both economic and cultural terms. Besides the theory, it is a fact that we should face the new global context, part of

¹Huntington, Samuel P., “The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order”, New York, Foreign Affairs, 1996.

which is our culture, and move on to consider the re-definition of our identity in it. But we should also keep in mind that **language belongs to the immaterial culture of every cultural group**. It constitutes an integral part of every culture and nation. Language not only gives people the ability to communicate and declare their identity, but also embodies the culture itself; language works as a mirror that reflects the cultural characteristics of each ethnic group. And as cultures constantly change and develop -which is a natural process, languages do the same. But now world order seems to follow a global-oriented direction. So, this natural development of cultures takes place in a globalised context and wavers between local characteristics and global dynamics. That is why we can do nothing else but wonder what our languages will turn out to be and to what extent global forces will affect the development of their distinctive features; whether cultural globalisation will reinforce diversity of the unique character of nations or whether the fears of homogenisation will become true.

This is the point where interpretation starts playing the primary role. In the context of global communication, interpreters work in order to help speakers of every nation to get their message across and convey their ideas. The “dialogue of cultures”, which presupposes equal partnership and mutual respect among nations; this dialogue can enable all partners to gain from each other’s experiences. Through interpretation we can foster a greater cultural dialogue and we can exchange our cultural characteristics, so as to better comprehend our differences and finally find a way **to use exactly these differences in order to achieve common goals**. That is why culture-and language- should not be understood as an element of separation and conflict, but as a connecting factor which brings people together.

The prerequisite of trust

But then another issue occurs. Innumerable references internationally have been dedicated to the distrust against interpreters regarding the accuracy of the transmitted message and the faithfulness to the words of the speaker whose message they interpret. This distrust was present not only in the past but is also present today. We can find examples in the First Opium War between Britain and China (1839-1842), when the interpreter Gutzlaff was accused of giving the impression of being a spy;

without even being clear which side he was on.² His colleague Bao Peng had then been characterised as a “liar” and even a “traitor” by the British side.³ And a recent example: in 2003 in Iraq many suspected the interpreters of tampering during interpreting.⁴

We can easily conclude that interpreters can enjoy respect only when they use their knowledge in the framework of trust during the process of communication. In other words, assuring trust among the interpreter and the dialogue parties is a prerequisite for achieving the goal of communication through the interpreting process. Because only when the dialogue parties feel trust about the clarity of the transferring messages, they can express themselves as if they were talking the same language, without having any doubts for the interpreter tampering the meanings. That is why the “transparent” and “neutral” role of the interpreter is a *sine qua non* for the communication.⁵

The *invisible* presence of the interpreter

With the terms “invisibility” or “transparency” of the interpreter we mean that the interpreter contributes to the communication only with the transfer of the ideas expressed from the one dialogue party to the other, without interacting himself anyhow with the parties. The main reason justifying this strict attitude is the protection of the interpreter from the possible “attacks” by the dialogue parties accusing him of altering the meanings, as well as his exemption from undertaking the responsibility for any possible final decision at the end of the communication process given that he is an “inactive” speaker, a simple deliverer of others’ ideas, a *neutral* interpreter.

However, how inactive this *inactive* speaker is, is a relative issue. This relativity regarding the role of the interpreter indicates the need for a clear definition of his duties. Because only the guideline of neutrality does not solve the problem; in fact, it may complicate it even more.

² Wang-chi Wong, p. 47.

³ *ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴ Palmer, p. 20.

⁵ Le & Ménard & Van Nhan, p. 93.

This need for the exact definition of the interpreter's role is being highlighted by many researches, like that of Anderson, according to which whatever the interpreter does, one of the communication parties tends to be disappointed by the interpreting.⁶ Other researchers that focused on the role of the interpreters during the communication process are Le, Ménard & Van Nhan⁷ and Davidson⁸, as well as Pöchhacker who refers to a "neutral identification" of the interpreter with the speaker; in other words he says that the interpreter has to be in the middle of the interaction of the communication process without being influenced by it. In the research of Angelleli regarding the role of the interpreter we find an interpreter stating; "A professional interpreter has to be neutral. His job is to facilitate communication. Nothing else..." At this point we can add the so-called *conduit* interpreting model of Reddy (1979)⁹, which defines interpreting as a process seen through the speaker of the source language; that means that the interpreter has to focus on the ideas expressed by the source-language speaker.

The *visible* interpreter has the final say

No matter how hard the interpreter tries to be neutral and passive in the dialogue process, he takes part actively in the communication. Even the general guideline that the interpreter has to be "neutral" indicates that the presence of the interpreter is so obvious, that he himself has to try to remain "inconspicuous". To be more specific: even the selection of the words in order to express the ideas of the speaker in the target language consists of an active decision-making by the interpreter, since every word has a social –or even political- profile.¹⁰ Apart from that, since interpreters choose what to say and how, they make direct decisions, and as decisions, they can't be anything else but subjective!¹¹ Davidson adds that interpreters cannot be neutral language machines because they are confronted with two language systems that do not perceive in the same way the information of each context.¹²

⁶ Anderson, p. 212.

⁷ Le & Ménard & Van Nhan, p. 96.

⁸ Davidson, p. 402.

⁹ Wadensjö (1995), p. 113-114.

¹⁰ Kaufman, p. 544.

¹¹ Vermeer., p. 101.

¹² Davidson, p. 401.

Besides, the process of interpreting itself orientates the “interpreting product” to the receiver of the message in order to achieve the communication between the dialogue parties. As a result, the neutrality of the interpreter regarding the transfer of the ideas expressed by the speaker in the source-language is being limited by the need to choose the way of interpreting everything, determining that way if the dialogue parties will communicate successfully.¹³ In other words, interpreters cannot focus only on the source-language-speaker in order to remain neutral; they should keep in mind the target-language-message-receiver that has to understand the ideas expressed in another language system. Consequently, neutrality has to give place to the communication target.

To be invisible or not to be?

The opinions conflict and interpreters –especially the new ones– do not know if they should be absolutely invisible or if they have to limit their neutrality while interpreting, because then they play the role of the speaker and they can be nothing else but visible.

Thus, the general conclusion is that the role of the interpreters in the process of communication stands between visibility and invisibility. In other words, while transferring the message through interpreting, we set the ideal target of keeping it unchanged in the target language and of staying absolutely neutral in order to offer the original message to the receiver. Because only when the ideas remain unchanged in the chain of dialogue, we can achieve communication through interpreting.¹⁴ However, there will inevitably be a minimal loss of meaning. We know from the beginning that we will not keep to the ideal standard of neutrality set, because we are required to make subjective decisions while dealing with the interlingual issue, as we said before. So, in order to achieve communication through interpreting, we have to be visible and invisible at the same time.

In other words: neutrality remains our target, but the subjective factor of each interpreter is present and influences the communication process. Concluding, maybe the answer to our question “to be invisible or not to be?” is the so-called “minimal

¹³ Vermeer, p. 90.

¹⁴ Palmer, p. 24.

filtering” that Anderson suggests.¹⁵ Let’s be present as interpreters, since we cannot be completely invisible and neutral anyway. But in order to make the dialogue parties communicate, let’s be discreet.

Conclusion

Interpreters are the link between the speaker and each target audience, without whom the meaning and the value of the expressed ideas would not be understood by speakers of other languages. Because if we choose a non-native language as a medium of communication, we will reduce the quality and content of our speech according to our acquired language skills, because we will never be able to use a foreign language as well as we use our mother tongue¹⁶.

That is why interpreters constitute an integral part of the intercultural dialogue. **They build confidence among cultures. Interpretation** neither impoverishes the language of each nation, nor forces it to simplify its language in order to be easily understood by everybody. Language- and culture- remain pure and the interpreter operates the smoothest possible transfer. That is why interpretation **leads to the real global mutual understanding**, to the real global communication among nations.

Thank you.

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¹⁵ Anderson, p. 213.

¹⁶ Gottlieb, Henrik. “Language-political implications of subtitling”, 2004 (according to: Orero, Pilar, p. 83-100).

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