**Challenges to Translation from Interpreting**

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**Abstract**

This paper is a practitioner’s perspective of some of the questions that interpreting practice raises for translation. There are three parts to the discussion. Part one defines the type of interpreting and interpreters under discussion. This paper gives clear recognition to the fact that differences between languages and countries in which the languages are used have a direct bearing on issues of and approaches to interpreting. There are fundamental differences between bi-lingual interpreters working between major European languages and interpreters working between English as a Foreign Language and their mother tongue, a language outside Europe and outside English-speaking countries.

Part two uses examples taken from real interpreting assignments to illustrate two specific challenges to the second group of interpreters referred to in part one. They are:

- **Linguistic understanding only** – this is when an interpreter does not understand the substance of what has been said but can still interpret successfully.
- **Drip-fed linguistic understanding** – this is when understanding the content of a speech comes in the form of a few words heard at a time.
- **Delayed understanding** – this refers to the delayed realization by the interpreter that humour is being used in a speech.
- **Retrospective Error** – this is when the appropriate rendition by an interpreter of a previous utterance is found to be erroneous at a later turn.

Part three raises questions for a possible re-think of some of the prevalent practices in translation.

**Definitions**

**Interpreting** in this paper refers to both consecutive interpreting and simultaneous interpreting (or conference interpreting). Consecutive interpreting is defined as the verbal realization of a two-staged interactive communication between a speaker and an audience through an interpreter at an organized event between two organizations (Lin, forthcoming). It can be between two governments, two companies or two academic institutions. It is different from translation which refers to written text.

One key feature of consecutive interpreting as defined here is its diversity. It can be used for top-level meetings, high-profile visits, sensitive talks, presentations, training courses or one-to-one conversations. The location can range from conference halls, formal
meeting rooms to a hotel lobby, an assembly line at a manufacturing plant or a high security prison. An interpreter can be interpreting for the same person throughout a day or a dozen different people with very different backgrounds on a range of subject matters. The audience can be one individual or a crowd of several hundred people. This diversity has a direct impact on interpreters.

**An interpreter** refers specifically to an individual who interprets between English as a foreign language and their mother tongue. Their competence in English is substantially inferior to their competence in their own language. An overwhelming majority of the interpreters in the non-EU countries in Eastern Europe and right across East, South East and Central Asia are in this category.

One major challenge to these interpreters is often to have to work without the benefit of the convergence of both knowledge and the linguistic expressions of that knowledge which their European colleagues often take for granted. For example, new accession countries in the EU benefit from multi-lingual outputs from the EU. New concepts and notions in EU official documents are translated and published on the EU website regularly in all the languages of the member countries. But it takes much longer for these concepts and notions to be translated into a language outside the EU, if they are translated at all.

One immediate consequence is that Chinese interpreters, and hundreds of their colleagues in Central Asia, East Asia and non-English speaking South-east Asia have to interpret from English into their own languages without a full understanding of the substance of what they interpret. Furthermore, they are called upon to interpret a much wider range of subject matter than their colleagues in Europe who are working between major European languages.

**Simultaneous Interpreting** in this paper refers to the type used at international conferences, where interpreters use specialist equipment and interpret concurrently as speakers speak. It refers in particular to jobs undertaken by the second group of interpreters referred to above.

**Linguistic understanding only**

It is widely believed that understanding what has been said by the speaker is a pre-requisite of interpreting. Roderick Jones says in Conference Interpreting Explained (St Jerome, 2002) “the interpreter
has first to listen to the speaker, understand and analyze what is being said, and then resynthesize the speech in the appropriate form in a different language”.

The depth of understanding required is described by Andrew Gillies as “You will not only be listening to the words and the content as the normal listener does, but you will also be dissecting the speech in your head, analyzing its structure and progression to find out what fits with what and why.” (Gillies 2006) In other words, understanding of the content or substance is a pre-requisite of interpreting.

In the following we look at cases in which full understanding and analysis of the kind described by Jones and Gillies is absent, but the interpretation is successful. Here linguistic understanding – the understanding at lexical and grammatical levels only – suffices. It is common at an expository type of event where interpreting is used.

Training courses, workshops or presentations of an organization, product or services are all situations where speakers speak of notions or ideas that are new to both the audience and the interpreter, although these notions or ideas are fairly well known in the countries or industries or the organizations the speakers are from. Sometimes, there is a clear and timely exposition by speakers. At other times, there is not. There are also times when no exposition is offered at all.

Although an interpreter needs to be well prepared in advance, it is not possible to anticipate everything every speaker on the day may be saying, not least because of the lack of convergence of knowledge discussed earlier. There may not be time for a thorough preparation for each interpreting job. In any case, it is not possible to anticipate off-the-cuff remarks or what might be discussed during the questions-and-answers part of the day.

The following is an example taken from a workshop on corporate governance and regulation. The speaker used the case of Enron as an illustration. Enron was one of the largest utility companies in the US. It collapsed almost overnight. After a fraud investigation and court trial, some of its top executives went to jail. The interpreter did not know that the speaker was going to talk about Enron and did not have more than a general understanding of the Enron affair. The speaker started explaining how Enron had deceived its shareholders:

“What Enron did was to create a special purpose vehicle, a separate company. Enron then transferred some assets into this
special purpose company and invited external investors to pay for 50% of the equity of this company in exchange for 3% of the shares.”

The second half of the passage seems to go against common logic. External investors pay for 50% of the equity of the company but own only 3% of the shares. Unless an interpreter already knows what Enron did and why Enron did it, he will not be able to make sense of this part of the speech. However, if the interpreter simply converts the utterances into the target language, he will have fulfilled his task successfully. An understanding of the substance of the talk in this case is not required.

What happened in this particular case was that the audience raised a question about the ratio of investment to share holding, to which the presenter gave a detailed explanation. It was not until then that the interpreter understood what had been described by the speaker earlier.

This is not to claim that linguistic understanding is all that is needed. But interpreting successfully without full understanding of the substance of what has been said is no rare occurrence in interpreting. Let us examine the following example –

“The key information aspect there is signalling systems. Under this question, test methods are to be developed for different traffic model networks; and also, a test specification is to be created both inside the domain, and end-to-end when using intra-domain communications.”

Here, as long as an interpreter knows how to convert the terms “traffic”, “domain” and “intra-domain” into the target language, s/he will be able to interpret the utterance successfully. S/he doesn’t have to know what it is about, only what has been said linguistically. In fact, it is often like this when interpreting at a technical session. As long as the interpreter knows the terminology, he/she does not have to know the technology behind or the substance of the discussion. The speaker knows. So does the audience. The interpreter doesn’t have to know and often doesn’t.

In a third example, the speaker said:

“Debt funding in the UK cannot exceed the debt which would be advanced by an unrelated lender”
It would take a specialist several minutes to explain the process summarised in the utterance. But as long as an interpreter understands the utterance at the linguistic level, he/she will be able to convert it into the target language without too much difficulty.

**Drip-fed linguistic understanding**

This is when linguistic understanding is not achieved at sentence level, but at the level of the words heard. In other words, the interpreter needs to interpret words heard from the speaker a few at a time as in simultaneous interpreting. This is a particular challenge between two languages that have drastically different syntactic structures. Here is an example from interpreting from English into Chinese:

“It is very important that we cover all the items on the agenda in front of us”

Chinese syntax does not have an equivalent structure to “It is important that…”. Instead, “…is very important” has to be put at the end of the utterance. But doing that would clash with the basic requirement of simultaneous interpreting. One common technique is to say “It is very important” and either repeat it at the end of the utterance or paraphrase the utterance into: “It is very important. We must cover all the items…”

There are about 30 frequently used techniques in interpreting simultaneously from English into Chinese. They help interpreters to resolve the problem of different syntax. They enable sequential interpreting – interpreting upon hearing as few as 3 – 4 words at a time. The structure of “It is important…” is one example. Here is another.

In Chinese, adverbial clauses of time and location come before the verb. In English, they can come after the verb. For an utterance in English such as the following:

“China has provided financial leadership in the Asia region”

its written translation into Chinese would be “China in the Asia region has provided financial leadership”. However, when interpreting simultaneously, the interpreter will have said, “China has provided financial leadership” before hearing “in the Asia region”. A common
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technique is to render the preposition, in this case “in” in the form of a verb so that the interpreted version becomes something along the lines of “China has provided financial leadership, heading the Asia region”.

**Delayed understanding**

The third case in which interpreting can be done successfully without full understanding is when humour is used in simultaneous interpreting. In the following example, the Director of Human Resources of a leading company in the UK was opening a week of management training for a group of senior managers from another country, and was interpreted simultaneously.

“Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. My name is David Brown. I’m the HR Director of the company. When I joined some 10 years ago, they didn’t know what to do with me. So they sent me out to Poland. After three years, they still didn’t know what to do with me. So they sent me to Slovakia.”

It’s difficult to present in text form utterances heard in sequence. But if one consciously processes a few words at a time as one would when hearing them, one might suspect something is not right after hearing “they didn’t know what to do with me”. It might well be until after the clause “so they sent me out to Poland” or even later that it becomes clear that the speaker has been speaking in jest. But that does not prevent a simultaneous interpreter from fulfilling the task of interpreting in that sequence. Delayed understanding of humour has the same effect on the interpreter as not knowing humour is being used.

The three case studies discussed so far represent three realities in interpreting:–

- linguistic understanding is often sufficient
- drip-fed linguistic understanding is often sufficient
- failing to recognize that humour is being used doesn’t necessarily mean unsuccessful interpreting

These realities are not consistent with the widely held belief that the understanding of ideas is more important than that of words (Jones 2002, p11). They raise questions as to the necessity of treating the sentences as the basic unit of translation (Newmark 2003, p30).
Retrospective Error

By definition, this is an error in hindsight. It describes the situation in which the rendition by the interpreter sounds appropriate at one turn of the discourse only to become inappropriate at a later turn. The interpreter realizes with hindsight that his earlier decision on how to interpret was based on a context that has since been expanded. The expansion makes it sound as if he had made a blunder. The following is a legendary example known to many interpreters in China.

A Chinese government minister was entertaining his counterpart from another country at dinner. When asked about his view of a particular issue, the Chinese minister used a Chinese proverb (literal rendering):

"This matter is like blending spring onions with bean curd – the green remains green, the white remains white”

Upon hearing that, the interpreter remembered teaching received back in the classroom years ago that an interpreter must use idiomatic language, must render proverbs and metaphors in a way easily understood in the target language. Fearing that the foreign visitor would not understand this proverb in Chinese with its vegetable-based imagery, the interpreter went for an equivalent expression in English:

“This matter is crystal clear.”

Only to find that the Minister continued with: “Do you have bean curd in your country”. By now, it was too late to change the metaphor. The interpreter pressed on with:

“Do you have crystal in your country?”

The story ends there. It could have become absurd if the guest replied “Yes, we export large quantities to China” – the interpreter would have had to continue creating a different dialogue from the one he was supposed to be interpreting.

In this case, the interpreter gave a perfectly good rendition at one turn of the conversation only to find to his horror at the next that he had embarked on a different dialogue which he had created himself. The risk of a retrospective error is common in interpreting. Speakers
often stretch their metaphor or analogy or play on a word they used earlier.

Retrospective errors can occur in other types of interpreting. But it is more of a problem in Consecutive Interpreting in an institutional setting, between two governments or senior officials for example. The formality of the settings and status of the speakers are often such that interpreters are unable to retract a metaphor several turns of speech later.

In Simultaneous Interpreting, retrospective errors tend to cause immediate confusion. Simultaneous interpreters do not have a second chance as consecutive interpreters do. The consequence is usually a very confused audience. If the speaker plays on a word used earlier to achieve humour, the audience of the target language will be wondering why their colleagues who are conversant with the source language smiled or even laughed at some incongruous remarks by the speaker.

**Discussion Points**

This paper raises four questions. First, if interpreters can interpret successfully without understanding the substance of what has been said, to what extent can translators do the same?

Second, if sequential rendition can produce good quality interpreting, to what extend can written translation benefit from the technique? Further, can sequential translation be a helpful way of dealing with long and complicated sentences in written translation? There is one clear benefit – there will be significant improvement in speed, as translators do not have to analyze sentences before translating them.

The prevalent practice of understanding the whole sentence in the target language before translating it means that non bi-lingual translators have to do the more difficult part of the job in the language they are less competent in. Sequential rendition offers an opportunity to reverse that.

Third, the examples and discussion of retrospective error provides food for thought on the value of literal foreignization. At first sight, the issue does not arise in translation. Translators, after all, are able to read to the end of the source text before translating it and will be able
to change a metaphor used earlier, if they find it necessary to do so later.

However, if one looks at the translation of a new concept or notion not as the one-off task of one translator, but as the creation of a term to be used whenever the source term is used in the future, the matter takes on a different perspective. The translator has the responsibility of making his/her translation future-proof, to borrow a term from the domain of computer technology. It means the translation must work not only in the current context and in terms of current usage but also in any future context and in terms of any future usage that the translator cannot foresee.

When “governance” first gained currency in the UK and Europe a few years ago, it was predominantly used in the context of corporate governance. The issue of the day was the remuneration of board members not being based on the performance of the company. When it was translated into Chinese, the phrase adopted was the equivalent of “sort out”, implying there were major problems. Given the state of most Chinese companies at the time, the translation was sufficiently appropriate.

However, “governance” in English is a neutral term and a noun, too. Since then, it has been used in a wide range of contexts and acquired much broader meaning and functions than “sort out”. Literal foreignization is a particularly attractive solution in the definitive translation of new concepts and notions, especially when the translator can match the part of speech in the target language – a match of both substance and form.

It is possible that given the immediate context that a translator has to work with, literal foreignization may not be the best choice in the target language. But it has the advantage of being future-proof. This adds a new dimension to the practice of translation.

Finally, if interpreters, especially simultaneous interpreters, regularly work with drip-fed and delayed understanding, can it be possible that context is not as crucial to translation as is often believed? The question is particularly relevant for languages with very different or sometimes reverse syntactic structures from English. Sequential interpreting into those languages regularly requires interpreters to convert a few words at a time and ignore any context that might otherwise be provided by a larger chunk of words. If it can
be done in interpreting, to what extent can it also be done in written translation?

References