TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION – KEY ASPECTS OF THE DIPLOMATIC COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: *The present article is intended to analyse the history of English language use in diplomacy, the several meanings of the term "diplomatic language" and the way in which the quality of translation and interpretation during official meetings can influence the diplomatic and international relations established between various countries.*

Keywords: *Diplomatic English Language, translation, interpretation, diplomatic relations, international communication*

Introduction

To begin with, it must be stated the significance of diplomatic language. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, language is defined as "*the system of words or signs that people use in order to express thoughts and feelings to each other*", while diplomacy represents "*the work of maintaining good relations between the governments of different countries*".[1]

In Sir Ernest Satow's opinion expressed in his work called "*Guide to Diplomatic Practice*", diplomacy consists in "*the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states and between governments and international institutions*". (Satow, 1932:1)

Another definition was given to diplomacy by Henry Kissinger who describes it as "*the art of relating states to each other by agreement rather than by the exercise of force, by the representation of a ground of action which reconciles particular aspirations with a general consensus…; diplomacy depends upon persuasion and not imposition*". (Kissinger, 1957:326) This way he emphasizes the fact that international actors should make all the efforts to reach an agreement through peaceful means not by military operations.

Although the roles of professional diplomats have significantly changed in the last decades by gaining a greater influence in the government system and by using more modern operative methods, the fundamental purposes of diplomacy remained the same. This idea is supported by Sir Harold Nicolson who argues that "*Diplomacy is neither the invention nor the pastime of some particular political system, but is an essential element in any reasonable relation between man and man and between nation and nation*". (Nicolson, 1977:4)

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[1] In order to have a better understanding of the meaning of "*diplomatic language*", the authors consider it is worth analysing the concept from a linguistic point of view. In accordance with a theory that pertains to Ferdinand de Saussure and which appears in a book published in 2003 under the title "*On the double essence of language*", the elements of language function simultaneously as distinctive sounds and as meaningful sounds or signs, this representing the doubleness of the language. The Swiss linguist argues that a linguistic form cannot exist without a meaning and a linguistic meaning cannot exist without a form. (In Joseph, 2012)

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Ambassador Stanko Nick notes that the term "*diplomatic language*" can be interpreted in several ways. First of all, it refers to the common language used by the parties involved in an actual interstate negotiation process. Secondly, it refers to the lexicon of specialized words and of other technical terms employed by diplomats during their bilateral or multilateral meetings. The third meaning consists in a polite vocabulary, manner or tone of expression used by a person to deal with other people (Nick, 2001).

Diplomatic English Language Concept

Based on the previously mentioned theory, it is important to underline that diplomacy is mainly built on language and on the capacity of identifying and deciphering the hidden message or nuance of a certain expression or argument presented. In her work called "*Le discours diplomatique*", Constance Villar proposes a semiotical approach around four axes of the diplomatic language: honesty vs duplicity, sincere words vs lies, truth vs falseness and transparence vs secret. Starting from these axes and in conformity with the discourse analysis studies it can be asserted that language used in diplomacy is a common language, not a technical one. Diplomacy is characterised by a regular vocabulary used in every day speech to which a particular code is associated. This code is specific to interstate relations and to individuals in charge of representing their countries' interests in international negotiations (Villar, 2006).

Diplomatic language is considered to be a version of the political language which deals with the same categories such as rhetoric, persuasion, manipulation and attention paid to the signifier and to the signified. It is defined by two dimensions. The first one is represented by the paradox of having a formal language which is necessary to contain ambiguities. Ambiguity is a rarely noted point in the diplomatic language that deserves to be emphasized. There are semantic ambiguity (several meanings of the same statement) and strategic ambiguity that concerns the relation between utterance, speaker and addressee. For the analysis of communicative acts of diplomacy, the notion of ambiguity is essential as it allows to decipher the roles and behaviour of the actors. This type of language and its characteristics are used for internal communication between diplomats. The opacity of these words' meaning associated with the classic image of diplomacy lead the public to disregard this language because it does not prove to be sufficiently transparent. The second dimension is the political one which addresses to citizens and media who want to have access to information, this giving an external character to diplomatic language. (Arifon, 2010)

Diplomatic language and international communication

With regard to "*diplomatic language*" seen as a common language used for diplomatic purposes, throughout the history there have been numerous attempts of imposing an unique language in international communication. This role was played in ancient times by Acadian, literary Chinese, later by mediaeval Greek, Latin, Arabic and yet later by Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and French. In the 20th century, English gained more importance on the international scene and it finally became the most widely used diplomatic language (Nick, 2001).

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Owing to the increasing implication of more and more countries in international affairs and to their will of using their own languages in diplomatic documents and correspondence, international organisations have recognised the various languages of member states as official or working languages for their proceedings (Kurbalija& Slavik, 2001).

For example, in the European Union there are 24 official languages that enjoy equal status and make the European institutions more accessible and transparent by giving the citizens the possibility to read legislation affecting them in the language of their own country. Community law also entitles its member states' citizens to follow debates, ask questions and receive replies in their mother tongue. Thus, it should be clearly mentioned that multilingualism represents the reflection of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the European Union. (www.europarl.europa.eu)

Taking into consideration the first meaning of the concept of diplomatic language, the main difficulty diplomats have to cope with in their interaction is represented by finding a common tongue. This issue has been a topic of interest for a long time, but no ideal solution to overcome this problem has been found. One option could be that one of the participants speak the language of the other. The most important drawbacks that appear in this case are that one of the sides has a clear advantage over the other and it is not suitable to be applied in multilateral diplomacy. A second solution is that both diplomats use a third, neutral language. The most significant problem that may arise is that neither side has an excellent linguistic command of that tongue which is likely to lead to serious misunderstandings. In addition to the previously discussed formulas, another method to be often applied in international practice for negotiations during official encounters involves using interpreters because politicians and statesmen do not necessarily have to know foreign languages. This method implies the following disadvantages: it requires a bigger financial effort and the translation may prove to be not very accurate because the topic of the negotiation could be a very particular subject which exceeds the expertise of the interpreter. The final possibility to solve the problem of communication between diplomats consists in using an international artificial language such as Esperanto which would significantly reduce the costs of translation and interpretation and also the time spent with these processes making the conversation more fluent (Nick, 2001).

A topic that needs a particular attention is the way in which an experienced and skillful diplomat who speaks several foreign languages chooses to use a certain language in a specific context. The logical answer is that he should use the language he can master best. Judging by the professional point of view, this decision is not always the most adequate. Sometimes, it is preferable to use a language that he speaks not at a very high level having as a purpose to avoid the mother tongue of the interlocutor or to avoid an unpleasant political connotation. With respect to the language used in written international communication and documents of major interest, the choice is clearly stipulated in most of the cases in bilateral agreements and is based on the principle of sovereign equality of states. There are several ways of implementing this principle in the linguistic field: the first one implies that each side writes its official correspondence in its own language, the second method consists in writing in the national language of the other side which is opposite from practice. A third formula would be that in each

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country the correspondence is written in the local language and the last possibility is that a third, neutral language is agreed by both parts to be used (*ibidem*).

Some diplomats use certain tactics in order to gain the appreciation of their partners in conversation. They make gestures of benevolence or signs of special respect either for their interlocutors or for their countries. Upon their arrival to a foreign country, many speakers greet their hosts in the local language aiming to create a warm atmosphere and express their gratitude for the hospitality shown to them. When there are multiple diplomatic delegations involved in a negotiation or participating to an important reunion, communication becomes even more difficult to be ensured because it requires more human resources which consequently means more time spent for making possible the interpretation, supplementary costs and an impersonal way of interaction between the diplomats. In their attempt of solving this issue, many international organisations resort to using only a small number of languages calling them official or working tongues. (*ibidem*)

As regards the second meaning of diplomatic language that consists in the vocabulary used by a diplomat to convey a certain message in a subtler and more elegant manner, it is important to focus on analysing the substance of the message transmitted in every oral or written diplomatic communication. Any diplomat has to carefully choose the terms he uses in international meetings. Over the last centuries has been developed a well-balanced and moderate vocabulary which has as a goal to impose a refined control in the meaning of words both when the diplomats want to express their agreement with the interlocutor's opinions, but without giving the impression that they are too enthusiastic or when they disagree with them, but doing this without offending the partner of conversation. (Nick, 2001)

Generally, all phrases and expressions used by diplomats either in a dialogue or in a written document are scrutinised by their interlocutors who are interested in finding any possible hidden message that may exist, for instance in an official letter or communiqué sent by a foreign embassy. It is assumed that diplomats who are in charge of expressing the official viewpoint of their country on a certain topic possess enough knowledge of a language in order to transmit correctly what they intend to. An insulting formulation or an undesired confusion or any other obvious mistake made by a diplomat cannot be explained by invoking the insufficient knowledge of a language, the misinterpretation due to a improper translation or a momentary bad mood of the speaker. In writing, the words used have to be more carefully chosen because there is no possibility of correcting a certain statement if the reaction of the other part is negative. (*ibidem*)

Among the most valuable competences that a professional diplomat should possess are the caution and the self-control. For a diplomat it is compulsory to avoid offending his interlocutor and not to give too many details about his opinions and arguments concerning a certain subject. If he fails to maintain a reserved attitude, the success of the negotiation can be jeopardized. Besides this, it is recommended to avoid showing his weaknesses which can be divided into two categories: nonmastered technical knowledge and the will of keeping a high level of prestige and symbolic power (Arifon, 2010).

In diplomatic communication, there are cases in which it is better for the speaker to use short, simple sentences if he has to use a language he does not have a great command of. On the other hand, if the speaker does not want to state

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clearly his opinion on a certain subject, he resorts to using more complicated sentences, digressions and introducing new topics (Nick, 2001).

Another frequently used technique in international meetings is uncertainty in communication that derives from differences which appear between various cultural systems and values. According to Constance Villar, "*La stratégie de communication ambiguë permet en effet de maintenir le doute chez l'interlocuteur. Certes, la communication est parfois rendue plus claire en cas de réaction favorable, mais bien souvent elle est laissée en l'état pour maintenir l'autre dans le doute*". (Villar, 2006:175)

Diplomatic language is characterised by a sort of understatement and by a much stronger connotation of some words in comparison to their significance in common speech. An illustrative example in this regard would be represented by the invitation addressed by the minister of foreign affairs to the ambassador of a neighbouring country late in the afternoon to his office in order to express the *"concern of his government over reporting in the ambassador's country's press which is not in harmony with the existing friendly relations between the two countries*". In other words, this message can be interpreted as a warning sent by the minister with respect to the presumed denigratory press campaign commanded by the neighbouring country's government against his country and that he will not tolerate any more this kind of behaviour. The summons of the ambassador after the usual working schedule shows that local authorities consider this to be an urgent problem and beyond the normal framework of bilateral relations. In addition to aspects already discussed, in case the minister says "*he is afraid that the continuation of such practices might reflect negatively on relations between the two countries*", it means that the relations have been previously affected in a very serious proportion by other actions and that the signing of a bilateral cooperation agreement or an already arranged official visit are likely to be postponed. (Nick, 2001:45)

Formal language has also a diplomatic usefulness. In the following lines, we will give some examples of words that are used to neutralize or soften the things they describe. Thus, when a diplomat expresses his surprise regarding a certain issue, it means that he does not agree with that state of facts and he wants to assert his discontent. If he uses the verb "*to denounce*", things surely go wrong, while if he "*condemns*", the situation is considered to be extremely serious. An elegant way of expressing a refusal to his interlocutor's request is by using the formulation "*I apologise for not being able to respond favorably to your demand*". The following statement "*the negotiations were conducted openly and must be pursued*" indicates that no final decision was made and for not affecting the relationship between the parts involved, they decided to continue the negotiation. (Arifon, 2010:73)

Diplomacy plays an important role not only in interstate relations, but also in the business environment or in other types of social interaction. According to Bénédicte Lapeyre, professor of international and diplomatic relations at the College of Europe and author of the book "Être plus diplomate", diplomacy is based on knowledge and on the capacity of listening to the others. She continues by saying that: "*Elle nécessite une vraie empathie. Mais il ne s'agit pas seulement de se mettre à la place de l'autre. Il faut comprendre comment il fonctionne*". (Lapeyre, 2008:22)

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A relevant example that is meant to support the above stated idea involves attending your twenty year high school reunion and there you meet one of your former colleagues whom you have not seen for many years and who in the meantime has become an important politician and is now candidating for the position of senator. At a certain moment one of the teachers asks each of you to recount a funny event happened during high school years. You consider that narrating the incident when you and your colleague skipped classes pretending to be ill in order to attend a football match, but you were noticed by your Maths teacher on the television broadcast would not bother him at all and under no circumstances this would represent a reason for making him feel embarrassed. But this is not necessarily his case. Therefore, the question is not what would you think if you were in his place, but what he will really think about a certain issue. "*Etre diplomate, c'est donc avoir le souci de savoir comment l'autre va réagir à nos paroles"*, concludes Lapeyre. (Lapeyre, 2008:23)

Working in a corporation implies many interpersonal exchanges: between the manager and his employees, between colleagues, between clients and their providers, between the managing director and the shareholders. All these people have to be extremely careful when expressing their opinions because words can be interpreted. Criticism is part of the professional life either it is addressed to a superior or to a colleague. Before criticising someone, it is advisable to ask ourselves what is the utility of that criticism and if it can somehow improve the situation. If criticism is needed, then a softened vocabulary containing expressions such as "*I am sorry*" or "*I regret that you have not done that thing*" are preferable. In addition to this, if you have to make a critical remark to your superior it is wise to put it in the form of a piece of advice: "*Your solution is tempting, but I am afraid it means to take too many risks for our department"*. This formulation is clearly more adequate than saying "*Implementing your solution would be a mistake*". (www.journaldunet.com)

In the following paragraphs, I will put an emphasis on the role of translation and interpretation in modern diplomacy by underlining the possible negative effects that a poor quality of the 2 processes can cause at international level. Besides this, a particular attention will be paid to the description of the types of conference interpretation, to the preparation and techniques required in order to ensure a high quality work of interpretation.

Even though the professions of translator and interpreter are considered to be very similar, in fact the differences between them prove to be significantly important. While a translator works on his own for many hours dealing with a text about a very specific topic that is not attractive for the public and which presents several vocabulary peculiarities, the interpreter's work is much more dynamic because he has to relate to a speaker whose discourse can be unpredictable and he also interacts with the people who listen simultaneously to him and to the orator.

According to the professional translator Roger Chriss, translators have to combine skills from various domains like linguistics and literature, they also have to possess a good general knowledge in order to be able to detect subtleties and nuances in the languages they use, to look for several unknown terms and colloquialisms and to keep updated to the latest developments in their languages. The job of translator also implies the capacity of handling the social and cultural differences that exist between the languages he masters and his proficiency is demonstrated by the way in which he manages to transmit a certain message using

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the most adequate diplomatic terms and without recurring to censorship. (www.huntrans124.com/chriss.pdf)

Interpreters are expected to have a good ability to adapt to different topics and what enables them to do this is the education they received and their skill of making connections between the basic and more detailed information they have about the subjects they deal with. The confidence that delegates have in the interpreters is essential for the success of an international reunion. People participating in diplomatic conferences tend to be perfectionists and they set overly critical evaluations for the performance of the interpreters, so in several occasions in order to avoid additional tensions between their countries they choose to speak in a language they do not know perfectly rather than resorting to an interpreter. This is the reason why in this kind of situations there are required experienced and tactful interpreters who know how to manage moments of crisis. In addition to these traits, they should focus more on reading local and foreign newspapers, watching news broadcasts that keep them informed with the latest world political, social and cultural events. (Cremona& Mallia, 2001)

For each of the two main methods of interpretation (simultaneous and consecutive) are needed other competences. In consecutive interpretation, the capacity to synthesize is the dominant one because in the beginning the interpreter has to listen to the orator and then he has to render the most important points of the speech. Simultaneous interpretation involves more adrenaline, spontaneity, intense concentration, faster reflexes, but at the same time a good self-control. There are several styles of simultaneous interpretation. Some interpreters consider that it is preferable to relate just the essential parts of what has been said without entering too much into details, others choose a totally different approach which consists in reformulating the entire speech while another category of interpreters strive to translate the words of the speaker as faithfully as possible attempting to respect the style, the tone and even to express the gestures by means of the voice. (Cremona& Mallia, 2001)

A relevant aspect that deserves to be taken into consideration by interpreters concerns the key words that are present in almost any speech held at an international conference. Among these key terms we should mention *globalisation, treaty, agreement, labour force, gross domestic product.* In addition to these key words, in diplomatic discussions there are always mentioned acronyms of international organizations such as *NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation), IMF (International Monetary Fund), UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, WHO (World Health Organisation),* so for interpreters is mandatory to know at least the meaning of the most important ones. If the interpreters fail to identify these elements in a speech, it is very likely that they render incomplete or incorrect ideas from the orator's allocution. The key words vary from one field to another or even from one topic to another so it results to be pretty difficult for an interpreter to master this wide range of terms. In order to be well prepared for handling the subjects he has to confront with during the conference, the interpreter must do a very intense work of documentation by gathering backup material namely transcripts of the speeches that are going to be given during the conference. These will prove to be very helpful in anticipating the general atmosphere of the reunion and will prevent him from having any kind of surprises concerning the vocabulary, general attitudes or certain tensions that may arise between delegates. (*ibidem*)

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It is also recommended for an interpreter to possess a good knowledge of history and geography because the key terms often used in conferences evolve in the same rhythm as the world political and social events. Consequently, terms like *Iron Curtain, Cold War, Velvet Revolution* that were extremely popular after the Second World War have practically disappeared from the international scene allowing other terms such as *monetary union, free trade zone, emergent economies* to come into prominence. Interpreters who are aware of the historical and social connotations of the key words they use have an important advantage because it is easier for them to avoid possible errors. (*ibidem*)

Non-native speakers usually pose problems to the interpreters due to the sentence structure they use. Sentence construction is not the same in all languages, for instance, in English and French adjectives are placed before nouns while in German the verb is placed at the end of the sentence. Switching from one language to another, many orators do not manage to maintain a single trend of thought which determines incoherence in their discourse. A person who has experience in public speaking knows how to hold a speech as to take into consideration the presence of the interpreters. It is also important to mention that a good cooperation between the interpreters and the delegates would be strongly recommended. The characteristics of a written speech are significantly different namely the rhythm is much higher and the pauses between the ideas expressed are shorter due to the fact that the orator does not have to think about what he is going to say. Besides this, the vocabulary and the sentence structure are more formal and bureaucratic. All these features make the job of the interpreter harder and it results difficult for him to provide an accurate interpretation. (Cremona& Mallia, 2001)

Throughout the time, there were made some interpreting mistakes that actually have or might have changed the course of the history. One of the most relevant examples of this kind dates back to 2006. During the visit of the Iranian president Mahmoud Admadinejad in Israel, the interpreter claimed that the head of state said "*Israel should be wiped off the map*". Later it was revealed that Ahmadinejad actually said "*the regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time*" which gives the assertion a significantly different meaning. Moreover, a similar incident took place in 1976 when the president of the United States Jimmy Carter was giving a speech in front of a Polish-speaking audience. He began his allocution by saying "*I left the United States this morning*" which was rendered by the interpreter "*When I abandoned the United States*" (https://rpstranslations.wordpress.com)

The protagonist of another famous mistake of interpretation was the president of the Soviet Union, Nikita Hrusciov who, according to the interpreter's rendition, said referring to the Unites States and to the countries from Western Europe "*We will bury you*". In fact his words were "*We will outlast you*", but at that time this commentary increased the tension existing between the two world powers. (*ibidem*)

Open conclusions

In conclusion of this article, the authors would like to highlight once more the major role played by a good language use in diplomacy. The ability to master several foreign languages in terms of both grammar rules and vocabulary represents an immense advantage for any diplomat because it gives him more

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options of approaching certain delicate and controversial subjects and it also enables him to lead the conversation in the direction he wants.

As it has been demonstrated in the body of the article, the term "diplomatic language" has multiple meanings and it results to be of great importance to make the distinction between them. However, diplomatic language is generally referred to as the specific set of words used by country representatives to express their views in international meetings and in the correspondence exchanged between embassies. An excellent understanding and command of these terms added to a good linguistic knowledge are the underlying requirements for a high-level diplomat who is in charge of negotiating international treaties.

Finally, the authors consider it is worth mentioning that the jobs of translator and interpreter are extremely demanding and although they are not in the spotlight, the people occupying these positions should be regarded with more consideration and appreciation because in many occasions they managed to contribute significantly to the success of the diplomatic reunions to which they took part. In times of crisis, translation and interpretation are regarded to be as important as the speeches themselves given by the world political leaders.

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