OVERVIEW UPON THE CHALLENGES OF A CONFERENCE INTERPRETER

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Abstract: The article deals with aspects that build the professional activity and challenges of a conference interpreter, aiming to design the professional profile of this job that ensures intralinguistic communication. Light is brought onto the idea that the difficulty that lies in performing the task of an interpreter is strictly linked to its specificity. The article also presents the main activities performed by interpreters and the skills they need to master in order to ensure professionalism.

Keywords: interpreter, communication, oral translation,

The world we live in is like a complicated, sophisticated web, language-wise. People all over the globe thrive to communicate to one another, to interact, to change thoughts and opinions. Their actions result directly from their words, their words are directly reflected in their behaviour. But these words need to be transposed from one language to the other, for people do not all use the same language. Truth be said, English still holds the grounds for lingua franca, but, this only supports the idea that other foreign languages need at least to be taken to English, if other combinations seem more difficult.

The 'master puppets' who agilely operate rendering words from one language to the other are the translators, when we refer to written translation, and the interpreters, when we deal with oral translation. Some might argue that, since both translators and interpreters deal with transposing words from language A to language B, both categories cover pretty much the same area. In that case, some are prone to be a little far from the mark up to a certain extent, since the terms in question aim at different 'facets of the same coin'. Admitting that both translators and interpreters deal with conveying meaning and understanding among different languages, one ought to understand that there are

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similarities just as much as there are differences between the two. Yet, interpretation should not be confused with translation, since the latter refers exclusively to written texts.

Keeping this idea in mind, we will try to answer to the question *How Does Interpretation Differ from Translation?* by quotingJames Nolan[1]: "A translator studies written material in one language (the 'source language') and reproduces it in written form in another language (the 'target language'). An interpreter listens to a spoken message in the source language and renders it orally, consecutively or simultaneously, in the target language. Both the translator and the interpreter must have a thorough mastery of the target language, as well as a very good passive understanding of the source language or languages with which they work." Nolan continues by underlining that most interpreters prefer to translate into their native tongue, while the other languages used as source languages remain as passive languages.

The same author draws attention to the fact that the interpreters' job also consists in performing "thorough research with background materials and dictionaries in order to produce the most accurate and readable written translation possible."[2] But, their job does not end here, since they need to be able to "get the gist of the message across to the target audience on the spot."[3]

One ought to deeply understand that

"The differences in skills are arguably greater than their similarities. The key skills of the translator are the ability to understand the source language and the culture of the country where the text originated, then using a good library of dictionaries and reference materials, to render that material clearly and accurately into the target language. In other words, while linguistic and cultural skills are still critical, the most important mark of a good translator is the ability to write well in the target language. Even bilingual individuals can rarely express themselves in a given subject equally well in both languages, and many excellent translators are not fully bilingual to begin with. Knowing this limitation, a good translator will only translate documents into his or her native language. An interpreter, on the other hand, must be able to translate in both directions on the spot, without using dictionaries or other supplemental reference materials. Interpreters

[1]James Nolan, *Interpretation. Techniques and exercises*, Multilingual Matters LTD, Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto, 2005, p. 2
[2] idem
[3] idem

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must have extraordinary listening abilities, especially for simultaneous interpreting. (…) Interpreters must also possess excellent public speaking skills and the intellectual capacity to instantly transform idioms, colloquialisms and other culturally-specific references into analogous statements the target audience will understand."[4]

It has been agreed upon that there is no such thing as a perfect translation or a perfect interpretation, due to the inherent differences among languages and the cultures they belong to. Nevertheless, Nolan states, "in practice, the translator is usually held to a higher standard of accuracy and completeness (including the ability to reproduce the style of the original), while the interpreter is expected to convey the essence of the message immediately. The translator's activity is more like that of a writer, while the interpreter's performance is more like that of an actor."[5]

In order to better understand the challenges that interpreters are prone to undertake, we ought to trace the most important activities they perform. According to the official page of the European Parliament[6], interpreters render a message from one language into another, naturally and fluently, adopting the mode of presentation, tone and convictions of the orator and speaking to the person first. People with different horizons, coming from different cultures and speaking different languages attend international conferences. The mission of the interpreter is to facilitate communication among people, not by translating the words uttered but by transmitting the ideas expressed.

There is a certain terminology when it comes to the job of an interpreter and a number of styles in which interpretation can be performed. For instance, there is the so called *linguistic combination* of interpreters, which is represented by the languages from which or to which they perform interpretation, either simultaneous or consecutive. There are several types of interpretation: *Consecutiveinterpretation*, referring to the interpretation of the words uttered by the speaker after his/her intervention ended; *Simultaneous interpretation* referring to the interpretation of the words uttered by the speaker during his/her intervention; *Relay*, which is a form of interpretation from one language to another through a third language. *Retour*, meaning the interpretation from the interpreter's mother tongue in a foreign language; *Pilot*, referring to using another

[4] Acc. to http://www.languagescientific.com/translation-services/multilingual-interpreting-services/interpreting-vs-translation-services.html
[5] idem
[66] http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/scic/what-is-conference-interpreting/index_ro.htm

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language as the source for the interpretation or *Chuchotage*, which is the simultaneous interpretation whispered in the ears of the participants. All these only prove how sophisticated and challenging the job of an interpreter can really get, since all these types of interpretations are supported by an intense input of hardwork, energy, research in advance. In the same time, it would be unfair not to underline that they need to prove "thorough knowledge of the general subject to be interpreted, intimate familiarity with both cultures, extensive vocabulary in both languages, ability to express thoughts clearly and concisely in both languages and also excellent note-taking techniques for consecutive interpreting."[7]

On the other hand, the processes that interpreters need to undergo while performing any of the above mentioned types of interpretation are just as complex and varied. On top of it all, these processes need to happen very fast and very safe, language and knowledge-wise.

Recently, a group of students[8] in linguistic studies at out university have benefited from the amiability of an official conference interpreter, who kindly agreed to give a thorough presentation on *How Interpreting Works in the European Parliament*[9]. According to this presentation, the job of conference interpreters requires them to participate to different types of meetings: committees, political groups, plenaries, delegations, press conferences, and each type of such meetings poses different challenges and needs different preparation. Thus, interpreters need to get prepared for every such task, and, on top of this, as paradoxical as it may sound, they need to be ready to expect the unexpected. Besides the fact that they need to become accustomed to the material specific to the speech they need to interpret, which is already a very demanding job, especially when the terminology is very specialised and sophisticated, there are also other challenges interpreters may need to face. In her presentation, Dona Ursu makes us aware of the issues regarding speed of the speech, different speakers and different accents, information overload, written speeches that are being read at a rather quick reading pace, technicalities and complex legislative procedures, coded style of political discourse. All

[7] Acc. to http://www.languagescientific.com/translation-services/multilingual-interpreting-services/interpreting-vs-translation-services.html
[8] *AML (Applied Modern Language) Students of the "Petru Maior" University of Tg. Mures took part at a skype session hosted by Mrs. Dona Ursu, official conference interpreter of the Romanian Unit, European Parliament, April, 22, 2016.*
[9] *http://www.upm.ro/evenimente/index.html*

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these and more might impose an increased degree of difficulty when it comes to interpretation of any type.

In order to ensure professionalism, interpreters need to master good note taking skills, to be organised and develop a good short time and ling time memory. They also need to develop good public speaking skills, to be good diplomats and also to benefit from quick-thinking and decision-making techniques. And last, but definitely not least, they need to stay in good physical shape, in order to resist long and tiresome intervals of focusing on the job of rendering meaning from one language to the other.

It has been debated upon the idea that memory is a very important tool in the activity of interpreters. They appear to own spectacularly trained memories, able to retain a great amount of information. Good memory together with well-developed note-taking techniques are considered to be the main super powers that interpreters need to have. This is the reason why all interpreters take specialised courses in how to develop these main skills. They study about mnemonics and memory training techniques, they learn how to correctly take notes to enhance interpretation. Nevertheless, in her study, Marianne Lederer[10] notices that

"When consecutive interpreting was the norm, those who saw interpreters at work thought they had phenomenal memories- but that was not the case. Consecutive interpreters who succeed in retaining each nuance of sense before spontaneously re-expressing the whole discourse in their own language put into practice a very general aptitude which consists of retaining what has been understood whilst the words themselves disappear. This aptitude is universal. (...) Deverbalization may well be less obvious in translation than in consecutive interpreting but it is just as present. For interpreters and translators both, 'understanding' is arriving at a mental representation. Deverbalisation is a cognitive process known to all of us: as they disappear, sensorial data become bits of knowledge divested of their concrete shape. Cognitive memory consists of acquiring a piece of knowledge, as fleeting as its retention may be. It should not be confused with the cognition of computers where all knowledge is of necessity formalised, nor with verbal memory which allows for the rote learning of a poem or a song. The victory of interpreters over the evanescence of words, wrongly attributed to an astonishing ability to memorise, has allowed the close study of an important phenomenon of language behaviour:

[10] Lederer, M., *Translation, The interpretative model*, London and New York: Routledge, Hachette Livre, 2003, pp. 12-13

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deverbalized sense is transmitted from speakers to listeners, it arises out of words but is not to be confused with them."

Thus, she believes that memory is an asset to be mastered by interpreters by means of practice in order to achieve the aim, yet it is something that can be achieved by all who can understand the subtlety of behavioural psychology of deverbalisation. "Although it is developed in training and made particularly effective when used by interpreters, everyone who can speak has it."[11]

An interesting way to conclude this article would seem to bring into the foreground what the interpreter is not, according to Michelle Renee Hof, a conference interpreter.[12] Thus, an interpreter is not a language teacher, as that would imply lots of patience and pedagogical tact (…) not a community interpreter, (…) not an interpreting researcher, although the researchers' role and effort is highly regarded and valued, (…) not a translator. Hof only intends to draw attention to the fact that the job of an interpreter is a very complex one, indeed, as it needs to take into consideration a vast range of activities. Yet, this job is not to be confused or overlapped with that of other jobs, to which it tangentially gets in contact. Interpreters need to learn how to manage their knowledge of the subject, handle the linguistic aspect appropriately, an all this under the heavy pressure of time. According to Nolan, "A good translator will spend much time searching for the correct technical term or the right choice of words, but a good interpreter must immediately come up with a satisfactory paraphrase or a rough equivalent if *the right word* does not come to mind, in order not to keep the audience waiting. Some people are able to do both translation and interpretation. Others find that, for reasons of temperament and personality, they cannot do one or the other.[13]

The issue of stress and personality type is not to be considered lightly when it comes to analysing the job of interpreters. Depending on the type of job they have to perform, on the time they need to do it, on the contextual factors that frame the job they need to perform, the difficulty attached to it might increase or decrease. We have already agreed upon the fact that professional interpreters prepare in advance, get accustomed to the material they later need to interpret. Nevertheless, even if that is the case in the best of

[11] *Idem, op. cit., p. 13*
[12] Michelle Renee Hof in http://aiic.net/page/3712/confessions-of-a-conference-interpreter/lang/1
[13] Idem in Nolan, op. cit.

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scenarios, there may be cases in which the subject of the material that needs rendering in a different language is not always in the interpreter's comfort zone, i.e. knowledge area covered by the interpreter. Obviously, some might argue that this only adds to the challenges of the job, this is what keeps interpreters on their toes, this is what makes their blood boil, etc. True, to prevent it from becoming too boring and obsolete, all jobs need to keep people alert. Yet, a high maintained level of anxiety is prone to become ineffective, effete, and may lead to a decrease in the quality of the job performance.

People have agreed that the most difficult jobs to perform are those that imply working with people. People may come in all complex, complicated, sophisticated variants. Not to mention people who belong to different cultures, speaking different languages, standing behind different believes. Interpreters do more than just render words from a language to another: they render meaning, they render attitude, they render opinions and they need to do it with the utmost professionalism, in order to ensure intrapersonal communication.

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