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Interpreting in the 21st Century Challenges and opportunities

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Edited by

Giuliana Garzone
University of Milan

Maurizio Viezzi
University of Trieste

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Quality in interpreting and its prerequisites

A framework for a comprehensive view

Sylvia Kalina

University of Applied Sciences, Cologne, Germany

1. Interpreting quality — Past and present approaches

In his inaugural address at a 1998 exhibition on “Interpreting in the new millennium”, organised by the Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence (AIIC), Lord Simon of Highbury, then U.K. Minister for Trade and Competitiveness in Europe, made the following observation: “With experience, you learn to tell the difference between quite good, very good and excellent interpreters”.¹

The experience which the speaker refers to is well exemplified by examiners assessing trainee interpreters. Moreover, since evaluation of interpreting is an intuitive, to a certain extent subjective process, examiners cannot always state precisely what makes the difference between an outstanding and a modest performance.

While it has long been recognised that the quality and reliability of interpreting — and, in some cases, the allegiance of the interpreter — cannot be taken for granted, they are difficult to ascertain (cf. Wirtl 1958, Kurz 1986). Poor interpreting can plunge negotiations into a state of confusion and tension, sometimes even triggering hostilities. This in turn may lead to abandonment of interpreting in favour of negotiations in a vehicular language, however limited delegates’ linguistic skills.

In written translation, discussion of quality has traditionally focussed on fidelity to — as opposed to freedom from — the source text (cf. Störig 1963). In interpreting, there has been a certain consensus that the priority is to convey the sense, not the wording (Seleskovitch 1976), though this principle is not applicable to the same extent in all forms of interpreting. For example, court interpreting does not imply the same degree of freedom to reword the original as media interpreting. For conference interpreting, a variety of factors determine the extent to which the original wording has to be maintained, and quality cannot be determined simply on the basis of sense predominating over words. It is equally inappropriate to judge simultaneous interpreting in relation to quantitative indices such as *décalage*, i.e. by

equating a long ear-voice-span to good segmentation and high quality (cf. Goldman-Eisler 1972).

Scientific research on the quality of interpreting started only with the advent of simultaneous interpreting. Current studies of interpreting continue to focus far more on simultaneous than on consecutive. Among the possible reasons for this are limited market demand for consecutive and, to a certain extent, the tendency to consider consecutive cognitively less demanding than simultaneous. While processing conditions differ in the two modes, a framework for a comprehensive approach to quality should cover both.

2. Measuring output quality

In early interpreting research, product quality was judged by experimental studies comparing transcriptions of the source text (ST) and target text (TT). In many cases, a prose ST was used.

An early attempt to evaluate the TT was that of Barik (1971). He compared STs and TTs, counting omissions, additions, substitutions and errors. Quality assessment was based on the resulting data. This approach met with sharp criticism,² as Barik did not use authentic STs, his subjects were mostly not professional interpreters and — a particularly critical issue — assessment was based largely on transcripts of TTs. Such an approach does not take into account the interpreting situation, the overall setting or the constraints these place on the interpreter.

Anderson (1979) concluded from her more authentic study that making documentation available to interpreters before conferences did not necessarily improve interpreting quality, and that interpreters felt at ease even when given no documents in advance. Anderson's study also showed no significant difference in quality according to whether interpreters received live audio, or video ST input. The study, done in a very early phase of interpreting research, illustrates a common research problem — i.e., that data are often insufficient for drawing any kind of general conclusions.

Gile (1988), in his capacity management model, explains how interpreting quality is liable to deteriorate when one of the three main Efforts (in simultaneous interpretation: listening, memory, production) demands extra processing capacity and does not leave enough for the other Efforts. Constraints on overall capacity are liable to affect the quality of the TT.

Pöchhacker's hypertext approach focuses on product inspection as an integral part of quality assurance (1994c: 233); the author considers that one perspective on quality is to consider the TT as a product which can be judged independently of the ST (1994a: 205ff). This means that the ideal goal of the TT is to convey the message understandably to the addressees. Pöchhacker also takes ST variables into account

by establishing text delivery profiles. This makes it possible to define objective and subjective TT quality, according to the conditions in which the text is produced (1994c: 241–242).

Moser-Mercer identifies, as the optimum quality goal, a complete, accurate, undistorted rendition of the original, taking into account extra-linguistic information subject to situational constraints (1996: 44).

In his pragmatic approach to quality, Kopiczynski focuses on contextual factors and situational variables (1994a: 88).

A didactic approach is reflected in Viezzi's quality model (1996), which describes the four goals of equivalence, accuracy, appropriateness and usability; quality is defined as the degree to which these goals are achieved.

All these authors suggest that there are several dimensions to the relationship between speakers, STs, interpreters, TTs and users (addressees) (cf. also Kohn and Kalina 1996; Kalina 1998). This leaves the problem of how these relations and the factors that affect them are to be measured.

3. Users' views

The first survey on interpreting quality was carried out by Bühler (1986), whose respondents were professional interpreters. Among subsequent surveys was that by Kurz (1993a, 1993b), examining user expectations. The final report of a study commissioned by AIIIC (Moser 1995) provides extensive data on users' expectations and requirements. The one point on which users seem to concur is that content is more important than form (cf. also Kahane 2000). However, the content of the ST can be judged only by listening to it in the original language. If the user listens to the TT, equivalence between ST and TT can be assessed only on the basis of general criteria, such as logical coherence and plausibility. These factors alone, crucial as they are for interpreting quality, are not enough to allow a broader assessment of quality, examining the TT in relation to the ST. Users' understanding of ST content is at best vague, since they would not need interpreters if they could understand it without difficulty.³

Shlesinger puts the question succinctly: "Do our clients know what's good for them? What do they expect, and what will make them happy with the service and product we provide?" (Shlesinger et al. 1997: 126). While user surveys provide answers to the second question, the real problem is actually summed up in the first. How should users know what is good for them? Similarly, how should interpreters know what is good for users? Ultimately, the insights provided by user studies document only one dimension of the quality paradigm — i.e., users' perception of interpreted texts, itself a function of several variables (cf. Kohn and Kalina 1996). What is needed is a model encompassing the communication situation, the

intentions and knowledge bases of the different actors (including the interpreters), and any conditions liable to affect the interpreted event. However, caution is needed in any claim to define objective criteria for interpreting quality. Even in translation, which involves far fewer volatile factors and allows hard facts to be established much more easily than in interpreting, total objectivity is not possible (cf. House 1997).

4. A broader perspective

4.1 Interpreting as an interactive communication process

It is thus not as easy as it may seem at first sight to define exactly what interpreters are supposed to present and how. To make matters worse, little attention is given to what interpreters expect and/or require from the other actors involved in the communication process.

With advances in information technology and financial constraints, the profession is now facing a deterioration in the working conditions which the professional associations, particularly ALLC, have campaigned hard to improve over the years. This affects the quality which interpreters are able to provide. Based on the definitions reviewed in Section 2, I suggest that quality cannot be determined in relation to the interpreter's output alone. Other aspects too require close study — e.g., the interpreter's appearance and general conduct during and around conferences, booth manners, discretion, commitment to preparation and debriefing, further training.

The conditions in which the interpreting act is taking place, crucial for TT quality, also need to be examined more closely. A number of external factors can be made measurable, and studies may be carried out to determine their impact on interpreting quality.

Such studies may have a dual objective. First, they enable interpreters and other actors to identify whatever scope for improvement there is. Second, they highlight that interpreting quality is subject to appropriate standards in interpreters' working conditions.

One of the main needs is closer cooperation between interpreter teams and organisers of multilingual events. However, such cooperation requires time. This is why organisers often turn to agencies for recruiting interpreters. Agencies, or "event organisers", are even less inclined to invest time in problems which they do not see as an integral part of the interpreting service, i.e. obtaining documents, checking technical conditions, requesting speakers to send in manuscripts early enough, avoiding relay interpreting etc. They often recruit interpreters at the last minute, without sufficient notice for adequate preparation.

Interpreters may thus realise only during the meeting that the organisers could actually have provided them with documents, visual material (such as transparencies),

translations, or information on speakers. Similarly, if speakers are not informed beforehand of possible difficulties for interpreters, they will have no qualms in quoting lengthy references without prior warning.

Such oversights are bound to have repercussions on interpreting quality and earn interpreters a poor reputation. The impact of all these variables should therefore be made clear and, as far as possible, measurable.

4.2 A framework for determining factors that affect quality

Ideally, this implies the need for a yardstick against which we can assess an individual interpreting act in a given communication situation. We would like to be able to quantify what makes actual performance fall short of perfection. This seems a difficult undertaking. There are admittedly a number of measurable parameters in output (cf. Figure 1). However, these are not only interdependent, but also subject to continuously changing situational, contextual and procedural requirements. Finding the right balance during each and every phase in a communication act is a competence that may be reflected differently in different segments of an interpreter's output.

Semantic content	Linguistic performance	Presentation
consistency	grammatical correctness	voice quality
logic, coherence	adherence to TL norms	articulation
completeness	comprehensibility	public speaking
accuracy	stylistic adequacy	discipline
unambiguity	terminological adequacy	simultaneity
clarity	discretion	technical mastery
reliability	lack of disturbances	conduct

Figure 1. Dimensions of interpreters' output quality.

Other aspects are not necessarily reflected in output. First, the participants in the event and their role in the communication process must be considered. The main actors involved are the conference organiser, speakers (producers of STs), ST and TT listeners (addressees from the point of view of the speaker, users from the interpreter's perspective), and interpreters. There can be interaction between the interpreters, with their different languages and relay requirements, and the other actors, not only during the communication event but also beforehand.⁴

Other prerequisites are the interpreters' skills and professionalism. These include: general physical and mental factors (such as stress tolerance and concentration); linguistic and communicative skills; transfer competence between two languages; subject knowledge and prior preparation; teamwork skills; professionalism in dealings with conference organisers; and professional ethics.

More task-specific skills and competences include discourse comprehension and production, even under adverse conditions (e.g., poor speakers, non-native speakers), terminological knowledge and its application, intercultural knowledge and, very important, proficiency in choosing appropriate interpreting strategies as a function of the task, working conditions, situation and relevant constraints (cf. Kohn and Kalina 1996). Speaking and listening at the same time, for example, is a skill which can, in principle, be trained. Knowing when to speak during a listening effort and when to keep silent is a competence which has to be acquired in a cognitive learning effort.

Factors in interpreting quality can be classed in four groups, according to when they come into play in relation to the event. The first group includes factors defined prior to the process (pre-process or upstream). Factors in the second group are situated in the period immediately before and during the interpreting process (peri-process conditions). The third group is made up of actual in-process requirements and conditions, while factors in the fourth group cover what comes after the event (post-process or downstream). Figure 2 presents these four stages and indicates the factors most likely to affect output.

Given that all these factors may affect the quality of interpretation, data are needed to ascertain which can be measured and how, and to what extent each is related to the interpreting product.

When attending numerous conferences (whether as an interpreter, as a participant or as an observer sensitive to the problems of communication in interpreted events), one finds that there is often considerable scope for improving the quality of interpreting. Yet action is rarely taken. Interpreters themselves do not always make optimum use of their skills or of available information. Organisers and speakers are insensitive to the needs of the interpreter. Examining these factors more closely should afford a clearer view of where improvements are possible.

With this objective in mind, I have listed some data on overall conditions for simultaneous interpreters in two conferences. These were comparable in a number

1. Pre-process prerequisites	3. In-process requirements
skills and competences	knowledge and presuppositions
contract specifications	conditions of ST presentation
task definition	target language requirements
preparation	interactional competence
2. Peri-process conditions	4. Post-process efforts
number of participants	terminological follow-up
working languages	documentation
technical equipment	quality control
booth position	further training
team strength, composition	specialisation
working hours, event duration	adaptation to technical progress
language combinations	
relay quantity/quality	
availability of documents	
information on proceedings	

Figure 2. Factors relevant to interpreting quality.

General conditions	Event A	Event B
request for interpreters made by organisers	3 months in advance; recruitment by agency (specifying need for specialist interpreters); carefully composed team	one/two days before event; any interpreter acceptable; team composition not thought out in advance
contract negotiation	pay not an issue (generous); negotiation by one interpreter; contract settled 2 months before event	no information
Specific conditions	Event A	Event B
assessed need for preparation	extremely high	very high
availability of printed material	made available by organisers	existing publications
availability of glossaries and terms	specific 7-language glossary made available	none
availability of speakers' texts	none	some scripts made available just beforehand by speakers, when asked by interpreters
availability of speakers' transparencies	all	none

Figure 3a. Scenarios of interpreted event: pre-process conditions.

Peri-process	Event A	Event B
technical equipment	installed by highly reputable firm	fixed installation of average quality; microphone problems during discussion
booth position	lateral, with good view of screens and transparencies, speakers and audience	extremely lateral, with little or no view of overhead transparencies, average view of speakers; an alternative position would have been possible
working hours	9–12 (briefing), 13–17 (event)	9–18 (90 min. lunch-break)
explicit reference to translation	once at opening; thanks at close; positive remarks during breaks	frequently by chairperson, asking speakers to slow down when interpreters had problems

Figure 3b. Peri-process factors and conditions.

of respects. Both were one-day events, with the same language combination; on each occasion, the team consisted of two interpreters with different A languages. Scientific reports were presented at both events, with discussion and requests for follow-up action. Since presentations were thematically related to one another at each of the two conferences, intertextuality criteria as defined by Alexieva (1994) were fulfilled. Interpreters were aware of audience needs. The number of participants was roughly the same. Presenters and other participants knew each other and spent the whole day together (with an evening social event).

Figures 3a, b, c, and d show a synopsis of the variables observed at the two events, following the sequence of four stages illustrated above.

It would also be interesting to study the interpreters' output from the two events and users' assessments of quality; however, as no recordings were made and no questionnaire was distributed to participants, there is only cursory information. Remarks by participants indicate that they considered the interpretation excellent at event A, and the interpreters were also satisfied; in event B, the audience were aware of—and sympathetic with—the difficulties experienced by the interpreters (who actually reminded participants several times of the conditions they were having to cope with).

Even if recordings and user assessments were available, they would not shed light on all aspects of quality, some of which are not present in the TT or reflected in users' impressions. Confidentiality, of the utmost importance for interpreters, is a case in point. While lack of conscientious preparation will usually have a perceptible effect on the TT, breach of confidentiality will not.

Source text related	Event A	Event B
text presentation	40% read out manuscripts (with transparencies); no adjustment of delivery rate needed; use of transparencies in both languages	50% read out manuscripts; transparencies/handouts made available during presentation only on request; speakers asked to slow down — no effect
rhetorical characteristics	very marked	marked
non-native speakers	none	several (~20%)
language distribution	30:70	60:40
Target text related	Event A	Event B
length of interpreting turn	20 to 40 minutes, depending on speaker, language and speech length	5 to 25 minutes, depending on workload and language direction
need for interpretation	needed by most	needed by some (including non-natives)
feedback from audience	praised interpreters' specialist knowledge	encouragement; sorry for interpreters' difficulties

Figure 3c. In-process factors.

Post-process	Event A	Event B
need for confidentiality	yes	no
debriefing, terminological follow-up	thorough	no information
output review (e.g. recording)	no	no information
further training	yes	no information

Figure 3d. Post-process work and requirements.

5. Conclusion

A scheme such as that proposed above, which can of course be extended and adapted, might serve as a reference framework for determining the potential quality of a given interpretation. It may also distinguish between factors or conditions which depend on the interpreter and those which do not.

The next question is whether, and to what extent, these conditions and their effect on interpreting quality are measurable. For instance, does insufficient preparation affect only the content of the TT, or does it also affect interpreters' delivery and general conduct? Measuring such factors and effects is, I think, one of the most difficult tasks in interpreting research, requiring cooperation with other disciplines. One specific section of interpreters' output may not necessarily reflect all the factors identified above, but analysis of an entire conference certainly should. A large number of observational studies are needed to obtain information on all these factors.

One aim is to improve working conditions and ensure that what has been successfully fought for in the past is not lost. Another concern is to measure interpreting quality against more objective criteria, which means that all relevant conditions (variables) have to be clearly identified.

This attempt to sketch a broader perspective of quality — or rather quality assurance — could, in my opinion, also provide a useful basis for teaching future interpreters. After all, interpreter training is not only about processing skills. All aspects of mediated communication that may determine its success should be taught.

If we can prove that quality depends to a considerable extent on conditions such as those discussed above, we may have a better chance of obtaining a working environment conducive to the highest quality.

Notes

1. Source: Silke Gebhard in the *AIIIC Bulletin*, vol. XXVII no. 2, 15 June 1999:7.
2. The main points of this criticism can be found in an article by Eliane Bros-Brann (1975), in *Babel* 21/2, 93ff.
3. Participants occasionally listen in to interpreters to check their fidelity to the ST (cf. Pöchhacker 1994a:128).
4. For a more detailed discussion of what the different groups of actors require of each another, cf. Kalina (1995).