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Interpreting in the 21st Century: Challenges and opportunities
Edited by Giuliana Garzone and Maurizio Viezzi

Interpreting in the 21st Century Challenges and opportunities

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Linguistic mediation on Italian television

When the interpreter is not an interpreter: a case study

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1. *Ad hoc* interpreting in the Italian media

Despite the fact that the issue of quality has become of general concern within the field of Interpreting Studies, there is one area of interpreting, at least in Italy, where it would appear that the question of quality is largely ignored and in which the 'interpreter' can get away with producing oral translations which are often unacceptable. What can be defined as *ad hoc* interpreting in the media, and in particular *ad hoc* interpreting for entertainment purposes, is an area in which it would appear that the issue of quality is at best undervalued. Considering that this type of interpreting reaches millions of people, why the public should endure what are often undoubtedly poor quality interpretations remains unknown. Conceivably, the person who interprets is a special one, i.e. a personality, and this detail, coupled with the fact that professional interpreters are not involved, may result in such interpretations being considered fallacious by researchers and consequently unworthy of serious consideration.

Research on multimedia translation in general is still in its early stages and within this field very little research exists on TV interpreting. In the field of Interpreting Studies, it is clear that interpretations which do not fall within the categories of either simultaneous or consecutive are only just beginning to find their feet, so it is hardly surprising to find that, within the area of TV interpreting, even less research is dedicated to interpreting which is not concerned with matters of great importance such as mass-mediated events. The type of *ad hoc* interpreting discussed in this paper occurs in TV magazines and/or variety shows which are principally concerned with music and film. In other words, programmes within the realm of popular mass culture which are totally divorced from politics, economics and high culture in general. Let us beware that, just as what is not literary or Biblical

translation has run the risk of being categorised as 'other' in Translation Studies, what falls outside the scope of economics, politics and the pure sciences does not suffer the same fate in Interpreting Studies.

In the ever shrinking global village, where diverse cultures communicate with historically unprecedented ease, where news travels at breakneck speed and the role of English is ever gaining importance, it is hardly surprising that out of sheer necessity Italian television makes frequent use of various forms of linguistic mediation. Italy is renowned world wide for producing high quality dubbing and, owing to the vast number of imported films, series, serials, documentaries and news interviews to which audiences are exposed, it is not altogether unlikely that Italians are so familiar with dubbed programmes and recorded voice-overs that they are unaware of any linguistic transformation taking place at all. In fact, if in the BBC interview with the late Diana Spencer confessing her woes in dubbed Italian and in the coverage of her funeral in live simultaneous interpretation the translators/dubbing-translators and interpreters were well hidden, with regard to trivial news from Buckingham Palace reported systematically on the tail end of the eight o'clock news, the translator is completely invisible. Yet what audiences are experiencing is nonetheless a form of linguistic mediation, albeit opaque. *Ad hoc* interpreting is in total contrast with these other forms of linguistic mediation in the media because here journalists and presenters are fully visible to the public as they appear in their new professional roles.

1.1 The journalist-interpreter

Early morning viewers in Italy will certainly be familiar with RAI journalists who go on the air live and interpret international news web sites (especially CNN) by simultaneously translating the oral text of a site's video clips and often the written texts contained in Internet site frames in question, too.² Audiences thus watch a journalist watching and listening to a news programme in another language on a computer screen as it is being transmitted in real time through the World Wide Web, and listen to her as she (a) interprets the oral text and (b) orally translates some of the ever-changing written messages which appear around the video clip — these are usually news flashes, financial indices, weather reports and so on. This type of interpreting can be defined in terms of three-way interaction, of journalist-interpreter mediating between virtual written/oral text-types, guests and remote audience. As the flowchart in Figure 2 illustrates, this model of interpretation is quite dissimilar to that of simultaneous and consecutive interpreting and even of video conferencing. These traditional forms of interpretations typically involve an Orator performing in Language A, with an Interpreter listening to the message in Language A and translating it into Language B for an Audience, which is witness to both Languages A and B (Figure 1).

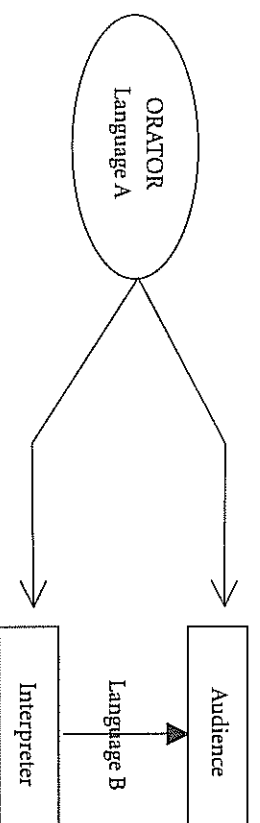


Figure 1. A model for traditional conference interpreting.

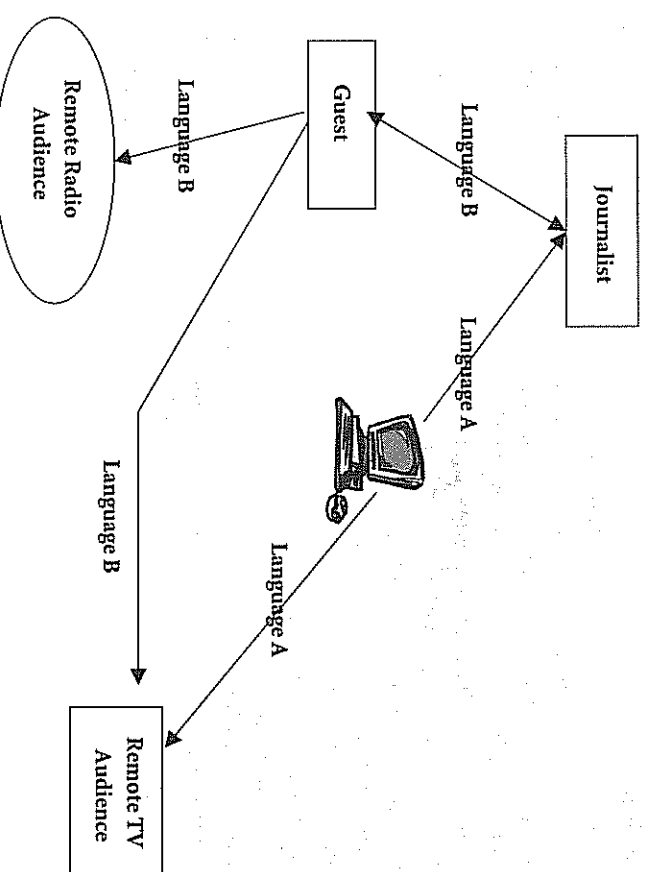


Figure 2. A model for interpreting across different media.

Interestingly, early morning journalists, like interpreters in booths, wear headphones as they converse simultaneously with monolingual guests, who are often physically elsewhere. In Italy such news programmes are usually in part broadcast on radio, TV and the Internet at the same time.³

1.2 The compère-interpreter

However, not all *ad hoc* interpreting on Italian TV deals with matters of great pith and moment such as international news. Much *ad hoc* interpreting exists simply for entertainment purposes. There are numerous compère - or host-interpreters on Italian TV; personalities such as Raffaella Carrà, Gabriella Carlucci, Fabio Fazio, Red Ronnie and Paolo Limiti, to name but a few, are all too willing to reveal their linguistic abilities to millions of viewers as they liaise between their non-Italian speaking guests and their Italian speaking audiences. And even if many limit their bilingual performances to a few short introductory and/or valedictory exchanges, others go all the way and take part in bilingual chatting within the wider framework of a monolingual chat show. In fact, often, the host of a variety/magazine-type show, and therefore a well known personality, will interview a foreign celebrity, usually from the world of show business, and interpret both himself and his guest.

In such cases, in terms of interpretation typology, we have a fairly uncharacteristic situation, as the interpreter is not strictly liaising between two parties, in the sense that he is transferring messages from A to B and back again from B to A as would occur in regular liaison interpreting (Figure 3).

In the case of liaison interpreting, the interpreter mediates between two parties who do not share the same language. Normally, any initiation comes from either of the parties for whom the interpreter is acting as moderator. We can imagine situations as far apart as business negotiations and court interpreting in which, although fully visible, the interpreter neither initiates discourse nor authors it. Conversely, the host-interpreter is not a regular go-between, but a totally independent agent within the speech event. Although he is indeed interpreting *for* two parties (or possibly three depending on how we wish to consider the audience) who do not share a common code, unlike any other interpreting typology, he is the initiator of the speech event and thus in total control of the situation (Figure 4). Unlike any other form of interpretation, the interpreter is not only the initiator of the text to be interpreted, but also author of part of the discourse — as far as a presenter can be an author, of course.⁴

2. The investigation⁵

An empirical study was carried out in order to investigate audience perception and attitudes towards *ad hoc* interpreting on Italian TV. The aim was principally to find out how audiences responded to such interpretations, with a view to understanding their levels of:

- a. trust: translation of some sort is obviously necessary in the media and an Italian-only speaking audience has no choice other than to trust the translator. How much credibility does a personality, a non-professional actually have?

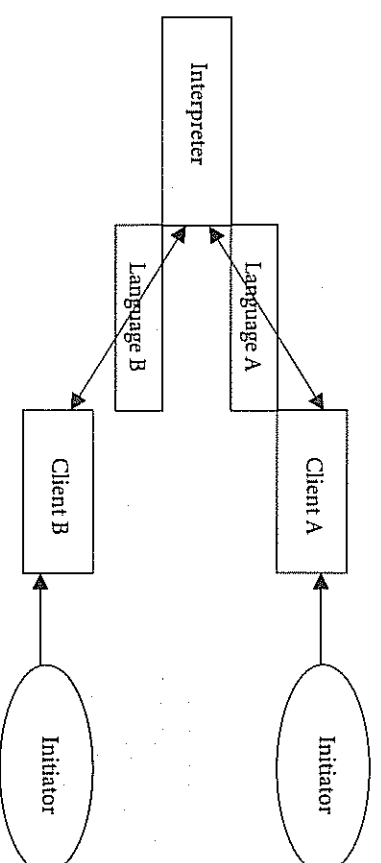


Figure 3. A model for liaison interpreting.

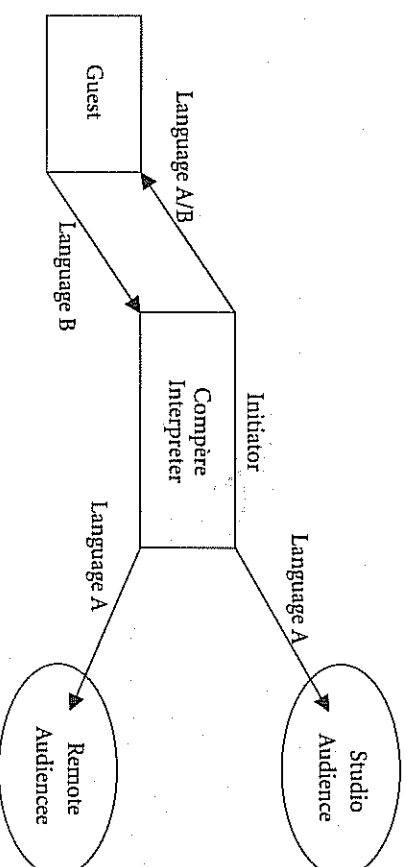


Figure 4. A model for interpreting for entertainment purposes on TV.

- b. levels of tolerance: audiences who understand the person being interviewed are obviously more fine-tuned to the interpreter than the linguistically 'lay' person. How much non-professionalism are such viewers willing to tolerate?

In order to explore these areas, two different categories of viewers were asked to watch a nine minute video clip containing an example of a host-interpreter interviewing a celebrity and were then asked to fill in a short questionnaire.

2.1 The recording

Our investigation was based upon an interview conducted by Paolo Limiti, as opposed to another host, mainly because of the compère's exceptional command of the English language. It was thought that the poor quality of English often spoken by other presenters would have almost certainly resulted in biased respondent

reactions, whereas a personality who was at least linguistically competent would receive a more neutral judgement. Younger and more linguistically competent host-interpreters of pop and rock music programmes were also rejected because they were often not well known to the general public. Limiti was thought to be the perfect choice because, despite his proficiency in English, his interpreting skills are those of an amateur, whose technique is quite unlike that of a professional interpreter. Whether the general public was aware of this was one of the factors we set out to evaluate. The recording chosen for our experiment was of Paolo Limiti interviewing heart surgeon Christian Barnard, which was originally broadcast in September 2000.

2.1.1 Paolo Limiti

Limiti is the compère of *Ci vediamo su Rai Uno*, a magazine which is broadcast daily by the RAI in the early afternoon. The programme is clearly aimed at senior citizens, both the studio audience seated behind Limiti and the guests being usually in the over-sixty age group. The format of the show is classic Italian variety, consisting of song and dance routines, stand-up comedy acts and phone-in quizzes. Most of the songs on the show are from the pre-war era and they are historically contextualised in detail by Limiti. When songs are not performed in the Italian version Limiti will first gloss the lyrics, after which the number can be heard accompanied by superimposed *not à not* subtitling — this also occurs for songs from the classic Neapolitan repertoire. Every day Limiti interviews different guest personalities and, if the guest of the day happens not to speak Italian, he consequently doubles up as an interpreter.

As far as this particular type of speech event is concerned, it could almost qualify as an example of what Goffman defines three-way conversation (1981:197) — in this case between presenter, guest and audience. Limiti will typically begin his interview by questioning his foreign guest in Italian, he will then repeat the same question in English, his guest will then respond in English and Limiti will translate the response back into Italian for his audience. This bilingual conversation within a conversation is, of course odd: although Limiti is conversing face to face, dyadically with his guest, he is, in fact, really only speaking Italian for the sake of the studio audience behind him, which in a sense is only vicariously part of the speech event. Furthermore, let us not forget the larger audience which is participating from home, what Goffman labels the 'remote' audience. Thus what we really have is a four-way conversation.

The translations of the guest's responses are also uttered in a dyadic mode, facing the guest rather than the audience. Occasionally, Limiti will ostensibly turn round and speak to the studio audience alone or even to the wider audience at large, usually when promoting a book or a film, but will do so (like all TV/radio announcers) as if he were speaking to one single person in pseudo-dyadic mode.

Finally, Limiti and guest converse in — or indeed perform in — what Goffman calls 'fresh talk' (op.cit.). Now, while we do not wish to imply that Limiti and his guests previously prepare the interview by rote, we would like to suggest that:

- a. Limiti prepares the questions beforehand — he goes on the air visibly clutching a clipboard which presumably has the questions on it; however, the clipboard is probably a 'safety-net', as it is feasible to suppose that he reads the questions over dozens of times beforehand. Nevertheless, his talk always give the impression of being "fresh";
- b. the guest is most likely to be not totally ignorant about what s/he is going to be asked, and has surely thought about or has maybe even practised what to answer. Yet once again talk appears to be 'fresh'. Thus, Limiti's interpretations appear to be equally fresh — or at least as fresh as those of a regular practitioner, who will not go to work totally unprepared on the subject matter to be interpreted.

2.2 The respondents

Two different groups of respondents were asked to watch the recording. Group A consisted of 80 informed respondents. These were all undergraduates attending the first two years of the Advanced School of Modern Languages for Interpreters and Translators of the University of Bologna, who were either majoring in English or studying it as their second language.

The same recording was shown to Group B, which was made up of three focus groups, each consisting of 10 participants aged between 15 and 70, from different walks of life, with different degrees of competence in the English language. Participants were chosen haphazardly from the local community — shopkeepers, teachers, builders etc. The only qualification they required was lack of linguistic expertise.

All respondents were given a short questionnaire to fill in. While group A were questioned on discrete linguistic features contained in Limiti's interpretation, group B were simply questioned on their perception and attitudes towards the interviewer in terms of trust in the host-interpreter.

Professional interpreters were deliberately excluded from the sample for this project, as were students attending the third and fourth year of our faculty. This was because informal reactions to the interview by professional interpreters tended to be extremely intolerant (quite rightly so perhaps) towards the presenter, although their comments on features such as the presenter's general absence of technique and professionalism were greatly appreciated. While laypersons generally marvelled at Limiti's interpreting abilities, professionals were particularly intolerant of features such as his poor use of ear voice span, his habit of talking over the interviewer and the fact that he paid little attention to style.

3. Results

In Group A, the informed respondents, 69 of whom were female and 11 male, which well reflects the male/female ratio of the faculty, when asked to evaluate Limiti's use of lexis, grammatical correctness and stylistic appropriacy, pretty unanimously gave him a pass mark. According to about half the sample, the presenter's rendering of these features was considered as being sufficient (Table 1).

The group of undergraduates were also asked to give a yes/no answer to whether they trusted the personality as an interpreter. This variable was crossed with those regarding perception — i.e. fidelity, lexis, syntax and style. The results of cross tabulation of these variables lead us to consider that there might be a relationship between trust and perception. We used chi squared statistics (χ^2) to test the null hypothesis that there could be no association between trust and perception against the alternative hypothesis that there could be an association. The data of the contingency table were plotted in four tri-dimensional bar graphs: Figure 5 illustrates the cross tabulation between fidelity and trust; Figure 6 between syntax and trust; Figure 7 between lexis and trust; and Figure 8 between style and trust. In each graph, the two categories of the variable *trust* were plotted on the y axis and the three categories of the perception variables (*poor*, *sufficient* and *good*) were plotted along the x axis. Percentages are plotted on the z axis. The results of chi square statistics (χ^2), the degree of freedom (d) and the p-value for the level of significance have been indicated in each figure. Chi square statistics show there is a strong association between trust and perception at least for three variables — lexis, fidelity and style. Thus the fact that the public figure inspires trust seems to affect the perception of respondents. As can be seen in Figure 5, of the 56.3% who rated fidelity positively in Table 1, 43% trusted Limiti. The same pattern can be observed in the other figures and, according to results of the chi squared test, it seems that respondents are able to judge the quality of this service objectively.

Table 1. Ratings given by informed respondents on Limiti's interpretations of linguistic features

	Poor	Sufficient	Good	Total
Fidelity	10 12.5%	25 31.3%	45 56.3%	80 100%
Lexis	19 23.8%	34 42.5%	27 33.8%	80 100%
Syntax	19 23.8%	44 55%	17 21.3%	80 100%
Style	29 36.3%	35 43.8%	16 20%	80 100%

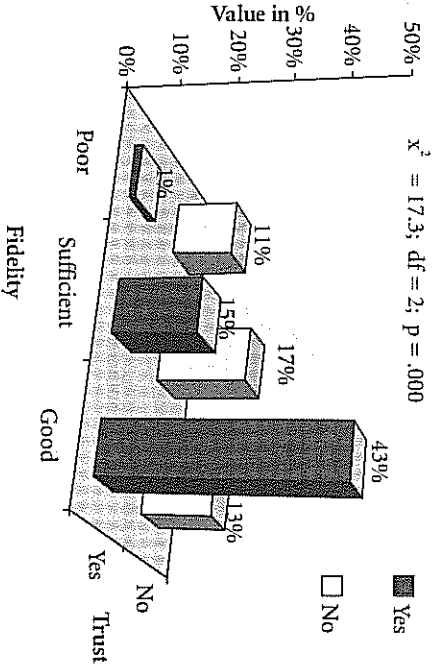


Figure 5. Trust and Fidelity.

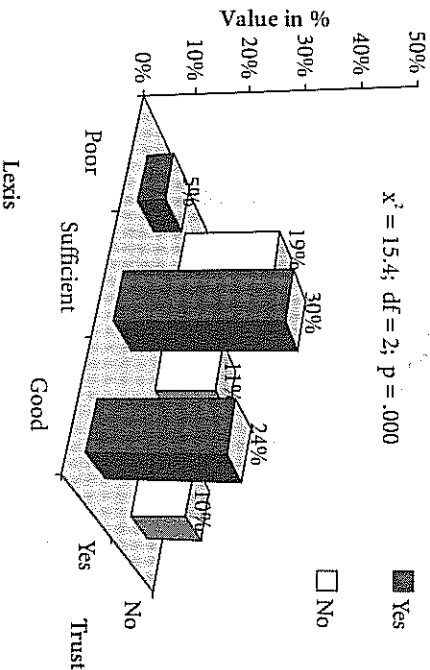


Figure 6. Lexis and Trust.

With regard to the layperson focus groups in which respondents were not asked to judge Limiti's linguistic abilities, discussions revealed that the more proficient the respondent was in English, the less he or she would trust Limiti's interpretation. This seems to reinforce the judgement of students whose English proficiency is certainly better than that of the people involved in focus groups. As a result, we could infer that the opinion most viewers have of the interpretations in these programmes is influenced by the reputation of the compère.

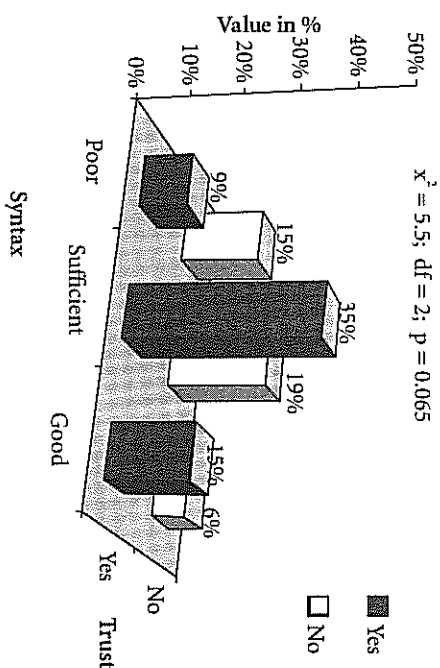


Figure 7. Syntax and Trust.

$$\chi^2 = 8.2; df = 2; p = 0.016$$

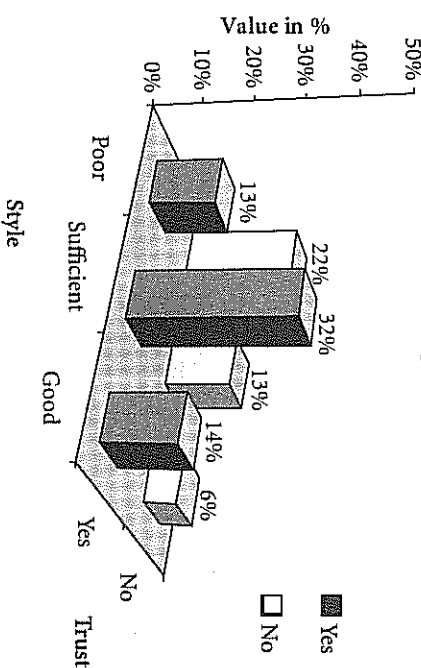


Figure 8. Style and Trust.

4. Conclusions

We would like to suggest that informed respondents, students who entered the School following severe linguistic and cultural selection, and are surrounded by English and linguistics, were influenced by the charisma of the TV personality and were therefore more tolerant than would be expected of his shortcomings, many of which were not simply poor interpreting strategies, but genuine mistakes and even contradictions. In the layperson focus group, our results are strengthened. While students who judge Limiti positively represent a homogeneous sample of linguistic

proficiency, the heterogeneous focus groups showed that judgement of our personality is higher when the level of English is poor. The chi square test also confirmed this hypothesis.

Despite the fact that non-professional linguistic mediators on TV are not so numerous, we believe that this typology of interpretation will become more common in the future, for obvious reasons regarding globalisation and the spread of English as a *lingua franca*. This case study has shown that, while in terms of quality we are a long way away from the performance of a practitioner who could raise the quality of the interpretation in every sense, such interpretations are part and parcel of the show, of entertainment. It would be unlikely that an anonymous albeit professional interpreter would have the emotional impact on the public of a personality like Limiti.

Since this is a pioneer study in the field of multimedia translation we would like to conclude that this typology of interpretation should not be ignored by researchers and that the model suggested in the flow chart be further explored using a larger sample of host-interpreters.

Notes

1. RAI (*Radio Televisione Italiana*) is the state owned radio/TV corporation.
2. Such interpretations, however, are not always necessarily 'live'. Since going into print early morning RAI journalist Emanuela Palerenti appears to have been preparing and summarising her texts before going on the air.
3. During the US presidential elections in autumn 2000, the CNN website went out live on Italian TV within a RAI Internet frame and the usual live interpretation was replaced by a mixture of subtitles and written glosses. Conversely, written web sites relating to Bush and Gore were (or at least appeared to be) localised and translated orally while on-line, once again by a non-practitioner.
4. For a lengthy and detailed discussion on authorship in the media, see Goffman (1981).
5. I would like to thank Giuseppe Nocella for his support regarding the experimental design of the investigation and above all for his generous contribution of statistical know how.