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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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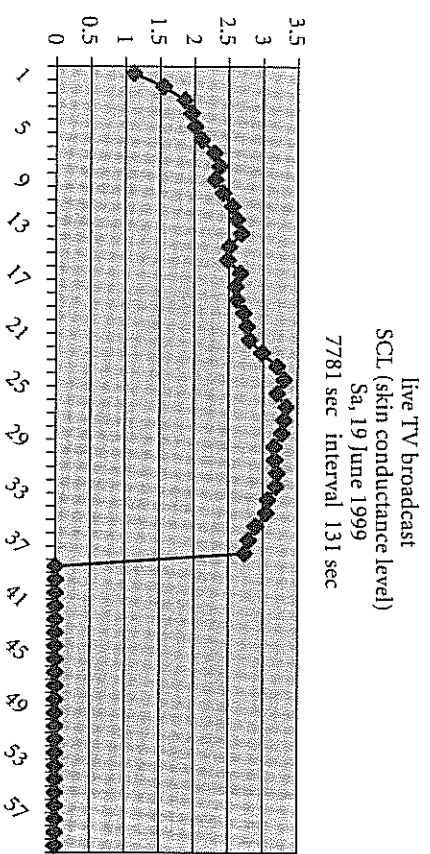
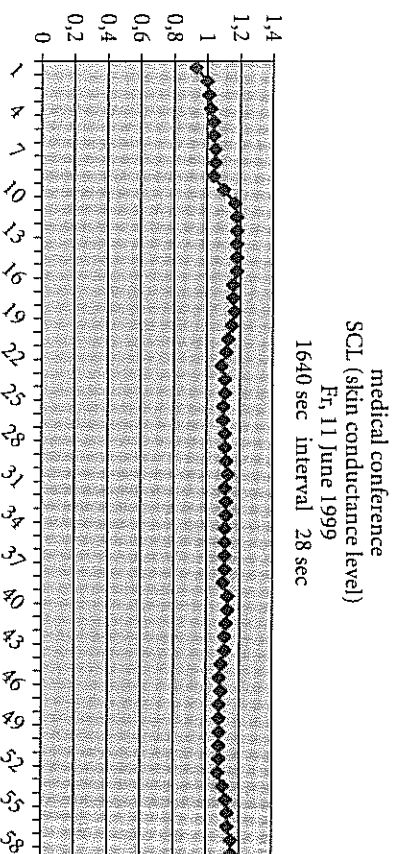


Figure 3. An interpreter's skin conductance level (SCL) recordings in two different settings: (1) medical conference, (2) live TV broadcast.

any final conclusions. However, even these first results leave no doubt that interpreters' subjective impressions of greater stress during live TV interpreting can be confirmed by objective physiological measurements.

Note

* I wish to thank Doris Chlida for conducting the physiological tests within the framework of a postgraduate research project. She has my full admiration for her ability to handle the equipment and for knowing how to compress the wealth of data into reproducible graphs that make sense even to non-experts.

New perspectives and challenges for interpretation

The example of television

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1. Aspects of international television communication

According to the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), during the first eleven months of 1999 its Eurovision network broadcast more than 100,000 programmes, with an increase of more than 15% over the whole of 1998, which was itself a record year (EBU 2000).

This simple figure casts an impressive light on one particular aspect of globalisation — the increasing internationalisation of television programmes, both terrestrial and satellite-broadcast.

As Blommaert and Verschueren observe, "it is quite obvious that processes of internationalisation always involve a cultural-communicative component, and that this component may precisely be the weak spot in the process, defying good intentions, elaborated policies, and the extensive preparation by the participants" (Blommaert and Verschueren 1991: 11). Yet, rather amazingly, scores of studies and books on international and intercultural communication hardly mention (and one could ask how far they consider) the fact that globalised communication implies the use of language — or rather different languages — and thus, in most cases, there must be some sort of overt or covert interlinguistic transfer.¹ This is true also for television discourse. Until now, though the problem has been addressed mainly by translation scholars,² a number of interpreting researchers have also made prominent contributions.³

If we accept with J. Lambert (1989: 215) that "the question of translation has become a key problem of discourse in general", translation being at the same time an (active) agent and a symptom of linguistic and cultural exchanges, we cannot ignore the social and ethical responsibility involved in its use, and the consequent need to improve our understanding of its working mechanisms — for example those of interpreting on television.

1.1 The research project on interpreting in Italian television

The research project the author is engaged in, initiated by Francesco Straniero Sergio (University of Trieste), aims precisely at exploring the field of impromptu oral translation on Italian television during the last thirty years. A large collection of recordings from public as well as private television channels is being transcribed and analysed. The insight to be gained from these studies will be used both for descriptive and teaching purposes. Until now over 900 items have been collected, with a duration ranging from a few minutes to several hours and involving about 100 interpreters. The transcription and its transformation into a machine-readable corpus is far from being completed, but there are already some preliminary results and partial studies.⁴

The present article aims at sketching out a general background for the systematic analysis of characteristics and typologies of orally translated television discourse in Italy, and at highlighting some of its crucial aspects.

2. Interpreting on television

Previous considerations on television interpreting have always acknowledged differences between television interpreting and interpreting in conference settings. Some researchers seem to consider television interpreting simply as conference interpreting performed under severer circumstances (e.g. Pimhas 1972; Stolz 1992); this is also the stance of many professional conference interpreters actually working for television. On the other hand, there are not only authors who stress the profoundly different character of performances expected from television interpreters, but also professionals who acknowledge a completely different approach on television by comparison with traditional interpreting settings.⁵ Altogether, there seems to be a consensus that television interpreting needs additional qualifications (Daly 1985), leading to a new professional profile (Laine 1985; Kurz 1990; Kaufmann 1995). In the words of Bros-Braun, "interpreting live for television requires an entirely new 'mind set' compared to everyday practice of conference interpretation and to what all of us have learned and taught in various schools of interpretation" (1993: 1). My theses, deriving from the analysis conducted up to now on the recorded material, are that:

- television interpreting is indeed substantially different from interpreting in traditional conference settings and ordinary face-to-face communication;
- most of the specific differences between traditional interpreting and television interpreting have not yet been sufficiently investigated;
- the norms of behaviour internalised by professional conference interpreters are not always adequate to television communication, and can even lead to conflicts about the perception of interpretation quality.

Media discourse as discourse in the age of technical reproducibility has been studied extensively. Some of the salient peculiarities of interpreted television discourse are:

- a. the typically asymmetrical and one-way character of television communication: there is a growing number of recipient subgroups — the television audience, henceforth referred to as off-screen participants — who cannot actively participate in the communication process but have the power of (remote) control, accompanied by a shrinking number of producers of messages, the on-screen participants, and an even smaller number of senders distributing the 'raw material' (pictures and contents);
- b. the industrial character of message production for mass communication, involving enormous personal and technical resources and economic interests, which makes it difficult to identify and clearly distinguish between animator, author and principal of a message.

In face-to-face communication the situation is physically shared by all participants. For example, at the funeral of Princess Diana, the liturgy and the speeches were in English, being addressed primarily to the congregation in Westminster Abbey.⁶ If interpreters are needed, they can be present and translate for some of the participants.

Media communication, instead, takes place in a virtual situation. In the above-mentioned case, the broadcast of the funeral, staged in different formats, was made available in 44 different languages to 2.5 billion people. It was shown live in about 187 countries, and after the event in another 45 countries (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 7 September 1997, p. 7).

3. Characteristics of interpreter-mediated communication

For the purpose of the present analysis, I consider an interpreter to be anyone who acts as a mediator between at least two people speaking different languages, independently of her/his status and the other roles that particular person may play in the specific communication situation. On television, as in real life, interpreters are not always professionals, officially recognised as interlinguistic mediators. On the contrary, especially on Italian television, there seems to be an increasing tendency towards a hybridisation of roles, with leading journalists and showmen/women acting (also) as interpreters, and professional interpreters becoming (also) primary communication partners.

According to the basic premiss that interpreting is a socially determined activity, a multifactorial analysis is thus needed. The general framework chosen to systematise the salient characteristics of interpreted discourse in different communication situations is Dell Hymes' analysis of communicative events (1974: 45–65).

Hymes distinguishes eight main components with sixteen fundamental aspects, summarised by the acronym *SPEAKING*:

Situation	3. setting	4. scene
Participants	5. speaker, sender	7. hearer, receiver, audience
Ends	6. addressor	8. addressee
Act sequences	9. purposes-outcomes	10. purposes-goals
Key	1. message form	2. message content
Instrumentalities	11. key	
Norms	12. channel	13. forms of speech
Genres	14. norms of interaction	15. norms of interpretation
	16. genres	

Following these categories, some aspects will be highlighted to underpin the claim that television interpreting is indeed substantially different from interpreting in traditional conference settings.

In particular, these categories are applied to three varieties out of the host of possible types of interpreted communication: informal or natural interpreting (in which the interpreter acts as an unremunerated 'helper'), interpreting in traditional conferences, and television interpreting (the latter two in both consecutive and simultaneous mode). Given the dynamic character of any form of communication, all distinctions made are at least to some extent artificial and should be viewed as different positions along a continuum.

3.1 Situation

As to the physical setting (time and place), the main characteristic of interpreting on television is the complex character of techno-communication, constructed for the benefit of a remote audience, while face-to-face interaction always occurs between physically present primary and secondary communication partners (though impaired by the presence of a booth in simultaneous interpreting). On television, programmes can be recorded in the studio and broadcast much later. The television interpreter shares the setting only (if at all) with on-screen participants: working in the consecutive mode, he/she is mainly on-screen, but his/her visibility to the audience is determined by the camera, while the simultaneous interpreter is often completely isolated from the primary communication partners. The scene is mainly determined by the transmission genre (see 3.8), and by the specific roles and status of participants (see 3.2).

In a form of communication with 'no sense of place' (Meyrowitz 1985), staging becomes a constitutive aspect of discourse. This always implies a series of choices (concerning the selection of the images and parts of discourse to be broadcast, their arrangement and explanation), and thus some sort of pre-interpreting. Staging is

often used to create a sense of authenticity; together with editing and mixing, it can enhance the impression of actuality and spontaneity on television.

3.2 Participants

The main aspect distinguishing television discourse from spontaneous face-to-face interaction in this respect is the double level of television communication: carefully chosen on-screen participants — mostly both visible and audible² — communicate with each other for the sake of an off-screen audience. This audience is by definition undifferentiated, anonymous and numerous, with no possibility of active participation. The interpreter can be employed exclusively as a mediator between on-screen and off-screen participants, or also as a mediator between on-screen participants.

The increased size and fuzziness of the television audience makes communication more complex for both primary participants and interpreters. As Holly observes, in oral communication "the greater the number of addressees, the more difficult it is for the speaker to provide a text which at the same time is relevant, informative, and comprehensible for a heterogeneous target group" (Holly 1995:342).

Television interpreters obviously always act 'on-screen' at least in voice, but there are important distinctions to be made. In some circumstances the (mainly consecutive) interpreter is placed right in the focus of attention and experiences a new type of involvement in the communication situation, playing the role of an expert or even becoming a television personality. On other occasions, the interpreter (working mainly in the simultaneous mode) is treated as a sort of non-person placed no matter where, a technical device which transforms a verbal input in one language into a verbal output in another language — in Goffman's words, a talking box. This makes the role and status of the television interpreter much more ambiguous than those of a conference interpreter (see 3.7. *Norms*). The ambiguity of the television interpreter's role is further increased by the fact that this function can also be performed by non-experts playing a double role, e.g. as presenter and interpreter.

In interpreter-mediated communication situations on television, we have till now observed three main typologies of participant relationships.

Type 1 comprises events in which on-screen participants communicate with the help of an interpreter, (part of) whose translation is made accessible also to the television audience. Researchers have described this form of discourse as talk constructed for absent overhearers (Hutchby 1995). There is a first level of interaction, including the interpreter and the primary communication partners, and a second level, where their interaction is 'amplified' for the benefit of the television audience.

Type 2 includes events developing independently of their broadcasting; interpreting in this case is one of several means to make the media event accessible to a television audience which cannot follow it in the original language. In this case,

there is a first level of interaction excluding the television interpreter, who comes in only at the second level for the benefit of the television audience.

Type 3 consists of events in which one of the primary communication partners plays a double role, acting both as presenter and as interpreter for the exclusive benefit of the television audience. In this case, there is a stronger sense of mutual relationship between the first and the second level of communication, as the interaction with participants speaking a foreign language is controlled and mediated by one and the same person. Television audiences, the main addressees of media communication, are made less aware of their position as overhearers, being treated as if they were the only addressees of interpreting and thus potentially active communication partners. This particular form of staging adds to the ambiguity of all participants' roles and makes the distinction between author, animator and principal of what is being said particularly difficult.

3.3 Ends

Both in a conference situation and on television, interpreting is the most immediate (and often the cheapest) way of granting verbal communication between people speaking different languages. This could be one reason why the possibility of postponed broadcasting has not led to a systematic substitution of interpreting with more controllable forms of language transfer, such as dubbing, traditional voice-over or subtitling (see Luyken et al. 1991), notwithstanding the risk admittedly involved in actual spontaneity (see 3.8. *Genres*).

In conference interpreting, the interpreter's supposed professional purpose is to act as a neutral mediator and honest spokesperson, loyal both to the speaker and to the listener, aiming at mutual understanding, equivalence and possibly completeness (see e.g. quality questionnaires); additional personal goals may be to earn one's living (keeping the customers satisfied by allowing the conference to run smoothly) or to optimise the cost/benefit ratio (balancing fatigue and time against fees), together with the pressing need to preserve one's face in front of an invisible but large audience, not to mention critical clients and colleagues.

In pursuing these same aims, the television interpreter must adapt to massive technical, process- and interaction-related constraints (see 3.1. *Situation* and 3.6. *Instrumentalities*), as well as audience expectations (e.g. as to characteristics of media discourse; see 3.7. *Norms*) and the purposes of the other communication partners (e.g. rapid questioning style of presenters leaving no time for *détailage*, prior instructions to the interpreter to make somebody 'sound' some particular way).

In the case of mixed roles, there can be an even stronger interference with personal goals of the presenter/interpreter (tendency to adapt the translated discourse to one's expectations or aims, need of topic and situation development, gatekeeping etc.).⁸

3.4 Act sequences

Schematically speaking, discourse occurring in informal interpreting situations is mainly dialogical. Conference interpreting, instead, generally occurs in situations which privilege monologic discourse, focussing on propositional content and prevalently informative function, and using a style nearer to the written pole of the continuum. Thus the interpreter, too, tends to privilege correspondence of semantic content over form in his/her output if circumstances do not allow the achievement of both.

On television things are different. There 'the medium is the message', the oral component is accompanied by an obtrusive visual component, and both are carefully staged (see 3.1. *Situation*). Interactive and conative functions prevail both in monologic passages (explanations, comments, speeches) and in dialogic format, with a strong tendency towards shortening turns. Situation development can prove more important than topic development, the way social discourse is constructed more important than propositional content. The conference interpreter's tendency to set greater store by semantic content than form may thus not be judged the same way on television as in a conference setting.

3.5 Key

In order to involve the audience in television discourse and to keep their interest alive, the role of presenters and other types of 'guides' becomes essential. In the entertainment genre (see 3.8. *Genres*), phatic aspects, talk-as-play and fooling are skilfully used by media professionals to create a "personalised style of pseudo-intimacy" (Holly 1995:345) and to enhance parasocial interaction involving the virtual audience. In this respect, interpreting helps to create the illusion of live participation through television, hiding its character of 'mediatedness'. Here the interpreter's ability to take key into account in both input and in output becomes crucial; consecutive interpreters, especially, are exposed to changes in fooling which temporarily modify their role in interaction (see Straniero Sergio 1999a).

In the event-like genre, on the other hand, probably the most important feature is the tendency to concentrate attention on the present moment, giving television audiences the impression of living reality 'as it is'. The original sound audible in the background thus "contributes to the sense of authenticity in the translation and prevents a degree of mistrust from developing" (Luyken et al. 1991:80).

3.6 Instrumentalities

Obviously the main medium of expression all interpreters rely on, both for their input and for their output, is speech transmitted via the acoustic channel. Yet the

visual channel also carries important non-verbal information for all communication partners.

The main characteristics of media instrumentalities, compared to more traditional forms of interpreting, are their increasing technicality and the minimal control the interpreter has over them, as well as the complete lack of back-channel from the off-screen audience and, sometimes, from all participants.

Television interpreters depend even more than conference interpreters on technical devices; the interplay of visual and acoustic channels, including their own output (staging), is almost totally out of their control.⁹ Consecutive interpreters mostly work from and into a foreign language and often have to alternate *chuchotage* and consecutive without notes.

3.7 Norms

Conference interpreters, at least in Western societies, are established professionals. They usually operate in a highly ritualised interaction context, with mainly monologic turns managed by a chairperson. They are generally regarded by their public as impartial experts helping participants to cross the language barrier, as ratified overhearers authorised to speak in the first person singular for primary communication partners and even to talk together with them, infinging the rule of 'one speaker at a time'. This 'instrumental' or service character is confirmed by the general absence of voice matching and the interchangeability of interpreters (the same speaker can be translated by different interpreters). Though the audience does not always have a correct perception of the interpreting process (the 'talking box' idea seems still very popular), the interpreter's loyalty to both the speaker and the listener is granted by professional ethics which perpetuate the 'true interpreter' principle (Harris 1990).

On television, this scheme is (partially) used only in the event-like genre (see 3.8. *Genres*). In the information and entertainment genre, there is a complex interaction which — on the macro-level — follows a pre-established script often unknown to the interpreter, while turn management on the micro-level, though made more complex by the presence of an interpreter (e.g. by *décalage*), is strictly controlled by the presenter. Voice matching is increasingly employed, and television interpreters occasionally also switch to the third person singular (see e.g. Straniero Sergio 1999a, Amato forthcoming).

The fact that the interpreter can become a primary communication partner and that the interpreting function can be taken up by a primary partner raises several problems, including the ethical question of loyalty (which norms are applied? what is privileged in the case of conflicting goals?) and the audience's perception of interpreted discourse. Unfortunately, not only in Italy but elsewhere too, there are few studies on this aspect.¹⁰

3.8 Genres

The typical cultural specificity of genre traditions observed in cultural studies (see e.g. Rehbein 1985a) seems not to apply to interpreting situations in conferences and on television. At international conference level there are well-defined rituals (official or political encounters, press briefings, traditional conferences with presentations and debate, parliamentary work), but mostly these are not bound to any specific culture. On Western television, on the other hand, a hybridisation of traditional genres has been observed, which also tends to cross national borders.

Leaving aside the broadcasting of conferences and conference-like events, consisting in a mere amplification of the interpretations produced for the public present on the spot, television makes use of interpreters in three typical types of interaction:

- a. the "infotainment" genre (mainly formal conversation and narration — e.g. interviews, debates), for which interpretation is mostly simultaneous;
- b. planned or unplanned media events, again mostly with simultaneous interpreting;¹¹
- c. the entertainment genre (breakfast television, talk-shows etc.), with informal or formal conversation and narration adapted to television requirements, where consecutive interpreting is mostly used.

As to speech act performance on television, Ong (1982) identified the 'secondary' orality of media discourse: electronic media are not really spontaneous, but contrive apparent spontaneity by carefully programming events. In the words of another researcher, "media spontaneity (...) has to be learned by media professionals, and it differs from the language style of non-professionals in a significant manner" (Holly 1995:344). Holly classifies this kind of performance as obviously read, recited (by heart), pseudo-spontaneous (with the teleprompter), semi-spontaneous (improvised from written text or keywords), and spontaneous. He also states that actual spontaneity is generally avoided, because it is considered too risky.

This could explain the apparently paradoxical fact of interpreters sometimes experiencing more difficulties with the 'oral' style of television discourse than with the more 'written' style of conferences: even more than elsewhere, television interpreters seem to be the only participants in communication compelled to produce genuine fresh talk!

4. Conclusions

In the light of the factors analysed, there should be no doubt that television interpreting on the whole is indeed very different from traditional conference interpreting and should therefore deserve more attention from both researchers and teachers.

To sum up, the main characteristics of change are related to:

- the progressive loss of interpersonal character of communication;
- the reproducibility of oral discourse in the age of electronic media;
- staging (where the selection of viewpoints and the restructuring of discourse implicitly include a pre-selection of meaning);
- the secondary character of orality on television, conflicting with the interpreter's genuine fresh talk;
- last but not least, what I have called ambiguity — the loss of a clear-cut profile of language mediation. This pushes the interpreter a step back into invisibility and, above all, may be discriminatory towards 'the other' who wants to make his/her voice heard.

To finish with a deliberately provocative statement, the impression gained from Italian television is that at least some of its interpreters still live on the other side of the (media) moon, where the faithful transmission of meaning, even at the expense of form, for a co-operative audience is the supreme goal of interpreting, while others use their power as mediators in a far from impartial way. Perhaps it might be their choice of a self-imposed norm that denies 'old style' interpreters success in the media context. Failing to recognise and react to these different circumstances could result in an increasingly frequent substitution of 'traditional' interpreters with other mediators, who prove more adaptable. The ethical consequences of these observations, which I consider crucial, are still unexplored.

Let me conclude by again quoting Blommaert and Verschueren, whose comments on intercultural communication partners are, in my view, of particular importance for interpreters: "The solution of these practical problems [...] cannot be found in 'increased awareness' of otherness alone. [...] Solutions are to be found in practical training involving the questioning of one's own role in the interaction. [...] Training should focus on the range of adaptability which the interlocutor [and I add: the interpreter] can hold for him/herself without losing the effectiveness crucial for attaining his/her communicative goals" (Blommaert and Verschueren 1991:9–10).

Notes

1. Cf. e.g. Hall (1976); Brislin and Yoshida (1994); Meckel and Kriener (1996); Samovar and Porter (2000).
2. Cf. e.g. Rehbein (1985a); Knapp et al. (1987); Schäffner (1994); Drescher et al. (1997).
3. Cf. e.g. Kondo and Tebble (1997); Kurz and Pöschacker (1995); Kurz (1998).
4. Cf. Straniero Sergio (1999a,b); Mack (1999, 2000 and 2001); Amato (forthcoming).
5. Cf. also Mack (2001).

6. Yet, events themselves are more and more designed for being broadcast. The 'perfect crime' (Baudrillard 1995) has been successful: virtual reality appears by now more real than physical reality.

7. But sometimes only visible (e.g. the studio audience) or only audible (e.g. people from the audience calling in during a transmission, or simultaneous interpreters).

8. After all, television's main purpose is to involve, to capture: no pauses, no voids, no decrease of interest mean no zapping; thus its need to appear entertaining, but also authentic and credible.

9. Cf. also Mack (2001).

10. Cf. e.g. Elmagir (1999).

11. Cf. Dayan and Katz (1992).