

Factors Determining the Success of an Interpreter and His Performance

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Abstract

A close study of the conduct of a translator or an interpreter indicates that there are a large number of factors which can play a significant role in their success or failure in their profession.

The present paper is intended to probe into a number of these factors which appear to have a rather more important role in the profession of interpreters. It is accepted though, by the majority of the scholars, if not all, that these two disciplines namely interpreting and translating are so highly interwoven that what applies to one necessarily applies to the other as well, perhaps to a more or less degree. For this reason, since it is beyond the scope of the present paper, translating will not be focused upon unless prescribed by the discussion.

Attempt has also been made to illustrate the features of each of these factors as well as their impact on the performance of the interpreters. Finally, whenever necessary, some solutions to the problems are provided at each stage.

Keywords:

Typology of bilingualism- bilinguality- simultaneous- interpreting- consecutive interpreting

Attending a session in a multilingual context, where interpreting becomes, and in fact is, a necessity, the participants—whether

monolingual or bilingual but most probably not interpreting experts—may, on the basis of the performance of the interpreter- prescribed by the circumstances- react in two rather different manners as follows:

1. They may admire the interpreter for his fluent transfer of the SL information to the TL. Statements like, “the interpreter was very fluent, I really enjoyed it!”, or “it was the first time, I believe I got the whole lecture thoroughly!” would be indicative of such types of admirations.
2. They may blame the interpreter and question his / her competence due to his / her poor performance – unnecessary repetitions, muttered utterances, long gaps between and among statements, uncertain tone of voice indicative of doubtful mind, etc. - which would result in lack of information transfer, or perhaps occurrence of misunderstandings. Statements like, “ the interpreter muttered so much I didn’t get a word of the lecture!”, or “ why did he repeat himself so much? I couldn’t concentrate at all.” Or perhaps, “ what a boring session! I couldn’t keep my eyes open, you know!” would illustrate such types of criticism.

There is, however, always a possibility for a third type of reaction as well: though relatively content with the performance of the interpreter, the participants may at the same time express discontent with certain parts of the rendition offered. “I didn’t quite understand what he [referring to the interpreter] meant by, “.....””? Or perhaps, “ what was

he [interpreter again] trying to say, when he said, “.....”? ” These are the types of statements which indicate the discontent of the audience.

Nevertheless, taking into consideration the performance of an interpreter whose work is always successful, one may come to ask:

“What determines an interpreter’s success in his performance? Is it merely because of his linguistic competence in the source language he claims to have acquired over years, or is it in fact simply because of his linguistic performance in the target language he claims to have mastered?” Neither one really seems to be the case. The performance of an interpreter and his success or even perhaps failure are basically determined by a number of internal and/or external factors, such as:

1. Interpreter’s qualities, particularly his degree of bilinguality
2. The circumstances under which he provides his rendition
3. The social status of the interlocutors for whom the rendition is meant
4. Interpreter’s familiarity with the field and the subject he is dealing with
5. The significance of the topic under discussion
6. Interpreter’s degree of self confidence
7. Interpreter’s position in relation to the interlocutors involved in the inter-lingual communication being carried out.

These are not the only factors, but rather they may be the ones that play a most significant part in any session requiring interpreting. I will try to discuss each of these factors (some of

which may also affect the performance of a translator) at this point believing that dealing with them can possibly prepare the grounds for the provision of a more successful rendition particularly on the part of novice interpreters.

1- Interpreter's qualities particularly his degree of bilinguality

Speaking of the fact that a qualified interpreter guarantees a successful job is not a discovery. A great deal has been said and written about interpreter's qualities with regard to his performance; different scholars have attributed various qualities to professional interpreters whose success is guaranteed. Some point out to interpreter's short-term memory and others attach importance to his knowledge of the two active languages he has access to, and still others underscore his psychological characteristics. However, for one reason or another, requirements for the profession are not well known; this is probably because not all the required qualifications for the profession are agreed upon by the scholars unanimously. Apparently, depending on his research field, each scholar attaches more emphasis on some of these characteristics. For this reason, there don't seem to be one solid pack of requirements available which is internationally approved of, so that leaning on that institutes and organizations which need to recruit interpreters can make their best choice. That is why, though weak in both competence and performance of their languages, a large number of people, are attracted to the profession, as we witness today, without

taking into consideration that they do not quite qualify for the job (see Seleskovitch: 1978).

It so appears, to my knowledge, that the interpreter's degree of bilinguality plays a significant role in his performance, guaranteeing his success in most cases. Let us discuss two terms 'bilingualism' and 'bilinguality' at this point hoping that it will help clarify the subject more.

The term 'bilingualism' refers to a state in which two or more languages are alternatively spoken. But strangely enough, if and when one consults dictionaries and reference books with regard to the definition of the term, one will be surprised to see that they define and / or describe a 'bilingual individual' under the entry 'bilingualism' (see: Hamers and Blanc: 1990).

Moreover, majority of the scholars have agreed on the use of the term bilingualism even when more than two languages are involved in the discussion, though a rather more precise term 'multilingualism' is an internationally accepted one (see Appel and Muysken: 1989). The present paper, too, will follow the majority using the term 'bilingualism' as a general term unless the discussion specifically focuses on situations where more than two languages are involved.

In his famous typology of bilingualism, Weinreich (1953) distinguishes three types of bilinguals namely, coordinate, compound, and subordinate, sometimes referred to as subcoordinate (see Romain: 1991). According to Weinreich for coordinate bilinguals equivalent

words in the two languages have (slightly) different meanings or refer to different concepts. For compound bilinguals, the two linguistic forms have an identical meaning. For subordinate bilingual, the meaning of the word in the second language is interpreted through the words in his dominant language- the mother-tongue. This can mean that the subordinate bilingual requires much longer time to transfer meaning from the SL to the TL. Therefore, he shouldn't be suitable for the profession.

As far as the second term is concerned, 'bilinguality' refers to the ability of the bilingual individual in his practice of alternately using two (or more) languages. In other words, it indicates that the individual is capable of making use of two languages in his interaction with other members of the linguistic community in which he lives. But, meanwhile it does not illustrate to what extent the person has acquired each one of the languages he uses. Thus, as it appears, it is always necessary to indicate the degree of the individual's mastery of his active languages with regard to their levels and skills. This of course, depends on the objectives on which the discussion is based.

Taking the capabilities of these three types of bilinguals into consideration, it should now be easy to decide which is suited for the job most. Since the two words in his two active languages have an identical meaning, a balanced compound bilingual, therefore, who is also referred to as a "perfect bilingual" by bloomfield (1933) requires

the least time possible to shift from L1 to L 2 providing the rendition required.

2- Interpreter's familiarity with the subject he is dealing with

Interpreter's degree of familiarity with the subject at hand can in many occasions guarantee a highly successful performance. That is to say, his conduct is profoundly affected by the amount of information he has with regard to the subject being discussed. If he is not familiar with the subject there is a strong possibility that he will not be able to understand the nuances in the on-going discussion properly. For instance, familiarity with the legal delicacies of the court language is probably a must for the court interpreter who is functioning as a mediator. For if he is not, his interpretation of the utterances in the court will not be accurate, and consequently, he will be unable to present proper equivalents for the terms and utterances and hence provision of a poor rendition. That is why, one may arrive at this conclusion that if the interpreter equips himself with the necessary information including the subject matter, and the technical terms together with their proper equivalents in the target language/s as much as possible, before stepping into the session where he will be performing as a mediator of an interlingual communication, he will be at ease more, but if he doesn't, he will be confronted with a lot of problems regarding both understanding the SL and providing TL equivalents. Thus,

chances are very much that he will provide inaccurate renditions which will be to the benefit of one side and naturally leaving the other side at loss.

3- The circumstances under which he provides his rendition

Lectures, seminars, negotiations, press conferences, and so on, each requires a particular place, and necessarily specific conditions under which interpreting takes place. In highly formal occasions, due to the high degree of technicality of the topics required by such occasions, the interpreter is by no means expected to make mistakes, whether appalling or trivial; for any mistake made by the interpreter may lead to very chaotic or at worse disastrous consequences. That is why, such conditions can be quite tenacious for both interlocutors and the interpreter(s). If, however, the session is less formal, and the topics of not much crucial importance, the interpreter will find himself in a better situation, feeling not much stressed and consequently he will be capable of providing proper and accurate renditions without being distressed all the time.

4- The social status of the interlocutors for whom the rendition is meant

Whether interpreting is performed for ordinary individuals or distinctive social and / or international figures, it will have different impacts on the treatment of the subject, attitude and consequently performance of the interpreter. If the interpreter knows that he is going

to participate in negotiations held between two presidents, he will naturally alter his tone, and organize his statements in such a way that they are suitable for the occasion.

At the same time, he will most probably make every effort to provide the negotiators with as exact interpretation of the statements uttered as possible, in that, in such occasions sometimes connotations play a greater part than denotations. It may so happen that the conclusions arrived at, and elicitation made due to ill performance of the interpreter, will turn out to be to the benefit of one state, and consequently to the disadvantage of the other. Therefore, in such occasions, careful rendering of the utterances, the use of euphemism (to the extent circumstances allow, if at all, for it is not normally allowed.), and avoiding any additional personal interpretations are highly recommended.

5- The significance of the topic under discussion

Rendering highly significant topics can more often than not exert great mental pressure on the interpreter. For, feeling responsible for the outcome of the discussion, it is very probable that the interpreter will find himself under a lot of stress. Let us assume, for instance, that the interpreter is scheduled to perform his task in a session where the negotiators will be discussing crucial matters such as peace talks, negotiations concerning the diplomatic ties between the two states, and so forth. The thought of this is enough to put him under a great deal of pressure, which may in times lead to providing inaccurate interpreting that can easily lead to a chaotic situation.

Since the interpreter is well aware of the fact that, for instance, the destiny of a nation or maintenance of relations between two states virtually depend on the accuracy of the rendition he provides, it is possible that due to the load of responsibility of the task, he will be under a great deal of stress resulting in his making mistakes, whether minute or serious, depending on how experienced he is. Whereas, on the contrary, if the interpreter is supposed to perform in a friendly discussion which is, if at all, of very trivial importance, he will be comfortably performing his task without feeling anxious or doubtful about the outcome of his performance.

6- Interpreter's degree of self-confidence

Though in itself a psychological feature, self-confidence can be taken as a factor which plays a significant role in the success of the individual in his performance.

Psychologically speaking, skill, extent of background knowledge, and experience, all can help enhance the individual's self-confidence, a quality that helps him perform his task to the best of his ability. Lucky enough, some people are born with this quality, and thus regardless of their professions, they are almost always successful in their jobs.

Whether novice or skilled and experienced, some interpreters, too, are born with this gift which helps them with their career a great deal. The number of gifted people who are born with this quality is not so considerable. In the general estimation, it may be said, one in every twenty to forty people is equipped with such a gift. This quality, however, is not a divine talent; in the absence of abnormality it can easily be acquired. It is the responsibility of the interpreter to find his shortcomings, make every attempt to overcome his weaknesses and finally leaning on his acquired capabilities, he can turn into a self-confident interpreter—the one whose success in the job is guaranteed.

7- Interpreter's position in relation to the participant interlocutors

Acting as a mediator, the interpreter is responsible for the smoothness of interlingual communication. One of the factors that may impede this, is his position in relation to the interlocutors. In order to investigate the probable problems, however, we must first decide on the type of renditions required for different occasions, in that different types of interpreting require different positions in which the mediator may perform his task. To do this, let us consider two most general modes of interpreting: simultaneous and consecutive. Though not necessarily always, simultaneous interpreting mainly requires booth interpreting. In booth interpreting the interpreter is located in a booth with a headphone on his head that is connected to the microphone of the SL speaker as well as a microphone before him that is connected to the headphones of the audience. The interpreter has a tough job to perform in such a situation; for while receiving the statements of the SL speaker, he has to produce rendition for the statements already offered. Usually he can only see the speaker from a distance and consequently he would be unable to lip-read. Lip-reading can in many cases lead to better understanding of the utterances particularly if the speaker happens to be a nonnative speaker of the source language.

It is also possible that the speaker move back and forth before the microphone in which case the interpreter may be unable to hear

properly and understand his statements which will surely lead to inaccurate or improper rendition.

The consecutive interpreting, however, puts the interpreter in a much less tense situation, in that he is normally situated either next to the speaker i.e. lectures delivered in inaugurations and so on, or is somewhere between two or more negotiating individuals or delegations. Under such circumstances, he has the privilege of taking notes while the lecture is being delivered or when any of the negotiators is uttering his statements. This provides him with the opportunity to hear the statements at least once (sometimes speakers repeat themselves for emphasis) with rather enough time to mentally formulate the SL utterances in the TL. So, when it is his turn to present his rendition, he already has his notes before him from which he can render and his short-term memory helps him fill in the gaps (since statements— whether in speeches or in debates— are usually uttered at a normal pace, and thus not every bit of the statements uttered are jotted down by the interpreter) and complete his rendition.

Insofar as it is related to the interpreter's position in relation to the interlocutors, sometimes the interpreter comes across certain problems. Let us assume, for instance, that the interpreter is situated at distance from the interlocutors. In this case, there is a strong possibility that he will hardly hear the statements which will strongly affect his rendition.

Needless to say that distractions of any kind, such as coughing or sneezing of a third person when the interpreter is listening to the speaker, or in the case of simultaneous interpreting where there may be disturbances such as short period electricity cut-off that can also disrupt rendition.

The problems mentioned are not the only factors that may be awaiting the interpreter, but perhaps they are of some degree of importance insofar as problem-solving is concerned. So, taking these into consideration before embarking on rendering, may pave the way for a better and more accurate and consequently successful rendition.

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