“And maybe you can translate also what I say”: interpreters in football press conferences

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Abstract

Today most professional football teams are multilingual; at the same time, the increasing media exposure of this sport has led to a growing number of press conferences involving players and coaches with limited proficiency in the language of the country where they play. As a result, there is a niche market for interpreters in professional football. This paper presents a case study based on a small corpus of press conferences organised for the official presentation of new players: its aim is to describe communication dynamics, common practices and pitfalls and to discuss interpreter roles in such settings.

Introduction

As a consequence of globalisation in sports, in recent years professional football has been characterised by the increasing mobility of players, referred to by Baines (2013: 207) as elite migrant athletes. The trend is especially marked in the main European football leagues, the so-called Big 5 (England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain), but also affects most European countries and some “new” football countries, such as China, India, the United Arab Emirates, the US and Canada. A recent survey has revealed that in the 2013-2014 season 62.93% of footballers playing in the English Premier League were foreign nationals, followed by 54.56% in the Italian Serie A, 41.45% in the German Bundesliga, 39.02% in the Spanish Liga and 32.34% in the French Ligue 1. Over the last five years the number of foreign play-
ers has increased steadily in all of the above leagues except Germany; the Italian Serie A has seen the biggest increase, +13.16% (CIESFO 2014). The trend also concerns clubs in the lower leagues, virtually flooded with new players from Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Africa, and so on.

Mobility in modern football also extends to coaches and their staff: the English Premier League boasts the highest number of foreign coaches (9 out of 20 in the past season), followed by the German Bundesliga (5 out of 18 coaches). There are European and South-American coaches working in China, India, Australia, the US, and so on. Moreover, the trend can be seen not only in club football, but also in the coaching of national teams. In the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, 13 out of 32 teams had a coach of a different nationality, and, more specifically, 6 came from countries that were not linguistically related to the host country (e.g. the Italians Alberto Zaccheroni and Fabio Capello coached Japan and Russia, respectively).

As this brief overview shows, it has become relatively common for professional footballers and coaches to spend part of their careers abroad. In a way, this is hardly surprising, since footballers and coaches are selected by clubs on the basis of their football skills, not their language skills. However, there is very little research on the role played by multilingualism, translation and interpreting in professional football. This paper aims to contribute to filling this gap by presenting a small-scale case study on interpreting during a special type of press conferences, i.e. the ones that are organised to announce the signing of a new player. After a brief overview of the available literature (§1), football press conferences are presented as an example of institutional communication and the interpreting modes most commonly used in such events are discussed (§2). Then, the paper focuses on interpreting in official presentations of players (§3): communication dynamics and interpreter roles are analysed with a view to describing common practices and pitfalls in such settings.

1. Multilingual teams and the language issue

The language issue comes up relatively often in the football press, but journalists usually mention it either as a curiosity or to refer to specific controversial incidents, such as misunderstandings on the pitch or during press conferences. An example of the former case is a piece about multilingualism in the Bundesliga (Gladwell 2014), which suggests that players overcome language barriers on the pitch thanks to body language and the use of English as a lingua franca. Comments on the use of professional interpreters (Peach 2013), or on players or coaches acting as interpreters for the benefit of newcomers (Mullock 2012) are

1 The CIES Football Observatory is a research group affiliated to the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland).
2 These figures were obtained by checking the nationalities of the head coaches on the teams’ websites, since, to our knowledge, no official statistics are available.
3 Here the expression “football press” is used to refer to the football pages in the main papers (both tabloid and quality newspapers) and to specialised football publications and websites.
fairly common, and so are articles on translation errors in press conferences or interviews. For example, Bascombe (2011) describes an incident involving the Argentinean player Carlos Tévez (when he was playing for Manchester City) and the club performance analyst who interpreted for him in an interview to Sky TV. Tévez allegedly refused to play when asked by coach Roberto Mancini and wanted to leave the team in the following season; the player's agent claimed the “interpreter” had mistranslated his words. This situation caused serious tension between player and coach and led to an internal investigation within the club, resulting in a suspension and a heavy fine for the player: what had actually happened never became entirely clear.

These examples show that there is some awareness of the importance of the language issue on the part of the media. However, there is very little research on the topic, despite the obvious importance of communication in many daily situations in professional football. A rough distinction can be drawn between internal and external communication. The former refers to communication within a football club (i.e. not meant for public scrutiny), among team members, coaches and other members of staff, during training sessions, in dressing-rooms, the gym, etc. The latter refers to communication in the public sphere, i.e. not only verbal exchanges during games (involving team mates, opponents and referees), but also football-related media events before and after games, such as press conferences and interviews (Lavric/Steiner 2012: 17). Clearly, language problems may affect both internal and external communication.

To our knowledge, the Innsbruck Football Research Group is the only one investigating the role of language in professional football. Lavric/Steiner (2012) interviewed 55 players, coaches and referees in Austria, Italy and Germany and also selected articles published in the football press, to find out what solutions clubs had in place to ensure communication. They identified 4 common strategies. The first one, adopted only by big clubs, is the use of personal interpreters who are assigned to foreign players. A more common option is the use of a factotum, usually an ex footballer with language skills, whose task is to accompany the foreign player everywhere. A third solution is the use of a team mate who speaks the foreign language and acts as an interpreter and cultural mediator. The advantage is that he knows not only the culture of the host country, but also club policies, dressing-room dynamics, and so on; he can act as a guide because he has already been through the same adjustment process himself. Finally, clubs sometimes arrange language courses: this option is not very popular among players, who often find these courses too general (not football-specific enough). Language classes are much more successful if motivation comes from players themselves.

Similarly, Ringbom (2012) reports on a questionnaire-based survey on language use in a multilingual team (IFK Mariehamn) on the Åland Islands between Finland and Sweden: there were eight different nationalities in the dressing-room and Swedish was mostly used in training sessions, while English was the preferred language of communication off the pitch. The club organised

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4 The term “interview” here includes both extended encounters and flash interviews at half time or at the end of a game.
Swedish and English language classes in the local adult education centre to try and help its foreign players.

Losa (2013) analysed the role played by multilingualism and code-switching in coaching the Swiss national youth team, made up of German, French and Italian speakers. Thanks to field observation, Losa concluded that, although German was the preferred language used in training (because the majority of players were German-speaking), the coach tended to code-switch and give explanations or ask for confirmation in both French and Italian. Moreover, when providing feedback, he tended to use each player’s native language, which contributed to establishing his authority in the eyes of the players.

The Swiss case is the aspirational ideal for the modern coach: it is certainly better to speak to players in their own language. The same applies to players, who certainly enjoy a more direct relationship with their team mates, coaches, fans and the press if they can speak the language of the host country. However, not all football coaches and players can be polyglots: there are subjective factors (e.g. a penchant for languages), but also objective factors, such as how long they spend in each country and whether the new language is related to the one(s) they already speak. In this scenario, significant numbers of professional coaches and players require interpreting services when they move to a new country: “The linguistic diversity created by the presence of elite migrant athletes in national football leagues has created a need for translation and interpreting in professional sporting contexts” (Baines 2013: 209).

Interestingly, the power and special status enjoyed by elite migrant athletes means that the fact that they are speakers of another language and, at least initially, outsiders in the host country, is not necessarily a disadvantage. Baines (2013) analyses how the above-mentioned Tévez incident was reported by the British press and how the player’s agent put the blame on poor quality translation in order to defend his client. He also discusses another example, involving the accusations of racism made by Manchester United’s Patrice Evra against Liverpool’s Luis Suárez, and the role played by translation on that occasion. In both cases, translations were strategically manipulated by all sides: the elite migrant athletes and their associates sought to protect their financial interests and the players’ character; the media sought to maintain its role in the national distribution of knowledge and values among its readers; and the host institutions had a stake in upholding their rules, regulations and national and international reputation. All parties relied on the ambiguities and information gaps that translation creates to turn the events to their advantage (Baines 2013: 224).

Having established that there is a need for interpreters in professional football, especially in external communication settings (see above), and given the potential manipulations by all the parties involved, it seems important to investigate the role of interpreters in the most public media events of all, namely press conferences.
2. Interpreting football press conferences

The number of press conferences that clubs are expected to organise during every football season has grown exponentially in recent years, hand in hand with their media exposure: they have gone from quick, closed-door weekly media briefings with local reporters to prolonged, full-blown events broadcast on TV and on dedicated web channels. There are different types of press conferences: a basic distinction can be drawn between press conferences before and after games and special-purpose press conferences organised for important events in the life of a football club.

During the football season regular weekly press conferences are held at the club training ground or the stadium media centre before and after games. They always involve the coach, often the team captain and sometimes another player who meets the press for various reasons (e.g. he has come back to the team after a serious injury). Attendees usually include members of the local press, and occasionally foreign correspondents if the match is between two top-flight teams. Very high-profile press conferences are organised during major international club competitions (e.g. UEFA Europa League, Champions League, etc.) and competitions for national teams (e.g. UEFA European Championships, FIFA World Cup; see Sandrelli 2012a and 2012b). By contrast, special-purpose press conferences may take place at any time of the year, to announce the signing of a new player or coach, a new sponsorship deal, and other initiatives. Press conferences to introduce new players take place during the transfer periods, i.e. when the market to buy or exchange players is open: their function is to enable journalists and fans to get to know new signings, to hear their reasons for joining the team, and so on.

All football press conferences are examples of institutional communication (Orletti 2000; Sandrelli 2012a); they are highly ritualised, with pre-established roles for participants and a limited range of acceptable topics, determined by the purpose of the press conference. Bearing in mind that one of the distinguishing features of institutional interaction is the symbolic meaning of space (Orletti 2000: 37-39), it must be noted that the primary participants (coaches, players, and club representatives) always sit at a table in the team colours, with a backdrop bearing the club’s main sponsors. There is usually a press officer to act as a moderator and manage the flow of communication. Only accredited journalists can take part in these events, organised to allow the press to ask questions, obtain quotable answers and collect the information they need to produce written or video reports (Sandrelli 2012a).

Journalists (as ratified participants) act as both interviewers and members of the primary audience. However, most professional football clubs have a website and dedicated YouTube channel or TV channel (e.g. F.C. Juventus’ JTV), and press conferences are often broadcast live or made available later via web streaming: therefore, as well as a primary audience of journalists, there is a secondary audience of football fans. When there is a language barrier, an interpreting service is provided for the benefit of primary participants (players, coaches, club officials and journalists);

5 In Europe players may be bought and exchanged during the summer pre-season training period and the January transfer window.
big clubs may decide to offer the service even during monolingual press conferences, in order to enable foreign fans to watch the event on TV or on the Web.

2.1 Interpreting modes

The full range of interpreting modes may be found in football press conferences, but the most common choice is consecutive interpreting (sometimes in combination with whispered interpreting), because it is relatively easy to organise and does not require any specialised equipment. For the same reason simultaneous interpreting in the booth is rarely found in pre- and post-match press conferences in domestic league games and during the official presentations of players: only some big clubs, such as Real Madrid CF, FC Barcelona, FC Bayern Munich, and Arsenal FC, have the necessary equipment in their stadiums.

By contrast, simultaneous interpreting is generally preferred in the final stages of international tournaments: given the truly multilingual nature of these events, simultaneous interpreting is the only practical solution to provide several language versions at the same time (Sandrelli 2012a, 2012b). FIFA and UEFA have their own Chief Interpreters who recruit the conference interpreters with the required language combinations and liaise with the suppliers of interpreting equipment and technical support services. In the two most recent editions of the FIFA World Cup (South Africa 2010 and Brazil 2014) remote interpreting was used: all the interpreters worked from an interpreting centre (in Johannesburg and Rio de Janeiro, respectively) connected to the various match locations via videoconference link (Binder/Hof 2014).

Despite the relative variety of situations, the interpreter’s role in press conferences would seem to be fairly clear: if a foreign player or coach does not speak the official language of the press conference (L1), the interpreter translates the questions into the foreign language (L2) and the interviewee’s answers into L1; similarly, if questions are asked in L2 by a foreign reporter (and answered in the same language by the coach or player), they are translated into the official language of the press conference for the benefit of all the other participants. However, it is not always so straightforward, as the case study in §3 shows.

3. Interpreting in official presentations of players: a case study

As was explained in §2, the press conferences organised for the official presentation of players are an “induction ceremony” for new members of the team. They are formal events in which the new player is introduced to the press by a representative of the club, such as the chairman, the sporting director, or, in England, the manager himself.\(^6\)

\(^6\) In the English Premier League coaches are generally referred to as “managers” and have direct control over player transfer dealings. In Italy, France, Spain and other European countries, this responsibility usually lies with the sporting director.
An important part of these press conferences is the photo session (held either at the beginning or at the very end), in which the new player shakes hands with the club representative and holds up the new shirt with his name and number. In the opening stages of the press conference, the club representative usually explains how the deal came about, and highlights the added value of the new player for the team. Then the floor is open for the Q&A session.

In order to study communication dynamics in this type of interpreter-mediated press conferences, it was necessary to collect relevant interpreting data for analysis. Gaining access to recordings is possibly the biggest challenge in Interpreting Studies, as it is often difficult to obtain the collaboration of conference organisers, speakers and interpreters themselves. Another methodological challenge is ensuring that the data are sufficiently homogeneous and representative of the specific communicative event under study. The huge variability in interpreter-mediated events makes it difficult to compare different situations; therefore, in order to obtain reliable results, it is essential to try and control as many variables as possible (Bendazzoli/Sandrelli 2009).

To get over the above-mentioned methodological hurdles, a small corpus of interpreter-mediated press conferences was collected on YouTube. Today all major football clubs have a YouTube channel, which made it possible to search for interpreter-mediated player presentations and download them: they were all freely available and in the public domain, which solved the problem of access to data. The selected press conferences concerned the following clubs: Paris Saint Germain (PSG), Manchester United FC, Juventus FC, AS Roma, and FC Shaktar Donetsk. The choice of teams and specific players was influenced by the languages, which had to include Italian, English, Spanish or French (the researcher’s working languages), in various combinations. A common element is that all of them are major teams in their domestic leagues (French Ligue 1, the English Premiership, the Italian Serie A and the Ukranian Premier League, respectively), so in all of these clubs the official presentation of new players is a key media event, in which smooth communication is very important. Another selection criterion was that the recording had to include the whole of the press conference: this reduced the number of potentially interesting videos available on YouTube. Finally, all the interpreters involved in the selected press conferences are professionals with previous experience in football-related events.

The press conferences involving the Italian-Spanish language pair were fully transcribed by a final-year student writing her MA dissertation under my supervision (Maselli 2013); all the other examples were selected and transcribed specifically for this study. The transcription conventions are the ones used in the FOOTIE corpus (Sandrelli 2012a). Overall, 7 press conferences were used in this

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7 One exception was the Shaktar Donetsk press conference, in which the language combination was Italian-Ukrainian. It was included in the study because it provided an interesting example of a player who was totally reliant on the interpreter: in this case the analysis was not linguistic, but focused on interaction and turn-taking dynamics (see Example 2 in §3.2).

8 Unfortunately, it was not possible to contact them for an interview to find out more about the circumstances of these press conferences.
case study: the sample is small, but highly homogeneous and representative of this speech situation (Sandrelli 2012a).

The approach taken in the analysis below is purely descriptive, not prescriptive: the aim is to illustrate what actually happens in interpreter-mediated press conferences. As they are highly ritualised events and all the participants have their pre-assigned place in them, it seems appropriate to begin our case study by looking at the seating arrangement and the interpreter’s position.

3.1 The seating arrangement

The club representative is usually seated in the middle, with the new player at his side (left or right), and another club representative on the other side. This reminds everyone in the room that the men in the spotlight are the new player and those who worked hard to sign him for the club. Any other participants, including the club press officer (acting as a moderator) and the interpreter, must be accommodated in a way that does not alter this visual hierarchy. In our corpus, the issue was tackled in different ways on different occasions.

The first case is a good example of the interpreter’s invisibility. In the screenshot below (figure 1), from David Beckham’s official presentation at PSG, the player is the first one on the left, the club chairman (a Qatari businessman) is in the middle and Leonardo, the sporting director, is on the right: it is the traditional set-up used in monolingual press conferences. All the participants were wearing formal clothes and the table had been placed on a stage. The two “supporting actors”, the interpreter and the press officer, were as unobtrusive as possible: the former was sitting away from the table in a darker area of the stage to the right of the player (far left in the picture below); the latter was standing at the opposite end of the stage, slightly in the dark as well.

![Figure 1. David Beckham's official presentation at PSG](image-url)
The considerable distance between the interpreter and the player meant that consecutive interpreting had to be used at all times, both when the interpreter was translating questions into English for him and when translating his answers into French for the audience. This increased the overall duration of the event and made it slightly uncomfortable for both player and interpreter: the former had to turn towards the interpreter every time he heard a question in French and the latter found himself speaking at him from a distance rather than to him.

A different solution was chosen during Martín Cáceres’ presentation at FC Juventus (January 2012), when the interpreter was seated at the table, next to the player requiring translation (sporting director Giuseppe Marotta was in the middle and next to him was another new player, who did not need the interpreter). The interpreter alternated between whispered interpreting into Spanish (for the player) and consecutive interpreting from Spanish into Italian (for the audience); she could take notes quite comfortably and had her own microphone.

Figure 2. Martín Cáceres’ official presentation at Juventus FC

Strangely enough, this effective configuration was not replicated about a year later (July 2013), when Fernando Llorente joined the same club: this time the interpreter and the player were sitting on either side of the sporting director. The choice was unfortunate, because the sporting director found himself literally “in the middle” of a lot of exchanges between the interpreter and the player. Since the interpreter could not use whispered interpreting, all of these exchanges had to be made on open microphone (see examples 3, 8, 9 and 12 in §3.2 and §3.3).
As these examples show, the seating arrangement is no trivial matter and im-pinges on the choice of interpreting mode and overall duration of the event. But there are a number of other thorny issues, including a very basic question: what do you actually translate in these press conferences? Careful study of many videos (not just the ones in our corpus, but also several others that were not included) has revealed that certain parts often go untranslated. Clearly, this does not corres-pond to common interpreting standards, which include accuracy and complete-ness of the message (explicitly mentioned in the Codes of Ethics of many inter-preting organisations). The following section discusses a number of examples.

3.2 To translate or not to translate?

As was mentioned in §3, before the Q&A session there is an introduction by the club representative who explains how the signing came about. In our corpus this part was often untranslated or summarised; in some of the videos the interpret-ers can be seen whispering from time to time, summarising what is being said. It could be hypothesised that they did not bother translating the introduction because the players already knew the whole story behind their contract negot-iations. However, during the course of the introduction new information might come up that the player needs to hear. Indeed, this is precisely what happens in Example 1.9 When the Argentinean Ángel di María first met the press as a Man-chester United player (August 2014), he was accompanied by the manager, Louis

9 The examples used in this section and in §3.3 involve 3 interpreters: interpreter 1 (I1) in Cristiano Lucarelli’s press conference at Shaktar Donetsk; interpreter 2 (I2) in Fernando Llorente’s press conference at Juventus FC; and interpreter 3 (I3) in Erik Lamela’s and Ashley Cole’s press conferences at AS Roma. In all the examples, players are indicated as P, moderators as M, coaches as C.
Van Gaal. After a short introduction (during which the interpreter kept quiet), a journalist asked the manager whether the arrival of the new player would make him rethink the system of play. Van Gaal began his answer and then suddenly stopped in mid-sentence to prompt the interpreter to begin the translation:

Example 1

C: but he fits in our philosophy and what he can do more than to fit in our philosophy – and maybe you can translate also what I say, because it’s very handy for him to know – that I can change the system with him.

When the languages involved are not related and the player is totally reliant on the interpreter, it may be very hard for him to realise what is going on. When the Italian Cristiano Lucarelli signed for Shaktar Donetsk (July 2007), the press conference opened with an introduction in Ukrainian that went untranslated, and the beginning of the Q&A session was not signalled to him in any way. When the first question was asked, the player did not know whether the interpreter was making small talk with him or whether he was translating an official question (i.e. whether he was speaking as himself or speaking for another; Straniero Sergio 2007: 417):

Example 2

I: la prima domanda è che cosa tu lo sai… di Ucraina… quando tu hai firmato il contratto… prima che tu vieni qua
P: no, n- non sa- … ma ora è ufficiale, stiamo parlando, è iniziato?
I: si
[I: the first question is what do you know about Ukraine when you signed the contract, before you come here?
P: no, I d- didn’t… but now is it official, are we talking, has it begun?
I: yes]

When cognate languages are involved, the interpreter has the opposite problem, i.e. s/he can never be sure when translation is actually needed. Fernando Llorente’s presentation at Juventus FC was a tricky case, since the player spoke and understood some Italian: as the interpreter was sitting at the other end of the table (see Figure 3 in §3.1), she could not discreetly ask him if he needed help. As a result, the very first utterance produced by the interpreter was the following:

Example 3

I2: [off mike:¿te ayudo?] ehm son cuatro preguntas en realidad
[shall I help you? well it’s four questions, really]

When the player understood a question asked in Italian, or when a question was asked in Spanish, he tended to reply straight away, forgetting the translation process altogether. In those situations, the interpreter took the floor after him and both question and answer were translated in the same turn. This mechanism is
quite common in press conferences in which consecutive interpreting is used, and usually determines a shift in the interpreter’s footing (see Examples 6, 8 and 9 in §3.3). In other cases the club press officer intervened to give the floor to the interpreter:

Example 4

M [off mike]: traduciamo prima...

[let’s translate first]

In the same press conference, the interpreter was not always sure whether the player’s answers should be translated or not, since his mixture of Italian and Spanish was partially comprehensible to both Italian and Spanish journalists. For example, when he was asked about his choice of shirt number (14), the interpreter began to translate his answer, but after a few words the Spanish-speaking journalists stopped her.

Example 5

I2: las respuestas serían el número catorce me gusta y creo que puedo hacer un buen papel con él ehm ¿no es necesario? / de acuerdo

[the answers would be I like number 14 and I think I can play well with it ehm is this unnecessary? / alright]

In the course of the same event, the interpreter occasionally acted as a prompter, to help the player with difficult words in Italian: for example, she suggested the past participle meritato (deserved) to replace the Spanish merecido that the player was using. She only suggested words when the player was very hesitant: once again, had she been sitting next to him, the whole process would have been less awkward for both of them.

Let us now analyse in greater detail the issue of the interpreter’s footing. When producing the target language rendition, the default option for the interpreter is to take on the role of reporter, i.e. to relay another’s words as if they were his/her own: therefore, the standard grammatical choice is the first person in most settings. However, this is by no means the only possible choice.

3.3 Shifts in footing and interpreter roles

In our press conferences there are many instances of shifts in footing, with interpreters mixing the role of recapitulator and reporter (Wadensjö 1998; Merlini/ Favaron 2003), not only within the same press conference but often within the same turn. There may be different motivations behind such shifts (Straniero Sergio 2007). Football interpreters most commonly take on the role of recapitulators when they have to translate both question and answer in the same turn. In the following example, taken from Ashley Cole’s official presentation at AS Roma (July 2014), the player was asked a question by a British reporter and replied im-
And maybe you can translate also what I say

Immediately, without waiting for the interpreter’s rendition in Italian. Therefore, in the next turn the interpreter (I3) began by signalling that he was translating the question first (la domanda era – the question was) and then indicated the beginning of the answer (la risposta – the answer). In the rest of his rendition he switched back to the 1st person (Example 6).

Example 6

I3: appunto, la domanda era, sicuramente avrai visto qualche partita dell’Inghilterra al mondiale / che cosa come è stato, ecco, guardare da fuori, da ex nazionale inglese, senza poter dare una mano ai tuoi compagni? / la risposta, si certo, ho visto le partite della nazionale questa volta... questa volta da tifoso [right, the question was, you must have watched some England games in the World Cup / how was it, you know, to watch from the outside, as a former England international, without being able to give a hand to your team mates? / the answer, yes, of course, I did watch the games of the national team, this time... this time as a fan]

In the following example the Argentinean Erik Lamela, who had just signed for AS Roma (August 2011), was asked to talk about his personality and what it felt like to move so far away from home at his young age. The interpreter (the same of Example 6) began his rendition in the 3rd person (dice - he’s saying), switched to the first person (non saprei – I wouldn’t know), then changed back to the 3rd person (fa – he’s going) and then concluded in the 1st person (Example 7). In this example three repetitions are also noticeable (dice, dice – he’s saying, he’s saying; non saprei, non saprei – I wouldn’t know; arriverà, arriverà – will be arriving will be arriving), signalling hesitation.

Example 7

I3: dice, dice sì, non saprei, non saprei come come definirmi / fa, in ogni caso a fine mese arriverà, arriverà qui, qui la mia famiglia / per me questo è molto importante, naturalmente mi dà tranquillità e mi faciliterà le cose [he’s saying, he’s saying yes I wouldn’t know, I wouldn’t know how to define myself / he’s going, in any case at the end of the month my family will be arriving will be arriving here / for me this is very important, of course it gives me peace of mind and will make things easier for me]

These shifts in footing were repeated several times by I3 in both press conferences: it could be hypothesised that he uses this device as a stalling technique, in order to organise his ideas and plan the next sentence. Clearly, if it is too frequent, it can be distracting and potentially cause comprehension problems.

Here is another example from Fernando Llorente’s press conference, involving a different interpreter, I2. A Spanish journalist asked why the player had left his former club; the question was translated into Italian for the local press. I2 probably anticipated that the player would not welcome the question, as his decision to leave Athletic Bilbao had been the object of much controversy in Spain.

“AND MAYBE YOU CAN TRANSLATE ALSO WHAT I SAY”
Example 8

I2: ehm la domanda sarebbe quest’anno, quest’ultimo anno è stato un anno molto difficile e ehm chiedeva da un lato come ha vissuto quest’anno complicato e forse in questo momento, che è il momento di tranquillità visto che in avanti c’è una prospettiva ehm di speranza di crescita, ehm, voleva capire il perché se n’è andato dell’Athletic Club [the question would be this year, this past year has been a very difficult year and he was asking on the one hand how did this complicated year feel for you and maybe this moment, that is a moment of relaxation given that in the future there is a prospect of hope, of growth... he wanted to understand why you left Athletic Bilbao]

The interpreter began by specifying that she was translating a question (as I3 had done in example 6), but she also used the conditional verb form as a hedging device (la domanda sarebbe – the question would be). She noticeably continued to use the 3rd person throughout the turn (chiedeva – he was asking; voleva capire – he wanted to understand). The actual question (why Llorente decided to leave his former team) is finally formulated at the very end of a long turn. The same thorny issue came up again in a subsequent turn, when another Spanish journalist asked for more background details. Once again the interpreter used the 3rd person in the question and switched back to the 1st person in the player’s answer.

Example 9

I2: la domanda era, chiede scusa per ritornare al discorso de, di come si era sentito nella prima partita una volta che si è saputo che aveva intenzione di lasciare l’Athletic Bilbao e chiedeva anche se le reazioni negative erano reazioni da parte di... di colleghi... compagni di squadra o della direttiva / la risposta è no... non sicuramente dai compagni di squadra, non sicuramente dalla direttiva, ma comunque la verità è che le cose sono andate in modo diverso a quello che io volevo [the question was, he apologises for going back to the issue of, of how he felt in the first match after the news he would be leaving Athletic Bilbao was leaked and he also asked if the negative reactions were reactions from colleagues, team mates or the management / the answer is no... certainly not from team mates, certainly not from management, but the truth is things did not go as I wanted]

It could be hypothesised that these shifts in footing were used by the interpreter to put some distance between herself and the journalists who were probing into sensitive issues: they could be seen as face-saving strategies for the interpreter.

As well as acting as a reporter and a recapitulator, the interpreter sometimes acts as an author, i.e. producing coordinating talk that is not a direct translation of any remark made by primary participants, but is aimed at improving the communication process (Wadensjö 1998). In Example 10, I3 spotted a potential problem in Erik Lamela’s distance from the microphone and instructed him to speak directly into it: here he was acting almost as if he were the press conference moderator.

Example 10

I3: si puedes hablar allí [points at the microphone] [if you can speak into it]
Other instances of coordinating talk include asking the player to expand his answer. In example 11 Erik Lamela was asked about his ankle injury and expected recovery time; he replied that he was better but he was not the one who could say when he would be fit to play again. The interpreter asked him to explain this and the player added that the team doctor would decide. The resulting interpreted answer incorporated all the information:

Example 11

P: bueno muchas gracias y ... y bueno el tobillo está ehm mejorando y hay que ver en la próxima semana si ... si progresa y eso no puedo decirlo yo
I3: ¿quién lo puede decir?
P: el médico
I3: el médico / bene allora ringrazio, molte grazie per il benvenuto / per quanto riguarda la caviglia sta, sta migliorando e dobbiamo vedere la prossima settimana come evolverà la situazione e ovviamente spetterà al medico ehm decidere

[P: well, thank you very much and, well, my ankle is getting better and we'll have to see next week if it improves or not, and it's not for me to say
I: who can say?
P: the doctor
I: the doctor / well, then, thank you, thank you very much for your welcome / as regards my ankle, it is improving and we'll have to see how the situation evolves next week and obviously it will be up to the doctor to decide]

It must be taken into account that I3 is the in-house interpreter at AS Roma, and has been part of the staff for several years. He knows the reporters and the kinds of questions they ask; in this case, he probably anticipated the player's answer would not be considered complete and would prompt further questions, so he decided to step in and clarify the answer before translating.

A final observation can be made about another important coordinating function often carried out by football interpreters in these press conferences, i.e. managing turn-taking. One of the characteristics of football press conferences is that each journalist is usually allowed only one speaking turn by the moderator (Sandrelli 2012a: 140). To bypass this limit, journalists tend to ask multiple questions within the same turn, which can be quite long and difficult to remember. Interpreters can break up multiple questions into individual questions, to give players the opportunity to answer one at a time. This happened several times during Fernando Llorente’s press conference, and the mechanism is fully accessible for analysis because all the exchanges were interpreted consecutively.10 An Italian journalist asked a four-part question, which the interpreter translated in full. The player answered the first part and then was at a loss about how to continue: the interpreter stepped in to help (¿recuerdas? / la pregunta era – remember?/the question was) and translated each part of the question in turn (en tercer lugar – thirdly; y en último lugar – and finally).

10 The same mechanism can be seen at work twice in Ashley Cole’s press conference, but it was not possible to transcribe and analyse the whole interaction because the renditions into English were whispered.
Example 12

P: eh, el segundo, ¿cómo era?
I2: ¡recuerdas? / la pregunta era ¿porqué la Juventus? que ha sido un equipo que le ha seguido mucho tiempo
[...]
I2: en tercer lugar si ha habido otras solicitudes por parte de clubes de la misma altura
[...]
I2: y en último lugar si le han hecho referencia a la Copa Uefa que la Juve le ... ganó al Bilbao en el año ’77
P: ehm, the second one, what was it?
I2: remember? / the question was why Juventus, that is a team that chased you for a long time
I2: thirdly, whether there were other offers from clubs of the same level
I2: and finally, whether they mentioned to you the UEFA Cup that Juventus... won against Bilbao in ’77

Clearly, this strategy makes it easier for players to answer questions, but slows down proceedings considerably. However, if moderators allow journalists to ask excessively long and complex questions, it is a sensible strategy for interpreters to use.

4. Conclusions

Today many professional football players and coaches spend part of their careers in a foreign country, and most football teams are multilingual. There are several ways to bridge the language gap within a team, including the use of a lingua franca or the help of a non-professional interpreter (a team mate or a factotum; see §1); however, in public events such as press conferences and interviews it is important to ensure that messages are communicated clearly and accurately, so as to prevent potential manipulations by the media, by players’ agents, and so on. The use of a professional interpreter is certainly the best solution, as long as the interpreter in question is familiar with the press conference environment and as long as football clubs are aware of how to make the best use of the interpreting service. The small case study presented in this paper has shown that, unfortunately, that is not always the case. Many factors seem to have an impact on how football interpreters perform their task, sometimes to the extent that common interpreting standards do not apply.

The study was conducted on a small but homogeneous corpus of press conferences organised to officially present new football players. The physical set-up of these events and the interpreter’s place in them were examined in §3.1. More specifically, if the interpreter is seated next to the player requiring his/her services, questions can be interpreted simultaneously (whispered interpreting into L2), while answers can be interpreted consecutively into L1 (for the audience): this speeds up the pace of the press conference and makes interaction smoother (see Figure 2). If the player needs explanations or repetitions, or if the interpreter needs clarifications before translating, it is easy for both of them to let each other know, verbally or non-verbally (i.e. via touch or gaze). As was discussed in §3.2,
this is especially important when the player already has some knowledge of the language of the host country and does not require a continuous translation. In such cases, the interpreter can function as a prompter and simply help the player along by confirming that he has understood the question correctly or by suggesting L1 words. By contrast, if the interpreter is not sitting close to the player (see Figures 1 and 3), consecutive interpreting in both directions is the only option and any requests for additional information or repetitions must be formulated on open microphone (see Example 3): this slows down proceedings and forces the audience to listen to these asides in L2 between interpreter and player.

The analysis has confirmed that there is some variability in the seating arrangement and that not all football clubs seem to be aware that the interpreter’s positioning has a direct impact on how he/she can carry out his/her task. A briefing with the interpreter before the press conference to discuss these issues could easily solve the problem.

Another interesting aspect that has emerged from this analysis is the fact that sometimes the first section, in which the sporting director or manager talks to journalists about the transfer deal, is not translated at all or is only summarised, with the result that the player is completely left out (Examples 1 and 2). Although the player can imagine what the club representative is telling the press, this practice is potentially problematic, because it deprives him of potentially useful bits of information not only about the club he has just joined, but also about the reporters: indeed, in Example 1 the manager had to prompt the interpreter to start translating. Of course, it is not known whether the interpreters in our videos were following their clients’ indications or whether it was a personal initiative; however, once again this issue could easily be discussed and settled in a briefing before the assignment. The same applies to the wider issue of the need for translation during the Q&A session when the player in question has some knowledge of L1: if the interpreter can meet the player before the press conference starts, they can decide whether the player is going to ask for help only when he needs it or whether a full translation of all the questions into L2 is preferable. Similarly, the interpreter can explain the turn-taking mechanism and discuss possible options with clients. For example, it is useful to point out that if questions are asked in L2 and the player replies in the same language straight away, then the interpreter will have to take on the role of recapitulator (Examples 6, 8 and 9); on the other hand, if the player can remember to wait for the translation of the question into L1, standard turn-taking norms apply and, incidentally, this can be exploited by the player to his advantage, as it gives him more time to think of his answer.

Football interpreters play not only a relaying role (reporter), but also a coordinating role (recapitulator and author), as indeed happens in dialogue interpreting in other settings (Wadensjö 1998; Merlini/Favaron 2003). This becomes evident in their management of turn-taking (Example 12), in their requests for clarifications and expansions (Example 11) and in their taking control of other aspects of press conferences, such as advising on the proper use of the microphone (Example 10). However, it is important to be able to coordinate talk without overstepping one’s role; specific training would be useful in familiarising aspiring football interpreters with the specific interactional dynamics of press conferences.

“AND MAYBE YOU CAN TRANSLATE ALSO WHAT I SAY”
This study has obvious limitations in the small data sample, which was influenced by the availability of video recordings in the researcher’s language combination. However, since the data were taken from interpreter-mediated press conferences that took place in different countries and football leagues, and involved different interpreters, they can be taken to be fairly representative of common practices in this specific setting. Football interpreting remains under-researched and it is hoped that these observations will serve as a starting point for future studies.

References

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And maybe you can translate also what I say.