QUALITY: A SHARED OBJECTIVE

By

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Introduction

Research into audience expectations and preferences, with special regard to the definition and evaluation of interpretation quality, is of crucial importance for a profession whose raison d'être is to establish effective communication between speaker and audience. Checking our own assumptions against our listeners' feedback may, I believe, provide useful orientations for practitioners, teachers and aspirant interpreters.

Moreover, this area of research lies at the interface between theory and practice and, being accessible also to non-academics, is apt to encourage a more active involvement of practitioners in research projects.

Against this background I have drafted a questionnaire, drawing profusely on available material and previous experiments. The questionnaire was administered at a lecture on the Constitutions of small states - to be interpreted consecutively - given at Rome University by a German professor of Comparative Constitutional Law before an audience of about 150 (a large majority of students plus a dozen researchers and professors). 87 questionnaires were returned.

The questionnaire combined certain questions on the relative importance of a number of quality parameters with others inquiring about such miscellaneous issues as the audience's preferences and reactions with respect to the length of "takes", the speed of delivery, the impact on performance of the interpreter's state of fatigue, the rendition of institutional terms without direct equivalence, and the interpreter's role as "scrupulous translator" vs. "cultural mediator".

Methodological remarks

When drafting the questionnaire, one of my main concerns was to attempt to minimise the influence of a number of subjective factors: for example, with respect to the order and formulation of questions and with a view to facilitating "access" to the questionnaire, I opted for a progressive approach, moving from very simple, concrete questions (do you prefer a slow or a fast...}

2 Stenzl C., above.
3 Gile D., Research Proposals (...), above, p.226-236 and Scientific Research Vs. Personal Theories in the Investigation of Interpretation, in Aspects (...), above, p.28-39. Being a practitioner myself, I particularly wish to emphasise this aspect: there are certainly objective, "historical" causes behind the limited attention paid by the profession as a whole to its academic side (although things may be starting to change). I am convinced, however, that conference interpreters stand to gain much in terms of self-esteem and outward prestige if they become generally more capable of reflecting about what they do, of understanding and articulating in a more scientific way the workings of conference interpreting in its manifold aspects.
6 There is, of course, no opposition between the two. Still, in order to elicit a clear-cut stance from the audience on the appropriateness of a degree of cultural mediation, I felt that I had to provide an alternative between two acceptable approaches (avoiding, for example, reference to "literal translation"). I was afraid, too, that more sophisticated definitions might not be understood. See Marrone S., above, and bibliography.
delivery?) to the more abstract and general issues such as the definition and evaluation of interpretation quality. With respect to the latter, I included, after the question on the relative importance of the quality parameters, a "double-check" question asking the respondent to assess their corresponding shortcomings.

Again, in order to stimulate a clear-cut reaction to the question "scrupulous translator" Vs. "cultural mediator" - having previously secured the lecturer's consent - I added on two occasions a few explanatory remarks which were obviously my own.

One further subjective variable, possibly only specifically relevant only to the type of situation discussed here - where only one interpreter was involved - is, to my mind, the individual interpreter's "style", in general, and performance on the day the questionnaire is administered. Thus, to avoid having to assess my own performance with respect to a number of factors (speed of delivery, the onset of fatigue etc.), I asked an experienced colleague with an academic background in pedagogy to attend the lecture and "monitor" events in the light of the questionnaire's parameters.

Results

Question 1

Do you find it easier to follow consecutive interpretation if the interpreter translates sentence by sentence or do you prefer to listen to longer passages covering several concepts?

52 respondents indicated their preference for longer passages as against 35 who preferred the sentence-by-sentence approach.

It should be noted that the length of "takes" varied enormously according to the lecturer's free choice. Furthermore, the subject-matter was very technical - involving quotations of articles and paragraphs - and the students were required to take notes; it may thus be assumed that, under different circumstances, the preference for longer "takes" may be more marked.

Question 2

Do you prefer a fast or a slow delivery?

58 respondents expressed their preference for a slow delivery Vs. 29.

Two factors may have influenced the response, namely that I usually speak quite fast (and did so on this particular occasion, as was confirmed by the colleague I had invited) and that, as noted above, the students were required to take notes (researchers and professors all marked the "fast" box). Thence, this response does not appear to be very meaningful.

Question 3.

Did you notice the onset of a state of fatigue in the interpreter? When? Which of the following consequences, if any, indicated a state of fatigue:

- incompleteness
- inaccurate terminological usage
- lack of clarity
- slips of the tongue

81 respondents out of 87 had noticed no fatigue; only 6 had - indicating a loss of clarity and terminological accuracy as consequences - and they were right! I had indeed felt tired more or less at mid-lecture without having clear awareness of the perceptible effects. Again, the presence of a colleague-observer proved very helpful: he, too, had noticed a temporary state of fatigue after 45 minutes or so and was able to identify the part of the lecture concerned, i.e. when the speaker gave a rapid and very technical overview of the preambles to a large number of Constitutions, reading out passages (I had the texts) between which he interjected very short sentences.

A number of factors may have contributed to

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7 Thus, for example, respondents were first asked to rate the importance of "quality of delivery" with respect to the overall quality of interpretation and then to rate the seriousness of the shortcoming "unpleasant delivery". Slightly below 10% (8 out of 87) of the responses were inconsistent with respect to at least one parameter and were, therefore, not considered when calculating total scores.

8 To give one example, the lecturer continually stressed the importance of the notion of "Heimat" (home, place to which one belongs) in the Constitutions of small states. In Italian "Heimat" is translated by "patria", which also renders "Vaterland" (fatherland) and carries, for historical reasons, a strong conservative, nationalistic connotation that is totally absent in "Heimat". In this connection, I explained to the audience this difference between Italian and German and made it clear that I was using the word "patria" without its negative connotation.

9 For example, if the interpreter is a slow speaker (unlikely but possible), the audience might tend to indicate a preference for a fast delivery.

10 This result ought to please all those who, like myself, feel that the ability to do long consecutives is an integral part of conference interpreting.

11 Compare Meak L., p.12.
the onset of fatigue in relation to this interpreting situation: the fact that the interpreter was obliged to alternate between the very different techniques of sight-translation and consecutive interpretation; the comparative lack of redundancy; my own strong preference for long "takes".

As noted above, only 6 respondents out of 87 had noticed the onset of fatigue or, rather, had become aware of any perceptible symptoms; as this perceptive minority had indicated, fatigue had made me less accurate in terminological usage and less clear. However, the fact that the vast majority made no comment would seem to indicate that they found no difficulty in comprehending. Therefore, this pattern of reaction may actually signal an overriding importance of substance over form for most of the listeners.

Question 4

When foreign institutions without a direct equivalence in Italian are mentioned, should the interpreter:
A. Repeat the name of the institution in the foreign language
B. Translate literally
C. Refer to the closest equivalent in the Italian system
D. None of the above

32 chose A; 22 B; 16 C and 17 proposed mixed solutions - 6 A+C; 4 A+B; 4 A+explanation of the concept, 2 B+C; 1 a combination of the three solutions.

The majority in this case was clearly in favour of the interpreter either retaining the foreign denomination or providing an Italian mould. The fact, however, that 16 of the respondents advocated an active "intercultural" intervention on the part of the interpreter and that 17 proposed a multiple approach shows, to my mind, that the "minimalist" policy is not totally satisfactory even for an audience of experts and that the interpreter must develop an acute perception of the requirements of different audiences.

The following question (No. 5) asked the respondent to rate the importance of three quality parameters with a scale of 0-3 (where 0=irrelevant, 1=not very important, 2=important, 3=very important):

A. Completeness of information
B. Quality of style and correct terminological usage
C. Quality of intonation and delivery

The total scores were: A 216 points; B 165; C 137.

Completeness of information was, thus, rated as by far the most important component of quality (64 respondents gave it a score of 3); correct terminological usage obtained a large majority of 2s (important), while "quality of delivery", though clearly considered less important, yielded a more heterogeneous response (for example, 18 respondents rated it as "very important" Vs. 7 "irrelevant").

To some extent, these results seem to contradict the view generally taken by the profession that these parameters are all of equal importance, thus confirming the conclusion reached by D.Gile that "Il semble donc y avoir ... une différence au moins dans certains cas entre le jugement des interprètes et celui des délégués".

Question 6

How would you rate the following shortcomings? (0 = it is not a shortcoming; 1 = Not very serious; 2 = Serious; 3 = Very serious)
A. Inaccurate terminological usage
B. Unpleasant delivery
C. Reproducing the speaker's faults (verbosity; repetitiveness)

The scoring was as follows: A 194; B 122; C 100, thus reproducing for A and B the pattern of the previous question, where the corresponding parameters B and C were rated respectively with 165 and 137 points. Again, as in the previous response, while individual scores with respect to "terminological usage" were fairly homogeneous, reactions to "intonation and delivery" tended to

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12 This highly differentiated response seems to confirm my assumption (Newsletter No.3, p.74) that "there is no single solution to the problems posed by the rendition of institutional terms ... and that a workable solution ... may well be a mix of the different options. On the issue of equivalence see also Mechel M.M., Aequivalenz. Desiderat der Uebersetzungskompetenz und Postulat der Uebersetzungswissenschaft, in Miscellanea di studi in occasione del ventennale della Scuola 1962-1982, SLLM, Trieste, 1982, p.107-122.

13 These preferences are to be expected when the audience is made up of experts; the preference for the Italian "mould" might indicate the listeners' fear of being unable to decode foreign sounds. See Marrone S., p.73-74.

14 Gile D., L'évaluation (...), p.68.
diverge, with 10 respondents rating "unpleasant delivery" as a very serious shortcoming, 5 as "not a shortcoming" and the rest about evenly split between "not very serious" and "serious".

As for C, which asked indirectly whether the interpreter should improve on the quality of the original speech, the score of 100 (which comprised 1 "very serious" and 14 "it is not a shortcoming"), appears to indicate that the interpreter is quite permitted - and, indeed, encouraged - to go beyond mere fidelity and use his/her resources as a professional linguist15.

Question 7
Do you think that the interpreter should confine him/herself to scrupulously translating or that he/she should also act as a "cultural mediator" and, thus, bridge comprehension gaps by drawing upon his/her cultural background? 47 marked "cultural mediator" Vs. 40.

I had indeed expected a higher proportion of respondents in favour of the "cultural mediator" solution. I am inclined to assume, however, that my individual approach to interpretation, especially consecutive, may have played a role here: because of my professional background (European Parliament and, then, Italian Parliament) I tend to adapt my interpretation to the mind of national politicians, who are often unfamiliar with things foreign, pre-digesting the input and amplifying the output. This approach would ensure a relatively smooth comprehension, while the audience would be unlikely to become aware of the underlying cultural process. Still, it should be noted that professors and researchers (i.e. those who can be assumed to have been more "exposed" to interpreters) all marked the "cultural mediator" box. By the same token, I think it worthwhile to reproduce here some of the personal comments of those who were kind enough to fill the "Other remarks" box that followed Question 7: "if the interpreter complements his/her interpretation with his/her own cultural contribution, comprehension becomes deeper and more complete"; "the interpreter should certainly act as a cultural mediator, availing him/herself of his/her personal intuition" (some users too seem to encourage us to commit the sin of "naive empiricism" ...); "a degree of cultural mediation is essential for clarity"; "acting as a mediator, the interpreter makes the original speech more interesting, more complete, more homogeneous and transparent"; "proper intonation and delivery are essential in order to call the audience's attention to the more important passages"; and, on a sobering note, "if the subject is very technical and the audience is made up of experts, I recommend fidelity".

These comments were indeed very reassuring, not only for their intrinsic message (mostly denoting a considerable perceptiveness and a positive attitude with respect to the interpreter's labour), but also as evidence of the interest aroused by the questionnaire in at least some of the respondents.

Conclusions
I am very reluctant to draw conclusions from a single test; therefore, I shall confine myself to resuming some of the indications emerging and to a few remarks of a more general nature.

Starting with the responses on the relative importance of the quality parameters, I have already pointed out that the audience's view does not seem fully to coincide with our own, in that they seem to attach far more importance to substance, fidelity, completeness of information than to the linguistic quality or the prosodic features of interpretation (good voice, pleasant delivery) that interpreters usually consider essential components of quality (I should note, however, that the scores related to such features tended to fluctuate widely).

This trend can be inferred from the responses on the quality parameters and on the corresponding shortcomings and, indirectly, from the fact that very few respondents (6 out of 87) had become aware of a state of fatigue in the interpreter affecting the quality of his speech.

While not underestimating the import of this indication, I feel that, before drawing any conclusions suggesting a re-appraisal of our own concept of quality or a revision, at least to some extent, of the evaluation criteria usually applied to students, more questionnaires of this kind should be administered in a variety of contexts and, particularly, in conferences of a less "technical" nature.

The responses on the rendition of institutional terms without direct equivalence and on the "scrupulous translator" Vs. "cultural mediator" approach indicate that it is appropriate to attempt a degree of cultural mediation, and recognise the importance of a solid cultural background (it sounds

obvious to us, but it is not necessarily always so to
others) combined with an acute perception of the
requirements and expectations of different
audiences.
Finally, I wish to underline the difficulties of
proper selection and phrasing of questions,
especially in view of the danger of influencing or,
even, distorting the response. In this respect, I
believe that a degree of concertation and
harmonisation of questionnaires might be useful:
possibly a standard questionnaire could be
developed, applicable to most or all interpreting
situations. It would, of course, remain possible to
add specific questions relevant to individual cases.
ANNEX

Per finalità di studio sulle attività di interpretariato, si pregano cortesemente i partecipanti alla lezione di compilare il seguente QUESTIONARIO

1 - Lei ha ascoltato oggi una conferenza con interpretazione consecutiva. Ritiene che questo tipo di traduzione si segua meglio se l'interprete traduce frase per frase, o preferisce ascoltare brani più lunghi che contengano diversi concetti?

| frase per frase | brani più lunghi |

2 - Ritiene meglio che la traduzione consecutiva sia fatta a ritmo rapido o invece a ritmo lento?

| rapido | lento |

3 - Nella conferenza che ha appena ascoltato ha notato l'insorgere di uno stato di affaticamento nell'interprete?

| sì | no |

- se sì, a che punto della conferenza? ......................................................
- quali sono state le conseguenze di tale affaticamento sulla qualità della traduzione?

- incompletesaza __
- imprecisione di termini __
- minore chiarezza linguistica __
- lapsus __

4 - Quando l'oratore nomina istituzioni o enti stranieri, per i quali non esiste una denominazione già in uso nella lingua italiana, ritiene che l'interprete debba:

A. ripetere il nome dell'istituzione o ente in lingua straniera
B. tradurre letteralmente la denominazione straniera
C. tradurre con il nome dell'istituzione più simile esistente in Italia
D. (altra soluzione:) .................................................................

5 - Quale importanza annette ai seguenti parametri relativi alla qualità dell'interpretazione?

| A. completezza dell'informazione | __ |
| B. eleganza e proprietà linguistica | __ |
| C. intonazione e ritmo della voce | __ |

(esprimi la Sua valutazione indicando un punteggio da 0 a 3: 0 = irrillevante, 1 = poco importante, 2 = importante, 3 = molto importante)
6 - Quali difetti dell'interpretazione Lei ritiene più gravi?

A. impiegare espressioni tecnicamente im precise
B. ritmo o intonazione sgradevoli
C. mantenere prolissità e ripetizioni dell'originale

(esprima la Sua valutazione con un punteggio da 0 a 3:
0 = non è un difetto, 1 = poco grave, 2 = grave, 3 = molto grave)

7 - Ritiene che l'interprete debba limitarsi a tradurre scrupolosamente il testo del discorso, ovvero che debba fungere anche da 'mediatore culturale' e, come tale, colmare eventuali lacune di significato ricorrendo al proprio bagaglio culturale?

- Altre osservazioni:

Professione: Età: