

WHAT CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS SHOULD NOT BE EXPECTED TO DO

By

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1. Statement of the Problem

I wish to raise a few points regarding the limitations our profession (conference interpreting) has in performing the task of helping with inter-lingual and inter-cultural communication. There are things we can do as interpreters in such contexts, but there definitely are things we cannot rightly be expected to do in the same contexts. By clarifying the limits of what conference interpreting can do more clearly, we may put our conscience to a better rest, although no complacency is warranted, and we may also be able to enjoy greater public confidence. If we wish to avoid responsibility where it is not due, we should also disclaim omnipotence. By delineating the interpreter's sphere of activity clearly, we may also be able to advise potential speakers, if not so much a potential audience, as to what they should take upon themselves to do in order to achieve better results in inter-lingual and inter-cultural communications.

2. Forward-looking means backward-looking?

I would like first to describe a little episode that occurred in the early 1970's in the bi-lateral negotiations between Japan and the United States of America. I myself was not involved (thank God!), and the episode is now in the public domain, thoroughly exposed through various journalistic and scholarly writings. After having conceded to Japan to revert the Okinawan Islands back to Japan, President Nixon pressed Prime Minister Sato in private conversation with only the interpreter present to do something about the rapidly expanding Japanese exports of textile goods to the United States. The Prime Minister is surmised to have responded by resorting to standard bureaucratic language, standard only in Japan at that time, i.e., he said something like "I will deal with the matter in a forward-looking manner". Maybe Mr. Sato was a little more emphatic in the positive tone of voice, because

one version of the situation has it that the English interpretation came out as "I'll take care of it". In the mind of the Prime Minister, however, the wording did not commit him to anything. Well, you just say it in that kind of situation, you know. The President, however, not well versed in Japanese political language, did take it more literally, and expected his counterpart to do something specific to curb the volume of 'torrential export' across the Pacific, like pressuring Japanese exporters to exercise a bit of 'voluntary self-restraint' so that they would be engaged in more 'orderly marketing' practices. Having discovered that Sato was not about to do anything of the kind, Nixon felt betrayed and thought all Japanese politicians liars and utterly untrustworthy. When he subsequently decided to establish diplomatic ties with China and also to abrogate the dollar's convertibility to gold, he gave Japan only a few hours' notice before the press release, sending two waves of 'Nixon shocks' across the Pacific, only in the opposite direction this time, to inflict considerable political as well as economic damage on Japan.

It is also well-known that exactly the same phrase was used by another Japanese senior politician when he visited a number of Middle East countries and was asked to provide economic assistance. "Yes, I will examine the proposal in a forward-looking manner...." When the first oil crisis in 1973 occurred, the visiting Deputy Prime Minister of Japan, pleading special treatment to exempt Japan from the oil embargo, was reminded, in each of the Middle East countries, of the 'promise' he had not kept.

Who is to blame for these diplomatic blunders? Are the interpreters to be held responsible in any way? If so, how should they have behaved?

Let us tentatively examine the role of the interpreter in the Sato-Nixon encounter. He apparently valued fidelity with the source message in terms of word-for-word correspondence. That failed to convey the true intent of the speaking Prime Minister. But what

alternatives were available to the interpreter? Suppose he understood the mannerism of the client. Should he have interpreted as for instance "the Prime Minister says he will deal with the matter in a forward-looking manner, but that in his language means he is not promising anything" or "I, speaking for the Prime Minister, outwardly say that I will deal with the matter in a forward-looking manner but not substantively". He would not have been able to do this, firstly because he could not be completely certain about the intent of the Prime Minister. He just might do something after returning home. There is a risk involved in reading the actual utterance in the bureaucratic sense too. Secondly, if our colleague really 'interpreted' the Prime Minister in the broader sense, the Prime Minister would naturally say "Wait a minute. I am saying I will deal with the thing in a forward-looking way. Just who do you think you are to say that I do not mean it?" I can see him kicked out of the conference room then and there. He might thus have saved the two nations from years of mutual uneasiness and outright distrust to follow, but a free lancer would not be able to afford to become a martyr under ordinary circumstances even with the strongest love for his nation. Besides, even as we try to be more objective, would we not also say that he surely overstepped himself a little as an interpreter? Is it not a little presumptuous of him as an interpreter to give a commentary on the words of the Prime Minister? Are we commissioned to do that under normal circumstances? Are we remunerated and accredited to bear the risks involved?

What about the primary participants in this communications context, the Prime Minister and the President? Would we not be able to say that it be the job of the negotiators themselves to be aware of the possibility that his words may be construed differently by persons of different cultural backgrounds on the one hand and to properly understand the Japanese politician's mannerism on the other hand? If only one of the two had the minimum of understanding regarding this rather elementary point about communications involving any two cultures and, as an important aspect of them, two languages, the misunderstanding would have been avoided. If the old adage holds that "when a diplomat says yes he means perhaps; when he says perhaps he means no; when he says no he is no diplomat", then Sato might have been a consummate diplomat while Nixon a diplomatic novice.

What if Sato should have wanted deliberately to deceive his counterpart? This opens up a whole field of speculation regarding the role of interpreters in contexts where lies are told, but

for the moment we could probably agree that then we should blame either Sato for his bad intention or Nixon for his professional incompetence to have been so easily outfoxed. We would probably have to hasten to add that it is quite doubtful whether the lie paid off, if it was one.

3. 3-party 2-language model of interpreting

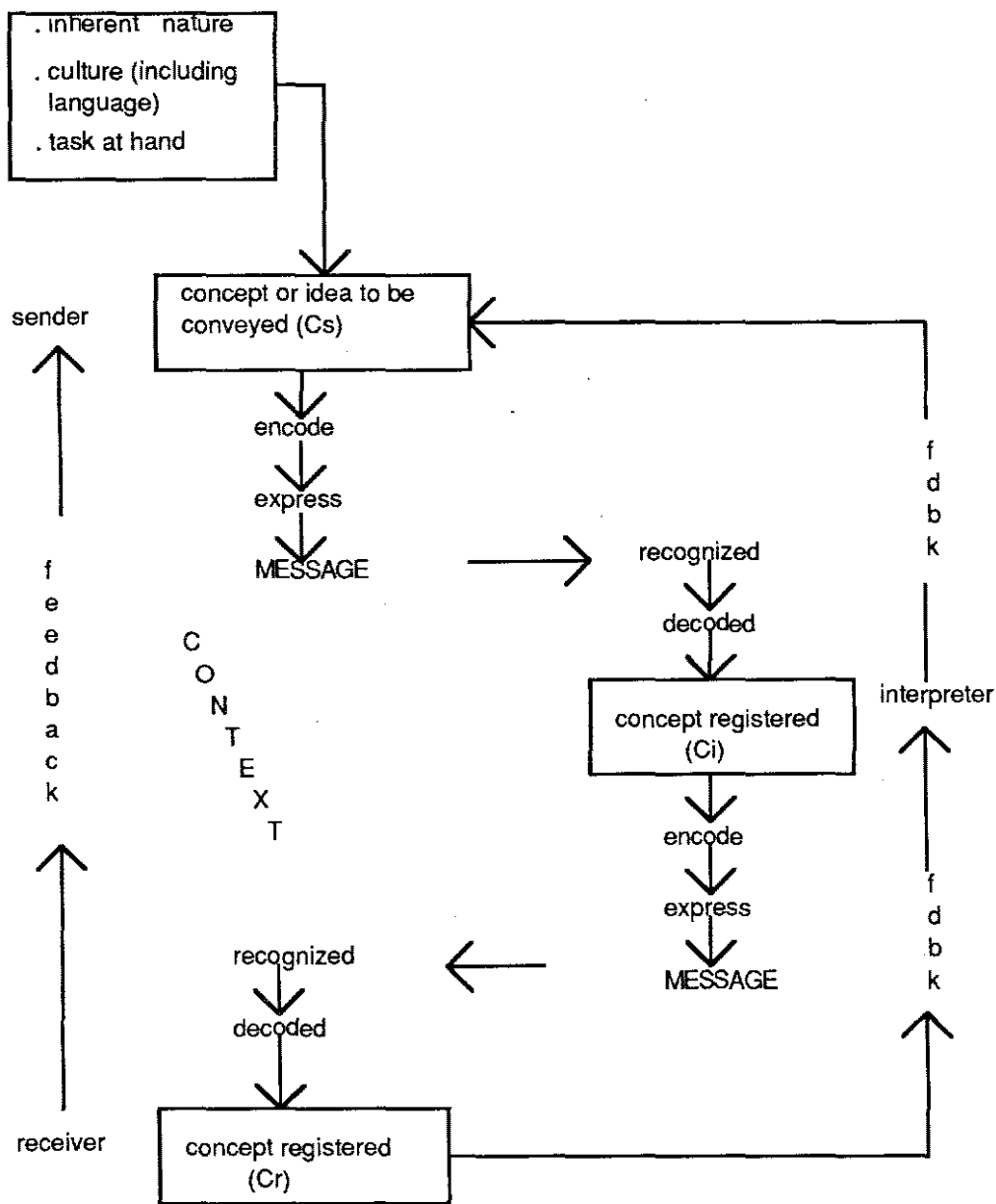
I came out of the very interesting symposium held at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, Monterey, California, in December 1989 with the impression¹ that efforts to theorise on the service we perform, i.e., to describe and analyse the content of the work we do when we are conference interpreting, seem broadly to take two directions. One is the pragmatics-behaviourism approach, where all the behaviour is taken to constitute communication, and communication is taken to induce some response from the other party (with behaviourism basically trusting only what tangibly occurs and therefore is observable, not what may be taking place mentally in our minds). In this model, the interpreter's task seems to be looked upon as best carried out when the intended behavioural response is actually induced, whatever linguistic and/or verbal forms of communication may take place on the part of the interpreters. If an utterance is intended to stop a person from being hit by an on-coming car, anything would have to be judged to have constituted a successful cycle of communication if somehow that person stopped going out into the street. You may cry "Watch out!" You may just grab the person by the shoulders. You may start singing a song if that did it. On the other hand, you have failed in the communication act if the person did not stop when you said, "Excuse me, but may I remind you that there is a car coming from your right and unless you stop, you might get hit and get hurt." If a brochure is to promote the sales of a certain product to Japanese consumers, the actual words contained may be radically different from those in a similar brochure meant for the Italian market, because different peoples are attracted to the same product through different messages. No word-for-word correspondence may exist, but the two brochures may be considered equivalent to each other in terms of their impact on the behaviour of those who are exposed to it, which is what matters most in the behavioural sense. If you go to an extreme in this direction, you will easily end up with what one of the Monterey participants declared: "fidelity is irrelevant".

The other direction in which I see theorizing efforts are going might be named the 'communications school', where the model is the

initiator sending a message to the receiver, this model being modified to include the mediator as the interpreter. This is aptly called the three-party, two-language model by Kirchoff,² and is described to be the generally accepted

interpreting paradigm by Ms. Mackintosh, the chair of one of the sessions at the Monterey symposium.

My simplified version of this model runs as follows:



The meaning of this diagram is rather simple. The sender, who is what he inherently is, is made by the culture in which he has lived and has a task to perform, has a concept or idea which he wishes to convey to the receiver. This concept (Cs) must be encoded in order to be expressed to result in the message, both verbal and non-verbal (if it is not expressed but received by the receiver, it is a case of telepathy). The message is recognised and decoded by the interpreter, who again is a person himself with his cultural background, to result in

Ci, which is what the interpreter thinks the sender is trying to communicate. The interpreter must then encode Ci in another code, in the code the receiver understands, and express it, which then is recognised and decoded by the receiver to result in Cr. The receiver again is a different person with a different cultural background and different or possibly the same immediate task in mind. Cr is what the receiver thinks the interpreter is trying to tell him, which he assumes is what the sender is also trying to

communicate to him. The term culture is used in its broad socio-anthropological sense, meaning all that is learned by the person after his birth in the process of socialisation, i.e., language, customs and mores, beliefs, ways of communication, ways of life, fine arts, and all other products of a group of people, handed down from generation to generation. If Cs equals Cr, one cycle of communication is considered to be completed. The context in which the process occurs is very important, because there is always more than one way of encoding a concept, and also plural ways of decoding the selected and encoded message so that both the interpreter and the receiver rely heavily on the context in arriving at an appropriate interpretation. The feedback also serves to assist the encoding and expressing stages to get the concept across³.

Interestingly enough, this second approach to interpretation again would posit that what matters is not word-for-word correspondence but the kind of rendition that would conjure up in the mind of the audience essentially that image the source speaker has in mind to convey to the audience.

I am not trying to involve myself in the perennial debate over fidelity versus communication or content. To me the tone of the presentations at the Monterey Symposium is enough to conclude that, essentially speaking, the debate is closed. The word-for-word correspondence between the source and the target language has virtually no place in our work, and strictly speaking, it is practically as well as theoretically impossible to attain it between any two languages that are different in terms of the semantic field, syntax, style, and the structure of paragraphs, although that international consensus is not so widely accepted in Japan.

Having said this, however, I would like to add two things. One: there definitely are occasions when word-for-word correspondence is the best that can be done even at the considerable risk of producing translationese or of giving misleading or even downright opposite impressions. There might even be a few exceptional cases where fidelity in such sense is not only unavoidable but desirable. The sessions drafting ILO conventions and recommendations in its Conference Technical Committees immediately come to mind, where delegates usually have a translated text in front of them in discussing proposals to add, delete, or otherwise change often individual words or phrases. The crucial issue then must be not whether fidelity as such is relevant or not but on what sort of occasion fidelity is desirable or at least permissible and what sort of occasion allows interpreters to work most comfortably

and assuredly with the principle of transferring ideas between two languages and cultures high on our minds. Maybe we should be able theoretically to separate the kinds of interpreting situations when either linguistic fidelity or communicative effectiveness should be emphasised. As of now, in my mind, the issue remains unresolved.

A rather outspoken Japanese politician met with a group of American legislators, when he, in a quite rough Japanese, said something like "Oh, come on! There are a lot of things you Americans got to do at home before you blame us!" I might soften his utterance, under certain specific circumstances, to the extent of slightly changing the register possibly to, for instance, "I would insist strongly, however, that there are a number of things you should try to do your end." 'Certain circumstances' would include a case in which I am quite familiar with the speaker's attitude, his intentions, etc. regarding the issue at hand. Under any circumstances, I would not go to the extent of watering down the message to: "There are a number of things we must work out together", or something similar. Ordinarily I would try to keep the level of politeness or formality of such candid or even rude remarks. Of course, by watering down politicians' remarks interpreters may save themselves some embarrassment, or even save the world from diplomatic crises, but we might inflict long-term harm to genuine mutual understanding by acting too much like diplomats.

Secondly, I would like to note that we interpreters are not always capable of transposing ideas from one language and culture to another both in a profound theoretical sense as well as practically (the latter referring to the temporal and spatial constraints within which we usually work). It is to define the role of interpreters more closely in relation to the roles of the sender and receiver, and not to assign the omnipotent roles for the mediator to accomplish effective communications in a given context. There are different things the communication initiator should know and handle. So there are things the receiver should also be aware of and be held responsible for in order for the interpreter as the mediator to do a satisfactory communications job.

Maybe we as a profession should be more active in enlightening the public, especially potential speakers, about things they must be aware of and responsible for when they face each other through an interpreter if they want to achieve meaningful communication with each other. Of course, there will always be 'impossible speakers', as there will always be difficult patients for medical doctors to handle, but the rapid development of the hardware of

international communication without a corresponding development of its software would increase, not reduce, misunderstandings, and would only place even greater burdens on the intermediaries, that is us. Even when no interpreters are involved, greater understanding of the inherent difficulties in international communications would be no less important. This would be the case of bypassing the left half of the diagram, but still involving the same encode-recognise-decode process.

4. Interpreters are not omnipotent

Below I try to point out a few important things interpreters cannot rightly be expected to do on the basis of the three-party, two-language model.

First, there is a general observation that must be made. Above I mention Cs to equal Cr to complete a cycle of communication but, strictly speaking, that in fact never occurs simply because the sender and the receiver are different persons living in different worlds with most probably slightly or greatly different immediate tasks at hand. These two parties simply do not share the same world so that the receiver does not have exactly the same concepts or ideas in his whole person as the sender, making it inconceivable that they would arrive at precisely the same Cs and Cr. And this applies to the interpreter, too. With training and experience we become better sensitised at arriving at Cs, which is probably the most important task of the interpreter, but whatever we arrive at is only an approximation⁴. Since we are all human beings, naturally there is a certain level of matters at which such mutuality is possible, but we often deal with matters at the levels where the difference does matter. The consummate communicator, whether he is a professional interpreter or not, is a person who can put himself in somebody else's shoes, so to speak, so that he would be able, theoretically if you please, to adopt two or more world views and thus imagine how a certain message (i.e., what is expressed, verbally or non-verbally, and not the content of that message) would be decoded or interpreted by the receiving party⁵. But even such skills would not easily produce or really create an entirely new image in the mind of the receiver especially when the receiver is not very perceptive and receptive.

Therefore, it will always be within the confines of this ultimate difficulty that I speak of the transposition of ideas or concepts. Even when the task of interpreters, or any communications job for that matter, is carried out in the most admirable way, it can conjure up only an approximately close image or concept in the mind

of the receiver. And, even within this restricted sense, there are other specific limitations to what interpreters can do in the normal context in which they work.

For one thing, the whole of the idea the sender wants to convey cannot, in the nature of things, be expressed by most senders, verbally or non-verbally. If that could be done, there would be far more master novelists, orators, writers, etc. and naturally far fewer broken hearts, for instance. And interpreters can work essentially only with what has been expressed. Interpreters can and do supplement certain messages in order to make them at all intelligible in the target language and in order to fit more comfortably with the linguistic requirements of the target language, but we rarely go supplementing substantive content of the message and then only at a great risk of over-interpreting or even changing the source statement. What is left unsaid and un-expressed cannot normally be transmitted through the interpreter to the receiving party.

We know very well that exactly the same verbal expression may be interpreted differently depending on a large variety of factors. In normal interpreting conditions, we can only control a certain range of these factors, and, indeed, very often only few of them. Do the parties arrive at the conference table in a friendly or angry mood? In a wrong atmosphere, a simple question like "What time is it?" may invite reactions like, "So they are trying to avoid the issue, uh!" I, as the interpreter, would not like to be held responsible for such a reaction. It is the job of the organizers, or that of the participants, to secure an atmosphere conducive to a smooth running of the conference, if that is their objective.

On a different level, things may be left unsaid because the speaker overtly or covertly assumes certain things to be already understood by the receiving party. Those things that are assumed, especially unconsciously, are often related to different aspects of the culture of the receiver, the term culture again used in its broad socio-anthropological sense already described above. And in most interpreting contexts what is not expressed is usually not interpreted. Neither could it be without running a great risk of over-interpreting and going beyond the speaker.

Suppose for a moment that the use of butter in the UK connotes high social status, while it does not do so in Italy (in addition to the fact that 'butter' has salt in it and looks yellowish, while 'burro' has no salt and is white). Literal interpretation of "He was using butter" in English into Italian would not convey the connotation of the subject's high social standing, and if this is the chief idea the speaker wanted to convey by

his reference to the use of butter, then the main idea is not transmitted. Is this a fault of the interpreter? I myself would not like to be held responsible for it.

If a Japanese businessman negotiating a deal with someone from a different set of business practices wrongly assumes that his counterpart naturally would use the Japanese bank that belongs to his 'group of corporations', he is running a risk of finding out too late that his counterpart has another bank in mind to use to settle the accounts. If the interpreter is aware of this difference, he may also assume the speaker knows it, too, in which case the interpreter would further assume that the speaker's silence on the matter is an indication of his willingness to let other banks handle the business. The interpreter as such should not be expected to remind the speaker of this risk, or remind the receiver of the message of the probability that in the context of the speaker's remark the use of a certain bank is assumed. And more importantly, interpreters cannot be expected to know of all the differences in business practices in all the different countries where the languages in use are related (English being used means practically the whole world). That indeed is not the job of interpreters but of negotiators themselves, or the primary parties involved in the communication.

I take off my hat when I hear of an interpreter who renders a quote from Tolstoy to one from Shakespeare with a straight face. But I would not feel very comfortable to be expected to do the same when the sender quotes a passage from a Noh play. Similarly, statements like "It's a case of *kanjincho*" can hardly mean anything to the receiver unless the receiver is well versed in the Japanese idioms or in *kabuki* plays themselves, or unless the interpreter with exceptional skills explains the phrase in a more mundane language, in which case, however, the string is lost. The sender could perhaps best explain how the phrase originated to make the point instead of leaving it to the interpreter or the receiver from another culture.

This can become a substantial communications barrier when the initiator comes from what Edward Hall refers to as a high-context culture. In a high-context culture, the context is important, i.e., the context in which actual spoken words are placed goes a long way towards illuminating the meaning of those words, so that one needs to rely less on the words actually uttered to convey an idea. In a low-context culture you need more words to communicate, because utterances stand relatively alone with little help from the context in which they are made⁶. In a high-context culture, like the

Japanese one, the speaker would tend to assume too much to be readily understood by the receiver. Or the taciturnness of the speaker itself may be taken to be a sign of unfriendliness by other cultures. Again, interpreters cannot be justifiably expected to close such a gap in perceptions on the part of parties belonging to different cultures. I would not call myself an intercultural communicator because I would not know how to manage it on such basic levels.

I move to the next point. Sometimes we hear interpreters claiming that they know more about the subject matter of the discussion than the speakers. While that may indeed be the case, for instance, when the interpreters have worked for the same organisation for a long time and the speakers come as new delegates but I would say that is exceptional. What is more, this kind of arrogance may be very risky and not warranted. If you are a medical doctor and interpreter, you could say you know the subject matter of the speech equally well or even better than the speaker when the speaker is from the same minute field of more general medical research. Even then, of course, you could not assume to adopt exactly the same viewpoint, or more precisely, the same angle of observation when examining the same object or phenomenon. If you are a general interpreter (or an interpreter period), it is indeed presumptuous to say you know more about the subject than the speaker in most conference contexts, and again even then you could not, most fundamentally speaking, have adopted precisely the same approach to the subject matter.

Jean Herbert, one of the founding fathers of our profession, is said to have remarked: 'Ideally the interpreter should be able to make the same speech himself. I would submit, then, there would hardly be any ideal interpreting situations at all. It also sounds arrogant, even to me, and it may alienate understanding clients and speakers. Most seriously, it could kill one of the most important skills a competent interpreter possesses, namely to be able to work in areas in which he is rather, though not completely, ignorant, and to be better able to make a more precise analysis of the utterance through linguistic cues and express various concepts more clearly than laymen. After all, is it not our strength to be better able to grasp various concepts not only from our own viewpoint (which is a very natural process) but also from the speaker's, and sometimes from the listener's, perspective?

On the other hand, there are people who downgrade the skills and knowledge of interpreters by saying "they are not very smart, because they can do the work only when I so

simplify the matter that their simple minds can comprehend." They merely 'spit at the sky' as the expression goes, because such a statement assumes that their lifetime's work can be matched by the interpreter, essentially a layman, except for special cases like a medical doctor adopting a second profession, and also because it merely reveals his ignorance about what communication is all about.

When we interpret such a statement as "to connect test leads and probes to a rack-mounted printed-circuit card, the card must be removed from the rack", we do not have the knowledge the speaker has about the test leads, probes, rack, rack-mounted printed circuit card, etc. Nor do we have to, although it is essential that we have some idea about them so that we can at least recognise these words, and of course it is always true that background knowledge helps and is sometimes crucial in arriving at an appropriate Cs. Seleskovitch speaks of the relevant knowledge the interpreter needs as distinct from the operational knowledge of the specialist speaker.⁷

I am sure that there are other things we cannot rightly be expected to perform as conference interpreters. Normally we do not 'interpret' bodily gestures, which mean different things to persons of different cultures. A Sri Lankan shaking his head sideways means 'yes' which can be taken by the receiver as negative but this impression cannot usually be corrected by the interpreter. Nor can we ordinarily say, "the speaker says this but his bodily gesture betrays him." Maybe there is a definite limit to the speed at which the speaker can be properly interpreted, although there admittedly are substantial individual differences among interpreters and the difficulty and eventually the impossibility to interpret depends not only on the physical speed of the speech but on many other factors as well. But these are the starters.

I would like to close this essay by inserting a small note of optimism. More recently, greater care seems to be taken to avoid the kind of blunders described at the beginning of this essay. Prime Minister Nakasone is reported to have retorted to a bureaucrat "How do you think that can be translated into English?" The Chief Cabinet Secretary simply directed that the word *kentousuru* be eliminated from a document they were preparing to be presented to the United States. The dictionary definition of the word is 'to examine a matter', but it usually means the thing will not be carried out in bureaucratic language. The difficulty is that once you are not allowed to use that very convenient word, you must define your position more clearly. In this document there were altogether eight places where this word was

used. By the time the drafting committee was able to eliminate six of them, the sky was growing light in the east. Hopefully the wisdom so gained⁸ will be inherited in bureaucracy and even propagated in other quarters in the country.

¹ Another strong impression I received from the Symposium is the painful absence in Japan of solid post-graduate interpreter training facilities in contrast to active training going on in many Asia-Pacific areas (including Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Australia, Hawaii and California), all involving Japanese as one of the languages concerned. If the Japanese in the past had to learn English or other metropolitan languages to communicate, it looks as if we are now telling the world that if they want to speak with us, they must learn to speak Japanese. This is a form of linguistic imperialism in reverse.

² Kirchoff H., 1976, 'Das Dreileidige Zweisprachige Kommunikationssystem Dometschen' in *Le Langage et l'Homme*, N° 31, pp. 21-27.

³ When Wilhelm Weber takes it for granted that the transposition of ideas is "the main process involved in any kind of interpretation," he is saying essentially the same thing. See Weber W., 1988, *The Training of Diplomatic Interpreters in a B-language*, Hong Kong, Oct. 2, p. 2.

⁴ It should not be necessary to point out that the same difficulty applies to the stage of recognizing the message, too. It is not a matter of good ears or pure physical hearing ability but that of epistemology, i.e. of having ample store of a *priori* content of the code used by the sender. If you have no idea that such things as printed-circuits and racks ever exist, you would not first recognize the words or mistake them for something that is closer to what you know.

⁵ According to many Japanese interpreters of Max Weber, this is what is meant by his so-called value-free science. Science must be value-free not in the sense of having no values on the part of the scientist, which is impossible and absurd (the choice of the subject matter for his study already is an expression of his values), but in the sense that he should extricate himself, temporarily and theoretically, or in imagination, from the values he espouses and try to see the object from the angle of observation of somebody else, which may not be easy but should be possible, and which would serve to objectify his scientific endeavors in search of the ultimate truth.

⁶ Hall Edward T., 1976, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday), especially chs. 6 & 7. For the impact that this Japanese cultural trait has on the social standing of Japanese interpreters as well as some specific difficulties, see Kondo M., 'Japanese Interpreters in their Socio-Cultural Context' in *Meta*, Vol 33, N° 1, March 1988, pp. 70-78.

⁷ See Davidson, Peter M. 'Some Theoretical Aspects of Simultaneous Interpretation with Suggestions for a Teaching Methodology' (unpublished, 1985), p. 6.

⁸ By this I do not mean that the Japanese should think more like English-speaking peoples, which is not possible anyway, although some mutual influence naturally occurs. I do maintain, however, that we should try as best we can (because it can never be completely possible) to avoid making a convenient use of the language to cover up hazy thinking or indecision, even when no cross-cultural and cross-language communication is involved.