

THE OTHER THREE EIGHTHS & THE FOUR 'F'S
Finiteness, Fallibility, Freedom of Speech and Fair Competition in the
simultaneous interpretation environment

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Dr. Samuel Johnson, the famous English lexicographer and wit, was once prevailed upon to go and listen to a woman preacher. Afterwards, when asked for his reaction, he likened the performance to that of a dog dancing on its hind legs – such was the freedom from the constraints of political correctness enjoyed by the men of letters of those days – and said that although, of course, it was not well done, it was amazing that it was done at all.

When Simultaneous Interpretation (hereinafter to be known as SI) first began to be used at international meetings it was greeted with similar awe and amazement that human beings could do it at all, and criticism of the performance would have been just as unlikely and inappropriate. Once, however, the status of SI as a circus act had worn off and succeeding generations of consumers had come to regard it as part of the furniture, the hapless canine that is SI is expected to perform as faultlessly as a natural biped.

Most of the public and formal multilateral – and much of the bilateral – verbal exchange between speakers of different languages throughout the world is now transacted through the medium of Simultaneous Interpretation. Over the fifty years or so that this medium has been in use, a tacit assumption as axiomatic as it is mythical has been allowed to go unchallenged and has now become unassailably entrenched. The assumption is, as the behaviour of speakers reveals every day in meetings of every kind throughout the world, that anything that can be uttered by the human voice can be simultaneously interpreted. In actual fact, SI is a finite and fallible function and the adverse effects of this state of 'denial', in the clinical sense, by the profession and its clients have never been properly appreciated.

SI is a species of the genus *translation* and the simultaneous interpreter is a species of translator. In order to illustrate from just one angle the unrealistic nature of client expectations let us compare them with a client's expectations of the work of a *written* translator. If the client finds a *mistake*, in the sense of an omission or an inaccuracy, in a translator's work, the translator may be legitimately faulted. After all a translator sits in an office with its panoply of dictionaries and reference works, access to colleagues, the scope and time for consultation and reflection. What makes someone an interpreter rather than a translator is that he is able or trained to react immediately to the stimulus, but an

interpreter is not *ipso facto* a better or more knowledgeable *translator* than a written translator. He is just as likely therefore to be left guessing or at a loss as a translator by things he finds incoherent or incomprehensible in *the text itself*. Add to this, or rather *multiply* this by the number of occasions on which he is bound to be left guessing or at a loss by inadequacies and shortcomings in the speaker's *delivery of the text* and it becomes clear that, all other things being equal, an interpreter cannot be held to the same level of fullness and accuracy as a written translator. Yet when a client, usually, a speaker or a member of his delegation, detects and complains about what he considers to be an error, or more rarely, an omission, the automatic assumption on the part of the complainant, the audience, the conference organisers or administration, and even, as often as not on the part of fellow interpreters and even the 'offending' interpreter himself, is that he is just as much *at fault* as if he were a [written] translator.

If the ultimate goal of SI is to bridge the gap between speakers of different languages, competent interpreting – and as a corollary, the proper training and education of interpreters – is only half, or, at best, five eighths of the battle. The other three eighths of the battle have been lost by default. Where this battle has been lost, if, indeed, it is possible to describe as lost a battle that has never been joined, has been in the failure to impress upon the clients or 'consumers' of SI the Two 'F's, that is, the finiteness and fallibility of the function as well as the consequent restraints that these 'F's place on a third, namely their Freedom of Speech.

Traditionally freedom of speech does not include the freedom to shout 'Fire!' in a crowded theatre. Nor should a speaker's freedom of speech include its moral equivalent in the SI context. SI cannot function at maximum efficiency if its users are not educated to respect its 2 'F's in their own best interests. There is, in fact, a law or vicious circle that governs this situation: the greater the failure by users to respect the finiteness of SI, the greater becomes its fallibility.

One factor, however, which would complicate such 'education', if it were ever to be attempted, is that these 'best interests' are not uniform and vary, certainly in degree, depending on the language a speaker uses. English speakers, for example, have less to lose by ignoring the limitations of the SI medium than speakers of other languages. At this point a crucial distinction must be introduced, namely that between the interests of the participant as a 'consumer' and his interests as a 'producer'.

The same citizen's economic interests vary according to his different roles as a consumer and a producer. For example, when cheap foreign goods are 'dumped' on his domestic market, the television sets he manufactures as a producer are harder to sell and export, but the imported cars he uses as a consumer are easier to buy. The trouble is that, in the same way, the interests of

a participant at an interlingual meeting are not, or may not appear to be, the same when he is a speaker [producer] as when he is a listener [consumer].

Purely as an example of how the 'consumer'-'producer' dichotomy operates, let us take the use of acronyms – a chronic, recurrent stumbling block and bugbear. As concepts, entities, organisations, technical terms and esoteric jargon proliferate throughout the whole spectrum of international discourse they tend inexorably to be reduced to acronymic form. Initially – no pun intended – the Former Republic of Yugoslavia was referred to by that name; after a while it contracted to F. R. Y. and later still it shrivelled to 'FRY'. Acronyms share a common characteristic with proper names, numbers, 'third language' material – that is quotations and interpolations in a language, such as Latin, other than the language being used by the speaker – and most technical terms. This common characteristic, which is a critical impediment to SI, is the lack of true semantic content. It is only when the material has semantic content that interpreters can bring to bear their resources of intelligent anticipation, inference, analysis and deduction, without it they have absolutely nothing to go by except an empty phonetic husk.

For the client of SI as a speaker or 'producer', making 'his' use of acronyms and thus accepting a limitation on his freedom of speech, is an irksome restriction, but as a listener or 'consumer' of SI he is likely to gain if the speaker who is being interpreted for his benefit honours restrictions on his own use of acronyms, since the loss in translation of acronyms through the medium of SI is probably second only to the loss sustained by numbers. In the unlikely event that a UN Committee were ever established for the Abolition of Gratuitous Acronyms, I wonder how long it would take before it became known as 'UNCAGA'.

Another example of a possible 'concession' – unfortunately about as unlikely as it would be helpful – would be for speakers to spell out large, complex numbers as a sequence of digits instead of interpolating the discombobulating billions, millions, thousands, hundreds tens and units in the normal way so that "Three billion, eight hundred and sixty four million, three hundred and ninety seven thousand, seven hundred and sixteen dollars" would become "U.S. dollars, 3, 8, 6, 4, 3, 9, 7, 7, 1, 6." The arithmetical contortions into which numerical utterances of the conventional kind force the unfortunate Chinese interpreter who has no 'billions' or 'millions' available in the Chinese language can only be described as cruel and unusual.

The more technical and expert the meeting, the more destructive are the effects of losing or failing to wage this battle for the education of the clients of SI. An illuminating paradigm of the actual situation on the ground was provided by a symposium on Small Energy Sources held some years ago in Los Angeles.

As is so often the case in conferences on science and technology, the traffic was almost exclusively one way and consisted largely of the reading of papers in English by American experts in the field who expounded the latest advances at the cutting edge of the technology of wave, solar, wind and bio-mass energy sources. The opacity of the subject to laymen, including interpreters, the density of the prose and the compression of argument was compounded by the well-nigh inevitable tendency on the part of their authors to read out the papers at high speed. This tendency, far from being discouraged by the organizers, was in fact actively promoted by an equally inevitable and irresistible tendency of their own, to cram too many speakers into too little time.

The value of the attempt to convey this kind of information by the reading of papers is highly questionable even in the case of an audience listening in the speakers own language, but the benefit to the audience listening to this kind of material in other languages through the medium of SI is bound to be a good deal less. This finding does not depend on, although it was certainly backed by, the testimony of those non-English speaking participants who privately confided to interpreters their frustration at their inability to follow the proceedings.

The question then arises, "if the system is broke, why ain't it fixed"? The short answer is, because of a combination of obliviousness and vested interests. To take the example of the Los Angeles Seminar, four distinct interest groups can be identified: the organisers, the speakers, the listeners – in particular those listening in languages other than English – and the interpreters.

For the most part, the speakers themselves are quite oblivious to the fact that the system is not working because, *inter alia*, of a dynamic which affects even *same language* meetings and prescribes that the larger the meeting, the greater the pressure not to interrupt the speaker, even to protest that you have no idea what he is talking about. While the other three groups *may* be aware of the fact in varying degrees, none has an interest in "blowing the whistle" and killing what is, again in varying degrees, a golden goose. The organisers want credit for a 'successful' meeting and for this the absence of 'trouble' seems a reasonable enough criterion; but as someone once said, "the absence of evidence is not the same as the evidence of absence". The majority of participants or listeners, apart from a natural organisational reluctance to 'make waves', want to continue to be sent by their ministries or sponsoring organisations on expense account jaunts to interesting places, as do interpreters themselves who also have an extra interest in maintaining their dignity. To acknowledge publicly and *voluntarily* the inadequacy of their results would mean revealing – and worse still, being the first to reveal after fifty years of "don't ask, don't tell" – the twin skeletons of Finiteness and Fallibility in their closet.

In any case, even if an interpreter could be found who was both sensitive to and modest enough about his results, as well as sufficiently conscience-stricken

to "cry uncle", where could he turn to unburden himself? The nearest interpreters come to this is when they indignantly denounce, to sympathetic fellow interpreters, a speaker by whom they have just been mauled. Whether the mauling is due to the "unfair competition" to which they have been subjected or to professional inadequacy on their part – or a combination of both – is seldom altogether clear, but at least the interpreter has vented his feelings and the secret has been kept in the family. The obstacles to bringing this problem to the attention of the appropriate authorities – conference service managers in organisations and conference organisers in the private market – at a level where it could be properly addressed as a problem of liaison with the consumers, are many and complex. However, over fifty years, management itself has been allowed or conditioned to assume that SI is *infallible* and *infinite* and only fails on those rare occasions when the customer complains, and that when he does, the customer must be right and the interpreter at fault. One of the main psychological and hierarchical constraints is, of course, that any initiative of this kind on the part of an individual interpreter who might be prompted to come forward, is liable to be taken as a confession of weakness vis-à-vis those colleagues who do not come forward.

The ghost at this banquet is, of course, management which can be a little hard of hearing when it comes to detecting the sound of whistles – especially when they are not being blown.

It is the, in a sense, flattering assumption on the part of participants that a simultaneous interpreter's capacity to handle anything that is thrown at him or her is 'infinite' that actually increases his or her 'fallibility'. Conversely, the more speakers can be sensitized to the 'finiteness' or limitations of SI and the nature of these limitations and the more they are prepared to adapt what they say and the way they say it to these limitations, the better the performance of interpreters will be and the better they themselves will be served.

I would now like to explain some of these limitations. Some are limitations of *degree*, such as speed of delivery where the actual threshold will vary from one interpreter to another and others are limitations of *kind*, such the use of technical terminology and jargon including overuse of acronyms. Some, again, will be limitations which are beyond the control of the individual speaker, such as cripplingly inadequate command of the language being spoken or in the case of a speaker using his native tongue, an accent, regional or otherwise, which is too far from the standard, or a congenital inability to express himself coherently in public. Some of these limitations which may be beyond the control of the individual speaker, may, of course, well be remediable in principle by his delegation or the organisation he represents; although not, of course, until the vicious circle of "don't ask, don't tell" is broken.

I would like to do so in terms of the concept of 'fair' and 'unfair' competition with which we are familiar in a commercial context. Here the concept is introduced purely as a useful metaphor for the relationship between speaker and interpreter and in no way implies that the goal of one is to 'defeat' the other. In actual fact, the 'effect' is, more often than one side would like to admit or the other side believe, tantamount to the defeat of the interpreter by the speaker to the ultimate detriment of the act of communication being attempted and believed to have been achieved.

Broadly speaking, a simultaneous interpreter is facing "fair competition" only when certain conditions are met. A broad but important distinction should, however, be drawn here between those factors which are remediable in principle and those which are not.

The following is a by no means exhaustive list of conditions that should be met by speakers for the 'competition' to be 'fair'. It should, however, be borne in mind that these are exclusively difficulties of *content* which are as often as not compounded by difficulties of *delivery* which belong to a distinctive category of their own.

Speaker Incoherence

It is only relatively recently in the history of diplomacy, with the rise of international organisations, that speaking in public has become part of a diplomat's job description and indeed of the job description of representatives of a vast array of commercial, business, governmental and non-governmental organisations as the process of globalisation gains momentum. The ability to speak impromptu, coherently and lucidly in public is a talent that by no means everyone possesses and is of an entirely different order from the ability to hold one's own in private conversation. Multiply this factor by the fact that most of the time at international *multilingual* meetings speakers do not enjoy the privilege of using their own languages and the inevitable product is a degree of incoherence of one kind or another.

A complicating factor here is that among *same-language* speakers there is considerable tolerance for casual incoherence. The same incoherence, however, ceases to be tolerable in translation, so that the interpreter is often held to a higher standard of coherence by *his* listeners than is the original speaker by *his* listeners. A glance at the cold print of the verbatim transcripts of the impromptu public utterances of some prominent political and public figures, even those whose stock-in-trade is public speaking, might astonish members of the audience who had, or thought they had, no trouble in following the speaker live. This kind of casual incoherence, however, will not travel through the language barrier. It is not for nothing that at the time of President Clinton's first

inauguration a political commentator, not known as one of his supporters, wrote: "... at least *sentences* have now come back to the White House." Imagine for a moment that you are the hapless correspondent of *Le Monde* or *Izvestia* faced with the task of reporting to your readers in French or Russian, a recent U.S. President's reply to the following question "Do you think there could be a battlefield [nuclear] exchange without escalation into full-scale nuclear war?" The answer was, verbatim: "Well I would ... if they realised that we ... if we went back to that stalemate only because our retaliatory power, our seconds or our strike at them after their first strike would be so destructive that they couldn't afford it, that would hold them off."

The considerable difficulties posed for interpreters by the many different kinds and degrees of incoherence encountered in live battle conditions can be broadly classed as irremediable, except perhaps as a by-product of the kind of consciousness-raising exercise being attempted here.

Mother Tongue or "Other Tongue" Use

The speaker should be speaking his native language or a language in which he is at home. Although this is a factor beyond the control of the individual speaker, if the "don't ask, don't tell" taboo could be broken and the speaker formally apprised of the difficulty, he might at least be persuaded not to compound this difficulty with additional difficulties which are in his control and compensate by enunciating with particular care and avoiding excessive speed. As has already been suggested, this is a difficulty that could in principle be remedied by those whom the speaker represents if the practice could be established of bringing the problem to their notice and impressing upon them the disservice being done to their own cause.

It is common to hear interpreters wistfully, but unfortunately only in jest, suggesting that certain speakers of a language other than their own would gain by being interpreted first into the language they are attempting to speak by the interpreters into that language and relayed by the other interpreters into the various target languages. But here again, "don't ask, don't tell" prevails.

Verse

The speaker should be speaking prose and not verse. Reciting poetry has never been a common practice and is now much rarer than it once was, but the fact that it has happened and can happen is a sign of the untrammelled innocence of the clientele of the facts of SI life.

Written Texts

The speaker should be speaking *extempore*, not reading from a text.

In terms of 'content' and format, the reading aloud of a prepared text approaches the 'unfairest' form of 'competition'. In principle it is remediable, but only if three essential conditions are fulfilled by the speaker or the delegation he represents.

The first and indispensable condition is that of making copies of the text available to the interpreter, but even this essential condition can be frustrated by the failure of the conference organisers to play their part. To do this they must first be alive to and appreciate the importance of delivering such texts to the interpreters and, secondly, ensure the machinery exists for doing this. The quite frequent failure on the part of conference organisers to fulfill this function not only contributes to the 'unfairness' of the competition but actually compounds it, since speakers who have done their part by making texts 'available' feel, reasonably enough, that therefore the interpreters must be in possession of them and that they, the speakers need not make allowances or 'concessions' in speed or other aspects of delivery. Too often, however, texts go astray and never reach interpreters.

A second condition is that the text must both be made available and *actually delivered* with sufficient time to allow the interpreter at least to read it through before the speaker takes the floor.

A third condition which is outside the control of the speaker but which is something he should be made aware of as part of any meaningful and comprehensive campaign of consciousness raising is that the interpreters who will be responsible for interpreting his statement may well be prevented from studying it before it is delivered since they may be fully occupied up to that point in studying the text[s] of and/or interpreting the statements of previous speakers.

Because of the linguistically solipsistic mind-set of many speakers, particularly English speakers, and because in many cases they know that copies of their statements have been, are being or will be distributed to all members of their audience – and even on occasion to the media – they clearly tend not to regard the reading or delivery of them as an actual act of oral communication so much as an act of reading it into the record. Unfortunately, this purpose is served just as well by a mindless gabble as by a meaningful, authentic speech act. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely in these circumstances that, if speakers wish their words to reach their hidden audience on the dark side of the language barrier intact, accurate, comprehensible and in full, they should be at particular pains to enunciate clearly, to moderate their reading pace into a speaking pace and above all to give full value to oral punctuation.

The last and perhaps most important condition is that of the speaker's sticking to his text. The injunction to "check against delivery" which accompanies many texts of statements, far from solving this problem, is about as effective as the signs one sometimes sees at the approach to airports warning motorists to "Beware of low flying aircraft!" It has been suggested in the latter case that motorists might try taking their hats off. It is difficult to see what equivalent precaution might be taken by the interpreter.

The 'unfairness' of the competition here stems from two principal causes. Firstly, the speaker or reader's thinking process has already been completed, so that the 'speaker' in reading out 'pre-composed' material is engaged in an entirely different kind of psycho-linguistic exercise which can no longer properly be described as 'speaking'. This difference in itself immediately makes different and greater psycho-linguistic demands on the interpreter.

Secondly, composed, written material, of which the newscast is the extreme example, is almost always more complex, more elaborate and, above all, *denser* than impromptu speech as well as being free of its characteristic element of *redundancy* which some have claimed is precisely what makes SI possible. A well written, carefully composed speech verges on literature which is *not* 'fair competition'. This problem is compounded by other factors:

- Speeches are not always read out by the people who wrote them, or, at times, by those who have even read them before. It is not always easy for a reader unfamiliar with his material, especially if it is at all literary or elaborate, to make sense of it for himself or for others.
- A well known phenomenon in foreign language acquisition is the fact that a foreign speaker of a language often sounds more foreign when he is *reading* the language aloud than when he is *conversing*. Since most speakers at international multi-lingual meetings are foreign or non-standard users of the language they are speaking, this factor can only compound the 'unfairness' of the competition for the interpreter.
- For various reasons, including appeals for 'brevity' by chairmen, speakers who are reading their statements aloud are often in a hurry to get it over with, but, of course, because of pride of authorship, without sacrificing a single *ipsissimum verbum*.

Thus, at the end of the day, an interpreter can often end up facing 'competition' from elaborate, composed and dense material, badly read, at an unnatural speed, with 'foreign' phonetics, intonation and stress, devoid of oral punctuation and with the reader flitting with papilonaceous randomness from one segment to another.

Nothing is more disruptive and unsettling for an interpreter than for a speaker to depart from his text. As a rule, an interpreter will at least know that a speaker *is* departing from the text and *where*, but by no means necessarily so. The reason is that with a text in front of him an interpreter has a tendency to lag further behind a speaker than when he is following without a text and may therefore fail to notice that a speaker, who has outstripped him, has in fact departed from his text. If what he is *hearing* the speaker say does not appear to correspond with what he *sees* in the text before him, he may assume that the speaker has simply outdistanced him and will try to speed up what has by now become a sight translation of a written text in the hope of catching the speaker up.

However, even if the interpreter is right on the heels of the speaker and *knows* that he is departing from the text, what he does *not know* is which of the following things the speaker is doing:

- a) Inserting something new, but intending to resume after the insertion at the place in the text where he broke off
- b) Simply leaving out part of the written text, in which case the interpreter has no way of knowing *how much* is being left out – a line, a sentence, a paragraph, a whole page or more – and therefore does not know where to *reboard* the text

or

- c) Reformulating material already in the text. However slight such reformulation turns out to be, once the words being uttered by the speaker cease to correspond to those on the printed page, the disruptive effect on the interpreter is wholly disproportionate because, once again, the interpreter does not know in which direction the speaker is heading or how substantial his deviation is going to be.

In all these cases, the interpreter will almost certainly be forced to subdivide dangerously his already divided attention, between trying to follow and interpret what he *hears* the speaker saying and furiously scanning the text with his eyes to see whether and where the speaker has resumed his reading of the written text. There is a considerable risk that, as a result of such departures, what a speaker has *not* said will be interpreted and that what he *has* said will not – or both!

Not only do participants or 'clients' remain oblivious to the frequency and extent of such loss or damage, but also interpreters themselves. As an example of the *extent* of the obliviousness, there was the case of the Spanish interpreter who read her way stolidly through the whole of a text of a lecture delivered by a Soviet scientist to a U.N. meeting on the desalination of water without realising that he was actually reading a completely different one and without provoking

any reaction whatever from her audience. The *frequency* of such occurrences cannot, of course, by definition, be demonstrated by a single example.

One of the reasons for this kind of loss or damage is that once a speaker has already disappeared over the auditory horizon, the interpreter's only recourse or means of cutting his losses, is to finish interpreting the text in front of him as fast as he can in the hope of finishing within at least dignified reach of the speaker. The degree of correspondence between what the speaker has actually *said* and the interpreter's rendering of the written text has by then become a matter of chance.

Again, sensitivity to this problem and the consequences of it vary considerably according to the *language* being spoken, but in general, the remedy lies in raising the consciousness of the client, in this case in his role as 'producer' or speaker, to the potential serious consequences of departing from a prepared text so that he can, in his own best interests, consider whether the advantages of departure really outweigh the risks. If a speaker then still finds it necessary to depart, I am afraid the only useful corrective action verges on the hopelessly utopian.

Marking the text with "check against delivery" certainly raises the interpreter's anxiety level, but does little to help him to cope with the problems posed by departures from it.

I have just referred to client insensitivity to loss or damage arising from departures from written texts. One particular inexplicable symptom of what might be called the 'client insensitivity syndrome' is that where a listener in language x who has just been subjected to what has obviously been a severely depleted and/or horribly mutilated version of the original by an audibly struggling, flustered and breathless interpreter who has clearly been unhorsed by the "unfair competition" imposed on him by the speaker. He then takes the floor as a *speaker* himself and, unable or unwilling to learn the lesson which must be fresh in his mind, immediately proceeds to subject the interpreters of his own statement to the same "unfair competition", and with the same likelihood of failing to communicate effectively with his listeners on the other side of the language barrier. This atrophy or stunting of what one would have thought to be a fairly elementary cause and effect connection, is a telling comment on the effect of five decades without liaison, feedback or education of the clients of SI – fifty years of "don't ask, don't tell".

This element of the syndrome not only takes a particularly heavy toll in the context of prepared texts in technical subject areas but also leaves the whole SI battlefield littered with casualties.

Written Translations

Written *translations* of texts delivered in another official language pose special problems and are far from being the unmixed blessing they might appear to be; suffice it to say that the problems posed by having to follow the text of a statement which is being read out are seriously compounded when an interpreter has to follow a *translation* of it.

There are two quite distinct problems here; the lesser and more obvious is the accuracy of the translation and the quality of the target language which can be the victim of the whole gamut of abuse ranging from the brutally ungrammatical to mere insensitivity to idiom. The greater and less obvious is that posed by the incompatibility or contradiction between the requirement that interpreters read out the text of the translation 'as is' without any changes and the requirement to "check against delivery".

The only way an interpreter can 'check against delivery' is by following the text in the *original* language with his *eyes* while *listening* to the words actually being uttered by the speaker, so that if there is any discrepancy between the two, the interpreter is in a position to detect it. However, if the interpreter is using his eyes to follow the text in the *original language* he cannot at the same time *read* the text of the *translation*.

If, on the other hand, the interpreter heeds the injunction to read the translation 'as is', he has no way of knowing whether the speaker is deviating from his text, regardless of whether it be a matter of changes, additions or omissions. The reason for this is that any translation will differ from its original in structure and word order, and such differences increase in proportion to both the level of sophistication of the translation and the structural differences between the two languages in question. In any competent translation between Chinese and English, for example, it would be extremely rare to find a sentence which bore any resemblance to the words actually being uttered until quite a late stage in the sentence.

In these circumstances, interpreters find themselves in a dilemma and must do one of two things. They may commit themselves to reading out the passage in the translated version *before* they can be sure that what the speaker is saying is in fact the original material of which the passage they are reading is the translation. If it is not, because the speaker is changing, adding or omitting something, they are in trouble. They have not only said something which the speaker has *not* said – and indeed may have omitted deliberately precisely because he does not want to be on record as having said it – but is now unable to retrieve and render what the speaker *has* said.

Alternatively, interpreters may wait until they have heard enough of what the speaker is saying to be *sure* that it is indeed the original of the translated

passage before him. If it *does* turn out to be so, they will have to make up for lost time and read out the passage with unnatural rapidity at precisely the time when the speaker has already embarked on his next passage, making it even less likely that interpreters will catch up in time to hear whether that passage in turn corresponds to the next passage in the translation.

If it turns out that what the speaker has just said *does not correspond* to the translation, the best an interpreter can hope to do at this stage will be to jettison the relevant passage in the translation but *without being able to retrieve* and render what the speaker actually did say.

Changes in form and substance, as well as additions to and omissions from the original text by the speaker can all wreak their own particular kind of havoc. Passages the speaker decides to omit may, for the reasons described, run the risk of being read out anyway by the interpreter, and additions or insertions run a particularly high risk of being omitted.

Two other factors which compound the problem are, firstly, that the texts of translations are often distributed to the audience and the media while the speech is in progress and, secondly, that a considerable proportion of interpretation between certain languages is performed by 'relay'. Without going into the mechanics of the impact of these factors on the problem, suffice it to say that there is a clear multiplier or ripple effect on the damage that may result.

Remedial action in this case could take the form of making it clear to speakers and those they represent that in their own ultimate self interest they should convey to interpreters a clear preference between :

- 1) having their translation read out 'as is' and
- 2) having the interpreter 'check against delivery'.

They should not be allowed to assume that they can do both.

If they choose 1), it should be made clear to them that they do so at the expense of their speaker's *freedom* to deviate from his original text, and they should advise their speaker accordingly. If, for whatever reason, organisations or delegations are unable or unwilling to impose such restrictions on their speaker and believe that he *may* deviate from his text, they should unambiguously opt for 'check against delivery'. The interpreters will then follow the speaker and *disregard* the translation. In this case they should be made aware that the *interpretation* heard by the audience will *not correspond* with the *written translation* that they may have distributed to the audience and the media, and may wish to reconsider whether their purposes are better or worse served by circulating a translation in these circumstances. On one occasion at the time of *perestroika* during a speech at the U.N. by the then Soviet Foreign Minister, Shevardnadze, a CNN correspondent complained on the air that the U.N.

"translator" was not saying the same things that he was reading in the text given to him by the Soviet Mission.

In brief, speakers and those they represent should be made aware of the incompatibility described, that they have to make a choice, that this choice must be unambiguously conveyed to the interpreters and that, having made their choice they must live with the consequences of it. Too often interpreters are left in doubt as to what their policy should be in these circumstances and the results are often an uneasy compromise which can sometimes be the worst of both worlds.

Subject Matter: Specialist Fields, Technical Terminology and Jargon

The speaker should be speaking in terms and on subjects which a well educated speaker of his language would normally be expected to understand, that is to say not technical language or jargon. The casualties inflicted on the ground by the failure to recognise the 'unfairness' of this kind of 'competition' are enormous. In a military campaign, any competent commander would regard a battle won at such a cost as a purely Pyrrhic victory. Briefly, there are two alternative remedies.

The first, which would have serious organisational, administrative and financial consequences would be to bring together the teams of interpreters servicing the particular meeting or conference for as long as it would take to give them a meaningful face to face briefing on the subject matter, the agenda of the meeting, the issues likely to arise, the background to them and the positions of the protagonists as well as the terminology in all the languages. It would also have to be recognised that in cases where a meeting or conference has a number of different simultaneous meetings of its committees or groups dealing with different subject areas and agenda items, the most *cost-efficient, quantitative* deployment of the corps of interpreters is inconsistent with the most *quality efficient* results. Switching interpreters around from one meeting to another for the purpose of equal work-load distribution and optimum utilisation of resources has a lot of bureaucratic sex-appeal. Its inevitable effect, however, is to reduce significantly their chances of getting a firm grip on the terminology, jargon, agenda items and status of the proceedings as well as the positions, speaking habits and even idiosyncrasies of the speakers in any one particular committee or working group.

Because of the extra cost and effort that such a major and comprehensive remedial exercise would entail, it would be unlikely to be acceptable to conference organisers or properly enforced by employers or even interpreters' organisations.

The alternative remedy would probably be even more unpalatable to the parties concerned. It would consist in facing the facts, namely recognising that for certain kinds of subject matter and context SI is not an appropriate medium and giving up the attempt. This idea will, of course, seem unnecessarily drastic to administrators or organisers who have never witnessed or to participants who have remained oblivious to or unmoved by the interpretational havoc wrought by certain speakers from, say India or Japan, with notoriously unfathomable accents in English or speakers from Estonia and Mongolia with equally unfathomable accents in Russian, when they have read out, often under time pressure, their contributions to the Scientific and Technical Sub-Committee of the U.N. Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. The list of such examples is endless.

Quotations

The speaker should attempt to situate all literary or other allusions in context and to enunciate them with particular clarity and distinctness and above all to make it clear that they *are* quotations. In cases where quotations and references are drawn from the documents being used at the meeting, "chapter and verse" or page numbers and paragraphs should be given and given *before* the reference or quotation is made – ideally, leaving enough time for the interpreters to find it. This is one of those things which, on the surface, may seem unnecessary to highlight, but, unfortunately, this is one of the many cases where what is good for the goose, in the form of the members of the speaker's 'same language' audience, leaves the gander, in the persons of the interpreters and their audience, totally stranded. However late in the day the speaker leaves it before revealing exactly where the quotation is located in a document, the members of his 'same language' audience can usefully refer to it at any time. If, however, the interpreter does not know where to look for it before or at the time the reference is made, he cannot subsequently make up for or repair any omission or deviation from the verbatim text of the quotation. Without the precise location of the quotation and the opportunity to find it *before* offering a version in the language of his listeners, the best even a resourceful interpreter can do is to offer his listeners an impromptu *interpretation* of it, and even the best of interpretations or impromptu translations may differ in important and relevant respects from the *officially sanctioned* printed translation of it. Such differences can be baffling, misleading and actively counter-productive, especially in the course of a drafting exercise where the paramount issue is precisely the choice of *specific words*.

Asemantic Elements

Figures or numerals, which are notorious stumbling blocks, share a characteristic with certain other types of recurrent material which pose a particular kind of difficulty for SI. This material includes acronyms, proper names, including geographical place names, 'third' languages and, to a large extent, technical terms and jargon.

Their common feature is that they lack true semantic content. You may not need much convincing of this when it comes to numerals and proper names, but it may not seem as immediately apparent in the case of technical terms, jargon and 'third' languages, because, of course, if they did not have *meaning* you could not look up their *meaning* in a dictionary – and you can. This distinction – between semantic and asemantic elements – is relevant not because of any purely theoretical interest, but because it has a severely practical application to SI. The distinction is best understood in terms of a spectrum ranging from "phonetic-intensive" to "context-intensive". Any of you who have ever struggled to retrieve names and numbers from the indecipherable, protoplasmic, acoustical sludge left on your telephone answering machine, even when the rest of the message makes perfect sense, will have some inkling of the sense of this distinction. And this difficulty, be it noted, exists even when 100% of your attention is available for the tasks of listening and comprehension instead of the 50% available to interpreters.

Let me illustrate this distinction. An extreme example of "context-intensive" discourse would be the announcement of sports results by TV sportscasters. When reading out the results of team sports competition they somehow feel compelled to use and even invent a different synonym of 'defeat', 'beat', or 'win' for each successive result announced, such as: 'knock off', 'rip', 'nip', 'blank', 'pound', 'edge', 'drop', 'upset', 'blast' etc. In cases of this kind, however, the context is so narrow and constricting as to force the meaning 'defeat' or 'beat' out of absolutely any noise the announcer chooses to make at this point. At the other end of the spectrum there lies another kind of discourse – the "phonetic-intensive" – where the meaning depends almost exclusively on phonetics and context supplies no clue. It is at this end of the spectrum where elements which are not *inherently* or *ipso facto* devoid of semantic content, such as technical terms and jargon, become asemantic for all SI intents and purposes, because the contextual atmosphere becomes so rarefied as to supply little or no oxygen for the interpreter's brain to work on. Even the most common objects or concepts can become temporarily asemantic in this sense.

Take, for example, any of the many committees on sanctions within the U.N. which, because of the nature of their mandates can be relied upon to throw up this kind of material in its most problematic form. The essence of their work is

to review individual cases of "sanctions busting" and to pronounce on the legitimacy of individual items of cargo carried into the territory on which sanctions have been imposed. With lexical items of this nature the interpreter is almost back in the limbo of numerals and proper names where he has to rely almost exclusively on phonetic clues. Paradoxically, the consequences of the failure to grasp and convey this kind of item are, if anything, more damaging and embarrassing than is the case with semantic material. Items such as "black calico for nuns' habits" and "bicycle pump valves" come right out of the blue and disappear promptly back into it. What is happening here is that these words or phrases, while not *strictly* asemantic in the sense that numerals or proper names *are*, become so for all practical purposes once they become items on a list or enumeration. Items on a list are totally devoid of semantic or syntactical links with the other items.

This factor causes an additional and dangerous disruption to normal operating procedure. What some have claimed makes SI possible is the lag between the speaker and the interpreter. What makes the *lag* possible is a combination of factors which includes the interpreter's ability to anticipate and make intelligent inferences from the connected chain of discourse as it sweeps past. The trouble with asemantic elements is that they are not part of a semantically linked chain, but just so many unconnected or loose links which cannot be inferred or anticipated from the speech flow. Phonetic-intensive elements can only be captured if the interpreter is *not* observing the customary lag and is so hot on the heels of the speaker that he can catch and reproduce the actual phonetics of the utterance. If an interpreter is observing the normal lag of a second or two, he will normally have no trouble with a speaker's "... to be held in the capital of my country". But if he is not there to hear the word "Ouagadougou" at the very moment it is being uttered and only arrives on the scene a second or two later, he will find that the phonetic trace has vanished, leaving only the grin on the face of the Cheshire Cat, and all the deductive powers of Sherlock Holmes and Nero Wolfe rolled together will do nothing to help him.

The element I have described as "third languages" takes two main forms. The first is the interpolation by a speaker using one of the official languages of the meeting of material from another language which may or may not be another official language. One of the most frequent examples of this is the use of Latin quotations or tags. Even if an interpreter happens to have a useful knowledge of that language, he would have to be very lucky to recognise it on the lips of, say, a Bulgarian speaking Russian or a Vietnamese speaking French, and even if he did, the chances are that it would in any case be untranslatable, since most Latin tags are highly elliptical and represent the merest tip of the contextual iceberg from which they have been extracted. If you have any doubts, try translating

"habeas corpus"! Another example is that of non-native speakers of the working language they are using who reach back into their own language, be it official or not, for a telling quotation from some notable political or literary figure of their country. The most frequent and disabling form is that of a speaker who interpolates into his Russian or Spanish sentence a word or phrase, most often in English, without breaking stride to honour English phonetic values, stress or intonation and often leaving it embedded in the grammar and syntax of the language of the sentence. For example, on 16/3/93 in the Social Development Preparatory Committee, the Chairman (Chile) said: "... *sería interesante tener un **fil** acerca de esa reunión ...*" In the event it turned out that he was saying 'feel'. At a meeting of the International Civil Service Commission [7/92] the Algerian Chairman speaking French said: "... *on n'a même pas fait un **clear as dandruff** ...*" It turned out in retrospect that what he was attempting to say was: "clearance draft". On 27/11/92, Russian ambassador Vorontsov at the Consultations of the U.N. Security Council on Angola, speaking of the movement of factions, said: "... *a storony, mozhet byt', **dzhoking** ...*" What in retrospect he appeared to have wanted to say was 'jockeying'. On a purely phonetic basis, even if the interpreter had detected that it was not a Russian word but in fact an English word, the English word it most closely resembles was 'joking'. A further complication which is quite common in these cases, is that the word is not used properly, appropriately or idiomatically. 'Jockeying' as an idiom has to be combined with the preposition 'for' and an object, e.g. "... for power". So here there are at least three strikes against the interpreter, which, incidentally, there would not be for a translator:

- 1) The switch occurs unannounced, without even the oral equivalent of quotation marks.
- 2) The phonetics, embedded as they are in their native – Russian – habitat are unreconstructed.
- 3) The use is, as so often in such cases, incorrect, incomplete, inappropriate or unidiomatic.

Figures or numerals are at particular risk of being misinterpreted or omitted and become doubly asemantic when they come in uninterrupted succession or lists. This risk is compounded by another ill-understood factor. When the interpreters find the semantic flow interrupted by figures and are forced to abandon their lag, their attempts to grapple with them, as often as not unsuccessful, tend to take up a disproportionate amount of their time and attention, with the net result that not only are the figures themselves garbled, mangled or omitted, but the surrounding *semantic* material also suffers damage or omission in the confusion.

Because of this risk, speakers would be well advised before using figures to reflect on whether their point could just as well be made by giving an order of magnitude, such as: 'much', 'little', 'few', 'a tremendous amount', 'sufficient' etc. If exactitude is of the essence, then the speaker should take special care to slow down and enunciate with particular clarity and above all, in the case of compound figures, to leave a perceptible pause between the millions, thousands, hundreds, tens and units.

Concatenations of proper names, including geographical place names, tend to have the same disruptive effect on the semantic flow with the same 'collateral' damage to the surrounding 'civilian' or semantic population. Speakers, again, would do well to reflect on whether their point can be made only by *naming* the person[s] or place[s] in question rather than using an alternative form of identification, such as "the Ambassador of my country" rather than Señor García Fernández de Terremoto or Tegucigalpa. An important ingredient in this mix which is consistently overlooked, is that many, if not most, speakers at international gatherings, are not using their native languages. Personal and geographical place names suffer particularly serious distortion on the lips of non-native speakers and since, with names with which they are not already familiar, interpreters have nothing more to go on than what is already a phonetic misrepresentation, the sounds that sometimes reach the "end-user" can be too hideous to contemplate.

Speakers quite often refer to and quote from newspapers and understandably wish to identify the source by name, but it would make a great difference for the purposes of SI, if the speaker, who may be Vietnamese, while speaking French, instead of simply uttering the words "Ren Min Zhi Bao" were to preface it with the words: "the Chinese (or Beijing) newspaper."

At a tender and vulnerable stage in my own career I was interpreting a Russian-speaking Bulgarian delegate in the 5th (Budgetary) Committee of the U.N. General Assembly. The item under discussion was Section 10 of the budget, "Printing and Publications". The speaker uttered one sentence of which I understood everything except the subject which was a "U PH O" or "unidentifiable phonetic object". The speaker went on to elaborate on his point, with the English interpreter and hence the whole of the English-listening audience, understanding absolutely everything he was saying – except what he was talking *about!* The "U PH O" in question turned out to be an attempt by a Bulgarian, while speaking Russian, to reproduce his version of the phonetics of the French word *L'Oeil*, the title of a U.N. publication at the time. Certainly this is a laughing matter, but not *just* a laughing matter.

Apart from bilateral [bilingual] meetings and the special case of the E.U. which may eventually founder under the colossal financial and administrative burden of linguistic equal rights for all, international meetings always have to

restrict the number of languages which may be spoken and interpreted. One of the important elements of "fair competition" is that a speaker should be speaking his native language or at least a language in which he is at home, a privilege that only some enjoy and which is generally beyond the control of the speaker himself, although it should not be forgotten that the *choice* of representative is within the control of the delegation, ministry or organisation. Puzzlingly, however, in this choice, the level of competence in that representative's use of his working language often seems to be left out of account.

Differences in control or mastery of the official language that non-native speakers choose to speak are very great. The strictly linguistic elements which interpreters rely on in a spoken language in order to absorb meaning, range as widely as phonetic values, pronunciation, accent, intonation, stress, grammar, syntax and vocabulary. The more 'foreign' a language is to a speaker, who, through no fault of his own, is forced to use it, the less reliable any one or combination of these elements may become. A non-native speaker using English as his working language, for example, may say 'w' when he means 'v', 'offs' when he means 'office', his voice may rise instead of fall in the right place, leaving it unclear whether he is asking a question or not, he may say 'muddle' and mean 'middle', he may say 'inter' when he means 'enter', he may use one tense and mean another or he may say 'standard' and mean 'switchboard'.

Strangely enough, many of these dangers increase when speakers are using a cognate or related language because of the risk of their confusing it with their own language. The possibility of SI depends on a very delicate balance between input and output. When an extra amount of the interpreter's divided attention has to be diverted from output to input [listening, establishing meaning and perhaps translating] this balance is disrupted and performance declines.

Speed

A further condition which must be met if the 'competition' is to be 'fair' is that of manageable speed. When a speaker is speaking *extempore* or off the cuff, speech usually falls into a rhythm natural to the speaker and if that rhythm is uncomfortably fast for the interpreter, it is usually impossible to make the speaker break his natural rhythm for more than a couple of sentences. However, members of a speaker's delegation or team can help by reminding an excessively fast speaker to slow down in his and their own interest, although, of course, a junior member of a delegation may not feel that it is in his or her own interest to badger another member of the delegation of too exalted a rank.

A major paradox here is that from the very inception of SI until this very day, the only one of the considerable number of conditions necessary for SI to be effective that has ever even nominally been recognised and which there has

been a token effort to control is precisely the one which is virtually beyond control, namely the speed of the speaker.

Anecdotal Material and Humour

Anecdotal material, particularly of the humorous variety, is another element which can tilt the balance 'unfairly' against the interpreter and the risk of its failing to survive SI intact should be weighed carefully against the rhetorical value and satisfaction of using it. One of the reasons for this is that among the elements on which interpreters rely quite heavily, consciously or unconsciously, there is predictability, a factor which allows room for informed and intelligent anticipation. With stories and jokes which are unfamiliar to interpreters – and it should be noted in this regard that it is precisely the unexpected or untoward twist which makes a story funny – there is absolutely no knowing where the story is heading or what will prove to be the point, humour or punchline. What is worse, the interpreter can rarely be sure that he has grasped – and conveyed – that point or humour. This uncertainty will itself affect his delivery and intonation, so that even if the interpretation is literally correct, wrong or missing intonation will blunt or even obliterate the point for the listener.

Furthermore, the story or joke may itself not prove to be very funny or relevant or may be too firmly rooted in the soil of its culture to survive a sudden brutal transplanting into another language. Finally, there is something about the psycho-linguistics of joke or story-telling which causes the narrator to shift into a different mode of delivery, so that by the time he reaches the punchline or climax, he himself is often so overcome by the hilarity of it that he actually becomes momentarily inarticulate. Yet it is precisely the punchline which needs to be delivered with particular – even unnatural – distinctness if the interpreter is to have a 'fair' chance of grasping it. 'Grasping' here involves two elements, understanding the *words* and getting the *point*. Those of you who have ever been left standing by a 'funny' story recounted in your native tongue will have no difficulty in recognising this distinction.

It is perhaps in this area that the *de facto* inequality of speakers of the world's different languages at international meetings is at its most conspicuous. Speakers of English at these meetings, with the notable exception of the E.U., enjoy objective conditions which approximate most closely to 'normal' public speaking conditions where the speaker and his audience share the same language. They get the benefit of an immediacy of response and contact with what they can safely assume to be a largely *English-listening* audience. I say "English-listening" since the size of the audience which actually listens in English is even greater than the already large proportion of participants who use English to speak. This is because, firstly, many participants understand English

without feeling able to use it and, secondly, many who could very well use English do not do so because their first language happens to be another official language of the meeting or organisation concerned. Thirdly, a number of participants who neither use English to speak nor understand it as well as another official language, listen to English in order to practise and improve their understanding of it.

A telling illustration of this difference in perception is the difference in instinctive response between the linguistically solipsistic speakers of English and the speakers of other languages when, because of some technical hitch, they are hearing nothing in their earphones. English speakers are likely to say something like: "Mr. Chairman, there is no *interpretation*", period. Speakers of other languages in the same circumstances tend to say: "Mr. Chairman, there is no Spanish/ French/ Arabic etc. interpretation". In other words, for English speakers interpretation tends to be something which happens only when 'foreign' languages are spoken. English speakers tend to perceive interpretation more as something they sometimes *listen to* than as something which actually happens to what they say. At the other end of the spectrum, speakers of Chinese, one of the least spoken and least understood international languages, are supremely conscious of SI as the medium through which they are *understood* and their speaking habits are clearly influenced, if not fettered, by this perception. How free would the British or American speaker feel to resort to humour if there were not a single member of his audience likely to get it at first hand? Thus English speakers tend to be less sensitive to the fact that there is a hidden audience out there that they must also reach and that certain compromises may be needed to do this.

While it is possible to *identify* the elements of difficulty in SI such as deviant pronunciation or incoherence, it is impossible to measure or *quantify* them for the purposes of determining the borderline between difficult and *too difficult* or between 'fair' and 'unfair' competition. However, one at least of these components can be isolated and measured and can be used as a paradigm for all the other elements and indeed for the entire complex bundle of 'difficulties'. This element is the speed of the speaker which can be measured in words or syllables per minute, with the *caveat*, however, that this measurement alone does not tell the whole story of 'speed'.

The problem is that as speed increases, so, of course, does the difficulty for the interpreter and quality of performance declines. But, and here is the rub, performance does not decline in strict arithmetical proportion to the increase in speed, but rather in geometric proportion until, when a given interpreter's personal speed threshold is reached, total incapacitation or breakdown occurs. To put it in the plainest terms, there comes a point in terms of speed of delivery – and also, but less identifiably and measurably, in terms of all the other

elements of difficulty – where the speaker, by increasing his speed by, say, only 5 % can push the interpreter beyond his personal threshold and to use computer terminology can cause him to 'crash'. The last straw is not the same for every camel and in the same way each interpreter has a personal speed threshold or critical mass.

What is more likely and frequent in practice, is that by a mere increase of, say, 5% in speed – alone or in combination with other elements of difficulty – the speaker can turn a speech which an interpreter would normally be able take in his stride into a fearsome challenge, which, if the interpreter can rise to it, becomes a heroic feat or exploit. Conversely, if the speaker could be persuaded to curb his exuberance and to bring other elements of gratuitous difficulty under control to even a *small* degree, the benefits to the interpreter and ultimately to the speaker himself as well as to the audience he is trying to reach would be *out of all proportion* to the minute sacrifice of 'freedom of speech' involved.

Unfortunately, the harmless little premise reflected in the phrase, "the audience he is trying to reach", which might appear to be axiomatic, is very often a false premise and the thought of "reaching his audience" – even the one listening in his own language – is the one furthest from the speaker's mind. An attempt to elucidate this point would, however, take me beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, this is an important and ineluctable part of the environment in which SI operates, but one which, since the inception of SI, has been so docilely and obviously accepted by the profession, its managers and impresarios, that it has become part of the pattern on the wallpaper, unnoticed, unrecognised and unchallenged. It is therefore worth taking the time to give just one example.

An almost inevitable dynamic in any event at which people are brought together to speak – and sometimes to listen to – each other, ranging from the most shirt-sleeved and informal of seminars to the most solemn ceremonial occasions, is that too many speakers are crammed into too little time and "something has to give". What usually 'gives' is that the chairman or moderator will impose a time limit on statements and /or will exhort speakers to be as 'brief' as possible. For various reasons such appeals for 'brevity' will rarely dampen a speaker's enthusiasm or put a dent in his pride of authorship, so that instead of responding with 'brevity', speakers normally say, or what is worse, *read out* everything they had originally intended to say, only much faster, and less comprehensibly or jump around even more randomly and unpredictably from one part of their text to another.

A case of this kind occurred in the 2nd Committee of the U.N.G.A. on 4/11/95 when the Chairman, in the interests of saving time urged delegates to cut out as many paragraphs as possible from their written texts without any regard for or sensitivity to the likely and indeed inevitable effects on

interpretation. Nor in such cases – and they abound – is there any machinery for or tradition of interpreters, or more appropriately their hierarchs, taking any initiative to acquaint their clients with the ill-effects of such an exhortation.

The deep-lying root cause here, which does so much to falsify the innocuous and axiomatic-sounding premise in question, is that in so many SI contexts, speakers are speaking – or *reading out* – not so much in order to reach the listening audience but rather *for the record*. This powerful factor is but one of the many which drive "unfair competition" for interpreters and which should have been identified and resisted when SI was still exerting the charm and magic of babyhood, with its admirers still clustered dotingly around its cradle – admirers much more disposed then than now to accept and accommodate the fragility of the new-born infant. SI is now 50 years older but its congenital *fragility* is now mistaken for *frailty* on the part of its individual practitioners by its now desensitized clients.

To return to the image used at the outset, SI is still the same dog dancing on its hind legs that it was fifty years ago; only now it is expected to perform as well as the natural biped for which it is substituting, and when its performance is judged it tends to be judged by the standards of the natural biped. Fortunately or unfortunately, the clients of SI, unlike those of most professions, tend to function in two quite distinct roles; producer or consumer, speaker or listener, transmitter or receiver. It is the speaker who has the *expectations* which he cannot or does not check because he knows only the input, and it is the listener who may make the *judgments* which he cannot check because he is only privy to the output. In practice, listeners tend to react to or appraise SI in terms of what might be described as "comfort level" – something which has zero correlation with its accuracy. This is one of the reasons why it would be misguided and dangerous to allow "quality control" to depend on "customer satisfaction".

It is worth noting in this regard that expectations depend partly on perceptions of the function which are influenced considerably in the case of SI by the electronic paraphernalia which screen off the function and the interpreters from the direct observation of the consumers. This is in stark contrast to the heyday of consecutive interpretation when the interpreters, whose humanity was a conspicuous and palpable presence, were probably as fallible but seem to have enjoyed greater impunity and license – if we are to believe the legendary tales of the giants of yore who made the speeches the speakers should have made rather than the ones they did.

Because they cannot see what is happening or how it is being done, the consumers or clients remain ignorant of the process, hence the frequently demonstrated vagueness about and misunderstanding of which interpreters are translating which language in which direction. The electronic paraphernalia not only distance the clients from the process, but create the strong impression that

the raw process of human translation is somehow electronically facilitated or aided. When I saw for the first time the actual process of 'closed captioning' where the words of a speaker actually appear in print on your TV screen within three seconds or so of being uttered, it was a real surprise to find that, with all the bewildering array of electronic equipment involved, in fact the system depended on nothing but an actual human court- or verbatim reporter processing as fast as possible what the speaker was saying.

Linguistic Harassment

It is on the rare occasions when the roles of "expecter of performance" and "judge of the results" converge in the same person that the issue of what can be described as "Linguistic Harassment" arises and the interpreter finds himself in the invidious position of a "servant of two masters". SHOULD he be setting himself to give his listeners his best possible interpretation OR should he be at pains to satisfy the expectations of the speaker who is 'monitoring' him? Whatever the individual answer to this may be, no interpreter's task is made any easier by having yet one more division of his attention thrust upon him. 'Linguistic harassment' is something that occurs when the speaker and/or his delegation 'monitor' the interpretation – almost exclusively into English from one of the other languages. Whenever the 'monitors' find fault with the interpretation, they themselves, the hapless interpreter, the audience, the management or the employers and even fellow interpreters, because of five decades of cumulative disregard of the '2 F's' factor, inevitably conclude that "something was wrong" with the interpretation; never that something was or may have been wrong with assumptions about or expectations of the process of SI itself – not to mention the fact that the complainant's judgment may have been faulty. Where the speaker is himself the 'monitor' of the interpretation, this is *par excellence* an example of the now well established problem of "the observer affecting the experiment" adversely. One of the reasons for this is the fact that the effort of 'monitoring' inevitably distorts the natural delivery and rhythm of the speaker and in cases where there is a major syntactical or structural difference between the source and the target language, this distortion can be so serious as to be disabling.

'Monitoring' effectively especially when you are speaking at the same time is extremely difficult, and speakers who 'monitor' tend to become 'lexically fixated' so that, while they can be quite oblivious to or unwittingly tolerant of significant syntactical damage, they focus on particular words or lexical items they want to hear the interpreter say in the target language – and at the particular time and place in the sentence when they expect to hear it. Sometimes they take exception to a perfectly acceptable alternative word or phrase used by the

interpreter which is not the one they wanted to hear; sometimes their version may be better and sometimes the interpreter's version is better, but to the extent that translation, and *a fortiori* SI, is an art and not a science there is no rendering of a word or phrase that cannot be "second-guessed". However the floor of the debating chamber is *not* the place for a medieval disputation over the comparative merits of different renderings any more than a crowded theatre would be the right place for a drama critic to get up and argue with the director about his staging of the play.

Whatever satisfaction a speaker may derive from faulting an interpreter, whether his own preference is better or worse in a given instance, it should be weighed against the two kinds of "unfair competition" to which he is subjecting him. The first is the gratuitous difficulty he is causing in distorting his own delivery by the act of 'monitoring' and the second, perhaps ultimately even more damaging, is the undermining effect of drawing attention to an interpreter's actual or alleged fallibility, both on the confidence *of* the interpreter and on the confidence *in* him of the audience. As I have had occasion to point out in the past to one delegation which has been a notorious offender in this regard, if you flog a galley slave or a grave digger you will probably succeed in making him row or dig faster, but if you embarrass and unnerve an interpreter in public and thereby undermine his confidence, you will almost certainly make him perform worse for at least the duration of the meeting in question. While you can certainly make a given interpreter perform *worse* by this treatment, a fact of interpretation life which should be understood is that the only way you can make him perform *better* in the course of a single meeting is to replace him by a better interpreter.

If the speaker or his delegation know the actual words or expression they want to hear in the given target language, they should simply *say* them in that language to begin with rather than risk hearing the interpreter saying something different and having to second guess him in public with all its detrimental consequences.

Every time a multilingual meeting is held anywhere in the world using the medium of SI where the 'competition' is 'unfair' and the *qualitative* demand outstrips the *qualitative* supply, the vicious circle which has been spinning for more than fifty years gathers that much more momentum and may now be unstoppable. In the old Soviet Union one of the most telling items of underground humour was the saying: "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us". The underlying phenomenon this saying reflected was no doubt one of the elements of entropy which led to the demise of the system. What did someone once say about those who do not learn the lessons of history?