

INTERPRETING: THE LEXICOGRAPHERS' VIEW

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Introduction

The "consensus conference" is an increasingly popular format for scientific discussion, the idea being to bring together authorities in a given field and hope that they can agree as to what their respective approaches have in common. Accommodating differences of opinion with a deftness worthy of a medieval casuist dispensing pardons, the final consensus document highlights what is agreed on, states what is almost agreed on and hints at the implied disagreement on everything else. Much of the discussion revolves around attempts to reach some sort of consensus on definitions, which everyone present often takes for granted but no one can promptly formulate to the satisfaction of the other participants. It is, for example, instructive that world authorities on phlebology may not readily agree as to the meaning of a "varicose vein" – the implication not being that we should lose faith in medicine, but that it is worth reflecting on meanings we dismiss as obvious.

A case in point is the definition of the words "interpreter" and "interpret" by a number of authoritative English language reference books, comparison of which appropriately involves an exercise in "interpretation" to identify what is recurrent in the lexicographers' differing approaches. Only the meanings of "interpret" and "interpreter" relevant to oral reformulation in a different language are considered in the present article, the usage of these words to state concepts such as the explanation of dreams or the understanding of art being outside the scope of the proposed discussion.

The sources are referred to in the following order: a reference work on language and linguistics; four monolingual English dictionaries, listed by alphabetical order of title; and a computerised corpus of modern written and colloquial British English usage. Since the interest of the discussion is not confined to the English language, this first part is followed by an examination of how the equivalent terms are defined in one French, one German and one Italian dictionary (consulted in the same sequence as listed here, i.e. by alphabetical order of language rather than of title). In conclusion, the etymology of the Romance "interpret-" is briefly considered. It would be fascinating – and appropriate – to consider the definitions and etymology of the equivalent terms in many other languages, but so extensive an undertaking would unfortunately

preclude reasonable brevity. It can thus be left to the reader's curiosity to seek out the relevant dictionary entries in other languages.

Other interesting sources of definitions are the web sites of the European Commission's *Service Commun Interprétation-Conférences* (SCIC) and of the *Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence* (AIIC). The SCIC homepage, which can be consulted in the 11 working languages of the E.U. (<http://europa.eu.int/comm/scic>), includes a definition of "conference interpretation"; similarly, the introduction to the interpreting profession on the AIIC site (<http://www.aiic.net/en/prof/default.htm>), currently only in English, takes as its starting point the definition of a "conference interpreter". The "professional" status of these sources and their inclusion of the qualification "conference" set them apart from the present survey, but the reader may find it instructive to compare the definitions concerned with those discussed below.

The highest common factor in English

David Crystal, in the Glossary to his excellent *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, defines the verb "to interpret" as follows: "to make an oral translation" (Crystal 1987: 423). The definition of "interpreter" in the *Chambers English Dictionary (CED)* is "one who translates orally for the benefit of two or more parties speaking different languages: an expounder: a translator (*obs.*)" (Schwarz *et al.* 1988: 746), while the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (CC)*, alongside the conveniently highlighted essentials of syntactic status and meaning ("N COUNT = translator"), offers the following entry: "a person who repeats what someone else is saying by translating it immediately into another language so that other people can understand it", backed with the customary examples (Sinclair 1987: 764). *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (NSOED)*, undoubtedly the gold standard for British English, explains the term as "a person, esp. an official, who translates orally the words of people speaking different languages. Formerly also, a translator of books etc." (Brown 1993: vol. 1, 1399). *Webster's New World Dictionary (WNWD)* states the definition as: "a person who interprets, specif., a person whose work is translating a foreign language orally, as in a conversation between people speaking different languages" (Neufeldt 1988: 706).

The highest common factor of these definitions is their dependence on the concept of *translating*, stated by all of them to be specifically *oral* in nature (the term is not explicitly included □ but words to the same effect are undeniably used □ in the *CC*)¹. Of the dictionaries consulted, the *CED* and the *NSOED* seem

1 The SCIC and AIIC sources, referred to above, state that the oral nature of interpreting makes it quite distinct from translation. Consistently, both definitions

at first sight to fall into the circular definition trap by including the term "interpret" among their definitions of the verb "translate": in the *CED*, "to interpret, put in plainer terms, explain" (Schwarz *et al.* 1988: 1559) and, in the *NSOED*, "to expound [...]; interpret, explain" (Brown 1993: vol. 2, 3371). In both cases, however, the definition concerned is preceded by ¶ and separate from ¶ those relevant to the craft of Cardinal Mezzofanti or John Florio, which is stated by the *CED* as "render into another language" (Schwarz *et al.* 1988: 1559) and by the *NSOED* as "turn from one language into another; express the sense of in another language" (Brown 1993: vol. 2, 3371). Both dictionaries therefore define "translate" as "interpret" only in the sense of expounding or explaining, which is treated as a secondary, *transitive* usage; by the same token, they agree that to "interpret" as does an "interpreter", who in turn leads the patient reader to the semanteme "translate (orally)", is distinct from such activities as explanation or exegesis and is to be accorded *intransitive* status. In both sources, the transitive usage of "interpret" as "expound" or "explain" is preferred as first definition. The verb's intransitive status as the activity pursued at a faculty of interpreting is thus denied the prominent position in which the lexical browser (rapidly becoming a "surfer" or "zapper" in media parlance) would most probably stumble across it.

The *WNWD* and *CC* adopt a similar arrangement in placing the intransitive usage of "interpret" well down their respective lists – bringing up the rear after five entries for the transitive verb in the former, fourth out of four entries in the latter. What distinguishes both sources from the *CED* and *NSOED* is that the *WNWD* includes an explanation of "interpret" as "translate (esp. oral remarks)" in the *v.t.* entries, where it enjoys a certain pride of place as the second out of five definitions (Neufeldt 1988: 706), and the *CC* is similarly clear in recognising the possibility of transitive status when the verb is used as a reference to oral translation (Sinclair 1987: 763). Both sources have the merit of avoiding the apparent "Catch 22" of the "interpret = translate"/"translate = interpret" arrangement ¶ predictably so in the case of the *CC*, with its format of definition by example rather than by reasonable approximation to synonymy.

The purpose of the above remarks is not to provide a "consumer's guide" to the best dictionaries, a purpose for which so few entries would be a woefully inadequate basis. Even if a larger sample of definitions were considered, comparing for comparison's sake would be meaningless between dictionaries targeting such different readerships as the *CC* and *NSOED*. It is, however, instructive to review some of the definitions of "interpret" and "interpreter"

eschew any explanation of interpreting based on the verb "translate", preferring the terms "convey" (<http://europa.eu.int/comm/scic>) or "transpose" (<http://www.aiic.net/en/prof/default.htm>). "Lay" sources are understandably less concerned with strict separation of (oral) interpretation and (written) translation.

offered. Interesting points are whether: (i) the verb in the sense of "translate" is listed as only intransitive, or also as transitive; (ii) the definitions of "interpreter" refer explicitly to the oral component of interpreting; (iii) explicit reference is made to interpreting in sign language, as for the deaf; and (iv) the definitions of "interpret(er)" include reference to interpreting as a computer programme activity (even if the primary sense from which this derives is arguably more that of explaining in simpler terms than of translating between different languages). These parameters are set out in table form below. For the sake of diachronic comparison, a precursor of today's *CED* has also been included. The volume in question is *Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary (CTCD)* (Geddie 1959), the changes in the lexicographers' perception of interpreting over four decades being readily apparent from a comparison of (b) with (c) in columns (ii) and (iv):

dictionary and edition	(i) <i>vt</i>	(ii) oral	(iii) sign language	(iv) computing
a. <i>CC</i> , 1987	+	+	-	-
b. <i>CED</i> , 1988	-	+	-	+
c. <i>CTCD</i> , 1959	-	-	-	-
d. <i>NSOED</i> , 1993	-	+	-	+
e. <i>WNWD</i> , 1988	+	+	-	+

Definitions of "interpret"/"interpreter" in five English dictionaries

Legend:

- (i) "interpret" (= translate) as a transitive verb (+) or not (-)
- (ii) oral component of interpreter's work explicitly mentioned (+) or not (-)
- (iii) interpreting from/to sign language explicitly mentioned (+) or not (-)
- (iv) application of terms to computing explicitly mentioned (+) or not (-)

Interestingly, the *CC* is the only British source to specify the transitive usage of "interpret" in the sense relevant to the present survey, while the *NSOED* rejects this usage as archaic. However, quibbling that it is variously "old-fashioned", "American" or "new-fangled" seems irrelevant, and its inclusion in two such authoritative sources as the *CC* and *WNWD* would seem to provide eloquent proof of its acceptability. A more relevant concern is the total absence of reference to interpreting into or from any form of sign language. Removing this architectural barrier would, of course, require that references to the *oral* component of interpreting be restated.

To badger the lexicographers a little more, the *British National Corpus* was consulted for the entries "interpret" and "interpreter". The Corpus spans the last

thirty years of British English, with a 9:1 written:spoken weighting. Since "interpret" in its unsuffixed form occurs in 1,322 examples, "interpreter" in 418 and "interpreters" in 233, a random selection of one hundred was made for each of the two entries "interpret" and "interpreter(s)". Interestingly, the transitive usage accounts for almost all entries under the verb "interpret" (96 examples), but never in the sense of oral translation! Of the four intransitive entries, only one concerns translation between different spoken languages (English and Spanish, in the item concerned); in another example, telephone messages are "interpreted" for a deaf person. For "interpreter(s)", sixty examples out of one hundred concern transposition into a different language (including six cases of translation from or to a sign language). In addition, there are six examples of "interpreter" as a software term. The salient message of the *Corpus* survey is the striking difference between substantive and verb in their respective lexical market shares of the "translating orally between different languages" entries □ 54% for the former, only 1% for the latter. The situation becomes less imbalanced if the intransitive verb alone is considered, in which case the respective proportions for substantive and verb are 54% and 25%; however, comparing one sample of a hundred with another of four is hardly sound statistics.

One consideration on which a sample of informants might help achieve a modicum of agreement is the cut-off point between acceptability and unacceptability in utterances or sentences such as "I have interpreted him many times" or "I interpret" in answer to the question "What do you do?". The verb is readily applicable to a specific occasion, as in the example "Paul had to interpret for us" (Sinclair 1987: 763), but arguably unconvincing as an unqualified reference to what is habitually done as a profession. Admittedly, things are not as clear-cut as with "accountant" and "to account", but a degree of consensus on the matter might be gleaned from informants. Incidentally, could a moment's thought not also be given to the nouns "interpretress" and "interpretess"? These are listed by the *CED* and *NSOED*, though the latter dismisses them as lexical dinosaurs. Their omission from the *CC* and *WNWD* can hardly be accounted a serious oversight!

A glance further afield

An appropriate complement to the above comments on "interpret(er)" in the English language sources is the description of the French cognates by the *Petit Robert Dictionnaire de la Langue Française* (Robert 1979 and 1990). Rigorous argumentation, based on crisp, precise thought and expression, is something for which French scholars are more renowned than their pragmatic Anglo-Saxon counterparts. A distinguished mid-century writer, with a memorable turn of

phrase, depicted the French as "transposing into [...] precise terms our mistier notions from across the Channel" (Waugh 1945: 231). So encouraging an endorsement singles out a French reference work like the *Petit Robert* as the logical first step in the attempt to broaden the research beyond the admittedly far from constraining limits of the English language. "Interpréter" having only transitive status in French, the French lexicographers at least have less scope than their English language counterparts for uncertainty regarding the possibility of transitive use in the sense of "translate orally". The earlier of the editions consulted is, indeed, categorical on this count, opening with a bold "*expliquer, rendre clair (ce qui est obscur dans un texte)*" but eschewing any reference to the strictly linguistic task of translating orally between different languages (Robert 1979: 1023). In the later edition, the updating of the entry to include "*traduire oralement un discours*" as the second of four definitions reflects the lexicographers' changed perception of the matter (Robert 1990: 1023).

The first definition of the substantive "interprète" as "personne qui explique, éclaircit le sens d'un texte", followed by "traducteur servant d'intermédiaire entre deux personnes ne sachant pas la langue l'une de l'autre", is consistent with the entry for the verb in according pride of place to the "explanation" component of interpreting. Interestingly, the *Petit Robert* states that the first attestation of the "traducteur" usage dates back to the late sixteenth century, when "interprète" in the sense of "commentateur, exégète" had already been in use for over two centuries. Whereas all four English sources except the NSOED focus first on what the Corpus survey suggests is the most common current usage of "interpreter" (i.e. as "oral translator"), the *Petit Robert* lexicographers thus opt for a "first attested, first served" approach. A further point of curiosity emerges, as in the case of the verb, from a comparison of the quoted entry with that in the more recent edition: "Personne qui donne oralement, dans une langue, l'équivalent de ce qui a été dit dans une autre. – Professionnel servant d'intermédiaire entre personnes parlant des langues différentes" (Robert 1990: 1023). As in the transition from the CTCD to the CED in English, the *Petit Robert* has updated its entry to include the specification that interpreting is an oral activity; going even further than its English counterpart, it has also excluded any reference to "traducteur" or "traduction" in the new definition. It is heartening that, despite the obtuseness with which the private market often denies the interpreter professional status and respect, the French lexicographers' review of their entries for "interprète" and "interpréter" has ensured explicit recognition not only of the oral component in interpreting but also of the interpreter's standing as a "professionnel".

An additional source of interest in the French definitions of "*interprète*" is the cross-referencing to the related terms "*drogman*" and "*truchement*". Dictionaries are delightful mazes even when the suggested equivalents are

limited to "native" terms – here, the etymology of the exotic synonyms brings us fittingly into contact with Italian, Byzantine Greek and Arabic.

In German, an interesting difference from English and French is the lexical cohabitation of "*dolmetschen/ der, die Dolmetscher(in)*" and "*interpretieren/ der, die Interpret(in)*". The English language clearly has no premium on the customarily vaunted wealth of nuances afforded by the presence of both "native" and Latin roots in its lexis! Whereas only context can clarify whether English "interpreter" and French "*interprète*" are used in the sense of "oral translator" or with some such meaning as "commentator", this difference is lexicalised in German. Thus, the *Duden* restricts the entries for "*interpretieren*" and "*Interpret(in)*" to such fields of experience as interpretation of art or literature, while the Germanic terms "*dolmetschen*" and "*Dolmetscher(in)*" (actually Germanic by adoption, the probable source of the "*dolmetsch-*" root being a Sorbian or Hungarian term with origins in Asia Minor) are confined to oral translation and those who provide it (Drosdowski 1989: 355, 775). The definition of the verb "*dolmetschen*" as "*einen gesprochenen oder geschriebenen Text für jmdn. mündlich übersetzen*" (Drosdowski 1989: 355) is of interest on two accounts – its unhesitant versatility as a transitive or intransitive form (the French verb being classed by the *Petit Robert* as only transitive, and the English entries being inconsistent on this score in column (i) of the above table), and the possibility that the interpreter can provide oral translation of written texts. This entry is undoubtedly welcome to the partisans of sight translation as an exercise for trainee interpreters.

That each national culture has its distinctive qualities is so trite a statement as to appear superfluous in a publication read by the interpreting community. However, it seems apt that the present survey, with curiosity rewarded – but not appeased – by the orderly clarity of the French definitions and the user-friendly division of rôles in the German lexis, can be intensified into a *crescendo* of etymological speculation by the scholarly historical comments in two successive editions of a monolingual Italian dictionary (Dogliotti *et al.* 1971 and 1983). One feature common to both editions is that *Il Nuovo Zingarelli Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana*, though not a dictionary of etymology, explains the Latin root of the Italian word "*interprete*" (Dogliotti *et al.* 1971: 888). The Latin term "*interprete(m)*" is described as a learned word of uncertain origin, meaning "middleman", "negotiator", "intermediary" or "interpreter" (presumably in the sense of "expounder" of laws or omens), from which derives the Latin deponent verb "*interpretari*". This means that, though the semantic shift of French "*interprète*" and Italian "*interprete*" seems to have been from the primary sense of "person who explains what is obscure (in texts)" to "person who translates to help people speaking different languages communicate", the former of the two meanings is not the only attested referent of the Latin root. Its usage in the sense

of "middleman" can perhaps be regarded with the benefit of etymological hindsight as apt, in that the definition of the Latin term as a commercial go-between is arguably a rôle on which the work of the interpreter sometimes borders today – admittedly more in the call of duty than through concern to set the etymological record straight!

Before concluding this brief survey with a closer look at the etymology of the Latin root, it is relevant to note that the *Zingarelli* does not include any reference to oral translation in its various definitions of the verb "*interpretare*" (the only remote connection being an attestation of its archaic usage in the sense of "*tradurre*"). The only entry which falls within the scope of the present survey is thus the substantive "*interprete*", defined as "*Chi traduce oralmente un discorso fatto in un'altra lingua*" (Dogliotti *et al.* 1971: 888). This definition is subsequently revised by the *Zingarelli* lexicographers to: "*Chi, per mestiere, traduce oralmente un discorso fatto in un'altra lingua*" (Dogliotti *et al.* 1983: 969), the addition of "*per mestiere*" affording a neat parallel to the introduction of the word "*professionnel*" into the French definition.

Etymology

When the sense of the Latin substantive "*interprete(m)*" shifted from "middleman" to "expounder" is not specified by the sources consulted for the present survey. What is certain is that the sense of "interpreting" as understanding and explaining what is not clear is attested by the late years of the Republic².

Greater etymological detail than in the genealogical reconstruction of Latin "*interpres*" as a middleman is immediately transparent only in the first part of the word, the function of the prefix "*inter-*" as a link between two entities, limits or parties being readily accessible without further consultation of dictionaries. Where "*-pret(er)*" comes from is not a point on which the various dictionaries agree. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Onions 1966:481) maintains a non-committal "INTER- + unkn. element". An authoritative Italian source equates the "*-prete(m)*" element in the Latin root with a derivative of "*pretiu(m)*" (= "price"), which would be neatly consistent with the "middleman" usage (Cortelazzo & Zolli 1983: vol. 3, 612). The *NSOED* is at odds with the Italian etymologists on this point, identifying the "*-pres*" of the Latin nominative with the Sanskrit verbal root "*prath-*", defined as "to spread about". Though the

2 Cicero's *Brutus* (46 B.C.) contains many references to "interpreting" in this sense, such as "*orator in hoc interpretandi [...] genere mirabilis*" (*Brutus*, 39), and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* (late first century A.D.) also includes examples like "*quotiens interpretatione res [...] eget*" (*Institutio Oratoria*, I.vi.29).

NSOED does not speculate as to the cognates of this root in other languages, eligible candidates are readily identified in both Gothic ("*frathas*" = "intelligence") and Greek. Appropriately, the Greek "*phrázein*" means "indicate, declare, tell", and "*phrásis*" (hence English or French "phrase") denotes "speech, manner of speaking". A little philological speculation thus pinpoints various terms for which semantic kinship with the modern term "interpret(er)" is an attractive hypothesis. If the presence of the Sanskrit root is accepted, the idea of the interpreter starting etymological life as a spreader is an interesting notion.

An item of terminological history which emerges from the etymological sources, while not strictly relevant to the present survey, nevertheless offers a heartening message for the future of the interpreting profession. The *Dizionario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana* states that the infinitive "*interpretare*" of modern Italian was formerly denied dictionary status by the lexicographers' insistence on the Latin deponent form "*interpretari*"; on the authority of earlier etymologists, the entry goes on to attest the wretched existence ("*grama vita*") once led by the verb "*interpretare*" (Cortelazzo & Zolli 1983: vol. 3, 612). The idea of the verb "*interpretare*" finally enjoying true lexical status after prolonged ostracism offers hope to those of us who despair over the all too frequent unwillingness to consider the interpreter a professional figure. Insofar as an isolated item of Romance etymology can be considered an appropriate precedent, the "*grama vita*" that most interpreters will admit to having experienced at some time or another on the private market should not be perpetuated indefinitely!

Conclusion

"Opera naturale è ch'uom favella"
(Dante, *Paradiso* XXVI, 130)

Considerations of space discourage extension of dictionary research to other languages in the context of the present article. An appropriate concluding remark is that the importance of communication in the rôle of the interpreter is consistently acknowledged by the dictionaries consulted, the only source which does not explicitly highlight this being the Glossary of the *Cambridge Encyclopedia*. (The explanation for this omission is surely that the communicative function of language is considered self-evident unless obscured by an anachronistically structuralist bias. Crystal's chapter on Translating and Interpreting actually provides eloquent confirmation of this precept.)

It is therefore fitting that, if the present survey prompts the reader to reflect on the terms for "interpret" and "interpreter" in languages other than those

considered above, it will at least not have failed as an exercise in communication.

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