

ON NORMS AND ETHICS IN THE DISCOURSE ON INTERPRETING

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This paper deals in general terms with the way the notion of “translational norm” has been used in research on interpreting, mainly in papers by Shlesinger (1989 and 1999), Harris (1990), Schjoldager (1995), Gile (1999), and, more recently, Garzone (2002).¹ I shall then advance reasons why this notion could find wider application, or at least be made more explicit. I shall not be looking, yet, at a corpus of scholarly or non-scholarly discourse *stating* more or less implicitly what the norm is,² although this body of “extratextual pronouncements” is, as Shlesinger (1999) noted, an important source of evidence for the norms operating in interpreting (with some caveats concerning the gap between normative discourse and norms in practice, as recalled in Toury 1998). A recent example of how prevailing norms for a given setting, conference interpreting, can be elicited from discourse and then compared with actual behaviour is provided in the study by Diriker (2004). For the time being, however, I shall keep within the limits of a broad and admittedly abstract argument in favour of a “thicker” description of norms in interpreting, substantiated by anecdotal evidence that I hope will be deemed relevant.

1. Norms as the key to variability in Descriptive Translation Studies

The main result of the strand of research known as Descriptive Translation Studies³ may well lie in the fact that it has “discovered the complexity of translation” as a sociocultural product; in this way, translation appears as “characterised precisely by its variability” (Toury 1998:12), whereas essentialist

1 This paper documents a step in my ongoing research on interpreting within the framework of the EU institutions (moving from Marzocchi 1998). I am indebted to Miriam Shlesinger and Franz Pöchhacker for inspiration, for their constructive criticism on previous drafts and for drawing my attention to relevant literature. My thanks also go to the Editors for their valuable support. Of course, I remain solely responsible for the arguments put forward.

2 An interesting corpus to this end could consist in the early writings on interpreting (1930 – 1970) that were the object of a recent study by Falbo (cf. in this respect 2004: 21 ff. and *passim*).

3 Hereinafter DTS, although the acronym misleadingly suggests a monolithic school of thought.

statements as to what constitutes true or faithful translation are determined by historical contingencies and are culture- and period-bound.

Accordingly, the move towards awareness of the historical variability of the object of study can be said to have implied a radical *undefining* of translation. A-priori definitions were felt by DTS scholars to project the researcher's own assumptions on translation onto a corpus that was often culturally and historically distant; this would involve the risk of circular reasoning, as translational corpora selected according to a particular definition of translation are bound to confirm the definition (cf. Hermans 1999, ch. 4).

An instrument of the attempt to have "variability in all its facets *introduced into the notion of translation itself*" (Toury 1998:13) is the notion of norms, used as an explanatory tool to account for the diverse ways translation is historically, socially and culturally determined. Norms can be defined as regularities of translatorial behaviour, departure from which implies some form of social sanction, that in turn reflect the values shared by a social group. Historical instances of translational behaviour can then be explained in terms of

- preliminary norms, governing for example the choice of source texts, of source languages, the option to translate directly or through a relay language, or to translate into the foreign language; in other words, what Toury terms "translation policy";
- initial norms, governing a very broad orientation towards *adequacy* with respect to the source text or *acceptability* within the target culture;
- operational norms, that guide decision-making during the process of translation at macro- and micro-structural level (cf. Toury 1995, ch. 2).

Different articulations of the concept have been proposed, notably by Chesterman (1993), who suggested a distinction between norms operating at the level of the translator's role and of the relationship between ST and TT (professional norms) and norms pertaining to what is expected from a translation product to be recognized as such (expectancy norms).

2. Norms in interpreting: early doubts and explorations

The beginning of *explicit* discussion on translational norms in interpreting can be traced back to a programmatic contribution by Miriam Shlesinger (1989) in the 'Forum' section of the inaugural issue of *Target*. Shlesinger's paper strikes the reader – this reader at least – for its methodological insight and scepticism at the same time. On the one hand it cast light on the methodological advantages, for TS as a whole, of extending the concept of norms to interpreting, in a way that was entirely in line with the systemic approach of DTS and fitted neatly within the general framework of TS as charted by Holmes in the 1970s. On the other hand Shlesinger discussed doubts as to how to elicit norms and even as to

whether norms do operate in conference interpreting, that is, as to whether interpreters' translatorial behaviour is determined by anything else than personal preference or cognitive constraints (cf. her later paper on this subject, 1999). Shlesinger's doubts were motivated by the size and scattered distribution of the profession, thought not to favour the socialization processes by which norms emerge and are passed on; however, the fact that interpreter training is (was, rather) concentrated in a few institutions could in fact lead to more consistent transmission of norms to future interpreters. On balance, this led Shlesinger to conclude that norms may well govern interpreter behaviour, despite the difficulties in eliciting them.

Other methodological considerations advanced by Shlesinger concerned the difficulties in finding and designing corpora, legal obstacles to recording performances, and the impact of monitoring on performance. Apart from these, however, a key insight in Shlesinger's paper – again, firmly within a DTS framework – is that in order to study norms in interpreting one needs to place interpreting within a 'system'. Given the interactional nature of interpreting, the system cannot be defined at the level of the ST, nor at the level of a vaguely defined receiving culture, and must therefore be conceptualised at the level of the interpreting event or setting. A thread may be seen running from Shlesinger's call for a systemic look at interpreting settings to later research, such as Pöchhacker's detailed analysis of the context of his case-study (1994), or to Alexieva's (1997) reasoned typology of interpreter-mediated events. Although Alexieva draws her analytical tools from sources other than DTS, her analysis of settings in terms of sociolinguistic parameters could be complemented by looking at the different professional and expectancy norms associated with each constellation of parameters.

A response to Shlesinger's early methodological doubts came very quickly from Harris (1990). In Harris' reply, observations from specific sectors of practice, that testify to the variability of norms in different interpreting settings are somewhat inconsistently juxtaposed to an essentialist statement as to a "fundamental norm" constituting all translatorial activity, that of acting "as a honest spokesperson". The opening statement illustrates how norms not only govern interpreters' behaviour, but are also *expected to do so* by fellow practitioners and scholars, in other words, it testifies to the 'psychological reality' of norms: Harris states that norms do in fact operate in interpreting, and that "anybody well acquainted with the activity could point to some of [them]" (1990: 115). He then moves on to name a few 'norms' organized around binary oppositions:

1. professional vs. natural interpreting (the respective norms being speaking in the first person vs. reporting speech);

2. conference interpreting (CI) vs. TV interpreting (the norms being “conventional fictions” in CI such as 30-minute turns regardless of change of speaker, vs. preference for consistency of voice, gender and prosodic features on TV);
3. his own training experience at Ottawa, and Russian tradition, vs. Western, AIIC practice when it comes to encouraging or frowning upon interpreting into the B language;
4. interpreted speech vs. written translation (production errors and calques being more acceptable in the former than in the latter).

The examples presented by Harris actually represent different levels on a continuum between habits, preferences and socially sanctioned norms, but also raise the issue of how to distinguish between the statement of a norm and its practical operation, and between stating that there is a norm and eliciting it from textual data.

The same lack of a clear distinction between habitual behaviour and a socially sanctioned norm can be found years later in a paper by Schjoldager (1995). This paper is a more articulated attempt to infer an initial norm from the way interpreters treat a particular cultural item in a corpus of Danish–English interpretation. However, the fact that the author’s research project underwent changes in progress explains a certain inconsistency: the stage is set in an evaluative framework, where performances by two groups of subjects are to be compared in terms of equivalence, in a search for interpreting *quality*. The conclusions are then drawn in a descriptive framework, in terms of norms governing the choice of how to treat the cultural item while coping with processing constraints. Nevertheless, the pattern that emerged deserves further study, even though the author formulates it rather sweepingly as a generally valid norm: “[The interpreter] is allowed to say something which is *apparently unrelated to the source text* [...] provided s/he can say something that is contextually plausible” (Schjoldager 1995:310, my emphasis – the normative discourse is implicit for example in “is allowed to”). In fact, apart from the limited size of the corpus, it is the lack of information on the social acceptance of this translatorial behaviour that makes me hesitate to call this a norm governing interpreting. It would have been interesting to have Schjoldager’s subjects comment on their performance, or have other students or trainers assess the performance, before concluding that the subjects’ behaviour was in line with a norm.

Going back to Harris’s response to Shlesinger, as could be expected from a scholar coming from an entirely different background, no notion of system comes to organize relations in Harris’ examples, although Harris identifies different social agents as those who actually set the norms: TV managers, conference organizers, trainers, institutions. Yet it is precisely the apparently

heterogeneous character of Harris' reply that illustrates the *undefining* potential of the notion of norms. Examples in the very short response given by Harris range from what is known as natural interpreting, performed by children in bilingual communities, through interpreting in conference and diplomatic settings, to legal and TV interpreting; the author introduces them stating that "norms will not be the same everywhere" (Harris 1990:115). In other words, the simple fact of reflecting rather loosely on norms in interpreting elicited an academic discourse that began building bridges between different interpreting settings, otherwise still marked by different social and academic prestige and by separate research paradigms, with a cognitive and process-based one prevailing in conference interpreting and a more socio-culturally oriented and discourse-based one in court and community interpreting (despite unifying efforts notably by Pöchhacker in his more recent work, and by Diriker 2004).

Gile, in a contribution to a discussion on translational norms in 1998, also saw the research potential in a norm-based approach to interpreting. He saw it from two points of view:

- as a way to open up the object of study to paradigms that had not figured prominently in his conceptual toolbox, or at least had gone unnoticed in the reception of his writings; to him, norms could be a tool to "foster more empirical research into interpreting and more interdisciplinarity, in particular with sociology and with research on written translation" (1998:99);
- as a way to have research itself undergo a relativizing scrutiny: research is seen as norm-governed behaviour and, at least to judge by the following sharp criticism, the prevailing paradigms lose any aura of intrinsic, objective adequacy: "research in the field has been increasingly governed by status-oriented norms at the expense of problem-solving. Becoming aware of these norms and their operation is important for researchers in the field" (1998:99).

3. Norms in cognitive paradigms and in the social construction of interpreting

A shared concern in Gile's and in Shlesinger's contribution – perhaps the main concern – is the extent to which norm-governed behaviour on the part of research informants can interfere with the results of experimental or observational studies; this is a problem inasmuch as the studies were originally designed to relate behaviour to *cognitive* constraints. Gile (1998) reports an experiment on the variability of fidelity perceptions, looking at how target-speech segments were reported by participants as errors or omissions; among the results, he found that the same TT segments were by no means reported as errors or omissions by all assessors, and wondered whether they were simply

missed or whether the different appreciation reflected different fidelity norms. Similarly, the lack of correlation between the number of errors identified and the general impression of fidelity reported by the assessors led Gile to hypothesize that something else – the operation of a norm – must account for the way an overall performance is evaluated, possibly overruling the perception of individual errors at micro level.

Gile also noted that norms should be taken into consideration in studies comparing ST and TT on the basis of propositional analysis, if results are not to be distorted by deliberate, norm-based departures from literalness. In Gile's terms, norms presiding over the assessment of performance should enter into the picture in such studies because otherwise

the metric chosen by researchers [...] may measure the opposite of what it is supposed to measure. A correct identification of norms is necessary in order to calibrate the propositional or other metrics used (Gile 1998:99).

Along very similar lines, Shlesinger's (1999) concern in a study of how interpreters handle long strings of modifiers is how to "tease apart" omissions or rearrangements that are due to cognitive overload from those that reflect the norms governing what is sufficient output in simultaneous interpreting. In a move that illustrates how experimental and discursal data can be analyzed to elicit norms, Shlesinger then surveys the literature on interpreting, in search of normative statements that could account for her subjects' behaviour. This leads her to the very sensible conclusion that interpreters abide by what could be termed a "condensation norm", that "not only condones but often encourages strategic macroprocessing", so that "not every element of every proposition in the source text needs to be reproduced as such. It is appropriate for a simultaneous interpreter to produce the underlying meaning of the proposition" (Shlesinger 1999:69). Intuitively, this is corroborated by training experience (condensation techniques figure equally prominently in the curriculum in Trieste and in recent research on strategies adopted by students, cf. Donato 2003); it is also in line with the long-standing discourse on conference interpreting as documented in professional literature and analyzed by Diriker (2004) and Jones' recent *Conference Interpreting Explained*. However, in addition to seeing the operation of norms in interpreting as a "how-to-tease-apart-from-the-cognitive" issue, the institutional and social construction of norms should also be investigated, e.g. the role of training and professional institutions in shaping and passing on this and other norms. It may also be the case that norms start their 'lifecycle' as a strategy to cope with cognitive constraints in a given situation and are then interiorized and generalized, as could have been the case with condensation or "macro-processing".

Things become more problematic, in my opinion, when professional or academic discourse elevates a particular norm to a defining trait of (segments of) the interpreting profession, i.e. a tool to maintain self-perception, as is testified by the countless statements routinely heard to the effect that translators *say it all*, word for word, whereas conference interpreters get the “real” message across (if possible in a polished, TL-idiomatic version). Diriker (2004: 32 ff.) shows how in the discourse on interpreting condensation and “macro-processing” coexist side by side with ambitious claims to true “fidelity”; this is taken to distinguish interpreting from a received idea of written translation as a word-for-word exercise. This could be dismissed as a hasty but innocuous generalization were it not for the fact that it may have been instrumental in sustaining a status and prestige gap between the different language professions. One often finds, among language professionals, evaluative discourse that attributes different norms to different settings, even within the limited field of oral translation. The “getting the message” vs. “word-for-word” argument, for example, has been invoked in discourse by opposite camps: to underscore the interpreter’s sovereign intellectual command of the ST and its cultural implications as opposed to the translator’s purported literalness (again, see Diriker 2004 for quotes from professionals and organizations employing interpreters), but also to suggest an entirely different hierarchy, as is illustrated by the introduction to a standard work on court interpreting:

Court interpreters must conserve the tone of the language, the timbre of the vocabulary with a fidelity that distinguishes the *truly great literary translations*; conference interpreting is first draft translating, Court interpreting is polished translation (Gonzales *et al.* 1991: 27, my emphasis).

In an interesting search for intellectual legitimacy, we see here leading scholars marking a milestone in the academic and institutional consolidation of their field by linking it to one of the most prestigious types of language work in Western tradition, literary translation, with a discourse of, predictably, fidelity and truth.

To understand how statements like the one above are best read as instrumental to socio-professional needs, it is perhaps worth contrasting them with the landscape of norms on the field. In a study on court interpreting in Italy (Siviero 2003), normative statements were elicited in interviews with interpreters working in courts in Trieste and Rome. Some of them, mostly self-taught native speakers from immigrant communities, practising ad-hoc and with low professional status, did in fact play down their role and responsibility in the proceedings by denying precisely the operational norm of completeness (akin to what Gonzalez *et al.* would call “conservation”). Rather, they reported that their

task was simply to ‘get the gist across’, and in *plain* language for that matter, since they mostly interpreted for uneducated defendants. In a previous study, interpreters with higher levels of education and permanent status within the court in an officially bilingual region reported norms that they perceived as more demanding, for example in terms of completeness, fidelity, and role delimitation (cf. Roncalli 2001). A difference in actual behaviour was also found: interpreters surveyed in the former study often extended their role into various forms of interaction with and advocacy for defendants – without other participants objecting, for that matter. In the latter study this was not the case, although the comparison is made less relevant by the fact that the role of interpreters there was much more limited, as almost all other participants were bilingual too.

This difference in reported norms between the standard discourse on court interpreting in the USA and the one produced by some practitioners in Italy may well be explained, at least partly, by the different levels of professionalization achieved by court interpreters in the two countries; an explanation may also lie in the different legal systems: Italian proceedings are still largely paper-based rather than relying on interaction as in an adversarial system. However, the difference may also hint at a discrepancy in the discourse on norms between the grassroots and the more established segments of the profession.

Contextualized studies of conference interpreting also show a discrepancy between (assumed) norm and practice. Among the scholars in interpreting more aware of methodological issues, Pöchhacker has consistently used concepts from TS, in particular from the functionalist approaches of Vermeer and Holz-Mänttari (cf. 1994, 1995). Some features of his corpus of interpreted speech, such as the choice of forms of address, were easily accounted for in terms of an initial norm prescribing “adaptation to target cultural conventions” in professional conference interpreting (1995: 47-49). Moving from this assumption, Pöchhacker then noted that interpreters may fail to adapt instances of culture-bound communication – such as humour – to target cultural conventions, since this would involve segmenting the source text in larger units, which is at odds with the constraints of time and linearity typical of simultaneous interpreting. Interpreters would then be left in the ironic situation of being inherently unable to comply with the very initial norm they set themselves.

Pöchhacker’s solution to this paradox lay in suggesting that “cultural transfer” would not be a relevant norm in settings marked by a shared, supra-national socio-professional culture. As a corollary, Pöchhacker doubted that *Skopos*-theoretical concepts were fully applicable to interpreting. Elsewhere I suggested – although at that time not on the basis of the notion of norms, cf. Marzocchi 1998 – that a solution could also lie in pointing at possible

alternatives to adaptation to the target culture, namely at *documentary translation* as a viable initial norm for interpreting, at least in some settings. In other words, I was arguing for more caution in assuming that a fully *instrumental* initial norm is viable for conference interpreting, although it may appear frequently in professional discourse.⁴

The distinction between instrumental and documentary translation was put forward by Nord and is well known in Translation Studies (obviously, it also partly overlaps with dichotomies such as *covert/overt*, *dynamic/formal*, *domesticating/foreignizing*):

We find two basic types of translation processes. The first aims at producing in the target language a kind of *document* of (certain aspects of) a communicative interaction in which a source-culture sender communicates with a source-culture audience via the source text under source-culture conditions. The second aims at producing in the target language an *instrument* for a new communicative interaction between the source-culture sender and a target-culture audience, using (certain aspects of) the source text as a model (Nord 1997: 50).

In a documentary strategy, SI would then no longer attempt to mask features of the original speech such as idioms, humour, intertextual reference, perhaps even forms of address by *replacing* them with supposed cultural equivalents but would resort to a visible intervention by the interpreter to mediate them.⁵

A further reason to refrain from assuming a single initial norm lies in the fact that, as already suggested by Shlesinger (1989), the interpreting setting is best construed as a system in order to study norms. But if this is the case, a broad socio-professional label like ‘conference interpreting’ can hardly be construed

4 Individual aspects of interpreting behaviour in a given setting may very well respond to a norm prescribing instrumental translation: in an interesting study that deserves a more thorough discussion, Turrini (2004) analyzed the way interpreters handle set and creative metaphors in a corpus of SI at a plenary session of the European Parliament. Turrini found a trend towards translating set metaphors non-literally, i.e. with idiomatic equivalents. It would be interesting, however, to check whether *realia*, idioms, forms of address and humour are also translated in a TL-oriented, idiomatic way or whether they sometimes lead to a non-functional output as in Pöchhacker’s corpus. As Turrini rightly recalls, the EP plenary is a *sui generis* setting in view of the notorious speed of delivery, planned speeches and unshared knowledge; however, I wonder if these very features do not make it a suitable setting for research into norms, as cognitive constraints can be taken to be at their relative peak for *all* interpreters involved.

5 I have developed this argument with reference to the treatment of idioms in a more didactic paper to appear in the online *Translation Journal* (Marzocchi forthcoming b).

as single system, to which one could associate a single, default initial norm. This is obvious if one thinks of how this label actually covers (covers up, to a point) a wide variety of settings, ranging from the one-off conference serviced by highly mobile free-lance interpreters, to national or international organizations where staff interpreters serve for a whole career in a known range of meetings and for well-known customers, to settings that are in fact court proceedings, albeit at international level. The fact that the range of settings designated by ‘conference interpreting’ cannot be construed as a single system does not mean that some elements have no systemic, potentially normative effects across the range of settings: training institutions and professional associations come to mind as an example. But pretending that it is possible to formulate norms at the level of “conference interpreting” as a whole, and only at that level, means neglecting all the elements of each specific setting (institutional status and goal, membership, specific language policy a.o.) that enter, within the boundaries of the setting, into a systemic relationship with interpreting. The example discussed in the next section shows that it is at this level, and not at the level of a generic notion of “interpreting”, that norms emerge.

4. Norms, institutions and ethics

Both Gile and Shlesinger seem to take up the norms issue for its methodological potential, but somehow still as a by-product of studies focusing on cognitive aspects. This is of course in line with the researchers’ background and interests, and is reflected in the fact that both authors organize most of their examples of norms operating in interpreting around the quantitative metaphors of *addition*, *omission*, *condensation*, *completeness*, *leaving out* etc.⁶ My impression, however, is that the real potential of “norms” as a conceptual tool does not lie exclusively in the fact that it allows us to tune cognitive paradigms more finely, leading to “better calibrated metrics” in Gile’s terms. A wider significance of the notion of norms lies in the fact that it evokes the issue of *ethics*. I use the term still rather tentatively to designate both the body of codes of ethics, but also, more generally, any discourse relating translatorial choices to socially shared *values*.

To build this argument, one has to develop an insight that emerged in Shlesinger’s 1999 contribution and, perhaps only implicitly so, in Gile’s 1998

6 This is only partly the case for Gile, who lists a series of statements that he sees as candidate to norm-status in interpreting. One of these statements, “maximizing the communication impact of the speech” (1998: 99), can be read as a TT-oriented initial norm.

paper. From her review of normative statements in the literature on interpreting in court and community settings, Shlesinger rightly observes that norms potentially collide, especially in institutional settings. Shlesinger sees

a potential conflict between two sets of norms: expectancy norms implicitly or explicitly projected by the court, and performance norms based on the interpreter's own perceptions of her role and of what she ought to do to fulfil it (1999: 66).

The realization of the potential conflict of norms brings in another key actor, although only mentioned in passing in Shlesinger's paper: *institutions* and the way they shape the norms interpreters are supposed to abide by.

Again, court interpreting provides interesting examples: with the development of court interpreting in the US an explicit translational norm – the *verbatim requirement*, in fact a very strict initial and operational norm in Toury's terms – was inserted into many of the codes of ethics adopted by courts and professional bodies (cf. Gonzales *et al.* 1991, Mikkelsen 1996). The verbatim norm prescribes a very ST-oriented translation, including, as was mentioned above, the conservation (that is, the reproduction in the TT) of paralinguistic features, pauses, hedges, hesitations and the like. Its controversial adoption by the profession has accompanied a gain in status and the growing professionalization of the sector. At the same time, by framing interpreting within the usual conduit metaphor, the verbatim requirement seems to safeguard the different roles in the courtroom, protecting other actors from a potentially intrusive role of the interpreter as a would-be mediator or cross-cultural consultant.

An initial norm comparable to the verbatim requirement is prescribed by the Code of Ethics for Interpreters and Translators adopted in 1999 by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, a body whose staff comprises both interpreters coming from the mainstream "conference" circuit in Europe and ad-hoc interpreters of a more "community" profile. The content of the Code ranges from fairly simple prescriptions on courtesy and timeliness, professional integrity and development, role delimitation vis-à-vis legal counsel to, on the other hand, a more sophisticated attempt to enforce complete conservation of all linguistic and paralinguistic features of the ST. The rule stems from a reference to "truth and completeness" in the crucial article 10 (note the reference to the *wording*); at the same time the Code seems to provide for some latitude and visibility for interpreters: paralinguistic clues are deemed relevant if they "facilitate the understanding", and rectifying own errors as well as asking for clarifications are explicitly prescribed practices:

1. (a) Interpreters and translators shall convey with the greatest fidelity and accuracy, and with complete neutrality, the wording used by the persons they interpret or translate.
1. (b) Interpreters shall convey the whole message, including vulgar or derogatory remarks, insults and any non-verbal clue, such as the tone of voice and emotions of the speaker, which might facilitate the understanding of their listeners.
[...]
2. (a) Interpreters and translators shall acknowledge and rectify promptly any mistake in their interpretation or translation.
2. (b) If anything is unclear, interpreters and translators shall ask for repetition, rephrasing or explanation [my emphasis throughout].

The case of the verbatim requirement is a powerful illustration of how norms and ethics can interact. In the first place, it shows how ethical discourses in different settings go into varying degrees of detail in prescribing translational norms, be they initial or operational; indeed, the Tribunal establishes a clear link between the judicial setting and ethical discourse, when in the second recital it “considers that being subject to a Code of Ethics is an integral attribute of being an interpreter and translator employed in a judicial environment”. By contrast, the conference interpreting profession in Europe does not seem to have felt the need to spell out any initial norm in its code of ethics, apart from the generic appeal to faithfulness and professionalism (see Diriker 2004: 29-30 for a brief analysis of the AIIC code). Historians of the profession may wish to account for the different development.⁷ Secondly, the case of the verbatim requirement illustrates how the conflict between initial norms takes place at the level of ethics. The criticism of the verbatim requirement came out of value-based stances, pertaining to what kind of interpreting and how visible an interpreter role and status is better suited to serve the rights of the defendant or of whole ethnic communities, or even out of a more abstract idea of *fair trial* and *justice*.⁸

7 My own very idiosyncratic explanation, partially confirmed by the material analyzed by Falbo (2004), is that early scholarly writings on conference interpreting in Europe, written by recognized professionals and providing plenty of practical advice, did in fact replace an explicit translation norm in ethical discourse; they have since shaped the the self-perception of conference interpreters in Europe in much in the same way as explicit codes of ethics have done for court interpreting and other non-conference settings in the United States and elsewhere. Of course this is an interpretive hypothesis that cannot be retrospectively falsified.

8 Similarly, in the discussion of translation within the European Institutions one finds the same narrative of conflicting norms (roughly literalist vs. functional) over-

A further, anecdotal, illustration of how the discussion on norms almost automatically implies a discussion of ethical stances can be found in the following excerpts from an article by a professional in a semi-scholarly journal; here, the comments on a colleague's conduct very quickly turn from an expert register ("inaccurate", "key term", "comparison") to a discourse of values, rights and indeed sins ("entitlement", "dirty lie"). Note that the controversy apparently starts with an issue of completeness (the colleague had omitted some embarrassing remarks, i.e. he had violated a norm prescribing completeness in sensitive settings) but then the ethical dimension prevails, to the extent that one section of the article carries the heading "Trust":

On a fine day in Windhoek, Namibia, the President ad-libbed a few remarks, as is his wont. At a certain point the interpreter stopped translating, looked at the President, and interrupted: "Presidente, não estou entendendo", a remark that can be construed both as *Mr. President, I cannot understand what you say* or *Mr. President, I cannot understand why you are saying this*. [...] The President must have heard his interpreter, since he repeated the phrase and added a second phrase, so as to build a comparison. The interpreter then provided what would usually be considered an inaccurate rendering of the first part of the comparison and omitted what would generally be considered a key term from the second. [...] Now, why isn't the wilful deletion of a couple words from a presidential speech considered *a lie* [...]? *A lie is a lie*, of course, and although there may be cases where a *lie is ethically justified*, such as when a life is in danger, we should be really careful with exceptions. [...] I am sure the audience wants to know what the President of Brazil said, not what his interpreter thought he ought to have said instead. I would go farther than that: the audience is *entitled* to know what the President said (Nogueira 2004, my emphasis).

It is also worth noting that Nogueira's account is sophisticated enough to reconcile a completeness norm, named here an "exact translation", with the ethical stance that he concedes as a possible line of conduct for the interpreter, i.e. to "try and prevent fights". The reconciliation is possible by stretching the interpreter's role into that of a neutral but visible intercultural consultant who is the principal of some communicative acts ("letting the parties understand"), as appears from the following excerpt (note also that the discourse is about participants having rights: "I am *entitled*"):

[colleagues] told stories of how an interpreter prevented a fight by omitting insulting statements from the translation. Great. But, first, if

arched, for example in Wagner *et al.* 2002, by a value-based discourse on the function of institutional communication with citizens (cf. also Marzocchi 2004).

someone calls me an &#\$@!!! to my face in a foreign language I believe I'm entitled to know what he said and, second, the purpose of avoiding a fight might have been equally well served by *providing an exact translation* and *letting the parties understand* that the other guy was mad as hell and meant business, too (Nogueira 2004, my emphasis).

5. Three reasons to step up research on norms in interpreting

Up to now I have argued, with the help of a few illustrations from scholarly and professional discourse, that norms are not only a complement to cognitive paradigms, that norms have to do with institutions, and that they also have to do with ethics, i.e. with the values presiding over translation. There are three further reasons why I insist on advocating a fuller use of the notion of norms (we might as well call for a “thicker” notion) in research on institutional and social aspects of interpreting.

Firstly, if we look for an ethical construct⁹ that can inform interpreting behaviour across the range of modes and settings, the lack of an explicit translational norm in ethical discourse is a missing link, a grey area in the way the conference interpreting profession depicts itself. Investigating ethical discourses that include an explicit initial norm as developed in other fields of interpreting can help the profession fill this gap – court interpreting, but also Sign Language interpreting are obvious candidates for this exercise. Ultimately, I would like to see norms emerge from the way the profession perceives the communicative needs of a given setting, rather than being dictated by purely institutional needs – as was probably the case with the verbatim requirement in US court interpreting – or simply taken for granted with a vague reference to fidelity, as is the case today in conference interpreting.

Let me exemplify what I mean by the latter: elsewhere (Marzocchi forthcoming a) I have suggested that the defining feature of the EU institutions as a setting for language work is the complex configuration of languages in contact that prevails in the daily life of the institutions, despite official discourse focusing on isolated languages and identities. I have argued that relevant translational norms should be inspired by this feature, and that interpreting in such a setting cannot possibly be based upon the assumption that languages and cultures are isolated and that official language and mother tongue coincide. In other words, an initial norm should be elaborated that builds on and acknowledges the highly stratified language repertoire skilfully exploited by (some) speakers in that setting, as was documented in another thesis at Trieste

⁹ In fact, this has been my own (re)search as a professional prior to any scholarly endeavour.

(cf. Aquino 2001) on a corpus of speeches from the European Parliament plenary.

Secondly, a fresh normative elaboration by the profession could overcome some paradoxes between interpreter behaviour and norms governing language work in the same institutional setting, which I see particularly in the treatment of idioms and *realia*. Another anecdote can illustrate this point: European Court of Justice, spring 2004, novice colleagues from Poland are practising in the dummy booth. Suddenly one of the parties in the hearing uses the English expression “the proof of the pudding is in the eating”. The Polish colleague, who later reported thinking “we don’t say that in Polish” and “I cannot possibly talk about puddings in Polish”, renders the idiomatic expression in plain language, neutralizing the idiom. Later on another participant refers to what the previous speaker has said, takes up the “pudding” image again and in a perfect instance of intertextual reference develops it, half-jokingly, for a couple of sentences. The other colleague on the microphone at the moment cannot refer back to anything similar to puddings in the previous output of her booth mate. In normative terms, and excluding for the moment cognitive constraints,¹⁰ the first colleague seems to have been trying to adhere to a ‘full cultural transfer’ norm prescribing idiomaticity and proscribing a hybrid TT. For some reason she could not come up with a more literal or mediated solution, that would have provided material for intertextual reference in the TT (for example framing it as in: “as they say in English, the proof of the pudding...”).

The anecdote is particularly telling since it involved trainee interpreters, who are arguably more prone to norm-compliant behaviour. This contrasts sharply with an institutional setting that frequently resorts to literalist solutions leading to a strikingly hybrid TT, especially as regards the written translation of a specific type of *realia*, i.e. names of institutional bodies in legal texts. The striking juxtaposition of languages begins already on the cover pages of case documents, where a uniform layout tells us what the original language was as well as the official denominations of the parties and of the referring jurisdiction in their respective languages. The body of the translations illustrates the practice of keeping institutional names in the original language, possibly adding an explanation in brackets, even when the translation between cognate languages could allow for a calque; this is now an explicit norm of written translation at the ECJ and is visible in all case documents available to interpreters. One wonders, then, how powerful the idiomaticity norm must be to prevent my trainee colleagues from producing even a slightly hybrid output, for example

10 The comments made by the colleague afterwards led me to explain the anecdote with a deliberate choice of idiomaticity of the TT rather than of lack of processing resources to come up with equivalents for, say, the lexical item “pudding” (cf. also Marzocchi forthcoming b).

importing what is after all a fairly transparent idiom; and this in a setting where they are surrounded by an extremely visible translation practice (considering the pile of documents that ECJ interpreters are supposed to go through to prepare for the hearing) that displays its hybrid features on every page of the documents.

Anecdotes like this one also reinforce the doubts on cultural adaptation as a viable norm for interpreting, especially in settings where language contact is so obvious and interaction so structured that intertextual reference is the rule rather than the exception. To tackle this issue, research should not be limited to operational norms (e.g. Shlesinger's "condensation" norm) and should venture into the ethically mined field of initial norms, that imply a basic option as to what translators and interpreters are there for in a given setting.

A final reason why research into norms and interpreting should be linked to ethical discourse has to do with an overtly personal and possibly misplaced dissatisfaction with the following: we 'inherited' the notion of norms from DTS scholars who had used it, not without some intellectual daring, to legitimize variability in translatorial behaviour as the object of study in TS; in the study of interpreting, however, I see the risk of it being applied in an innocuous version that does not challenge the core of our received wisdom. This was already partly the case in Harris' (1990) reply to Shlesinger. Harris first listed several examples of variability in interpreter behaviour as evidence for the operation of different norms in different settings; yet he then made his case irrelevant with a final statement to the effect that "under all circumstances" all interpreters are assumed to serve as an "honest spokesperson", and convey the "ideas and manner of the speaker" as accurately as possible.

There is some merit in an ethics centred around the notion of "honesty", in a move not unlike Nord's proposal of "loyalty" as an overarching principle that informs translatorial behaviour within her functional approach (Nord 1997, ch. 8); at least, this would be in line with the traditional discourse based on the virtue of the *fidus interpres*. However, the problem with such a statement is that a single explicit accuracy criterion – an initial norm – cannot automatically be derived from the qualification as a "honest spokesperson"; and this is precisely because of the operation of socially and historically determined norms; in other words, the same bona fide honest spokesperson will perform in (slightly?) different ways in different settings. Denying this, and subsuming all forms and settings of interpreting under the umbrella of an undefined notion of fidelity "to the ideas and manners" of the speaker, means adopting the notion of norms only superficially. It amounts to neglecting the main lesson that can be derived from its application, precisely a lesson in *undefining*.

The same could be said of a more recent contribution by Garzone (2002), that deserves a closer look. The author reviews the debate on quality in simultaneous interpreting and traces the move from early, error-based notions of

quality to more recent, context-aware approaches that raise the issue of how to model all relevant variables; she puts forward the notion of norms as the principle

located at a sufficiently high level of generalization to explain the rationale underlying the interpreter's behaviour and choices, thus providing a basis for understanding the intrinsic quality of a given SI performance as well as the user's quality expectations (Garzone 2002: 110-111).

Garzone then identifies case- and corpus studies on interpreted speech, together with the analysis of discourse on interpreting, as the source of evidence for norms. She illustrates the socio-cultural specificity and the instability of preliminary norms by reference to the norm favouring interpretation into the mother tongue (specific to Western international organizations and increasingly challenged with, for example, the successive enlargements of the EU). Her discussion of operational norms focuses on the issue of completeness. In slight contradiction to Shlesinger (1999), Garzone states that

One of the basic norms shared by the interpreting community is that the interpreter should give a complete rendition of the ST, which in theory would rule out omissions (Garzone 2002: 114).

Departures from this norm, which are widely documented in literature, are then seen as "repair and emergency strategies which contribute to assuring the quality of the final product" (2002: 115). A section is then dedicated to the "variability of norms and quality criteria across cultures, space and time": quality, both from the interpreter's and the user's perspective, is redefined in terms of the negotiation between ideal norm and repair strategies (the latter made necessary, according to Garzone, by the fact that "most of the time" interpreters work in an "emergency situation", 2002: 117).¹¹

Although one cannot but agree with Garzone's reasoning on quality and possibly with its didactic implications, something is missing in her discussion. Garzone does not mention Toury's category of initial norms (1995: 56), those governing a broad orientation towards the source or the target system, i.e. orienting a translator's decision in solving the tension between adequacy and acceptability. I would argue that initial norms are highly relevant, as they are the ones more closely related to ethical discourse on translation.

The reason for this omission may be linked to the end of her paper. The conclusion reached by Garzone is that user surveys on quality criteria are prone to ideological distortion, because of the gap between the ideal norm and the repair strategies that users too are willing to deploy to maintain communication.

11 Perhaps an overestimation of objectively difficult working conditions.

A consequence of this is that “quality assurance rests exclusively on interpreters”, as the only “guarantors of the intrinsic quality and fidelity of the TT to the ST”; at the same time they have to make sure the finished product is “sufficiently fluent, plausible and coherent” not to lose the user’s confidence. However this “formal” criterion should not be used as a substitute for “*real* fidelity to the ST” (all quotes from 2002: 118, emphasis in the original). In my reading, Garzone thus places the ultimate responsibility back on the interpreter, so it is only to be expected that her paper should end with a discussion of ethics. However, in a slightly inconsistent ending, the author insists on a conceptual distinction between ethics and deontology that effectively *defuses* the potential for variability inherent in a norm-based approach, just as happened in the end of Harris’s paper. Deontology is taken to refer to the professional commitment to provide the best possible product; ethics would then refer to the moral orientation informing the choices made by an “upright person” outside the professional sphere but possibly “interfering” with deontology. The distinction is then developed by stating that the “formal acceptability” of the TT would be prescribed by professional deontology, whereas a properly ethical stance would also prescribe “fidelity to the letter and spirit” of the ST (2002: 119).

Garzone’s goal in upholding this distinction may well be to put a conceptual emergency brake against the relativistic drift hidden in a socially determined notion of quality; if this is the case, the goal is certainly worth sharing. Yet I doubt that it can be reached through the idea of an *intrinsic* quality of interpreting across the whole range of settings, framed in terms of an unspecified *fidelity to the letter and the spirit* of the ST, reminiscent, among other things, of Harris’s “honest spokesperson”. This would mean precisely that the descriptive scholar would nevertheless approach interpreting with a *built-in* norm, thereby wasting the whole intellectual effort invested in the move to a descriptive, norm-based approach in the first place.

Awareness of norms could also inform the selection of hypotheses and the way they are formulated in our own scientific rhetoric. This can be illustrated by reference to an interesting corpus-based study by Van Besien and Meuleman (2004), where they look at the way two simultaneous interpreters handle repaired and unrepaired speech errors by the speaker in a corpus of Dutch into English interpreting. Confirming their main hypothesis, their finding is that “in more than 4 out of 5 cases interpreters correct speakers’ unrepaired errors and translate speakers’ repairs without translating the original utterance”, which is in line with experience and teaching practice in conference interpreting (but would go against apparent norms in some court settings, as we have seen). Whereas I by no means question the relevance or plausibility of the result, there may be something slightly circular in the evaluative discourse in which they frame it: the hypothesis that interpreters, being listener/client-centred, “will always try to

produce a correct and unambiguous message”, i.e. they will not reproduce speech errors, is related at the outset to a distinction between “good” and “not-so-good” interpreters (2004: 65). Instances where the interpreters, seemingly without much effort, only translated the repaired utterance are repeatedly labelled as “successful translation” (2004: 77). More awareness of different norms would probably have led the authors to frame their finding, in itself a relevant one, in more detached terms.

The point in approaching interpreting as norm-governed behaviour, in conclusion, is to acknowledge and account for the fact that “fidelity to the letter and the spirit”, or the difference between good and not-so-good, means different things in different settings (again, perhaps only *slightly* different things). While the interpreting profession developed in different settings in society, the translation-normative discourse that accompanied it has intertwined with ethical issues to such an extent that there is not much methodological point in adopting the concept of norms without accepting the undefining potential, the awareness of variability, and ultimately the risk of relativism that it carries with it from TS.¹² This variability extends all the way up to the choice of initial norms and to the ethical, value-based definition of the interpreter’s role in each specific setting. Excluding from the scope of socially- and historically determined norms an undetermined essential *quid*, that should characterize all interpreting under all circumstances (Harris’ “honest spokesperson”, Garzone’s ethics of “fidelity to the letter and the spirit”) implies making the notion of norms a blunt conceptual tool, without much “added value”, i.e. additional explanatory power, compared to less abstract and more process-oriented notions such as *techniques* and *strategies*.

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12 A different story is of course how to tackle relativism in an academic field that needs to be at least as normative as to teach students know-how. The conceptual solution may well lie, rather than in an undefined essence of translation, in shared values that are defined outside and above translation (conflicting examples that come to mind: “intercultural understanding”, “language purity”, “experiencing the other”, “low translation costs”, “minimal effort” and many more).

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