

Interpreting in business settings: dynamics and patterns at play

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the main features of interaction in business settings based on the experience of the author, who dealt with this kind of work first as a free lance interpreter and then as a junior manager for a decade, and was thus able to see the dynamics of this type of social interaction at play first as an external consultant and then as an employee. Understanding the virtual rules on which a specific type of interaction is based enables to know what to expect and this is precisely what junior interpreters need to know, in that:

Knowledge of the negotiating styles adopted by different cultural groups is of paramount importance for successful interpreting. The interpreter must be familiar with these styles, which largely emerge through a combination of behaviors and only some of which are linguistic. (Gentile 1996: 119-120)

1. A QUITE SPECIFIC SETTING – IS IT NOT?

Liaison interpreting is a specific type of interpreting in which renditions are delivered both in interpreters' mother tongue and in their second (or third) language during interactions that generally concern a small group of people. The settings in which liaison interpreters operate can vary considerably and thus

require different terminology and background knowledge. Free-lancing certainly calls for flexibility, but there is no room for improvising.

In fact, it is no easy task to interpret in business settings. Interpreters are outsiders and yet they must quickly become aware of the code of conduct their clients share and adjust to it. Hierarchical relations, attitudes and standards must be quickly detected. Each company is a specific, separate entity but most companies share approaches and attitudes and although economics does not describe them, liaison interpreters have to become familiar with the way a company works in terms of inherent relations. Being basically consultants, liaison interpreters will not be familiar with the virtual rules that employees acquire naturally over the years, so they have to be extremely tactful lest they tread on somebody's toes without knowing.

That is why it is worth pointing out some of the most important features of this kind of setting. First of all, it is important to make a distinction between a) liaison interpreting within a company and b) liaison interpreting in business negotiations.

Interpreting for people that belong to the same company or group but who have a different mother tongue means working in an environment where people share know-how, terminology and a common company culture. They all know their products, common goals and problems very well and will use a very specific terminology in both languages. Meetings tend to be extremely lively because there is a high degree of intimacy between participants, who work together on a steady basis and the setting does not generally call for formality,¹ unless top managers are present. This category includes meetings in multinational companies after a take-over, a start-up or a merger where two cultures have to come together. In these cases, the mother company sends some chief executives over to supervise the process and there arises the need for them to have interpreters by their side. Companies prefer to hire consultants rather than employing people at a time of transition: interpreters are needed only until ex-patriots are replaced by locals.

The relationship between an ex-patriot and his personal interpreter resembles the relationship between a CEO and his Personal Assistant: being in a foreign country and unaware of cultural attitudes, habits and norms, an ex-patriot will need someone he can trust completely, someone he can ask even delicate questions without being judged or misunderstood and someone who can represent him when he needs to pass on guidelines and has no time to do it himself. In a word: a filter between himself and reality – almost an air-bag.

Interpreters who work for a company on a steady basis are perceived as part of the staff, which takes off some of the pressure generated by facing new envi-

1 On the contrary, sometimes interpreters will have to wear overalls and helmets and do their job on the production plant. Once the author worked for a company during an internal audit and went to work in a nice dress early in the morning. The secretary that welcomed her said, "I guess you will have to get changed" and in fact handed over overalls and the safety equipment that she needed to work on the plant. Obviously, the information she was given on the meeting was not accurate enough and the briefing consisted only in that one sentence.

ronments all the time. The big drawback in this case is that the amount of stress interpreters undergo is quite intense because the job does not last one day and so the multiple implications of meetings and events have to be followed up on.

On the contrary, liaison interpreting in business negotiation is similar to consecutive interpreting: the setting is formal and the communication flow is rather smooth. The previously outlined chaotic setting could not be further away. Each party thinks twice before phrasing their utterance. Because of the importance of these meetings, there will generally be a proper briefing at the outset: the interpreters' role becomes crucial if communication is to be effective. Sometimes after meetings clients ask interpreters if anything was said between the lines or off-the-record.² Professional ethics calls for neutrality.

2. INTERACTING PATTERNS AND LANGUAGE USE

The moves of conversation are produced primarily through talk.
Participants are not merely *saying* something to each other when they talk.
They are *doing* something at the same time:
directing communicative or social actions at one another.
(Nofsinger 1991: 7).

The business world is mainly a man's world where people wear a poker face. They have specific goals for which they are meeting and different tactics they use to achieve what they want.

All of this reflects in the way people talk. Being outsiders, liaison interpreters will be able to see Austin's illocutionary acts at work, namely what speakers *intend* to do with their utterances (Vanderveken & Kubo 2002: 3) and the dynamics of the interaction as it unfolds. Detachment from what goes on is a basic point. It enables interpreters to act in the most neutral way and work at their best.

Language use in meetings and negotiations reflects the nature of the people who meet and the tension they feel or dissimulate. In internal business meetings, turn-taking is not clear-cut: overlapping conversations are rather common. On the contrary, negotiations normally call for a more disciplined interaction because both parties try to court each other in order to achieve their goals and therefore use language carefully. But what should interpreters do when people overlap in speaking, do not wait for them to have delivered the message before moving on or bypass them entirely by addressing the other party in the foreign language – and why does this all happen?

Obviously, liaison interpreters have to assert their role kindly but firmly because their turns have to be respected for communication to work, as Gentile

2 Once the author interpreted in a negotiation where the potential buyers were German and spoke German with each other during the meeting, but chose to use English as the *lingua franca*. At the end of the meeting she was asked what the Germans said to each other, which she described as "nothing to write home about".

(1996: 36) correctly points out when he writes that interpreters must “ensure that the interlocutors speak in turn”. Yet, sometimes this is easier said than done, for reality is just far more complex than theory. People may well underestimate the need for everybody to understand what is going on when they are able to understand some of what is being said or when they intentionally take the floor if they feel strongly about something. At a psychological level, when they address the other parties in a foreign language without communicating through the interpreter, they are actually saying “I am closer to you because I can speak your language” and by doing so they are literally excluding some colleagues, thus gaining a temporary advantage over them.³ The others, in their turn, will be staring and expecting to be filled in on missing information. When this happens, interpreters have to take on the role of “recapitulators”, for, after all, “in dialogue interpreting, the translating and coordinating aspects are *simultaneously present*” (Wadensjö 1998: 105).

Recapitulation can be introduced by a statement like “I am not sure everybody could catch that – what was actually said is that...”. Being the only ones who catch all the nuances of what is being said, interpreters have a unique position from which they can and should exercise a certain control over the interaction.

A very important ice-breaker for meetings is humor, which creates common ground and can help overcome tension, misunderstandings and any standstills. In fact, “humor seems to be the next most socially acceptable form of communication in our society after bona-fide communication” (Raskin 1985: 104).

In this case, the problem is that some jokes may not sound as funny as they seem to those who tell them, but the audience will understand that it is supposed to laugh. At times, ironic remarks will be used to challenge a counterpart or to respond to some statement that was not appreciated. Ironically enough, this can be the case with colleagues who work for a multinational company and are compelled to fight a duel in a foreign language before their bosses. In this kind of setting, meetings become opportunities to bring up issues lurking in the background, challenge decisions or simply look smart in spite of the specific reason why the meeting was called. Irony and humor serve these purposes extremely well because you do not challenge your boss openly and strongly

3 During a rather tense meeting between the top managers of an American multinational company located in Italy and their American Chief Finance Officer, some of the Italian managers started to speak English, thereby bypassing the author and because of their excitement and rising voices it was not possible to stop that escalation. She turned round and gave the executive a puzzled look at which he said, “Just let them – you take a break”. It was actually their boss who asked them to quieten down and go back to normal. This is what can happen when you are breaking bad news to an audience and in this case it is the duty of the original players to take action.

unless you are prepared to face consequences. After all, the boss is always right.⁴ Besides,

Frankness and explicitness are a lot riskier, in the sense that one may cross the boundaries of tact and appropriateness (as understood by others), and as a consequence lose self-respect and hurt interlocutors' feelings. (Wadensjö 1998: 177)

Communication is a constantly evolving interaction – although you may have goals and strategies at the back of your mind when you start out, being a natural form of interaction its outcome is determined by the moves conversation takes – and sometimes it can be rather surprising.

[...] in a conversation involving three or more persons, sense is arguably made also on the basis of the *participation framework*, continuously negotiated in and by talk, in other words, on the basis of how interlocutors position themselves in relation to each other. (Wadensjö 1998: 153)

Therefore, the nature, openness, wish for clarity or ambiguity of speakers along with their use of face-saving devices determine the way conversation evolves. In meetings people know precisely how far they can go in promising something to their counterparts because, depending on their role, they set or are given precise guidelines. Yet, they do not know what cards their counterparts are going to play until they actually do, so they have to prepare for the worst scenario and hope for the best. This does resemble a game of poker in many ways and sometimes there are millions of dollars (and jobs) at stake.

Besides the interacting patterns at play during meetings that were outlined above, there are some aspects of language use which are rather interesting. One of them is the use of bad language, which can be a tricky aspect for interpreters. Participants will tend to know swearwords, which seem to be well known across cultures. However, interpreters are faced with the problem of how to transfer outbursts of anger, which are not so rare. Once the author actually witnessed a very bad argument between a few Italian top managers during a strategic meeting with the European CEO of their company. She was interpreting but stopped and explained to the CEO that those managers were insulting each other and he said, "Oh, I can see that – and don't wanna know what they are saying. It is bad enough as it is". Unless it is crucial to the meeting, or explicitly required, there is no reason why bad language should be translated; obviously, in these cases interpreters need to make a clear distinction between themselves

4 The more people are afraid of going against their bosses' decisions, the more they will resort to humor to display a subtle disapproval that they can quickly take back in case their counterparts show they do not like it. They, in their turn, will have a choice: they can either answer through humor, thus dissolving the tension or switch to "serious" language and clearly state they have the upper hand. Some meetings resemble fencing. In those cases the goal is to undermine the credibility of the opposing party. In business, when you feel you do not fit in any more you have to move on, if you have a chance to do so. Before getting to that stage, you try hard to stand your ground.

and the utterance. As Wadensjö (1998:247) points out, interpreters can resort to “relaying by displaying” as opposed to “relaying by replaying”, in that they can

 speak with a minimal amount of expressiveness when the original speaker has been talking animatedly, aggressively, sarcastically, hesitantly and so forth. The interpreter’s minimal amount of expressiveness, or, if you like, strictness of style, is then one of the key ways in which he or she conveys an impression of him- or herself as a person using others’ words.

The amount of emotion people show is often the result of conventions. As Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997: 69) maintain,

 members of cultures which are affectively neutral do not telegraph their feelings but keep them carefully controlled and subdued. In contrast, in cultures high on affectivity people show their feelings plainly by laughing, smiling, grimacing, scowling and gesturing; they attempt to find immediate outlets for their feelings.

These authors also analyzed the extent to which exhibiting emotion in business is acceptable and inquired on how people would react if they felt upset about something at work. The percentage of those who would not show their emotions openly varied according to nationality: it was 33% for Italians, 43% for Americans and 44% for British – but it was 74% for Japanese. Although percentages may vary according to the way surveys are structured, British, North Americans and northern Europeans are generally considered less emotional than Latinos and “there is a tendency for those with norms of emotional neutrality to dismiss anger, delight or intensity in the workplace as ‘unprofessional’ ” (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997: 72).

Another interesting feature of the language used in meetings is idiolect, that is a personal use of language whereby some expressions are given a new connotation. People working with the managers in question will consider this normal because they are used to it, but those expressions will stand out to outsiders. Here are some examples of idiolects:

1. “lettera” meaning fax, e-mail or letter. This term was used by an Italian top manager in his sixties who disliked technology and thus considered every kind of written communication to counterparts as “lettera” as in the good old days.
2. “che cosa vuoi”. This expression was used by a German Managing Director to meet any kind of request of his staff. He could speak Italian at a very basic level, but learned this expression in order to assert himself and scare people off.
3. “Du Schande”. This expression was constantly used by a German lawyer to express disapproval, disappointment or irritation. The frequency with which he used it was far higher than the norm.
4. “moldare”, meant as an Italian form of ‘to mold’ or “performare” for ‘to perform’ – in short, calques. Words like these were part of the jargon used by an

Italian top manager who worked throughout the world and as a consequence often ended up resorting to calques.

3. BEYOND WORDS: BODY LANGUAGE AND EGO AT PLAY

Managers are either trained for or naturally endowed with the ability to disguise their thoughts and opinions, so there is quite a big difference between what they say and what they have in their minds. The iceberg model certainly applies here and if they are good they can read between the lines extremely well and avoid reacting to provocations or statements they do not like. Those who can keep their head and carry on are quite impressive. They probably can because they eradicate feelings and let their ego lead the interaction. It becomes a power struggle. If you are interpreting for a manager, you just do not ask him if he is tired or needs a break meaning to be kind, because he considers both options as a display of weakness. Of course he needs no break and no food – maybe an aspirin. When you work with this kind of people, your best option is to be strictly professional. There is no room for establishing common ground or trying to make them feel at ease. Of course they are always on top of things, so all you have to do is being effective.

Their body language will speak loud. It will display their self-confidence and subtly remind others of their role. Yet, even these people have their weak spots and those who interact with them try hard to find them. For instance, if a top manager that you are extremely afraid of really loves his siblings, you will ask him how they are doing. He will like it – and will tend to like you more.

Such an assertive attitude can be seen in people who run a company while interacting with their staff. In business negotiations, managers switch to the role of hosts and guests, so their assertiveness is disguised by kindness and even by subtle forms of courting such as flattery, that is to say the tendency to “say what others want to hear”. On the whole, in negotiations people are mainly using their charm to achieve their goals. Flattery can take various forms, for there are many nuances of it: when applied to men it takes on the shape of compliments for performance, achievements or skills rather than for looks.

In top-level meetings, managers are accompanied by their partners so that a more intimate setting and a bond⁵ between the people who are in business together is created – consider a company that distributes the products of a world producer of any kind of goods located on the other side of the world. When interpreters are admitted to this kind of meetings, they are basically coordinating communication because participants will have a basic knowledge

5 As Woody Allen correctly points out in one of his movies, “In business friendly but not familiar”. Yet, trust is a big issue when you are in business with someone else, especially when the companies are geographically far apart and thus less easy to control, so a mutual attempt is made to create a familiar background. It is probably a subconscious self-defensive mechanism to prevent disappointment: “if you know me, my family, my home, you will not let me down”.

of a *lingua franca* like English but they want to make sure someone else can step in to clarify ambiguous points or to replace them when they feel they are on a slippery slope.

4. SHARED KNOWLEDGE – WHO SHARES WHAT

Any serious meeting is preceded by a sound briefing on goals, intentions, participants and background knowledge. Because of the hectic way people live and work, this is rarely the case – except for negotiations, where this is understood to be a key element for the success of the meeting and for meetings with outsiders (like contractors). When you work for a company, most of the time you are just “thrown into” a meeting – this happens both to employees,⁶ to their dismay, and sometimes to interpreters.

As consultants, interpreters must do all they can to gather background information on the purpose of the meeting and any material that will be discussed or shown,⁷ but because of the lack of organization of many companies, this just does not happen, so the amount of stress is much greater, especially because interpreters feel responsible for the communication flow and there can be moments where they may feel they are not up to the situation. Imagine a meeting in which people use abbreviations or acronyms that are company-specific (consider a software or system like “SAP”) or mention the name of a supplier instead of the type of service provided (for example “Number one” for ‘distributors’). How can an outsider who was not given a briefing possibly know what people are referring to?

In fact it is not as bad as it sounds. All participants will be familiar with the concept and will understand the word that was used except for the interpreter, but at that point all s/he has to do is just use that acronym or name. The only misleading factor can be the pronunciation, which may not be accurate, as is often the case when Italians use English terms. Interpreters must also be fast in

6 This may well be seen as a lack of organization, but emergencies require for people to sit down together and do some brainstorming on what is happening. Generally, companies do have a problem with internal communication, so it is no surprise to find out that some of the people who are attending a meeting are not fully aware of what is actually going on. Information sharing is a big issue within companies. Your access to information tells you how powerful you are. In fact, “particularist groups seek gratification through relationships, especially relationships to the leader” (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997: 41). On the contrary, if some information is not disclosed to you it means that you are intentionally kept out of the game.

7 As Gentile (1996: 118) points out, “interpreters will find very different levels of readiness on the part of companies or agencies to adequately brief them [...] efforts by interpreters to obtain specific documentation prior to the meeting or discussion may receive very little response because of the confidential nature and commercial sensitivity of the information”. This is yet another problem, for even those companies that have documentation at hand will have to obtain permission to hand it over to the interpreter and there will be a general tendency to pass the decision-making over to someone who is higher up in the company’s hierarchy.

catching key words and ready to use them. Sometimes speakers will help because they realize that there is an information gap between employees and consultants. Information gaps should prompt interpreters to ask for clarifications without feeling that they are showing inadequacy. The problem would be solved if companies decided to invest on in-house interpreters, but this is rarely the case. One-off jobs are far more frequent.

5. EVALUATION AND RENDITIONS: FROM SPONTANEOUS SPEECH TO “NORMALIZATION”

In the light of the features of interaction described above, it is interesting to see their impact on liaison interpreters' performance. In the midst of the often somewhat chaotic context of meetings, liaison interpreters can see what was described above happen right before their eyes. Being aware of the complex interaction that occurs through words and beyond, they must keep a distance from what is happening and concentrate on their tasks. Liaison interpreters tend to feel extremely responsible for the effectiveness of the communication, although there are many factors at play that they cannot control. Most of them have nothing to do with language and yet this is the first and foremost level at which the evaluation of liaison interpreters takes place.

While interpreters are working, they tend to store information about their own performance at the back of their minds for later reviewing and self-evaluating. Yet, assessing the job of a liaison interpreter is a tricky task: it is no maths problem, for there are many possible renditions and there are just so many variables at play that only those who know the context very well (or were actually there) can evaluate the quality of the job. In fact, agencies normally ask their senior interpreters to give feedback on the performance of their junior colleagues.

Clients' evaluation obviously runs the show, but clients do not necessarily understand the key features and problems of liaison interpreting because they have not been trained for the job or cannot see that some conditions make it harder than need be (lack of briefing, interruptions, overlapping dialogues, long hours). They will examine interpreters' performances strictly at the surface level – that is language use.

As was stated earlier, it is the interpreters' job to make sure that some basic rules are respected, kindly but firmly.⁸ If need be, clients (or agencies) have to be

8 During a very important meeting of executives of a multinational company based in Italy, the American CEO started his speech while supporting his statements with a slide presentation that the author had not been given and turned his back to the audience for about 5 minutes before he actually stopped to turn around and look at them. He was literally talking to himself. At that point, the author stated that she would not do the job unless he would allow time for the translation. That assertiveness made him change his style at once and those who spoke after him were just perfect – and the author worked for that company many times afterwards.

told that something was far too peculiar or that the lack of briefing posed serious problems. Of course clients are kings, but it is important to establish proper business relations. What is the use of working under conditions that are just not acceptable – for example, having to work for far too many hours without a break?⁹

In sharp contrast with the generally chaotic settings in which they operate, or probably precisely because of that, liaison interpreters tend to deliver renditions that are generally clearer, simpler and smoother than the original utterances: they have a tendency to *normalize language*.¹⁰ This happens because liaison interpreters act *both as translators and as coordinators*, so they feel extremely responsible for the quality of communication and for the success of the interaction – in fact, many factors are beyond their control: consider overlapping dialogues, interruptions, statements made directly in the L2. Furthermore, liaison interpreters are actually sitting (or standing) between the people they are working for, so even subconsciously, they will want to save *face* – that is to make sure they do not give the impression that something is not under control, not understood, or not relayed.¹¹

6. CONCLUSIONS – A CHART OF PATTERNS

Oral language use depends so much on contexts and interactants that it is quite hard to define general guidelines on how to approach it in business liaison interpreting precisely because of the specific nature of this type of setting. It is far more useful to look for *patterns* both in the social and oral interaction so that students *can be aware* of what happens and gradually find their own way into this job, while bearing in mind the virtual rules at play.

This article was an attempt to show what it feels like to work in this kind of environment – it is an extremely interesting field but there is no room for improvising. Liaison interpreters should never forget that they are acting within a framework with specific rules and expectations from participants, including them. Fitting in is the real challenge.

- 9 A word of warning for young liaison interpreters: although it is very important to gain experience, it is also equally essential not to disqualify our profession.
- 10 This is true of all forms of interpreting, but a far more prominent phenomenon in this case – and it is not simply a question of ruling out the typical features of spontaneous speech (false starts, searching for words, hedges, hesitations).
- 11 As Gentile (1996: 36) points out, pauses “may cause a client to believe that the response is not connected to the question as asked; the client is unsure as to whether this discrepancy arises from the interpreter’s work or the other party.”

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