VOCABULARY ACQUISITION
FOR STUDENT INTERPRETERS:
Recommendations on the judicious reading
of newspapers

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The purpose of this article is to attempt to provide an element of interim strategy in the vocabulary acquisition phase of the student interpreter's work. It is the actual performance of the student in the booth that quite rightly receives the most attention in institutionalised courses - exams are based on this and in the real world, jobs are given on the strength of it - but this interpreting act presupposes a pre-booth aspect of preparation. Naturally, courses in universities and other institutions do include an implicit pre-performance element within the make-up of the syllabus. A course (or part of a course) that concentrates on political language (Euro-Parliament, United Nations, etc.) or economic language (G.A.T.T., Common Agricultural Policy, etc.) or legal language (European Court of Justice, court and immigration interpreting - see N. Schweda Nicholson, The Interpreter's Newsletter No. 3, University of Trieste, etc.) already delimits the range of vocabulary required by the interpreter for that particular task and the kind of material to study is well defined. And the course itself will provide an invaluable opportunity for vocabulary widening.

However, the kind of terminology generally required is not of the hyper-technical type found in deeper, more philosophical political or economic discussion (ergonomics, Marxist dialectics, etc.), and much less so than complex scientific discussion. Nonetheless, training in 'quasi-technical' text types is more commonly found on course syllabi than practice in highly technical scientific material. This would seem to be a happy arrangement; students go on to become ade interpreters in many contexts and the leap from Community politics to, say, historiography does not seem to overwhelm them. Perhaps it is the basic, 'quasi-technical' background that is more important than the 'mugging up' of specific terminology prior to a highly specialised conference.

But let us consider for a moment those more narrowly delineated fields such as astronomy, nuclear physics, medicine, nephrology, etc. tha provide working interpreters with such headaches. Given the need to explore such specific subjects at a more than a merely superficial level, the kinds of course (or course element) outlined above, by virtue of their very format, do not provide experience of a vast range of different topics. Conversely, in the world of work, especially that of the free-lance professional, the subject-matter may change drastically from job to job. This is a familiar story and the clichés surrounding it are well known: an interpreter cannot know everything about everything, but he must know how to find out about anything; interpreters are not equipped to be doctors, but doctors are not equipped to be interpreters; the interpreter doesn't need to remember tomorrow what he interprets today, and variations on this theme, none of which evade the problem that the interpreter needs some form of terminological apparatus at his disposal when working in specific sectors.

This brings us to the process of conference preparation or 'mugging up' on terminology that takes up so much of the interpreter's time or,
perhaps more often than is desirable, is crammed into the little time available to the interpreter before the next assignment. Particularly in view of the latter hypothesis, anything that might render the vocabulary accumulation strategy a little more economic in terms of time (and effort) should be welcomed.

There are a number of time-honoured approaches to assimilating vocabulary, not all used by all interpreters but all tried and tested. First and foremost is gaining access to the paper of the delegate one is to interpret, and if possible a personal interview with said delegate. This, however, is rarely conceded and a mere reading of the paper, useful as this undoubtedly is, may not be enough in that it may lull the interpreter into a false sense of security for when the wider discussion starts. Thus, the interpreter is often left to his or her own devices in the attempt to absorb the necessary and sufficient material to carry out his task. This consists largely in the consultation of encyclopaedias, dictionaries, glossaries, text books, other papers on the subject culled from journals, proceedings of previous conferences, newspapers, cassettes, videos, etc. The list could continue and is an indication in itself of the potential immensity of the task and the drudgery involved. But let us examine some of these various sources individually.

According to Pinchuk ('Scientific and Technical Translation', 1977), encyclopaedias are too general:

General, humanistic encyclopaedias...are of only occasional value as they are not specific enough and do not contain sufficient detail.

Even on technical encyclopaedias, she simply says these are likely to be more useful appending the accusation that many contain a plethora of terms without clearly defined meanings though defending some specialised publications (e.g., The Encyclopedia of Polymer Science and Technology) as reference works. The series of Elsevier technical dictionaries are undoubtedly worthy publications, but much more useful to the translator for reference tasks than to the interpreter.

Whereas 'reading' is clearly the key to most vocabulary acquisition, technical encyclopaedias, dictionaries and glossaries are most emphatically not 'readable' material. Dictionaries are unwieldy except for purely reference purposes, and required terms are often difficult to find - examples in context are elusive while there is an abundance of invented examples, whose use is limited (see the systemic linguistics tradition e.g., Halliday and Fawcett 1987). Glossaries also contain much redundancy in that they contain too many simple terms that do not require study (e.g., 'blood', 'air', 'eye', etc. found in so many medical glossaries) and too many rarely - used terms to make easy assimilation feasible.

Textbooks are didactic in their intent but often are intended to accompany a student, over a period of months or years, to the point where the interpreter would like to be already. As an introduction to a topic they can be useful.

Journals can be too time-consuming (Pinchuk again) owing to the vast amount of redundancy contained in the ever-increasing number of quickly dated, hastily put together and qualitatively questionable publications. The proceedings of previous conferences might be vitally important if they could be traced. It is very commonly the case that the proceedings of the most recent conferences are still in the process of being published when another conference takes place. Videos and cassettes are of limited value: they are not designed for the interpreter's purpose and the viewer's or listener's retention capacity is inferior to that of the reader of the written word. The reader can linger, return, 'skip unimportant bits', mark the text or have access to material to a much greater extent than the audio-visual user.

However, although there are no instant panaceas, experience will have taught a great many interpreters a number of strategies and ideas and they will have worked out what suits them best, including the use of encyclopaedias, glossaries, journals and so on. In fact I am perfectly aware that the above criticism of information sources is hopelessly thin and uncorroborated and as regards student needs, may be in any case a bit of a red herring. For the moment it serves as an introduction to a few comments I intend to make on the exploitation of newspaper articles, so far left unmentioned.

I now wish to return to my earlier remark on
the 'quasi-technological' terminology that is assimilated in much course work. This often refers to the geopolitical and socio-economic world and one of the major sources of information (and terminology) open to students, and one which is wholeheartedly encouraged by teachers, is the newspaper article. There are good reasons why this should be so that go beyond an intuitive acknowledgement of the depth of up-to-date information contained in such sources. A judicious reading of newspaper articles may involve a strategy based on the concepts of redundancy, coherence and lexical patterning.

In simple terms, redundancy refers to the amount of material in a text that is not essential for an understanding of that text. Such material may be present for purely stylistic reasons or may be what is commonly understood to be 'padding'. Modern developed languages are of a level of sophistication that begs repetition through synonym, circumlocution, verbosity - in short, redundancy. However, in terms of technical texts and for the purposes of this discussion, the term 'redundancy' will be used to refer to all the lexical (and grammatical) items present that are not considered part of the corpus of 'technical language' or 'English for Special Purposes'. Various studies have claimed that the amount of strictly technical terminology present in so-called technical texts is rarely more than ten per cent (see Newmark (1988), Pinchuk, etc.), and thus one must expect to have silted 90% of one's reading in order to reach the relevant material. Compare the following newspaper extracts on financial affairs from the 'Weekly Telegraph' No. 7 (Sept. 7th, 1991), which contain terminology of a 'quasi-technical' and 'technical' level.

(A) Rights issue fails to score
Underwriter UBS Phillips and Drew has been left with more than 88 p. c. of the shares in the Mountleigh Group rights issue, making it one of the biggest flops since the BP share offer in November 1987 just days after the stock market crash.

Shareholders took up only 38.9m of the 326m shares in the two-for-one offer at 25p, representing 11.9 p.c. of the issue.

Nelson Petz and Peter May, the American financiers who bought out Tony Clegg, the founder of the group, in 1989, must now decide the future of the company. There has been recent speculation that in the event of the rights issue failing, they, together with the Gordon P. Getty Family Trust and other friendly parties, would obtain full control and take the company private.

Some institutional holders of Mountleigh shares are said to be on the point of asking the Department of Trade and Industry to order an enquiry into the company, and particularly into share transactions carried out at 100p a share just a few weeks before the directors went to shareholders for £96m at 25p a share. But most funds, if they have got stock, are not admitting it.

Alec Pelmore, property analyst at Kleinwort Benson Securities, said: "It is impossible to get to grips with the company. We have not been told what the future of the Spanish Gallerias retail operation really is, all we are sure of is that there is more to be written off the United Kingdom properties."

Following the flop of the rights issue, there could be a renewed effort to sell both the Merry Hills shopping centre at Dudley in the West Midlands.

But most shop agents believe that the £155m price tag will have to be reduced to a more realistic sum. The group has also been trying to sell its £75m Camberley Surrey shopping centre.

(B) News Corp loss totals £187m
Rupert Murdoch's holding company News Corporation lost A$393m (£187m) for the year to June 30, compared with a profit of A$343m (£163m) last year, because of abnormal losses of A$714m (£340m) - but the company has promised the worst is over. The company reported an operating profit of A$447m, (£213m), virtually identical with the previous year, but, after including A$37.4m in associates' losses, pre-tax profit fell to A$410m.

My first point regards the length of the articles.
In line with normal newspaper policy the length is not excessive; the items are indeed short, particularly item (B). Even (A) is considerably shorter than any average journal piece. And the relevance of this? A statistical examination of the two articles shows that in the case of (A), out of approximately 330 words, eleven terms (20 words) could be considered useful technical terms from the point of view of the interpreter's learning requirements. This represents a ratio of one to sixteen (6%), indicating that 94% of the material is redundant in the terms outlined above. In case (B) the piece is very short but one term in six is of a technical nature; only about 82% is redundant. Although these figures suggest a very high degree of redundancy, a comparison with a typical extract from an economics text book (Guide to the British Economy, P. Donaldson, 1973) and a typical journal article shows that these latter publications contain considerably more redundancy. Donaldson's section on 'The Process of Credit Creation' (circa 1,599 words; 31 technical terms) is 98% redundant. One subsection of an article, taken at random, entitled 'Transfers and Their Effects' by Danziger, Haveman and Plotnick in 'The Journal of Economic Literature', Vol. XIX September 1981 was 97% redundant of technical terminology.

Given that text-books and specific-sector journals might be expected to be more technically information-dense than daily newspapers, there would seem to be some inconsistency here. One explanation is that the specificity of such material involves much repetition of previously mentioned technical terms which are not counted in the survey. But it should also be mentioned that the more serious newspapers, in their specialised pages, do not pander to the layman (most of whom skip such sections) and consequently reach a reasonably high level of technicality. Clearly this level is still not high enough for the content matter of many conferences, but this is perhaps the key point. Going back to the student's (and the interpreter's) non-specialist background, it may be preferable for him/her, at least in the early, training stages, to be sure of absorbing a good stock of material that is not hyper-technical and jargon-ridden, but that can still be useful at many a conference, rather than flounder in a sea of confusion. Specifically, that might mean a sacrifice of the specific for the generic and I refer everyone to David Snelling's fascinating paper on this point delivered at the F.I.T. conference in Belgrade, 1990.

To return to newspapers, whatever the level of technical language they contain, they provide it in few words (witness the above articles). In the 'Weekly Telegraph No. 8', in a 'Business Section' of seven pages, no less than forty-six separate items were included, many dealing with associated topics but separate none the less. They ranged from an article covering five half-page columns to single paragraphs. The accent clearly is on brevity but, for the interpreter 'mugging up' 'City' terminology, it is a mine of information.

A second advantage to the reader of this kind of material is that while it may be more information-dense than an ostensibly more technical journal article, it tends not to induce 'comprehension cramp'. The logical progression of the discourse can be followed easily over a short hurdle and in spite of its shortness, the article must be coherent; otherwise it would be unintelligible (cf. Michael Hoey On the Surface of Discourse, 1983 on typical patterns of discourse (problem-solution pattern, general-particular pattern, etc). As the articles in question cover separate, albeit related, topics, they must display the coherence characteristics of longer texts while packing in more terminology. These short, complete and coherent newspaper articles should be more easily digestible than a series of much longer, more searching and perhaps, in the final analysis, more lexically redundant journal articles. Key words to learn within a particular field, suggested by frequency patterns (eg., marginal tax, marginal transfers, marginal benefits, etc.) and foregrounding (eg., in headlines), can be assimilated less painfully through a judicious perusal of this type of newspaper material.

However, the process can be put on a more scientific basis than merely picking up today's paper. As said before, all teachers of interpreting encourage the reading of newspapers, both in the mother tongue and in the foreign language, but usually as a means of keeping abreast of current affairs. It is my contention that the specialised pages of quality papers can be exploited much further in order to keep abreast of more special-
ised matters. Not only economics. Motoring columns, medical supplements and scientific sections (see 'The Sunday Times', 'The Economist', 'Il Corriere della Sera') can all be extremely useful. Again, the material contained is not sufficient to give the interpreter the necessary ammunition for a highly specialised conference, but can provide the framework for all such occasions. Consequently the student is referred beyond the mere news coverage and leader columns of newspapers for his vocabulary base. Much of the information retrievable nowadays merits being stored somehow, and, consequently, a systematic appraisal of the utility of the many short articles appearing daily in the world's press, and the terminology contained therein, which the statistics suggest is relatively abundant, should be followed by a filing of all useful material under appropriate headings. Key words and important terminology can be underlined or highlighted for ease of recognition. In this way the material is found in context and not in some artificial order based on chronology or hierarchy. Reading and absorbing from such organised schemes in short, sharp (but manageable) bursts, should help to keep interest from flagging. Here then, in essence, is one simple suggestion for vocabulary assimilation, particularly at the training stage, where the absorption of vast amounts of complicated, highly specialised terminology is probably counterproductive. It is a plea for a more complete exploitation of newspaper material, while, at a later stage, the particular strategies for handling a conference on topic A or topic B may be brought into play.