ACTION AND INTERACTION IN INTERPRETING

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Introduction

Erving Goffman (1922-82) became a distinguished scholar at the University of Chicago's prestigious Department of Sociology during the Fifties, before taking up the Benjamin Franklin Professorship of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. Like Shakespeare's melancholy Jacques, Goffman was a wry observer of the theatrical element in social interaction. One feature that sets Goffman apart from earlier generations of Chicago sociologists is that his writings, though not ostensibly – or even mainly – linguistic in scope, reflect a lively, contagious interest in language. It is, indeed, fitting that Goffman should be ranked with such eminent precursors of modern sociolinguistics as Garfinkel, the founder of ethnomethodology.

Reference to Goffman in the present article affords a starting point for a discussion of interpreting and interaction, prompting a number of considerations on the mental processes involved in interpreting – hence the inclusion in the title of the broader term "action". The discussion does not purport to be in any way conclusive. Indeed, the very beauty of taking Goffman as a potential vantage point from which to explore a fresh perspective on interpreting studies is that the relevance of the debate is not exhausted in the space of a single article. The essays by Goffman to which reference is made on the following pages are pioneering works in the now flourishing field of sociolinguistics. Though at first sight unlikely, their interest for the interpreting scholar – as well as for the practising or trainee interpreter – is arguably immense. Be it for the reader to judge whether he or she shares this enthusiasm and, if so, as a premiss for mere academic debate or a basis for further study and observation.

An unlikely source

The nicely worded definition of an interpreter as "a person who repeats what someone else is saying by translating it immediately into another language so that other people can understand it" (Sinclair, 1987: 764) highlights that the aim

of interpreting is to allow communication between different parties. Against this background, the concept of an interactional framework which includes the interpreter can be readily proposed. Erving Goffman did so in his 1979 essay, *Footing*, subsequently included in his *Forms of Talk* collection (1981). Goffman is a writer to whom I am sure most interpreting colleagues must warm. His keen, eclectic wit highlights all that is real, practical and immediate – not for him the highly technical, statistics-laden style of so many writers on linguistics. Though sometimes guilty of carrying the day by his dialectic skill rather than by scientific corroboration, he is also a master of microanalysis based on the pertinence of the small, everyday example.

The interpreter attracted by Goffman's approach will enjoy the additional benefit of finding an admittedly brief reference to simultaneous interpreting (SI) in *Footing*:

> *We can openly speak for someone else and in someone else's words, as we do, say, in reading a deposition or providing a simultaneous translation of a speech – the latter an interesting example because so often the original speaker's words, although ones that person commits himself to, are ones that someone else wrote for him.* (Goffman, 1981: 145-146)

Goffman's main interest is not specifically in the rôle of the simultaneous interpreter – indeed, this is the only occasion on which he explicitly mentions the subject in this essay. However, the very fact that interpreting is mentioned in what purports to be a study in sociolinguistics can only be heartening to those of us continually obliged to assert our professional rights on the private market. Here, it just happens that the interpreter provides convenient grist to the mill in Goffman's argument that the dynamics of communication are far too complex to be dismissed as an optimistically simplistic segregation of the participants in the speech act into those who speak and those who listen:

> *... commonsense notions of hearer and speaker are crude.*
> (Goffman, 1981: 146)

"Fresh talk"

More than the passing reference to interpreting which is likely to catch our attention on a first study of *Footing*, what the interpreter or the specialist in interpreting studies will surely find of greatest interest in Goffman's essay collection is the fascinating study entitled *The Lecture*. In this piece, Goffman distinguishes between the skill of the average conversationalist and that of the

experienced lecturer in handling "fresh talk". The basic premiss of the argument is that the ordinary conversationalist can master "fresh talk" convincingly and unhesitatingly only by thinking ahead of what he or she is actually saying. In other words, while engaged in pronouncing one phrase- or clause-length "segment", the speaker is mentally formulating the one which will follow. The "freshness" of conversation is thus somewhat illusory. What distinguishes the accomplished lecturer, by contrast, is the ability to go ahead one "segment" at a time, without having constantly to think about what will come next. Most of us probably felt little of the lecturer's confidence during our early efforts to acquire skill at reasonably impromptu use of a foreign language.

Quite apart from the interactional framework of the lecture and its implications for the rôle of the interpreter, what is striking here is the similarity between the mental process described as typical of the practised lecturer and an earlier description of SI by R. Glemet:

> As you start a sentence you are taking a leap in the dark, you are mortgaging your grammatical future; the original sentence may suddenly be turned in such a way that your translation of its end cannot easily be reconciled with your translation of its start. Great nimbleness is called for to guide the mind through this syntactical maze, whilst at the same time it is engaged upon the work of word-translation. (in Gerver, 1976: 165-207)

Glemet's "nimbleness" is matched by what Goffman terms the ability to:

> come up with (and on time) something which is grammatically and thematically acceptable ... without making it evident that a production crisis has been going on. (Goffman, 1981: 172)

The processes of linguistic production described in these two quotations are presented in terms that highlight the similarity between them. The two could, indeed, seem at first sight to be speaking of one and the same phenomenon – an impression reinforced by the down-to-earth, informal style in which both authors couch their analysis. The only difference between the two is readily pinpointed in Glemet's repeated use of the word "translation". If this term were deleted in favour of something like "arrangement", Gemet's comments could be plausibly passed off as an excerpt from Goffman's account of lecturing skills. It is as if the quotations from the two authors were a sort of "minimal pair" hinging on the inclusion or absence of the references to translation.

All this bears witness to the complexity and difficulty of the interpreting process. The interpreter must not only possess at least some of the lecturer's skill in maintaining an illusion of "fresh talk", but also have sufficient linguistic competence to do so while juggling with two or more languages. The source

language (SL) input will often comprise rapidly evolving utterances full of the
surprises and inconsistencies of normal speech. The only advantage that the
interpreter enjoys over the lecturer in the formidable task of processing this into
an acceptable target language (TL) output is that the SL input provides a starting
point of sorts, whereas the lecturer's words are his or her own. Of course, the
onus on the lecturer's creative powers which this statement implies is in practice
generally lightened to varying degrees by consultation of possible sources for
the talk which he or she delivers. This point is interestingly discussed by
Goffman in a longer essay, *Radio Talk*, one section of which identifies the
possible sources of vocal production in literate society as memorization,
reading, extemporaneous response to unplanned prompts, or any combination of
the three (Goffman, 1981: 227-228).

   At its starkest, the lecture may be nothing more than a reading of a
previously prepared text – patently and sleep-inducingly so if the speaker lacks
the experience or the will to disguise the fact, less obviously and uninspiringly
so if the lecturer pays at least lip service to liveliness and spontaneity. Input
from visual prompts, ranging from slides or transparencies to scribbled notes
clutched discreetly behind the podium, is another common practice. Equally, of
course, a talk may be genuinely impromptu – or, indeed, stem from any
conceivable combination of written cues, rehearsal and extemporaneous
production. The after-dinner speech, high on the list of Anglo-Saxon
mondanités, is a case in point. Ideally an extemporaneous delivery, in practice it
is usually a "party piece" based on skill at maintaining an illusion of
spontaneous wit. Despite its interest as an example of discourse production, the
after-dinner speech is admittedly of limited relevance to interpreting studies.
Whether the speaker's performance is a true example of "fresh talk" or a
convincing sham, the scope it offers for SI in particular is probably non-existent.
An after-dinner speaker may, of course, be thought important, interesting or
funny enough to warrant consecutive interpreting (CI). This will all too often be
promptly but reluctantly provided by an interpreter pressed into service, notepad
in hand, after a day in the booth. Needless to say, the interpreter's reluctance is
disguised with professional aplomb, but his or her thoughts probably concern
the injustice of being lumped with the job while colleagues are happily
ensconced well below the salt. Questions of remuneration and regret at not
being able to enjoy the pleasures of the table in an appropriately relaxed manner
will certainly be prominent considerations.

   Even an ostensibly impromptu talk can arguably not be considered pure
invention, unbacked by the slightest prompt or reflexion. Even if only at
subconscious level, the speech inevitably involves the retrieval and reprocessing
of recollections based on prior observation and/or study. To what extent a
"freshly" delivered lecture is truly extemporaneous rather than a reworking of

prior input is thus a moot question, to which there can surely be no conclusive answer.

The above considerations regarding the complexity of analysing the lecturer's speaking skills highlight the need for caution in comparing these with the simultaneous interpreter's ability to embark on a successful translation before realising where the speaker's sentence will drift. A hasty conclusion that the interpreter possesses all the lecturer's skills and much more besides is not justified. However, we can fairly state that the interpreter requires a good deal of the lecturer's "fresh talk" skill in addition to a high level of linguistic ability.

The variables in the equation

Any short account of interpreting skills runs the risk of summarising in broad, inevitably sweeping statements a subject on which generalisations should actually be regarded with diffidence. The "fresh talk" parameter is a case in point. Between languages not too far removed from each other, the interpreter will find that the task of linguistic reprocessing is relatively painless if the SL presentation is coherent and well structured – in other words, the SL speaker's skill in maintaining an orderly presentation without telltale signs of "production crisis" leaves the interpreter with little tidying up to do in reprocessing the speech towards a polished TL output. Unfortunately, interpreters are all too familiar with speakers who provide a far less convenient input. A variety of defects may be the cause – hesitations, backtracking, unfinished clauses, parentheses within parentheses like a series of Chinese boxes, or other examples of all too evident production crises and shortcomings. In such cases, the interpreter will almost certainly "disown" any self-correction or inconsistency caused by the speaker's dithering – statements like "five examples have been reported – sorry, four, the speaker is now saying" underline the interpreter's intention to share none of the blame for SL input which is too messy to be tidied up within the time limits of fast SI. To a certain extent, the experienced interpreter who prefers in any case to ensure that the TL output is elegantly packaged can fall back in such circumstances on Glemet's "nimbleness" and tuck the ragged edges of the original well out of sight; a less skilled interpreter will find it difficult to match such ability. This is one example of why sweeping generalisations about the interpreter's "fresh talk" ability have to be qualified, a point which neatly matches Goffman's comment on the different levels of "fresh talk" ability among lecturers:

> *Lecturers mark a natural turning point in the acquisition of fresh-talk competence when they feel that they can come close to finishing a*

segment without knowing yet what in the world the next will be ...
(Goffman, 1981: 172)

Goffman sees the acquisition of "fresh-talk competence" by the lecturer as occupying a learning curve, rather than occurring by spontaneous revelation on a latter-day road to Damascus. In the same way, ability to ensure apparently effortless TL output in the booth can be present to differing degrees according to the interpreter's experience and flair. Something like Goffman's "natural turning point" in the acquisition of speaking skills is surely perceived by teachers of interpreting – and hopefully by their students!

Another obvious variable is the familiarity of the interpreter with the subject or content of the talk. The interpreter with prior knowledge of the topic is at a considerable advantage in polishing up any imperfections on the speaker's part, though it is far from certain to what extent this is to be encouraged. The interpreter who becomes too glib at improving on the original speech runs the risk of changing it not only in form but in substance – a danger which is magnified in situations where the translation is in turn translated into other languages in something like a game of Chinese whispers. Indeed, even apparently innocuous formal streamlining can unwittingly create a knock-on effect which distorts the substance of the message for those listening to the translation of the translation in such cases.

Even where only one TL is involved and the problem of refraining from excessive "editorial" interference with the message is perhaps less keenly felt, the interpreter short on experience or empathy may find that the chief hurdle is understanding the SL input. Unconventional pronunciations and clumsily framed statements will be a problem for the interpreter dealing with a subject for the first time, but will be more readily understood if the topic is a recurrent item in the interpreter's professional repertoire. In the same way, acronyms will be readily picked up by an interpreter who is familiar with the subject, but will inevitably be a worry to the newcomer – matching English "AIDS" with its French equivalent "SIDA" is an easy matter if the two are seen in writing, but will probably be less readily perceived by someone hearing the two at speed for the first time. If less common examples are involved, the difficulty for the uninitiated will be all the greater.

Among the other important variables governing the dynamics of the interpreting process is the availability of visual back-up for what is being said in the SL. Medical interpreters craning forward in the booth, opera glasses trained on slides or overheads of case series or other key statistics, are only too keenly aware of this point. A further variable within this context is whether the visual back-up has captions in the SL or the TL – a difference which may determine a split second's difference in reaction time to the spoken SL input. Where slides or overheads are not used (or are not visible to the interpreter), teamwork in the

booth is another important variable. The interpreter working alone is at a disadvantage by comparison with a tandem arrangement whereby the interpreter who is "resting" can write prompts for his or her colleague during presentations with considerable statistical content.

The most valuable visual support in many cases is also, unfortunately, the one most frequently overlooked by speakers and congress organisers. The translation of a read text can be notoriously difficult if the interpreter has not received a copy of the text beforehand – preferably well beforehand rather than one minute before the start of the talk. The speaker's speed and intonation are rarely conducive to ready understanding in such cases. Even if the speaker is consulting notes as a general guide rather than reading a text verbatim, the interpreter can generally work much better with a copy of the speaker's prompts available in the booth.

Simultaneous and consecutive interpreting

The discussion has so far focused on SI. Matters are further complicated if its implications for CI are also considered. The skills required for SI and CI are obviously not identical* and most interpreters will admit to tackling one with greater confidence or relish than the other. Gemet's "leap in the dark" is an appropriate reference to the often unpredictable nature of SI, but seems at first sight less appropriate in the case of CI. This difference is implicit in the adjectives which differentiate the two – the former requiring production at the same time as the input on which it is based, the latter demanding reproduction in the TL of a prior input. Interestingly, SI is often thought of as the ultimate linguistic skill, while those unfamiliar with interpreting and translation work are sometimes unaware that such a thing as CI exists. Nevertheless, the public demonstration of promptness, professional skill and composure in well performed CI is generally what earns the highest accolade from an "uninitiated" audience. Those of us who have had to learn and use both skills realise that CI is far from being the poor cousin, and the kudos it earns on such occasions is fully deserved.

Looking at differences between the two, CI does not imply the same problem as created in SI by the need to keep pace practically in real time with unexpected twists and turns of the SL utterance – hence the temptation to argue that any difficulty in CI resulting from an unexpected change of tack in an utterance or argument is more bound up with the need to puzzle over concepts

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* An interesting experimental study of the differences between the two processes is the unpublished degree dissertation by L. Bissoli, *Confronto tra i processi di interpretazione simultanea e consecutiva*, SSLM, Trieste, 1990 (in Italian).

while noting them than with strictly linguistic problems in ensuring syntactic consistency from start to end of a sentence. The two problems are, of course, not always easily separable. In CI divided into segments only a sentence or so in length, the interpreter may have precious little time to process SL input requiring considerable effort in decoding forms far removed from what is perceived as the "norm". This is frequently the case when English or French is used as a vehicular language in scientific meetings – pronunciation, grammar and use of vocabulary may all be greatly at odds with what is regarded as standard, slowing down the interpreter's reprocessing towards the TL in both SI and CI. In such cases, it is not always possible to establish a neat dividing line between what constitutes difficulty in strictly formal decoding of the SL and the problems of assimilating what is inconsistent or incomplete in terms of conceptual content. Speed can be another stumbling block, again not strictly or readily classifiable as a difficulty related to the assimilation of either the form in which the SL input is administered or its substance. A more realistic (and less facile) view is that both form and content are difficult to retain and process when the SL input is uncomfortably fast. In the same way, the "leap in the dark" which Gemet sees as part and parcel of SI cannot be identified only with the result of structural surprises and twists – a delay in processing the message will surely result if the interpreter suddenly realises towards the end of a sentence that he or she has grasped the wrong end of the stick and has to be deft in bringing the attendant train of thought full circle to realign it with the SL input.

Even if the difference between CI and SI is clear, these brief remarks are a reminder that each is in practice an umbrella term covering a multitude of variables. It is therefore unwise to attempt a categorical statement of the difficulties involved in one or the other – each can involve a host of contingencies, and even the broad dividing line between the two is not necessarily accompanied by a clear-cut division between skills required for SI and those called for in CI.

A protean repertoire of mood and rôle

Passing to a few brief remarks on the rôle of the interpreter in an interactional framework, ousted from the more prominent place it was originally intended to occupy in the article, the relevance of Goffman's views again provides an appropriate basis for discussion. The starting point is once more *The Lecture*. An area of particular interest for interpreting studies is the way in which the message conveyed by public reading of a text as a lecture is seen by Goffman as not being wholly limited tó the content of the printed page. This will admittedly be a large part of the message conveyed to the audience –

irrespective of who actually stands on the podium and reads the text, its content cannot be appreciably changed. What can change is the speaker's use of what Goffman calls "footings". "Alignment of speaker to hearers" is how Goffman defines this concept (Goffman, 1981: 127), explaining elsewhere in the book that such extratextual elements:

> *seem to bear more than the text does on the situation* in *which the lecture is given, as opposed to the the situation* about *which the lecture is given ... And here, of course, is the reason why the printed version of a spoken text is unlikely to contain the ... asides that enlivened the spoken presentation.* (Goffman, 1981: 179)

What Goffman is telling us here is that a good deal of a lecture's liveliness and relevance to the audience which hears it on any given occasion is extraneous to the printed text. The mood of the occasion, so dependent on non-textual elements, is vital to the interaction achieved between speaker and audience. It is interesting to consider how far an interpreter can realistically be expected to convey this "atmosphere". Certainly, an interpreter isolated in a booth is unlikely to succeed – particularly if one considers that the asides which liven up the occasion may well be largely humorous, with obvious problems of translatability and understanding. Even CI is not likely to convey the full flavour of the non-textual fillers and asides.

The speaker's footing is an aspect of what Goffman calls, in the essay *Radio Talk*, the "participation framework" of a discourse (Goffman, 1981: 227). This concept is complemented, in terms of structural analysis, by that of "production format" (Goffman, 1981: 226). The "format" concerned is a statement of how Goffman attributes three potential rôles to the party generally called, for the sake of convenience, the "speaker" – a term which Goffman considers crude because it does not reflect the possible permutations on the three functions in question:

> *... the talking machine, the thing that sound comes out of, the "animator". Typically in lectures, that person is also seen as having "authored" the text, that is, as having formulated and scripted the statements that get made. And he is seen as the "principal", namely, someone who believes personally in what is being said ...* (Goffman, 1981: 167)

The above extract attributes all three rôles to the lecturer. The topic is taken up again, elsewhere in the essay collection, in the discussion of which functions are fulfilled by the radio announcer (Goffman, 1981: 226). Irrespective of such variations on the theme, it is not realistic to argue that either SI or CI of a lecture should be considered to project the interpreter into the rôles of "author" and "principal", which would to all intents and purposes make the SL speaker

redundant. This leaves the rôle of "animator" or "talking machine". Of these, the latter is probably the more apt and unambiguous job description of the two for the purposes of the present discussion, since the former tends to evoke connotations of entertainment which Goffman's definition of the word "animator" eschews. Such overtones of merriment are not specified as part of the interpreter's brief in formal training objectives! Readers who object to "talking machine" may prefer the alternative term "sounding box", used by Goffman in the section of *Radio Talk* referred to above (Goffman, 1981: 226).

Da capo e finale

These comments on the rôles of the speaker (and, by inference) the interpreter bring us nicely full circle to the short excerpt from Goffman at the beginning of this article, the purpose of the author's remarks in this quotation being to offer an example of animating words as opposed to actually formulating them. Though not even pausing to focus at length on SI, Goffman is sufficiently perceptive to appreciate that the SL input is often nothing but reading passed off as extemporaneous production. The corollary, not stated by Goffman, is that the interpreter working from a text which a speaker reads verbatim is hardly doing the same job as when translating more or less extemporaneously. Snelling's recommendation that the expression "simultaneous interpretation" be understood only in its narrowest and most literal sense states this point unequivocally:

> *I would wish to propose that the use of the term "simultaneous interpretation" be limited to the interpretation of an impromptu speech or to the interpretation of a conference paper with a written text used only as a guide by the speaker. The verbatim repetition of a written text, the translation of which the interpreter has ample time to prepare, seems to me a different operation altogether.* (Snelling, 1990: 14)

Given that the interpreter may or may not enjoy the advantage over the audience of being able or having been able to read the speaker's text, the situation may be: feigned "fresh" input in the SL and true "fresh" output in the TL by a textless interpreter; or feigned "fresh" SL input and equally feigned "fresh" TL output by an interpreter who has been provided with a copy of the text. The latter situation, in turn, may have several variants: the interpreter may have received the text well in advance, or have been able to snatch a copy only just before donning the headphones; a copy of the text may have been made available for use in the booth during the talk, or shortage of photocopies may have meant that the interpreter could only borrow it for consultation beforehand

and make his or her own notes; another variable is that the text may be read verbatim, or added to and adapted with differing degrees of freehandedness; the SL reading may be a "one-off" occasion, or a performance so oft repeated as to become more a recitation than a reading; and, last but not least, the text given to the interpreter may be either in the SL or already translated into the TL (if so, how convincingly?). The list is not exhaustive, and other variations on a number of themes could readily be found.

It is interesting to compare Goffman's comments with the uninformed questions and comments on interpreting generally raised by those lacking experience in interpreting or unconcerned with interpreting studies. Most of us could certainly recount experiences testifying eloquently to this! Though Goffman's reference here is only a passing allusion, he does at least appreciate that more is involved in SI than speed of reflex and a dimly perceived entity often referred to as bilingualism. Even so, Goffman's remark in turn gives scope for a wealth of further detail. The number of variables quickly mounts up, irrespective of which languages and cultures are interfacing in the booth or on the consecutive interpreter's notepad. In SI, a skill acquired by specific training in a "technological" society, the languages involved are inevitably those of literate cultures. In CI, at least one of the two may have either a wholly oral tradition or a written tradition in which the interpreter is not versed. This comment may raise the hackles of many readers and may, indeed, be less relevant today than in former years; but if we think of the unsung linguistic heroes who interpreted at early, often unrecorded contacts between speakers of Indo-European languages and peoples such as the American Indians or Maoris, the comment is surely justified. One famous expedition requiring interpreters for contacts with American Indians was that undertaken by Lewis and Clark in 1804-5, from St. Louis to what is now the Washington-Oregon border on the Pacific seaboard (Lavender, 1969: 85). Interpreters even feature in apocryphal drinking stories of the kind more often associated with the bibulous gunfighters who colourfully people Western lore:•

> *A camp of Miniconjou Sioux butchered a cow belonging to a Mormon*
> *emigrant. Acting on an appeal from the cow's owner, young Lieutenant*
> *John Grattan marched forth from Laramie with twenty-nine troopers, an*
> *interpreter, and two small cannons. One story has it that the interpreter*
> *was drunk and his clumsy translations caused tempers to flare. Be that as*
> *it may, fighting erupted, and every white man died.* (Lavender, 1969: 360)

Irrespective of such colourful asides, what is important is that Goffman sees more than meets the proverbial eye in many aspects of human behaviour and interaction, including interpreting. Those of us who are – whether by force of circumstances or vocation for language – involved in interpreting can enlarge on

Goffman's comments and introduce far more variables than mentioned in his brief remarks on the subject. The notion of "fresh talk", though not examined in connection with interpreting by Goffman, offers an excellent complement for further discussion of both SI and CI. The theoretical issues implicit in such an approach are of considerable interest as a possible source of fresh insight into the interpreting process. In addition, the reduction of the terms in the equation to such choices as "text/no text in the booth" "text in SL/text in TL" provides a useful means of checking which variables are obvious and which are less so, which have been thoroughly studied and which still beckon the researcher.

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