RESEARCH IN SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION. AN OUTSIDER'S OVERVIEW

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1. Introduction

For some time now I have been engaged in an animated epistolary polemic with my much-admired Mariano García Landa on the need to go beyond the strictly 'translational' aspects of SI and delving, among other things, into its psycho-motor support, i.e. descending from the lofty heights of Translation Theory into the pedestrian natural first object that supports the physical, mental and social sides of our craft. Mariano basically asserts the following: Translation (including SI) pertains to the second, social object — as opposed to the strictly natural first, and research into the psycho-motor first-objectual support is but research into the subsidiary trappings, but not the essence, of SI. I agree, except that until such time as the black box is pried open, research and experimentation are plausible only around SI's material support, since only a knowledge of the first object will begin to tell us, if not what the second object is or ought to be, how it is possible, what it requires, how it works, and what obstacles it has to surmount.

This conviction was further buttressed as I was working on this piece: Something quite unusual happened to me in the booth. I must have been in one of my worst days: my diction tended to degenerate into an unmitigated slur, I had trouble putting my sentences together in presentable Spanish, and, to boot, I could not even keep English at bay: I caught myself saying buco for book and rostro for rostrum. I had problems with my facial muscles; I had problems with semantic, syntactic and phonetic interferences; I had problems with long and short-term memory; I had problems with macro-processing. Although I had no difficulty grasping the speakers' intended sense, everything, from the purely physical to the strictly cognitive, seemed to go wrong. How come, I asked myself, can a seasoned interpreter who prides himself on his ability to sound as if he has studied with the redoubtable Seleskovich herself, while under no

1 This is a development of my intervention at the Round Table on SI Research held at the SSLM on 19 April 1996.
2 With capital T, including SI.
particular stress — professional or otherwise — and in full command of his analytical faculties, do such a second-rate job? At work that day was neither a faulty theory nor neglect. Telling myself what I tell my students was of no avail: I knew what I was supposed to do and I knew how to do it, but there and then I simply could not; my declarative knowledge could do little to help my procedural knowledge — the first object was wreaking havoc with the second. I dare believe that it has happened to all of us, and maybe it keeps happening to many. If that is indeed so, then all practitioners have a vital stake in research into the pathology of SI. And if, as I submit, we can legitimately speak about such a pathology exclusively with respect to interpretation (both simultaneous and consecutive), but not to translation, it is, precisely, because in the case of the former there is a decisive interference by the first object, or better, because interpretation, and especially SI, is very much first-object dependent. In this respect, I suggest, Popper's (1994) distinction between world 1 (of physical bodies) and world 2 (of mental states) is extremely relevant, since it allows us to address separately the physical and mental sides of the first object.

Salevski (1993) distinguishes two main breeds of writers on our subject: the liberal arts school and the natural sciences school. The first-object, in both its world 1 and world 2 aspects, is, naturally, the natural scientists' baby, and although I am an unabashed liberal artist, I have come to realise that reality must be looked at through the microscope if we want to understand why the Parthenon (together with the rest of the physical manifestations of world 3 — that of the products of the human mind) stands, without which historians and architects would have nothing to look at. In this respect, in my bibliography I have noted several latter-day pieces; I shall not repeat what they state, but try and generalize on the basis of the main avenues I see open to research. Needless to say, as we shall see, all of them intersect and overlap.

2. SI, a sui generis physical and mental activity

For my present purposes, I shall adopt the following definition of SI: A special time-constrained and technology-dependent modality of orally mediated inter-lingual (and therefore inter-cultural) communication whereby listening/understanding, analyzing/translating, and producing/delivering take place (quasi-)simultaneously. It encompasses, I think, all the relevant features distinguishing it from non-translational activities, from non-interpretational translational activities, and from non-simultaneous interpretation. Each attribute above opens a different line of research.

3 I have not consigned any works by the Scuola's scholars since I presume you are all acquainted with each other's work.
3. The theoretical, descriptive and applied approaches

Following manipulators (Holmes and his followers, notably Toury), we can distinguish three lines of pursuit: theoretical, descriptive and applied (with, I submit, particular emphasis on the latter — after all, interpretation schools are there to select and train interpreters). Of the three approaches, the theoretical, which Mariano legitimately propounds, is the least accessible to research. It cannot be, of course, a matter of giving up on it altogether, but simply that the empiric tools are not in place to allow for significant observations, and, for all we know, may be a long time coming⁴. The descriptive approach, on the other hand, must be handled cautiously: not everything that even the best interpreters do is as efficient as it could be (or, I submit, as correct as it ought to be). If didactically valid methodological conclusions are to be arrived at, if the profession is to develop and practitioners to get better, observation cannot be neutral, it must be decidedly critical. Finally, I submit that at this incipient stage of our discipline, in view of the dire need to train competent and polyvalent practitioners and thereby to separate the truly professional wheat from the all-pervading chaff, we should foster research that can be readily applied to improve didactics and, through it, performance.

4. Five separate objects of observation

Whatever the approach, five kinds of objects can be discerned: SI as a product, as a function, and as a process (again, with particular attention to the latter); the interpreter himself as the purveyor of a specific body, mind, psyche, background, sensitivity, knowledge, skill and motivation; and, lastly, the objective constraints on his performance.

5. SI from different vantage points

Whatever the approach and the specific object selected, SI can be studied from different angles:

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⁴ In this respect, Translation Theory could be assimilated to Psychoanalytic Theory in that, as Popper (1994: 77) points out, although it claims to be empirical, it is impossible to test it against observations. If Translatology can be placed on the same scientific level as Psychoanalytic Theory, and Translation can be treated on a par with Psychoanalysis, I, for one, cannot but be most proud.
a) SI as a natural and a social object

In line with Mariano's contention, we would distinguish broadly what pertains to the second, social object, from what has to do with the first, natural object; i.e. SI as communication (encompassing its inter-cultural, inter-lingual and translational aspects) and the interpreter as a social being on the one side, and, on the other, SI as a psycho-motor activity, and the interpreter as a psycho-physical subjective entity — which means that both the motor and the psychological aspects must be dealt with — plus, ever present in the periphery, the external, or objective factors (including, speaker, colleagues and audience, as well as equipment and working conditions). We thus have two kinds of first object: the subjective and the objective; and, within the subjective, the physical and the mental. I suggest that there is an ontological gradation in relevance from the objective to the subjective, and within the latter from the physical to the mental up to the social. This should not be lost sight of: the objective factors are but the ancillary framing to the interpreter's activity, whilst the interpreter's physical and neurophysiological wherewithal is but the hardware of his linguistic and intellectual software, and the latter but the tool of his communicative prowess. In other words, the point of studying the first object is to help explain, model, buttress and develop the second object; and in this respect, García Landa is right: the theory of SI as a second, social object is ontologically — if by no means practically — independent from first-object constraints. Research into the first object will tell us how and up to what point — in general and in specific circumstances — the ideal should-be of SI theory can be actually approached by different interpreters.

b) SI as a linguistic activity

If SI is a linguistic activity, we ought to proceed from a General Theory of Language, of language as language, i.e. the ability of man to acquire, develop and use a second signal system. We also need to know the mechanisms whereby thought and perception — global/ in parallel/ analogical — become channelled sequentially/serially/digitally; in other words, how they are mapped into language and then retrieved out of language, and whether and how language's anisomorphism affects them in turn. Here we need the neurophysiological aspects of language acquisition, perception, comprehension, retention and production and with it the input of Psycholinguistics. The fundamental issue at stake is none other than the interrelationship between thought and language!

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5 Should-be indeed: every don't presupposes a do, and therefore a certain degree of prescriptiveness. If there is no such thing as the 'right' way(s) of interpreting, how can we tell the 'wrong' ones? What is there to teach? What makes for a better interpretation? Who is a good interpreter? What is the difference between a professional and an impostor?
Then we need a thorough understanding of how language — one philogenetic capability — is crystallised in different langues; i.e. we must listen critically to what General Linguistics has to say. We must be mindful of the ways different languages segment the psycho-physical continuum of perception and experience favouring or hampering specific categorisations, their intellection and expression (and through that door we enter Contrastive Linguistics, our invaluable crutch when it comes to linguistic problems in Translation, and most especially in SI). If SI is, moreover an inter-lingual activity, it is of the essence to investigate how different languages are acquired and used by man in general and interpreters in particular; and then how they coexist, share the same or have their own cerebral centres, interfere with or buttress each other. Also, since each act of SI is unidirectional, the neurophysiological aspects of directionality must be elicited as well (a crucial element in deciding what is an A and what a B language).

Another decisive area to be explored is the interrelation between the oral and the written materialisations and uses of language, the relation between language and other semiotic systems, and the way extra-linguistic perception affects language production and comprehension. All this in general of course, but also in particular — how specific language pairs interfere with each other at all levels.

c) SI as an activity on texts

It is a truism that Translation operates with actual utterances, i.e. texts. In this connection, the specifics of text-manipulation by the simultaneous interpreter are to be studied. What are the special text-processing skills the interpreter requires (from perception to production)? How do interpreters process oral texts? What kinds of prospective and retrospective strategies and tactics do — or should — they apply? When and how is sense gradually grasped on the basis of linguistic meaning; in other words, what is the unit of interpretation? How does it vary as a function of the interpreter’s intuition, analytical prowess and relevant knowledge? Do the surface or semantic structures of the languages at hand have any influence in the segmentation into units of interpretation? What is the relevance of different models (Kintsch-Van-Dijk, de Beaugrande-Dressler, Gutt, Pym, Chernov, Selskovaitch-Lederer etc.)? Do all interpreters do it the same way? If not, what is it that good interpreters do? It is perhaps here, in connection with text production, comprehension and processing, that the role of kinesic, paralinguistic and other non-linguistic aspects of communication is best approached.

Unfortunately, as pointed out above, this aspect is extremely difficult to research and experiment. For the nonce, I am afraid, it cannot but remain the
ever-shrinking realm of the personal intuitions, insights and theories of liberal artists.

d) SI as inter-lingual mediation

There is no escaping a General Theory of Translation, embedded in a General Theory of Communication, itself framed within a General Theory of Semiosis. Several models come to mind that ought to be researched in practice: *la théorie du sens*, *skopostheorie*, *relevance theory*, etc. a) What is their explanatory power? b) How well do they tally with 'first-object' data (for instance, is deverbalization neurophysiologically possible, or is it but a useful metaphor)?

e) SI as a mental and physical activity

Here, the intellectual aspects of SI come into play, to wit: a) What kind of cognitive profile must the interpreter have (long- and short-term, semantic, procedural and explicit memory; analytical skills; lateral and analogical thinking)? Does it entail a specific neurophysiological profile? Can it be identified? How? b) What kind of emotional complexion (for example, ability to cope under stress) is required? c) What kind of intellectual build (for example, curiosity) is necessary? d) What kind of knowledge (procedural and declarative, linguistic, encyclopedic and communicative) must an interpreter possess? e) What kind of rhetorical abilities must he muster? f) What kind of physical attributes must he be endowed with (for example, endurance)?

f) SI as a mentally and physically taxing activity

This, I suggest, is a crucial area to be studied, since it ought to help determine the ideal conditions of performance, as well as the possible tolerance thresholds beyond which SI cannot be successfully performed and/or can be harmful to the interpreter's health. In this connection, three aspects may be usefully distinguished: the physical stress on the interpreter's ears and vocal chords, the mental stress on the interpreter's cognitive abilities, and the global emotional stress. To my knowledge, the only medical study on SI and health was undertaken by the United Nations twenty-five years ago, prompted, among other things, by the high rate of instances of sick-leave among interpreters. The study is now all but impossible to find, but it concluded that SI was an extremely stressful activity and that an interpreter should not be expected to spend more than three hours in the booth at one sitting, or do more than

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6 Let us remind ourselves of Popper's 1994 words: "A theory is true or false even if we cannot determine its truth or falsity" (p.76); and in this connection, Seleskovich's and De Beaugrande & Dressler's decisive contribution is that, whether true or false, their theories can **count** as a solution, "which is, of course, different from actually giving a solution" (p. ibid.)
seven three-hour meetings a week. On that basis, the extant work-load standards were set. I submit that whatever its merits, that study must of necessity be obsolete. For one thing, it dealt exclusively with the kinds of meetings typical of the United Nations Headquarters in New York. Retrospectively, a) those meetings might have been extremely sensitive politically, but did not begin to approach the technical difficulties of, say, a medical congress; b) the technical equipment at U.N. Headquarters twenty-five years ago cannot compare, for instance, with the portable, ill-ventilated and isolated booths of so many less lofty gatherings or the more sophisticated equipment presently available at most internationally recognised conference centres, including those of the UN itself; c) the five-language combination mostly obtaining at that time has little to do with the mainly two-way booths of the private market or the more than ten languages of the European Union; d) the interpreter's social and administrative status has since evolved dramatically (if not always to the better); and, most decisively, e) the professional background and training of today's internationally recognised interpreters are, in most instances, a far cry from those of the self-made, or even improvised practitioners who were but establishing the profession a quarter of a century ago. Prospectively, the ever expanding media interpreting and the whole new and upcoming area of remote interpreting will pose new limitations and perhaps entail unsuspected consequences, both quality- and health-related.

6. Constraints weighing upon SI (i.e. affecting quality and/or health)

To be studied from each of these points of view: neurophysiological, cognitive, psychological, linguistic (general and specific language-pair related), intellectual, time-, medium-, text-, participants-, environment-related, etc. It is here that the impact of phenomena such as the spontaneity/non-spontaneity of the original, the availability of written speeches read aloud, visibility, sound quality and a myriad of other variables should be examined.

7. Quality in SI

All interpreters are not equal. Here the elusive question of quality cannot be dismissed, for not every attempt at performing the task succeeds to the same

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7 In that connection, there is an initiative for the United Nations system to embark upon a thorough study of the effects of remote interpreting on performance and health before it becomes a regular fact of professional life (see Viaggio 1996).
extent — if at all. As stated above, purely descriptive studies, mere observation of 'successful' interpreters will tell us what is, and what is may be either not good enough or — more optimistically — not as good as it could be, according to the latest insights into both objects. In this respect, several series of questions come to mind:

a) Are all successful professionals equally successful? And even if they are, what are the criteria for success, the felicity conditions — i.e. what is a good interpretation and what is a good interpreter? How can a good interpretation be secured?

b) Are there norms in SI? Are they culture/language/meeting-specific (are Clyde Snelling's phlegm and my histronics reflective of such general norms)? Who establishes them? Are they adequate? Can they be changed? Who can change them? How?

c) In more general terms, then, what is fidelity in SI? (All of which takes us back to a General Theory of Translation.)

d) Quality assessment is, however, particularly problematic. Is it fair — is it scientific — to assess an interpretation upon second hearing? Are users — who, by definition, cannot adequately compare original and interpretation — reliable informants (is the patient a reliable informant of the physician's prowess)? Are colleagues, who — with few exceptions — are not users? Are teachers? And again, how does quality evolve with practice? Does acquaintance with theory help at all?

8. The simultaneous interpreter

All of the above turns around the interpreter as a subject. What does an otherwise normal and innocent human being specifically need to be able to perform SI?

a) His physical hardware and mental software

The physical aspects, I submit, are more easily circumscribed: basically, the anatomy and functioning of the phonatory8 and ear apparatuses. Physical symptoms of stress, and conditions physically affecting the interpreter (i.e. ventilation, adequate supply of water at the right temperature, etc.) should also be studied in this connection. These aspects, however, lie without the black box, whereas it is therein that the rub is.

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8 An oft-forgotten sphere. I, for one, could have used intensive diction practice; now it is too late, I am afraid. Also, chronic laryngitis has taught me — again too late — how important it is to take good care of one's instrument.
Once we attempt to penetrate the black box, several layers should be pursued; broadly speaking a) the neurophysiological specificity of language functions and their location in the interpreter’s brain; b) the specificity of cognitive processes (both translational and non-translational — memory, lateral thinking, inference, etc.); c) the specific psychological features; d) how they all come together. Crucially, are these natural attributes innate or can all or some of them be acquired? And even if they cannot be acquired, can they nevertheless be developed? In other words, is there in principle room for a didactics of SI?

b) His professional wherewithal

Natural ability is indispensable, but not enough. What are the professional attributes, the specific knowledge and skills required by the task: a) linguistic, b) encyclopedic, c) translational, d) analytical, e) elocutionary, f) communicative?

c) His socio-psychological profile

Are there typical socio-psychological attributes to an interpreter? What is the relative importance of socio-cultural background as an asset/handicap?

9. The didactics of SI

In the light of all of the above. What are the most effective ways of imparting/developing interpretational skills, knowledge and habits? For instance, are shadowing and sight-translation effective exercises? Is it really more effective to teach consecutive before simultaneous? What are the best grammars to teach? And more fundamentally, does (adequate) formal training a) improve, b) deepen, and c) accelerate the acquisition of relevant skills? How do graduates compare to self-made practitioners with similar experience? How do graduates from different schools having different curricula compare? Does their formal training help them develop better and more quickly after graduation?

10. The methodological tools

I am not going to delve into what is definitely without my competence. In the absence of an Interpreter Simulator, researchers are forced unnaturally to deconstruct SI into artificially compartmentalized tasks (down to mental interpreting, as poor Ingrid Kurz 1994). This is a tremendous handicap for which researchers are not to be blamed; on the contrary, that they proceed with such devotion and enthusiasm despite it is most inspiring. One of the main obstacles is the sheer orality of SI. Analysis demands the stability of the written word:
there is an urgent need to develop a suitable transcription method. We ought to
device a universal system akin to that of musical notation.\footnote{I understand that Franz Pöchhacker has developed one for his thesis, but, unfortunately, I cannot read German.}

11. The need for longitudinal studies

An urgent need exists for longitudinal studies of all sorts, from applicants to
a school to veteran professionals. As a case in point, didactic approaches and
tools can only be tested longitudinally; and only over an extended period of time
can formally- and non formally trained practitioners be truly compared. This is
an extremely onerous proposition: it requires, besides the time on the part of
both researchers and subjects, the relevant infrastructure and a hefty budget. I
suggest that the only realistic avenue is through cooperation between research
institutions, AIIC and international organizations with staff interpreters and
many meetings, which, as the most important users, stand to gain the most
from any insights derived from such studies.

12. The consequences for the profession

If nowadays the vast majority of main-stream interpreters have been formally
trained, most of us, their teachers, have not. We have few grandchildren as yet.
At present, interpreters — even most of those formally trained — have scant\footnote{I understand that Franz Pöchhacker has developed one for his thesis, but, unfortunately, I cannot read German.}
declarative knowledge about their activity: they are more at ease discussing
technical, administrative and financial problems than reflecting about the essence
of mediated inter-lingual communication. Even our very students are sceptical of
theory. Thus, the profession is not yet fully professionalised: it is still a lot of
most competent savoir faire and little specifically interpretational savoir.
Practice is based more on intuition than on reflection. The profession will not
have genuinely come of age until it is based on a scientific definition and study
of its object, until it has travelled the same distance from experience to
awareness as other professions, and fully established and articulated the three
indispensable basic components: research of the phenomenon, theoretical
grounding (and didactics) of the discipline and practice of the activity.
Meanwhile, any discussion of work-load, manning strength, working conditions
and proper remuneration will continue to lack a truly scientific basis.
13. SI as a window into the brain

Linguistics only became relevant to translation when translators separated the communicative wheat from the structural chaff. Translators and interpreters — or rather, translatorsologists and interpretologists — have caused fresh air to blow in the linguists’ den. I am sure that SI research is bound to open new and unsuspected avenues into the workings of *homo loquatus*.

Bibliography


