

MEDIUM SHIFT IN INTERPRETATION: DO INTERPRETERS PRODUCE ORAL TEXTS?

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Whereas the end-product of the translator's activity is a written text, by definition the interpreter's task is the production of oral texts, i.e. he works with spoken language. In dealing with the spoken variety of language, Berruto (1994: 38) stresses the need for a preliminary distinction: although the difference between written and spoken language emerges in concrete use, it is in some way independent of the producer of the message (his social status, level of education, etc.) and the language field (including the subject-matter in hand and the whole activity of the speaker or participants in a setting). At least to a certain extent, this difference is determined by the general characteristics of the selected medium and the typical context in which oral communication takes place.¹ In other words, the user's choice of the channel (voice apparatus or writing) bears a direct influence on the surface layer of the message. Moreover, Berruto points out (*ibid.*) that in concrete use the medium variation and field variation intermingle: in most cases deciding which traits belong to the spoken language and which traits are determined by the varieties exploiting the spoken medium is a rather difficult task. In this respect, Monica Berretta (1994: 242) stresses that the medium variation actually embraces all other variations; thus the features that can be said to originate from the channel selection are apparent only in hybrid discourse and other factors influencing the formal characteristics of the text inevitably need to be accounted for.

Linguists generally agree that defining the spoken variety of language *tout court* is a difficult task², also in the light of the lack of data and research in this

1 Berruto speaks of *diafasia*, *diastatia*, *diamesia* and *diatopia* with reference to the Italian terminology of sociolinguistics. A partial translation and adaptation was attempted here on the basis of Halliday's terminology (1978).

2 For example, see Horowitz 1987, who underlines how opinions diverge when the definition of differences between oral and written communicative exchange is at stake. Factors such as the mutual relationship between participants, the cohesive structures that are typical of each variety, the role of context, the procedures used to get across the message become relevant (p. 6). The conclusion is that oral and written language do not constitute unitary constructs. Rather there is much variation and overlap. Oral and written language forms depend upon the purposes

field.³ As regards Italian, Nencioni underlined the problem as early as 1976, mentioning that a comparative and contrastive analysis of the various types of spoken language is at least as useful as the comparison of writing and discourse to investigate the constant features of spoken language (Nencioni 1976: 51). The notion of *continuum*⁴ is introduced: medium variation cannot be resolved in a clear-cut opposition [spoken vs. written]; it is rather conceived as a cline characterised by the co-occurrence of traits (with a different distribution) that may be attributed to both of its extremities. Theoretically, two opposite types of concrete use may be identified having the maximum degree of representativeness: the *parlato-parlato* variety, i.e. casual conversation, and the *scritto-scritto* variety, i.e. planned, formal, written language. On the other hand, it should not (and cannot) be ignored that the distance separating the two extremes is full of different, intermediate concrete uses. For example, besides the typical context envisaging the use of spoken language (all participants are present in the same environment, the conversation is held in turns and speakers make sure that their messages are getting across), different contexts can be imagined, where participants do not share the same environment (e.g. a telephone call) and no feed-back is possible (e.g. radio or television programmes) (Berretta 1994: 242).

Although any text produced by an interpreter may be obviously termed as "oral text", the problem of placing the hypothetical language variety spoken by interpreters along the medium cline is far from resolved. Reference was necessarily made to a "hypothetical language" in the light of the number of factors contributing to determine the features of individual, concrete texts. In other words, the question is whether a section of the *spoken vs. written* language cline may be labelled "interpreted spoken language". In more practical terms, the problem involves finding a set of recurrent traits (or rather, groups of co-occurring traits) distinguishing the "language of interpretation" from other types of discourse.

Much seems to depend upon the selection of criteria aimed at achieving such a distinction. For example, possible common traits of translated and interpreted texts as opposed to other types of "monolingual" oral texts could be taken into

for which they are used and the listener and reader audience that they will serve. Oral and written language can be further broken down into still other discourse types and registers [...] (ibid. 8).

- 3 See Alexieva (1994: 179). Although a classification of text typology is considered vital for a definition of linguistic competence, research in this field focused especially on the written variety. With reference to the specific case of interpretation, mention is made that the majority of spoken language analyses deal with casual conversation in informal and monolingual contexts.
- 4 See Bazzanella (1994: 28). For an exhaustive description of the problem of the *continuum* in Italian, see Berruto 1987.

account.⁵ Although a wide range of potentially relevant criteria may be spotted, one factor seems to be vital: planning. Starting from the assumption that "there is a great deal of overlap between speaking and writing, in the sense that some kinds of spoken language may be very writtenlike, and some kinds of written language very spokenlike", the study conducted in Chafe 1987, while endeavouring to maintain a certain consistency as regards the participants' linguistic competence, identifies four varieties of English (two of which belong to spoken and two to written language: casual conversation, university lectures, private letters and articles to be published) stressing the non-discreteness of the *spoken* vs. *written* variation and the vital role played by planning both in writing and speaking.

Planning appears to be a decisive factor where the frontier between written and spoken language becomes blurred, i.e. in written texts destined to be read aloud in public. Cortelazzo (1985: 87) notices that written texts meant to be read aloud present certain features that show that the addressees' needs have been taken into consideration by the orator. Consequently such texts, albeit written, cannot be "fully included" into the *written language* category. A distinction should be made between written language addressed to readers, written language meant to be read aloud (e.g. conference interventions or official statements),⁶ written language meant to be broadcast (e.g. radio or television news), written language for the stage.

From the point of view of actual oral articulation, this distinction is bound to become more confused since there are different ways of reading a text aloud. As conference interpreters very well know, the speaker may read a previously prepared text without any modification or, more often than not, may more or less respect the general outline of a written text, except for departing from it every now and then to introduce impromptu remarks. Of course, in the case of partial improvisation, linguistic traits at surface level differ from those of written texts simply read aloud. With reference to the behaviour of conference speakers, a classification of the source-text types a conference interpreter may find himself dealing with was proposed by Alexieva 1994, stressing the difference between "(a) previously written texts, which can be *read* or *simulated* as spoken, entailing differences in the use of prosody, pauses and speed of delivery and (b) texts directly generated in the spoken medium"; the latter may in their turn be classified as impromptu or planned speeches. Something similar was attempted

5 By "monolingual oral texts" we mean any oral text that does not involve the rewording of a source text into a different language – e.g. an oral summary a speech made in the same language.

6 In this respect Cortelazzo refers to the German term *vorlesen*, which appears to be particularly effective.

by Kopczynski (1982). His detailed classification of the typical input text is also based on the principle of "planning":

- a) a [sic] unprepared oral monologue or dialogue (a toast, a repartee, free discussion)
- b) a semi-prepared oral monologue with notes (a lecture, a paper, etc.)
- c) a written monologue intended for the spoken medium – reading thereof (a lecture, a report, a welcoming speech)
- d) a written text intended for the written medium – reading thereof (a financial communiqué, a resolution, a draft document, etc.).⁷

Kopczynski concludes that interpreters generally find texts originally intended for the written medium more difficult to render in L2, owing to the "medium shift" involved in the process of interpreting.

The outcome of the (albeit limited) research conducted by Dejean le Féal (1982) on a *corpus* of fifty interpreters is significant. Asked whether they found it easier to follow impromptu speech rather than the reading of a previously written text, the informants showed a clear preference for the former typology. Their preference was justified by problems concerning speed and a monotonous oral delivery and the absence of redundancy and planning marks at surface level. Whereas a remedy to the first two shortcomings may be found in a carefully "recited" reading⁸, the two latter may only be related to the medium selected for the original production of the source-text.

Since the interpreter plays the role of a "privileged" listener (in the sense that he is forced to pay constant attention to what is being said), the difficulties he encounters when dealing with written texts read aloud are likely to be similar to the problems experienced by that part of the audience not taking advantage of the interpreter's services. On the contrary, "planned" spoken language – intended as a selection of the topics to be dealt with, possibly prompted by means of notes, without a previously written text – shows formal characteristics revealing the speaker's planning effort and his attempt to taking into account the listeners' needs. As regards planning, Berretta (1984: 239-240) is surprised at the (relatively) low degree of formality of the texts she analysed (explanatory monologues, e.g. lectures), especially as regards surface-level planning. Another

7 Kopczynski (1982: 256). Meaningfully, the first category does not correspond to "casual conversation", usually referred to as the most representative variety of spoken language, owing both to the field variation (context marked by greater formality) and to the strict formal structures typical of such text typologies (e.g., just consider linguistic formulae used on the occasion of toasts). According to Kopczynski, the most recurrent category in a conference interpreter's career is (c).

8 Many teachers at the SSLMIT in Trieste, when reading exam texts, endeavour to introduce pauses, hesitations and repetitions aimed at providing their reading with a more "natural" elocution.

example is provided by Italian parliamentary speeches (Cortelazzo 1985), whose formality derives from the absence of the most superficial traits of spoken language, especially as regards deixis and morphology, whereas traits at syntactic and textual level are maintained (possibly with a different quantitative distribution as compared to casual conversation (ibid. 116)).⁹

Such differences are certainly amenable to the context in which the communication takes place: even in the absence of real feedback, a receiver *hic et nunc* is always implied. Consequently, regardless of the medium variation (which, in expositive monologues for example, is to be held responsible for greater explicitness achieved through slower delivery, frequent explanatory paraphrases and repetitions) a monologue tends to be more explicit at surface level than a written text.¹⁰ In monologues the need emerges to take into account the listeners' limited memory and ability to decode the source text while the latter is being delivered. It is the difference between *deliberate* and *accidental redundancy* mentioned by Le Féal (1982).

The conclusion may be drawn that, within the context of a conference, the orator may well decide not to take his audience into account. After all, what is said is generally considered more important than how it is said and, in order to clarify what has not been understood immediately, other solutions such as conference proceedings or questions asked during the final discussion may be resorted to.

Can interpreters afford to ignore their audience?

The present article opened with the following, apparently self-evident statement: "the interpreter's task is to produce oral texts". Therefore we feel excused if we quote a remark that may be seen as un-revolutionary: "the simultaneous interpreter is at once both listener and speaker".¹¹ The role of *listener* is implied in the interpreter's function itself, i.e. acting as go-between for the orator and the audience. The aspects related to the decoding process, such

9 See also Danielewicz (1984), who examines the four possible combinations between planned/unplanned and written/spoken language and concludes: "planned spoken language is more similar to unplanned spoken than to planned written language" (page 253).

10 On the contrary, casual conversation tends to be more implicit; see Halliday 1989.

11 Dejean Le Féal (1982: 221). This is the first of the causes explaining why impromptu speech is an easier challenge for the interpreter's work, the other reasons being: "2) "the interpreter acts as receiver of a message intended for someone else" and 3) "the interpreter must fully understand the total sense of the utterances so that he can restate it in his own words in the target language" (ibid.). The most relevant statement to answer the question posed at the end of the previous paragraph is probably n. 2. However the interpreter's role as *speaker* and *listener* will be dwelt upon at length, since they are felt to be central in the present discussion.

as linguistic competence in the source language or the problems posed by the text from the point of view of contents, will not be dealt with here. Rather, interest will be focused on the influence that the listening/decoding process may have on the subsequent (or simultaneous) rendering in the target language. With reference to the factors which have an impact on the surface layer of spoken language, it can be said that the interpreter is spared those tasks that might be included in the general term "macro-planning". In other words, the interpreter is spared the *dispositio*, the phase in which arguments are selected to provide the text with a consistent, logical development.¹² Regardless of field variation, when dealing with the language of interpretation, "casual spoken language" cannot be referred to since the text-producer actually follows an external guideline that is perfectly defined at surface level too (albeit in a different language). Moreover, in ideal conditions, the interpreter should be aware of what subjects will be dealt with, what will be the relevant lexis and, possibly, what are the speaker's views as regards the subjects under discussion.

There is no need to go into detail as regards the way in which the interpreter divides the source text in order to translate it (selection and length of the information blocks, distribution of his attention between coding and decoding, etc.). However, it is fair to say that at "micro-planning" level (i.e. all aspects not included in macro-planning, for example at the level of phrases, clauses and sentences) the interpreter is granted greater room for manoeuvre. An obvious example is the order of the sentence components while translating from German into Italian and vice versa. In the light of such considerations, Kopczynski states that "it can be assured that the output text produced by the interpreter has the form of extemporaneous speech" (1982: 257), where "extemporaneous" means "produced on the spot on the basis of a previously unknown text". Whereas such a conclusion is sufficient for Kopczynski to conclude that "extemporaneous speech has most of the features of impromptu speech", it may be said that he did not fully consider implications of the role played by the interpreter as a *speaker*, not only in the sense of "producer of an oral text", but also "go-between of an oral message meant for an audience".

Whereas the orator may flout the "communicative charity" principle, thus neglecting the needs of the audience at the stage of decoding, the interpreter (except when reading a translation written in advance) is not given such a choice, firstly because the text he produces is, at least to a certain extent, impromptu, secondly because the interpreter's job is mainly determined by the

12 Clearly, this is not the only "facilitation" at this stage: for example, the lexical selection may be considered partly "pre-determined".

need to render the source text decodable to an audience not relying on the necessary linguistic competence to understand the original.¹³

The term EXPLANATORY EFFORT will be used to describe the effort made by the interpreter with a view to the needs of the audience, aimed at providing surface level signals facilitating the perception and decoding of the inner articulation of the message (Berruto 1985: 134).¹⁴ The term PRODUCTIVE EFFORT will be used to describe the interpreter's effort in relation to the planning and production of the target text. As compared to casual conversation, on the one hand planning can be said to be (at least in certain respects) easier, since the source text provides a useful guideline at macro-planning level. On the other, the interpreter's role as *listener* - involving receiving and decoding the source language text - and as *speaker* - translating/encoding the target language text - renders "speaking" quite a difficult business.

Such remarks leads to the identification of possible criteria to analyse the syntactic and textual level in the search for traits that may reveal the position of the "spoken language of interpretation" on the *spoken vs. written* language

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- 13 What is meant here is by no means that the identification of the source text according to the medium variation bears no influence on the target text. Obviously, the reading of a written text will lead to an "interpreted" text that is undeniably in the spoken medium, but also includes traits that do place it far from the extreme of "casual conversation" on the *spoken vs. written language* cline. Nevertheless, the interpreter will never be in a position to produce a fully-fledged written text (i.e. presenting all the characteristics of written language), both because he communicates via the spoken medium and because he is aware of the need for getting the message across to the audience. Moreover, this brief review does not take into account other inevitable linguistic variations. The context of a conference was considered as an undivided whole, which is certainly not true: simply consider all the possible linguistic variations implied in (previously written or planned) interventions as compared to the (impromptu) final discussion, for example. Within a multi-lingual communicative exchange, the question arises of differences in formality of certain traits during the process of translation. Kopczynski recalls that "In terms of levels of usage, written discourse is often associated with formality and spoken discourse with informality and familiarity [...] In interpretation, the effect of this impromptu characteristic can be expressed in stylistic shifts in formality". Similarly, the orator's ability to produce a consistent, correct and possibly elegant text was taken for granted, whereas this is not always the case. The "correcting" function sometimes carried out by interpreters is considered here exclusively for traits relevant to the medium shift.
- 14 As noted above, the EXPLANATORY EFFORT leads to the *deliberate redundancy* mentioned by Dejean Le Féal, although the term "redundancy" is felt to be somehow misleading. For example, among the traits involved in the phenomenon, a lower lexical density might be expected (the notion of *lexical density* is dealt with in Halliday 1989).

cline. With reference to the leading role of the source text, the features of the language of conference interpretation are expected to be comparable to those found in "planned oral texts". Moreover, the principle of "communicative charity" is likely to emerge during the encoding process, thus rendering the message more explicit and "easier" in terms of comprehension/decoding on the part of the audience.

As regards the way in which the "public" character of the text produced by the interpreter is reflected in its formal traits, Viezzi (1996: 73) recalls the role played by cohesion in the development of a text that may be actually intelligible to the addressees. Oral language means that reviewing and checking back on information not captured immediately is impossible, thus the correct use of all available means to make the target text cohesive is of paramount importance.

Cohesion¹⁵ appears to be a privileged field for analysis to account for the linguistic traits with which an interpreter can intersperse his text in order to facilitate planning for himself (while he is also endeavouring to decode the source text) and, at the same time, provide explicit "holds" to the addressees who are endeavouring to grasp the text while it is unfolding. Considering the wide range of available resources, a preliminary study was conducted on a specific micro-trait: the use of demonstrative adjectives and pronouns. The choice fell on demonstratives since they were felt to be particularly revealing in the light of three distinct factors. First of all, they have both an exophoric and an endophoric function (the exophoric function being generally absent in written texts, of limited importance in planned spoken language). Secondly, the system of demonstratives in Italian is undergoing a restructuring process leading to the underexploitation of certain forms and a redistribution of the fields of use. The process does not affect spoken Italian only, but also the variety which was termed *neostandard* by Berruto (1987). Finally, demonstrative adjectives and pronouns may provide an excellent approach to explore textuality. Their endophoric use is an effective means in the hands of speakers to "construct" texts while making their internal cohesive links explicit to the addressee. Moreover demonstrative adjectives may play a role in anaphoric and cataphoric relations involving repetition and synonymy, a factor which appears to be particularly relevant in varieties of spoken language in which the principle of maximum explicitness is vital.

15 According to De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 3), cohesion is one of the criteria defining textuality: "all the functions which can be used to signal relations among surface elements are included under our notion of COHESION". As regards cohesive means in Italian, see Conte 1989 (a). Her distinction between coherence *a parte subjecti* (involving unity of sense) and coherence *a parte objecti* (involving all linguistic means providing textuality) is particularly effective.

The research considered a *corpus* including twelve interpretations from French, German and English carried out during third and fourth year exams at the SSLMIT in Trieste. Candidates taking the exam were all non-native speakers, which means that the material taken into consideration is particularly heterogeneous owing to differences in linguistic competence in the target language and interpreting skills and to the possible number of "crossings" between source language, target language and mother tongue. Consequently, relating certain peculiar uses of demonstratives to the influence of the source text, the candidate's mother tongue or an inadequate command of the Italian language is quite a difficult task. Finally, data included both simultaneous and consecutive interpretations,¹⁶ two different translation procedures clearly affecting the final result of the interpreter's activity.

In full agreement with Snelling (1992: 5), according to whom "a great deal of interpreting pedagogy and recent research on interpretation appears more relevant to source-text comprehension, which is one way of not saying text analysis, than to target-text formulation", the analysis focused mainly upon target language, considering the influence of source-text structures only occasionally. The analysis showed that, except for sporadic occurrences, the paradigm of Italian demonstratives reflected the restructuring process characterising spoken and *neostandard* Italian. There is a limited exophoric use of demonstratives, governed by the simulated source context (i.e. the context in which the exam text was produced originally). On the contrary, data revealed a very widespread use of endophoric pronouns, both referring to individual lexical items and to whole passages (*extended reference* and *text reference*, as in Halliday 1976: 52-53). In general, interpreting students showed the tendency to use demonstratives to replace personal pronouns and provide stronger cohesive elements at surface level in order to opt for co-ordinate structures leading to a subdivision of originally dense information into smaller, easier-to-handle information blocks. Summarising expressions such as *tutto questo* and *e questo* turned out to be remarkably productive.

The same can be said of demonstrative adjectives. Repetition and synonymy also come into play and allow a simple means to avoid the use of the Italian *pronomi clitici*, notoriously difficult to master not only for foreigners, but also for native speakers. General nouns (Halliday 1976) modified by demonstrative adjectives were used to refer back to longer passages. However, the most striking feature is the marked explicitness at surface level, emerging throughout all the texts analysed owing to several means employed. The use of paraphrase is known to be central in oral texts, where cancelling what has already been said is impossible and getting the message across means relying on the listener's

¹⁶ Two simultaneous interpretation from French and German, one from English; four consecutive interpretations from French, two from German and one from English.

memory. Redundancy also emerged from repetitions modified by demonstratives, a typical feature in spoken language as opposed to written texts (especially for Italians, who consider repeating the same word after a short interval a mortal sin).

In conclusion, the analysis of the use of demonstratives confirms tendencies already well known as regards expositive monologues in Italian. The need emerges for providing explicit reference points to prop up text planning and to make the textual flow more explicit at surface level, thus making the job of understating easier for the listener. Which makes us wonder, as Monica Berretta does (1984: 239), whether formality in spoken Italian is governed by rules different from those most people tend to comply with, i.e. those of written language. Although the risk could be run of answering in the affirmative, the whole question of "spoken competence" emerges, the complexity of which stems from the ubiquitous nature of medium variation: subject, participants, context and many other factors affect linguistic choices at the same time as the selection of the medium.

Going back to the results of the present study, the texts analysed often revealed a clear overexploitation of demonstratives¹⁷. But against what background can five occurrences of *questo* in three sentences be considered excessive over normal, "correct" usage? Of course, reference cannot be made to the source text, since it is a specimen of written language.

There is an urgent need for further research into spoken Italian and how its features may be relevant to a qualitative assessment of the Italian produced in an interpreting booth. We share Snelling's view (1992: 3) on the interpreting students' need to adopt a humble attitude when interpreting into a foreign language: "the interpreting student learning to express himself in English as his foreign language has nothing to fear from the search for simple, clear, formal language within safe, universally valid, readily accessible structures". However, it should be stressed that any interpreter can but strive for simple, clear formal, ORAL language. Of course, defining "universally valid, readily accessible structures" in this respect would be an immensely powerful instrument for non-native students in interpretation wishing to translate into Italian. Probably not only for them.

17 An example is provided by the following passage, taken from a consecutive from French (demonstratives are underlined): *E questo coinvolge ... eh ... include anche i cibi - i cibi già preparati, i cibi già cotti. Ehm ... E tutto questo promuove la buona la buona immagine dell'agricoltura in questo settore, quindi nella montagna, e si incoraggia ... si incoraggi - quindi un ... ehm si incoraggia quindi di rafforzare i diversi ehm leggi in questo settore e che altri settori prendano un esempio da questo, ad esempio nel settore dell'artigiano, oppure l'uso del legno.*

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