

WHAT HELPS EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION? SOME INTERPRETERS' VIEWS

By

Janet Altman

Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh

The interpreter's role is, of course, to facilitate communication between participants across linguistic and cultural barriers. But how do they themselves view the contribution which they make? What factors affect their performance? And under what circumstances do they themselves consider they have failed to establish communication between speaker and listener? In order to attempt to address these issues, and to ascertain how interpreters consider that their role might change in the years ahead, a survey of conference interpreters' attitudes to their contribution to the communication process was conducted in 1989 by means of a questionnaire (1). The interpreters' own perception of the factors governing their success in fulfilling their role was elicited and assessed.

Since the respondents constituted a very specific interpreter population, in that all were working for one particular employer when contacted, and in view of the fact that some interesting findings emerged, it was considered worthwhile investigating to what extent the views of a rather different group compare and contrast with those of their colleagues.

We shall begin by summarising the main findings of the first survey, which will be referred to as the "Brussels survey", since it was conducted among EC interpreters in Brussels. Next, we shall describe the collection of data in the second set of investigations, which we shall call the "AIIC survey" as the questionnaire was addressed to members of the professional association. Once certain differences between the two populations have been discussed, the two sets of data and opinions will be compared. Particular attention will be paid to the way in which interpreters view the future of the profession.

The Brussels survey: main findings

Forty interpreters working for the Commission of the European Communities in Brussels, some as

permanent employees and others as free-lances, completed the questionnaire during a one-week period in April 1989.

Over two thirds of them were of the opinion that - even in the context of the EC - cultural differences between speaker and listener constitute a greater obstacle to communication than linguistic ones, as will be discussed below. It was widely acknowledged that communication at international meetings is sometimes hampered when an interpreter fails to convey a particular point. As to why communication does break down, a small majority criticised delegates for failing to make allowances for the presence of interpreters (eg. by speaking more slowly and clearly or using less technical jargon than is normal for them). A rather larger number of respondents admitted that interpreters are themselves sometimes responsible for situations where a listener has failed to grasp a speaker's message as conveyed in the interpreter's version, but three quarters of them felt that interpreters are at least occasionally blamed unjustifiably for communication breakdowns. Distaste for relay interpreting, and the view that its effect on the communication process is overwhelmingly negative, was practically universal.

In terms of specific influences on the interpreter's ability to bridge the communication gap, by far the most crucial factor was considered to be a physical one: the quality of sound transmission. Second in importance came familiarity with the subject matter; performance is also adversely affected when the interpreter has to function without a document which is under discussion. Rather more surprising, perhaps, was the lack of significance attributed by respondents to a clear view of the speaker, something regarded by AIIC as essential. Unexpectedly, and this point would also appear to conflict with the official AIIC view, the recording/broadcasting of an interpreter's output is the least relevant of all

factors. Another interesting finding was that although they were aware of mistakes made by colleagues, respondents demonstrated considerable reluctance to correct or compensate for them. This appears to be one area where communicating the message takes second place in the interpreter's priorities, a harmonious working relationship being paramount.

Perhaps the most remarkable finding of all was the almost universal pessimism of those interpreters who expressed their views about future developments affecting the profession. Most were apprehensive about one of two main trends, namely technological progress (and its consequence, the remoteness of interpreter from client resulting from tele-conferencing) and the spread of English as an international language eliminating the need for others.

The AIIC survey: collection of data

The nature of the target population for the Brussels survey (where the place of work and type of meeting were the common factors) may have been crucial in producing the results outlined above. Alternatively, the opinions held by the Brussels group might be widespread among interpreters generally. An almost identical survey was therefore arranged so as to determine to what extent the findings of the Brussels survey were corroborated by a different population. For the purposes of the second questionnaire, the common features were the respondents' membership of the professional association and their free-lance status. (2) Copies of the questionnaire were sent, by post, to all members of the British Isles region of AIIC who are listed in the handbook as a) active (as opposed to associate) members, b) free-lance, and c) both domiciled and resident in the United Kingdom.

Of the 89 copies distributed (with stamped addressed envelopes for the replies), a total of 54 completed forms was returned within two months of their despatch. It is likely that there was some overlap in the target groups for the two surveys: assuming that some of the AIIC members had already replied to the Brussels questionnaire, the high rate of response (61%) could in fact have been even higher. A copy of the questionnaire and details of responses can be found at the end of this article.

Differences between the two populations

Although it is perhaps inevitable that many members of AIIC (which only relatively practised interpreters are eligible to join) should be more experienced than those working at the EC Commission (where many novices begin their careers), it is striking that as few as 2% of the

former group had been working for just one to four years, whereas 24% of the latter fell into this category. The average amount of experience was

Brussels group: 13.1 years

AIIC group : 19.5 years.

Respondents were invited to indicate their principal target language. Here, a predominance of English and French emerges in the case of both groups, but the UK-based interpreters are much more likely to work bilingually with these two languages than are those in Brussels (see table 1).

Table 1: Respondents' target languages

Brussels	GB 28%	F 18%	D 15%	*
AIIC	GB 33%	F 19%	GB/F 13%	**

* - closely followed by Spanish and Italian

** - Spanish and German come a long way behind

Thus the UK interpreters tend to use a narrower language combination than do their EC-based colleagues. We can take it that, being free-lance, they undertake a wider range of assignments and hence have to deal with more varied subject areas. We can therefore make certain assumptions, to be explored when comparing the two sets of responses: namely that members of the AIIC group work more in bilingual meetings and, consequently, are more accustomed to consecutive and less dependent upon relay interpreting. The enormous variety of assignments undertaken by free-lances (3) could make them more familiar with lapses in communication and more reliant on receiving conference documents. The additional stress engendered by rapid switching of topics, locations and colleagues might lead to fatigue and health problems not experienced by EC interpreters. We shall now examine to what extent these postulates are correct.

Comparison of the two sets of responses

In response to Question 1 (Q1), 42% of the AIIC members considered that the interpreter has a very positive effect on the communication process, whereas only 19% of the Brussels group felt the same. An impression is created that the former are more content professionally, especially if one considers the average length of experience of the respondents concerned: whereas the Brussels interpreters who answered "very positive" to Q1 were somewhat junior (9.4 years' experience), their AIIC counterparts had been interpreting for far longer (19.9 years, i.e. even longer than the overall average: see above).

One might speculate as to the reasons for these discrepancies, but they certainly seem to suggest a higher level of job satisfaction among the AIIC group.

The AIIC members tended to agree with the Brussels group that "cultural differences are a greater obstacle to communication than linguistic ones" (Q2). Some, such as Respondent 19 (R19), find it difficult to distinguish between the two: "Language is the communications tool of cultures, so the two are closely linked: culture is expressed by language. Therefore cultural differences and linguistic differences go hand in hand".

There is, of course, a natural symbiosis between language and culture which makes it impossible to dissociate the one from the other in most instances. But a distinction can be made where cultures differ considerably, as illustrated in the following example. Discussions between a European Christian and an African Muslim might founder on the concept of bigamy: whereas the term is readily understood by both, its cultural significance in the context of their two societies is radically different. The interpreter might wish to intervene more actively than is normal in the communication process so as to clarify the fact that bigamy, though acceptable in the latter culture, is illegal in the former.

AIIC interpreters seemed marginally more reluctant than Brussels-based ones to amplify their interpretations, i.e. to introduce a gloss into their versions so as to explain either linguistic or cultural differences (Q3) (4). Several pointed out that it is almost impossible to do so in simultaneous but that they elaborate much more readily in consecutive interpreting. R6, obviously familiar with interpreting theory (5), explained why she hardly ever added explanations in the case of linguistic differences: "because these should be lost in a correct interpretation - the 'sense' should be conveyed". R37 pointed out that such explanations, both cultural and linguistic, are frequently required when she works between Russian and English but much less so between French and English. Her opinion is endorsed by Alan Melby, who notes (in a recent article on written translation): "of course, closely related languages with similar cultures will demonstrate smaller discrepancies between their meaning systems" (6). It is unfortunate that the AIIC group included only three interpreters of "exotic" languages (two of Russian, one of Japanese), since the supposition that the complexity of the interpreter's task increases with widening cultural and linguistic differences could not be substantiated by evaluating their responses.

There was a high correlation in views on the

subject of breakdowns in communication. 70% of the AIIC group (Brussels 73%) are often or occasionally aware of breakdowns (Q5): particularly, according to R41, "in meetings with lots of languages and relays like in the EEC". R15, however, has experienced such incidents "not infrequently between two speakers of the same language". It should not be forgotten that misunderstandings do often arise even in monolingual discussion for one of several reasons: acoustic problems, lapses in concentration or differences in language usage. British and American English of course provide numerous examples of the last phenomenon. Yet even Irish and British usage differ: for example, the Irish term "semi-state body" (eg. with reference to the airline Aer Lingus) might be meaningless to a British person. It thus appears all the more remarkable that multi-lingual, multi-cultural communication is so successful so much of the time. Furthermore, Daniel Gile points out with the aid of an enlightening anecdote that what he calls the "functional requirements" of listeners play a large part in determining whether or not they understand the content of an interpreter's utterance: in other words, communication can break down for one group of listeners whilst succeeding for another (7).

The responses to Q4 seem to imply that delegates to EC meetings make fewer allowances for the presence of interpreters than do those on the private market: 61% of AIIC members stated that allowances are made often or occasionally (Brussels 44%). The difference might be partially explained by the fact that the UK-based interpreters tend to work more in consecutive interpreting, where the interpreter is more visible and hence, as two of them pointed out, delegates are more considerate. Nonetheless, R36 stated dejectedly: "Usually we're part of the furniture. Occasionally we're considered".

The AIIC interpreters are more willing than their Brussels colleagues to admit to another cause of breakdowns: interpreter mistakes (Q7). 77% of them (Brussels 67%) experience such incidents often or occasionally. It is unlikely that the AIIC colleagues, having been assessed by their peers before being admitted to the professional association, make mistakes as a result of inexperience or incompetence. We could therefore posit that the mistakes are attributable to the impenetrability of some of the technical topics with which they have to deal.(8). About three quarters of each population considered that interpreters are all too often blamed unjustifiably for breakdowns (Q6). R34 highlighted the way in which, as one of the Brussels respondents put it, interpreters are "scapegoated": "even when not

using headphones, delegates refer to interpreting as the source of 'hiccups in the communication process'.

In response to Q8, the more experienced group of interpreters showed similar reluctance to those at the EC to correct or compensate for mistakes made by their colleagues (Q8: "hardly ever/never": AIIC 80%; Brussels 82%). As already noted, we could hypothesise as to the reason why: interpreters are eager to avoid any incident which risks marring the vital harmony in the booth, something identified under Q10/l as being a factor which greatly affects their ability to perform (see below). One of the more junior AIIC members noted modestly: "I think colleagues have to compensate for mistakes I make more often!"

The question as to whether or not an interpreter can improve on the quality of an original speech (Q9) gave rise to numerous interesting comments. Generally, the consensus was that s/he is indeed capable of doing so: "Interpreters can be more articulate than delegates and can improve [the original] if they also master the subject." This applies particularly in two cases: a) "in consecutive, by making it more concise and coherent", and b) when the speaker has a less than complete command of the language s/he is speaking: "especially out of English [i.e. when working from English] which is in my experience spoken as a foreign language 80-90% of the time." However, there were several statements along the lines of "can improve, yes, but the interpreter's function is to reproduce the original speech." One even went so far as to say that to take such action is to "betray the speaker to some extent". The issue raised here is what respondents regard as the limits to their function as communicators: is it appropriate, for example, to convey to a listener the (correct) impression that a speaker has a halting, irregular delivery or is incapable of structuring his/her thoughts in an orderly fashion? Surely not, since the interpreter's role is to communicate ideas, and to do so as effectively as possible. It would therefore seem legitimate to present a speech more eloquently than the original speaker without being guilty of "betraying" him or her.

The effect of relay interpreting on the communication process (Q11) is judged by 57% of the AIIC group to be negative or very negative, although as R22 pointed out, the result "can be at either end of the scale: with a very good relay, very positive; with a bad one, disastrous!" "Competent and calm" is how R26 describes a good relay. The AIIC respondents were rather less sanguine than the Brussels group about the

effect of relay interpreting on their own work (Q12): just 50% (Brussels 71%) found it to be beneficial. One gave details of the technique which she employs when acting as a relay source: "I become more concerned to produce above all a clear, comprehensible statement, possibly at the expense of some accuracy or details if a choice must be made (eg. because of a very fast speaker). Also I tend to use simpler or less colloquial speech, idioms, etc.". 91% "hardly ever or never" prefer working on relay to interpreting "direct" (Q13) although, as several respondents said, the quality of the interpreter serving as relay is crucial.

One of the very few comments on the subject of training was made by R7 in conjunction with this point and indicates that relay interpreting can in fact have a positive effect on the communication process: "I am shocked to find that some "professors" deter beginners from taking relay even when their knowledge of the language spoken is insufficient and when taking relay from a colleague who is specially qualified - eg. by familiarity with a technical subject - would improve the finished product." Whether or not we agree with the above statement, relay work is a "necessary evil" (R31) to which the trainers of interpreters might consider devoting more attention than hitherto. If, as emerged from both surveys, a change in interpreting technique is desirable when one is acting as a relay source, it might be useful for novices to have received some instruction in this technique

Turning now to the individual factors which, according to the practitioners consulted, have the greatest impact on the interpreter's ability to bridge the communication gap (Q10), they are shown below in descending order of importance. (Figures in brackets relate to the responses to the Brussels survey.)

1. familiarity with subject matter (2)
2. quality of sound transmission (1)
3. discussion of an unavailable document (4)
4. speaker's speed of delivery (7)
5. quality of speech (3)
6. clear view of speaker (10)
7. delegates speaking a language not their own (8)
8. interpreter's state of fatigue (5)
9. speaker using interpreter's strongest foreign language (6)
10. interpreter's state of health (9)
11. whether the interpreter is being recorded/broadcast (11).

The greatest discrepancies between the two sets of findings relate to points 4, 6, 8 and 9 above. Easiest to explain is point 9: as is clear from table 1, the AIIC interpreters use a narrower range of foreign languages than do those

in Brussels, which means that they are less likely to distinguish between stronger and weaker languages in their own combinations. Contrary to our supposition (above) that the AIIIC group might suffer more from stress-related problems of fatigue, this factor (point 8 above) has a much less significant impact on their ability to bridge the communication gap than is the case for the Brussels group. Similarly, the interpreter's state of health (point 10) comes lower down the list. Perhaps it is their greater experience which enables them to cope better with fatigue, although R40 remarks: "the interpreter needs to make sure he/she is not in a state of fatigue!"

One might also have expected the more experienced practitioners to be less disturbed by a speaker's speed of delivery, and yet this is obviously not the case: the differing opinions which emerge under point 4 could possibly be attributable to the nature of the tasks performed by the two groups of interpreters: there are many more occasions on the private market than at the EC Commission (where spontaneous discourse is the norm) when it is necessary to interpret from an oral rendering of a specialised written text. In these circumstances high speed can make it virtually impossible for interpreters to communicate any message at all. It is relevant, in this connection, that top priority is attributed by AIIIC members to familiarity with subject matter (point 1): one imagines that they have these difficult, technical conferences in mind. Their ability to perform effectively is also marginally more dependent upon receiving meeting documents (point 3) than is the case for the Brussels group; when dealing with a number of unfamiliar, technical disciplines in quick succession, documents become a life-line which is less essential if working regularly within one institution, however broad its range of business.

The virtual irrelevance to the Brussels group of a clear view of the speaker contrasted surprisingly with AIIIC prescriptions. Yet the second survey illustrated that members of the Association do indeed consider that a clear view helps them to perform effectively (point 6). One respondent rated it as enormously important in consecutive but somewhat less so in simultaneous. Two recent publications have addressed this issue: Monique Lebharr Politi's experiment using student interpreters and video-recordings led her to conclude that; "*l'interprète semble tirer profit de la vue de l'orateur uniquement dans le cas d'un discours improvisé*" (9). And in his review of Linda Anderson's new book, Daniel Gile states that in the course of the author's experiments: "Contrairement aux attentes fondées sur la *"sagesse populaire"*,

aucune différence significative n'a été mise à jour dans les prestations avec et sans vidéo." (10). Gile nevertheless adds that these results constitute insufficient evidence that previous assumptions were unfounded. It should also be noted that video screens do not have the immediacy or direct impact of "live performances", and that such experiments can hardly simulate the reality of the conference room. But, with the advent of tele-conferencing, this is undoubtedly a field where interpreters will be obliged to adapt to changing circumstances. Thus both the views of individuals and the professional body's stipulations may well also change.

The interpreters were invited to list any other factors which significantly affect their performance (Q10/I). Some commented on the physical surroundings: size of booth, adequate air supply and lighting. R30 referred to the relatively common situation where one might interpret all day and yet never hear delegates expressing themselves in one's own target language: "Language balance: it is important to get "feedback" in the target language during the meeting, to ensure that the message is getting across, and to hear expressions used in their proper context."

It is true that an unequal spread of languages in use at a conference can lead to a feeling of isolation resulting from the absence of any tangible response to one's own output. In other words, it is impossible to confirm the success of one's attempts to communicate effectively. Delegates' utterances are also an invaluable source of terminology. An English-language interpreter could experience the situation described by R30 during an EC meeting on wine production: delegates from major producer countries refer to "VQPRD" (French, Italian) or "Qualitätswwein b.A." (German), but the correct English term is revealed only if a UK or Irish representative takes the floor ("quality wines p.s.r.").

"The speaker's skill as a communicator" was a factor raised by some respondents; documents being read aloud at high speed is a particularly unwelcome phenomenon. R29 expressed concern about an "obtuse speaker thinking he's clever! Obscure references (i.e. private jokes)". Most of the contributions to both surveys under Q10/I, however, focused on the relationship with colleagues, as indicated by R25: "conviviality with your partner. Good vibes and co-operation create a good working atmosphere in the booth". R16 identifies some welcome and unwelcome practices in which fellow interpreters engage: "Colleagues fidgeting in the booth: filling their

nails, making noises with documents etc. Colleagues can also be very helpful: with figures, finding the right document, etc."

The way ahead

The wealth of comment supplied in the AICC survey in response to Q14 ("How are future developments in the profession likely to affect the interpreter's role in the communication process?") provides a valuable insight into the way in which interpreters see the profession moving in the future. It is generally accepted that, for better or for worse, major changes do lie ahead. R6 was part of a tiny minority who stated "I don't see any dramatic changes in the near future". R7's amusing reaction was: "[future developments are] probably like motor cars - good IF properly handled". Overall, the UK-based respondents seemed rather less pessimistic about perceived trends than did the Brussels group, and this tallies with the more positive attitude evident in responses to Q1.

Technological change was a recurring topic, and more specifically tele-conferencing: "Remote tele-conferencing is a thing of the future when we will have to learn to be away from clients. Psychologically damaging. Quality of work bound to suffer because of non-involvement." (R19). It is R25's view that "only very good interpreters would be able to stand the additional stress". On the other hand, not all interpreters see only the negative side of such developments: "good prospects for work in TV/radio/satellite communications"; "in-booth access to data bases would improve accuracy". Just one respondent cites personal experience of working with advanced communications: "I have done a meeting on the phone: three-way link between San Francisco, London (me) and Moscow. I should imagine that it will become much more common"

"The increasing use of English is likely to make us all redundant by the year 2000!" This rather unrealistic prediction, in fact expressed by a few Brussels interpreters but only one AICC member, is directly contradicted by R30: "I foresee an increased demand for interpreters, at least in Europe and at least in the non-technical area (i.e. political and commercial)".

Another pair of directly conflicting statements was made by R33 and R35 respectively: "cost saving and wider use of English (French to a lesser extent) will mean more bilingual meetings"; "I seem to be working less in bilingual meetings than in the past". The majority of comments relating to the language spread at meetings tended to concur with the latter rather than the former. Indeed, there was widespread concern that "mass interpretation such as

happens in the EEC (Commission) can detract from quality by underlining quantity". One interpreter, however, was not quite so convinced that quality is thereby doomed: "The effect could be a lowering of quality as interpreting becomes more routine, or conversely clients who have experienced quality interpreting may become more demanding. Communication, after all, is not just about ensuring that the bare bones of the message are conveyed".

A very noticeable distinction between the developments envisaged in April 1989 and in the second quarter of 1990 related to political changes unimagined at the time of the Brussels survey: "The present development is towards larger numbers of languages - this seems set to continue with the probable expansion to the east and south-east of the Community." R20 predicts not that the absolute number of languages in use will rise, but that a major shift in language policy will be engendered: "The advent of E. European countries will increase the use of relay, increasing the number of passive languages and probably reducing the number of active languages used."

In the light of what has been said above on the subject of relay work, such a trend would presumably be regarded as detrimental to the interpreter's ability to communicate effectively. R20 seems to have had EC interpreting arrangements in mind when writing the above: it is generally accepted that, if additional members were to bring new languages to the EC, the number of active languages used in meetings could not be allowed to rise indefinitely.

As already indicated above, hardly any respondents touched upon training, but R26 did wish "to stress the importance of good interpreters' schools". There was disagreement between the only two who referred to the acquiring of additional languages by practising interpreters. According to R46, "too much insistence on crash courses will lower standards". R21 does concede the "danger of learning too many C-languages too rapidly - hence inability to aid cross-cultural communication", yet s/he adds "but in-service training might remedy this".

In addition to language enhancement, some of the crash courses referred to above are designed to impart specialist knowledge in fields such as medicine or the law. "Greater specialisation will be required", writes R5. R46, on the other hand, is of the opinion that certain technical disciplines are so impenetrable to interpreters that they are unable to perform successfully, which will result in meetings being held without them, presumably in English: "Insufficient problem awareness

and/or inadequate preparation will lead to interpreters no longer being required for certain types of work (eg. medical)."

Should interpreters therefore specialise in certain fields? R34 expresses a personal opinion: "I am not too keen on 'specialised interpreting', i.e. someone who only does medicine-related subjects, or computing, or aircraft engineering". This attitude tallies with the findings of Nancy Schweda Nicholson's latest survey, namely that: "there is agreement that being a generalist is far more desirable, especially from an economic point of view". Some respondents went so far as to say "it is also better for one's mental health to be a generalist" (11).

Finally, three disparate statements were representative of a mood of apprehension about the future. Firstly, the risk of anonymity and remoteness (which was much more forcibly conveyed by the Brussels group) preoccupies R31: "with the notable exception of consecutive interpretation, I fear that we may become a standardized component of the communication process". Secondly, the fear that quality could be jeopardised. An old hand with 24 years' experience perceives a lowering of standards: "too many newcomers to the profession bring about a drop in quality as competition for jobs increases". And thirdly, one of these newcomers (three years in the profession, quality unknown) issues a warning with reference to the level of fees charged by interpreters: "I think the major factor is greed - if we get too greedy and prima-donna-ish they'll hold all international-organisation meetings in English alone!"

The way ahead for the profession is therefore difficult to predict. Several likely future developments have been identified, the major ones being technological change and a proliferation of languages in use at international conferences. Opinions diverge quite widely on, for example, the future of bilingual meetings and the need for specialisation. The upheavals in Eastern Europe present a new and exciting dimension for the future of the profession.

Conclusion

The populations participating in the two surveys differed in various ways: employment status, place of work, quantity of experience and apparent degree of job satisfaction.

Despite these differences, however, a high correlation in the views of the two groups emerged. It was slightly disappointing to discover that the AIIC interpreters, like those in Brussels, work almost exclusively with European languages and were therefore unable to provide any greater enlightenment on the subject of cultural and

linguistic obstacles to communication. They did, however, shed a little more light on consecutive interpreting, responding more readily to the invitation at the start of the questionnaire to "refer separately to consecutive where appropriate". No doubt they work more often in consecutive than is the norm at the EC Commission. Delegates on the private market, and particularly at consecutive meetings, seem to take more account of the presence of interpreters than do those at the EC. Interpreters are more likely to add explanations or glosses to their versions when working consecutively.

Opinions on the causes of breakdowns in communication were broadly similar: although interpreters admit to being the guilty parties at times, they consider that they are too frequently blamed unjustifiably, probably in an attempt at face-saving by delegates whose attention had momentarily lapsed or who wish, for whatever reason, to interrupt the proceedings. Both groups are reluctant to intervene when their colleagues make mistakes, which is undoubtedly attributable to the desire for an agreeable working atmosphere within the booth. Strained relations with colleagues can be very damaging psychologically. When invited to identify additional factors which significantly affect their performance, this was the one most commonly listed.

Interpreters are confident of their ability to improve upon the quality of a speech (particularly in consecutive), but they hesitate to do so for fear of overstepping the limits of their role in the communication process. Their comments on relay interpreting are overwhelmingly negative: not only do they intensely dislike using it, but most note that it has an adverse effect on their performance.

The factors which have the greatest impact on respondents' ability to bridge the communication gap are familiarity with the subject matter and the quality of sound transmission. Nine other factors are listed and an attempt is made to explain certain differences in the importance attributed to them in the Brussels and AIIC surveys: for example, the more experienced interpreters are better able to cope with fatigue, but are more adversely affected in their work by the speed at which papers are delivered at the technical meetings which they service.

Perhaps the most interesting comments were made in response to the question on future developments in the profession (Q14), which was left deliberately open-ended so as to try to elicit a wide range of statements. There were two main differences between those made by Brussels and by AIIC respondents: the latter (whilst

expressing some apprehension) tended to be rather less pessimistic about technological developments; they also took account in their predictions of recent political changes in Eastern Europe. The proliferation of languages within the EC and a concomitant drop in standards is a major source of concern. Various statements identified the future of bilingual meetings, interpreter specialisation, and training courses as areas of likely change, without any general consensus emerging.

Finally, we should not forget that both surveys involved only limited numbers of interpreters. Yet it is reassuring to discover, in comparing the two sets of responses, that disillusionment does not increase with length of service. It is, on the other hand, rather alarming that the more junior group (Brussels) is so comparatively despondent. There is a temptation to conclude that, at least in the case of practitioners working predominantly with English, a UK domicile, free-lance status and a variety of assignments (some of them preferably bilingual and/or in consecutive) make for a contented conference interpreter.

Notes and References

(1) ALTMAN, Janet, "Overcoming Babel: the role of the conference interpreter in the communication process", in *Babel: The cultural and linguistic barriers between nations*, ed. by R. Kölmel & J. Payne, Aberdeen University Press (1989), 73 - 86.

(2) The overlap between the two groups must not, however, be overlooked: some of the Brussels interpreters are free-lance, i.e. they presumably work for clients other than the EC, whilst some of the UK AIIIC members undoubtedly work for the EC at times.

(3) For example, the author's own clients during a three-month period of 1982, while domiciled in Rome, included freemasons, Ministers of culture, medical specialists, bankers, trade unionists, cement manufacturers and clergy.

(4) See ALTMAN 1989 for definition/discussion of terms such as "quality", "breakdowns in communication", to "amplify" one's interpretation, etc.

(5) In her first book, *L'interprète dans les conférences internationales*, Danica Seleskovitch writes of: "(le) phénomène le plus important que comporte l'interprétation: la disparition de la forme verbale qu'avait emprunté le message de l'orateur et l'apparition à sa place d'une 'pensée interprète'. Paris, Lettres Modernes Minard, 1968 (p. 160).

(6) MELBY, Alan, "The mentions of equivalence in translation", *Meta* 35/1 1990, 207 - 213 (p. 210).

(7) GILE, Daniel, "La traduction et l'interprétation comme révélateurs des mécanismes de production et de compréhension du discours", *Meta*, 35/1 1990, 20 - 30 (p. 21).

(8) See, on this point, QUICHERON, J.-B.: "L'interprétation de congrès techniques ou l'art de l'impossible", *Meta*, 26/4 1981, 396 - 398.

(9) LEBHAR POLITI, Monique, "A propos du signal non verbal en interprétation simultanée", *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 2/1989, 6-10 (p. 8).

(10) GILE, Daniel, "Simultaneous interpretation: contextual and translation aspects", un travail expérimental de Linda Anderson", *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, 2/1989, 70-72 (p. 71). (No publication details are provided for the book itself.)

(11) SCHWEDA NICHOLSON, Nancy, "An interpreter survey: the specialist/generalist controversy II", *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, 2/1989, 38-45 (p. 44).

ANNEX - THE QUESTIONNAIRE

HOW DO INTERPRETERS PERCEIVE THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS?

- Please a) base your comments on simultaneous interpreting and refer separately to consecutive where appropriate;
b) make full use of the differential scale in your responses, and give as many details/examples as possible.

Into which language do you normally work?
For how many years have you been an interpreter?

1. What effect do you think the interpreter has on the communication process ?

very positive / positive / neutral / negative / very negative
42 59 16 0 0 (% response)

2. Cultural differences are a greater obstacle to communication than linguistic ones.

true / partly true / partly false / false
15 58 4 23

3. I amplify my interpretation to explain

- linguistic differences	often / occasionally / hardly ever / never
	12 65 23 0
- cultural differences	often / occasionally / hardly ever / never
	16 43 31 9

4. Delegates to meetings make allowances for the presence of interpreters.

often / occasionally / hardly ever / never
23 38 38 0

5. I am aware of breakdowns in communication during meetings.

often / occasionally / hardly ever / never
6 64 30 0

6. Interpreters are blamed unjustifiably for breakdowns in communication.

often / occasionally / hardly ever / never
15 59 26 0

7. Breakdowns in communication are attributable to interpreters' mistakes.

often / occasionally / hardly ever / never
11 66 23 0

8. I need to correct/compensate for mistakes made by colleagues.

often / occasionally / hardly ever / never
2 19 72 8

9. The interpreter can improve on the quality of an original speech.

often / occasionally / hardly ever / never
33 55 9 2

10. To what extent do the following factors affect your ability to bridge the communication gap? (5 enormously, 4 = considerably, 3 = somewhat, 2 = hardly, 1 = very little)

	5	4	3	2	1(%)
a) - your familiarity with subject matter	67	31	2	0	0
b) - discussion of a document not available to you	40	42	17	2	0
c) - clear view of speaker	15	26	44	9	6
d) - quality of sound transmission	59	37	4	0	0
e) - speaker's speed of delivery	30	52	15	0	2
f) - whether s/he uses your strongest foreign language	8	29	3	14	18
g) - quality of speech	15	49	28	8	0
h) - delegates speaking a language not their own	13	2	54	6	0
i) - your state of fatigue	6	40	38	12	4
j) - your state of health	6	21	53	17	4
k) - whether you are being recorded/broadcast	6	11	28	19	34
l) - other factors (please specify)					

11. What is the effect of relay interpreting on the communication process ?

very positive / positive / neutral / negative / very negative
 2 13 28 50 7

12. What is the effect on your work when you know you are being used as a relay?

very positive / positive / neutral / negative / very negative
 4 46 38 12 0

13. I prefer working on relay to interpreting "direct"

often / occasionally / hardly ever / never
 2 6 26 65

14. How are future developments in the profession likely to affect the interpreter's role in communication process ?

Any further comments will be most welcome.
 Thank you very much indeed for your co-operation.