

# IS IT POSSIBLE TO TRANSLATE INSTITUTIONAL TERMS? A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

By

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## 1. Introduction

In this article I will discuss some of the options open to the interpreter when faced with a message formulated in a typically national political and administrative jargon and involving typically national institutional concepts, which have little or no direct equivalence in the target language.

In examining this specific professional situation, I will try to show that interpreting, in this case, is necessarily based on a proper comprehension of the concepts to be rendered, that it has very little to do with translating "words" and is characterised by a fair degree of intercultural mediation (1).

More specifically, I will focus on working situations observed in a relatively new area of international contacts, that of "parliamentary diplomacy" (to use a definition recently coined by the Speaker of Italy's Lower House ... or should I say, following the Italian form, "President of the Chamber of Deputies"?), with particular reference to the English-Italian language pair.

## 2. Preliminary remarks

Parliamentary diplomacy consists of a network of relations established by national parliaments (through their Speakers, Standing Committees, bureaucrats, etc.) in order to compare - and possibly harmonise - legislation and procedures as well as, on a loftier plane, to bestow a measure of democratic legitimacy to international and supranational developments.

Members of Parliament - and the bureaucrats assisting them - are, by their very nature, a nationally- ,indeed, locally-minded group of people, in that their careers have developed in a thoroughly national context and are inextricably linked to domestic or constituency-wide issues and interests.

By the same token, national institutional, legislative and administrative concepts - and the

language used to describe them - tend to reflect deep-seated underlying attitudes with respect to the way in which each nation conceives its public life.

In this connection, I would like to quote a remark by Ralf Dahrendorf on alternative forms of government and different institutional approaches: "Democracy in Britain is about effective government. It is not about fair, let alone proportional representation of the views of the people, nor is it about the checks and balances by the separation of powers" (2). To my mind, this quotation clearly highlights the chasm separating different national institutional options and helps us understand why the task of bridging the cultural and linguistic gap (our job) in certain areas of communication can be so strenuous.

In Italy, for example, the need for constant compromise (proportional representation, coalition governments, etc.) has produced a brand of political and administrative language which is particularly ambiguous, cryptic and involved (3).

## 3. Problems and proposed solutions

A somewhat extreme, but by no means exceptional, example of Italian "constitutionalese" is the following excerpt from a speech by a top official of Italy's Lower House (intended for simultaneous interpretation!): "... occorre rilevare che la disposizione costituzionale ... non pone il divieto nei confronti del governo di annettere preventivamente il carattere di mantenimento o meno della fiducia alla approvazione o alla reiezione di uno strumento regolamentare ...", simply meaning that "the constitution does not prevent the government from tabling the motion of confidence in relation to any procedure under the Rules".

When institutional concepts without direct equivalence are embedded in this type of context, the interpreter's task becomes quite formidable: not only will he/she have to predigest the legal-

political gibberish and to use the insiders' jargon in both languages as much as possible, but he/she will also have to scan the other system and language for some sort of correspondence: only thus will interpretation achieve its true purpose, enabling two groups with a scant knowledge, if any, of the counterpart to enjoy a smooth and "natural" exchange and encouraging them to pursue their analysis in depth and to discuss the peculiarities of their respective systems; on the other hand, should the interpreter adopt a "minimalist" approach (and refrain, out of choice or necessity, from going beyond a purely linguistic performance), communication will remain formal and superficial.

Thus, while the "single-party government" and the "inner cabinet", mentioned by Ralf Dahrendorf during the same conference, do not raise particular comprehension problems, they still require an effort by the interpreter who should come up with the jargon forms of "monocolore" and "consiglio di gabinetto", even though, strictly speaking, other translations are possible.

What are the resources available to the interpreter who is trying to work his/her way through the maze of abstruse concepts and, moving one step further, to elicit a natural cultural response in his/her audience?

Obviously, the interpreter should be given a chance of becoming familiar with the subject-matter (which, as in other cases, does not mean solely memorising lists of words) in order to try and establish a degree, however limited, of comparability. A few examples, related to a comparison of the U.S. and Italian budget processes (State finances are an exquisitely national domain) may be helpful in clarifying this idea of comparability; I have chosen the following among many: "controllo preventivo di merito della Corte dei Conti", "previsioni di competenza e di cassa", "Ways and Means Committee" (4).

Before finding out (by research or feedback) whether comparable concepts exist in the other system, you may, in some of these cases, seek refuge in EEC institutions and terminology, since community harmonisation has created a conceptual "corpus", which has smoothed out a number of national differences and can, therefore, provide that common denominator which, alone, makes communication possible; it can, furthermore, be reasonably assumed that EEC terminology is more accessible and better known among interpreters than national statute-books. "Previsioni di competenza e di cassa" might thus be rendered with "commitment and payment appropriations" - which is derived from EEC budget terminology, but is also comprehensible to a U.S. listener; "controllo

preventivo di merito della Corte dei Conti" may be translated as "supervision of the Court of Auditors (EEC equivalent) with respect to the appropriateness of spending decisions"; in both cases, however, I have experienced a breakthrough in the quality of communication as soon as I started using the standard U.S. forms of "budget authority and outlays" (previsioni) and "pre-audit" (controllo preventivo).

Let us now consider the problems raised by the rendition of "Corte dei Conti" and the "Ways and Means Committee". As a matter of principle, institutions without direct equivalence should be left in the original form; this, however, does not do much to foster comprehension and communication between national groups possessing little or no mutual knowledge and who may find it difficult even to identify sounds uttered in another language.

It may, therefore, be appropriate for the interpreter to establish a parallel with corresponding or similar institutions in the other system. Thus, with respect to the "Corte dei Conti" and the "Ways and Means Committee", reference should be made to the "General Accounting Office" and the "Commissione Finanze", both being institutions that have a considerable impact on the lives and minds of politicians and government officials (the former being responsible for auditing public spending and the latter for taxation matters).

The fact that I have so far mentioned only examples relating to the U.S.A. does not mean that similar problems do not exist in British-Italian communication: a sentence like "the Standing Orders of the House of Commons set out the order of reference for the Scrutiny Committee" (uttered by a British parliamentary official) raises exactly the same questions: comprehension of the subject-matter and knowledge of the relevant "jargon" in both languages are required in order to produce: "il Regolamento (here, again, the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure would offer a standardised solution when working into English) della Camera dei Comuni definisce il mandato della Commissione Affari Comunitari" (5).

I am not suggesting that the interpreter should deliberately gloss over substantial institutional differences for the sake of a nice translation or to avoid repeating the original several times. I do think, however, that our role in these situations should not be "limited exclusively to reproducing participants' utterances" (6) but should also be to offer parallels and, therefore, "to provide a certain amount of cultural mediation" (7).

At times, however, it may be more appropriate either to leave the original or to translate

institutional terms "literally"; I have, half-jokingly, hinted at this aspect in the introduction by providing two alternatives for "il Presidente della Camera dei Deputati" as "Speaker of the Lower House" or "President of the Chamber of Deputies".

The former option is, to my mind, the normal one, to be used as a general rule; still, if your audience is composed of experts in comparative constitutional law, it may be preferable to use the "mould" to avoid creating any confusion (the powers of a "Speaker" being, for example, not as extensive as those of a "President"). It should be noted, however, that the choice of the "mould" option requires a careful evaluation by the interpreter.

#### 4. Conclusions

Having adopted a practitioner's approach, my conclusions tend to be pragmatic (I would be very grateful if other colleagues could confirm - or criticise - my comments on the strength of a more scholarly approach).

I believe there is no single solution to the problems posed by the translation of institutional terms; that the interpreter must possess a not inconsiderable knowledge of different constitutional systems and that a workable solution (at least in my experience) may well be a mix of the different options - EEC harmonised terminology, mention of corresponding or similar concepts in the other system or "mould", blended according to the background and "tastes" of the audience.

How does this specific aspect fit into a broader view of our profession?

Even though I am not inclined to draw general conclusions on the basis of subjective experience, I hope that this contribution will be read as one more piece of evidence of the complex, intercultural, meaning-based nature of our profession.

I would not wish to conclude without asking whether these questions are of any relevance for teachers and students: in this respect, I think that students will benefit enormously from an early exposure to this type of interpreting situations as a way of making them aware (and wary) of conceptual traps; they will realise that learning endless lists of words is only a means to an end and they will, hopefully, become immune from the most dreaded disease of all: "psittacism" (8).

It will be then "safe" for them to train in the more automatic skills related to the high-speed "surface" processing and rendering of inputs which account for a substantial portion of our professional activity and which do not require or, for that matter, permit a constant querying of the

message.

#### NOTES

(1) This is, obviously, one of the basic issues about interpreting (and the teaching of it), which crops up unfailingly in articles written from different angles: in *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, number 2, 1989, for example, this topic is dealt with or hinted at in a number of contributions; see "Letter to the Editors" by Christopher Thiéry and reply by Laura Gran and John Dodds; Morris R., "The Trial of Ivan John Demjanjuk - A Case Study"; Gile D., "Simultaneous Interpretation: Contextual and Translation Aspects. Un travail expérimental de Linda Anderson".

(2) The lecturer is comparing the British, Italian and U.S. systems. Dahrendorf R., *British Institutions and the Construction of European Democracy*, Ufficio Pubblicazioni della Camera dei Deputati, Roma, 1989.

(3) For an extensive discussion of the topic, see *Atti del Convegno "Dimensioni linguistiche e distanze culturali nell'interazione sociale e politica"*, SSLM, Trieste, 1986, and, in particular, the contributions by John Dodds and Peter Newmark.

(4) These examples are drawn from my direct experience or observation when working for U.S. and Italian parliamentary delegations.

(5) As a matter of curiosity, the committees which are responsible for EEC matters within national parliaments are called such disparate names - they differ even between the two Houses of the Italian Parliament - that their official designation is the anodyne "specialised bodies".

(6) MORRIS R., *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, N. 2, 1989, p. 31.

(7) *ibid.*

(8) See "Letter to the Editors" by C. Thiéry, note 1 above.