

## **NON NOVA, SED NOVE**

By

Karla Dejean le Féal  
ESIT, Université de Paris III

In the course of a recent review of the literature on conference interpretation over the last decade I was particularly struck by the amount of disagreement which exists among theoreticians, among teachers and even among practising interpreters. No doubt such differences of opinion exist in every field and no doubt they are, if not exactly welcomed, at least accepted as a necessary evil: if there were full agreement about everything, there would be no progress. But disagreement can be carried to the point where it becomes harmful – where it leads to wars of religion and personal hostilities. And this is unfortunately, I think, what is happening in our profession.

I would like in this article, first, to analyse, in as dispassionate and impartial a fashion as possible, one of the most contentious issues in each of three areas: theory, teaching and practice. These are:

- 1) Theory: The question of whether or not deverbalisation exists (to my mind the most contentious issue)
- 2) Teaching: The student selection process, where selection is permitted (this being, to judge from literature, the most controversial issue)
- 3) Practice: The question of whether simultaneous interpretation into the B language should be fostered or discouraged (this as I see is the issue with the greatest implications for the future of the profession)

On the basis of this analysis I would then like to make some suggestions, for what they are worth, as to how each of these issues might be resolved.

The fact that the literature is so long on back-biting and distortion and so short on persuasive findings is surely due to the fact that all authors, experiment-minded or otherwise, are hard put to come up with proof. Translation science is not one of the exact sciences and does not lend itself to their methods. In translation science, the let's-just-try-it-and-see-what-happens approach to experimentation is not appropriate, as even the most dyed-in-the-wool experimenters among us will admit. Gile himself describes the multifactorial nature of interpretation performance as a hindrance to experimental research (1990a: 35). Interpretation is a complex phenomenon; when the complexity is lost sight of in designing experiments, selecting methods and evaluating results

– as I believe it was in some of the experiments that have been done to date – the conclusions are bound to be erroneous or incomplete. Furthermore, there is, as Gile also points out (1990b: 227), a severe shortage of subjects willing to participate in such studies, so that statistical studies, where they are possible in the first place, cannot be very meaningful.

I therefore believe that the only answer is "ecumenical" cooperation. What is needed is a joint effort on the part of everyone involved to develop experimental models and evaluation criteria which all can accept and use. Only in this way will it be possible to compare and exchange results, this in turn being the only way at least partly to compensate for the lack of large statistical series.

#### 1. Deverbalisation: Fact or Fiction?

##### *Analysis*

The "théorie du sens" developed in the latter part of the 1970s by Seleskovitch (1975, 1978: 333-341) and Lederer (1981a) and its linchpin, deverbalisation, were immediately challenged by a number of colleagues. The main objection to the theory was and is that the authors failed, in the opinion of their critics, conclusively to prove it. Seleskovitch and Lederer had in fact supported their hypotheses with a number of recorded interpretations, but their critics apparently did not feel that the recordings constituted sufficient proof.

And this is where the matter still stands today, as neither the authors nor those who subsequently adopted their theory have been able to devise other methods of proving to the satisfaction of the sceptics that deverbalisation does in fact occur. The only thing that has changed is the terminology: Seleskovitch (1975, 1978: 333-341) and Lederer (1981a) referred in their early work to deverbalisation but in later publications (1981b) they have tended to use the term "conceptualisation" instead. They have never explained why they changed the terminology, so there is no telling whether the change was stylistic and/or semantic or whether the use of a more conventional term was simply an attempt to defuse criticism (which it didn't).

There is thus still violent disagreement over the "théorie du sens", at least partly because, although no one has ever proved it, in the view of its critics no one has ever disproved it either. One suspects (though this is really neither here nor there) that the failure to disprove it is due to the same causes as the failure to prove it.

To overcome the standoff and resolve the underlying issue, what is needed is, I think, a closer look at the concepts used by those who support and those who oppose the theory, to see to what extent the two are in fact at cross purposes. All theoreticians, including the opponents of the "théorie du sens", acknowledge

that cognitive analysis is necessary in interpretation. How does it differ from deverbalisation/conceptualisation? As I understand it deverbalisation/conceptualisation is simply cognitive analysis carried to completion – the same concept, but more thorough. Indeed, there is no indication in the literature of how far cognitive analysis should go. Reference is always to "a certain" cognitive analysis of unspecified depth. As Gile (1990a: 33) puts it: "Seleskovitch's idea (1975) that a deverbalization stage occurs somewhere between the perception of the original speech and the reformulation of its 'message' into the target language by the interpreter (a stage at which only the 'meaning' remains in the interpreter's mind without any trace of its linguistic vehicle) is far from proven, however it does lead teachers to instruct students to move away from the linguistic structure of the source language speech and reformulate the ideas it contains in their own words, thus forcing them to analyse the speech and making them adapt their own speech to the listeners". If the critics of the "théorie du sens" were to spell out how far cognitive analysis should go, then a more objective discussion of the difference between the two concepts should be possible.

Furthermore, determination of the quantitative difference between the two concepts would no doubt make it easier to discuss the remaining differences of opinion, including the objection often made that the "théorie du sens" unduly neglects language-pair aspects, which the critics consider essential. In the view of those who hold with the "théorie du sens", on the other hand, deverbalisation makes language-pair aspects irrelevant. It would seem, in fact, that most of the disagreement on the subject of the "théorie du sens" boils down to a fundamental difference of opinion as to the depth of cognitive analysis.

#### *Suggested research*

My suggestion would be for the supporters and opponents of the "théorie du sens" jointly to work out a method for determining the depth of cognitive analysis needed for high-quality interpretation. It will then be possible to see what degree of cognitive analysis separates the two schools of thought, and on that basis better to understand the difference in approach with respect to language-pair aspects.

#### 2. Student selection

Most teachers of interpretation feel that some selection is needed in order to keep groups of students at least moderately homogeneous. Selection procedures differ from one school to another – some schools being undergraduate, some

postgraduate, and the legal situation varying according to country. Selection is either official, by means of aptitude tests or probationary courses (Weber 1989: 161-166), or else informal, by means of student counselling (Neff 1989: 127).

There is disagreement on how to design the aptitude tests in such a way as to minimise the number of inappropriate admissions and rejections.

D. and M. Bowen (1989: 109-125) and Renfer (1992: 173-184) advocate a written translation exam alone or in combination with an oral examination. Harris (1992: 259-268), on the other hand, reports (without further explanation) that his school will henceforth not be requiring such an aptitude test.

There is likewise a lack of consensus on the design of the oral examination. The basic disagreement here is over the ability of a "shadowing" test to predict outcomes. Moser (1983: 318-325), Longley (1989: 105-108) and Harris (1992: 259-268) recommend "shadowing", whereas others reject it – Seleskovitch and Lederer (1989), Thiéry (1989: 3-5) and Van Dam (1990: 5-6) on grounds that it is inconsistent with what is being tested and Kurz (1992: 245-250) with reference to the findings of neuro-psychological research.

The striking thing about student selection, apart from the degree of disagreement on the subject, is that there is no statistical data measuring the efficiency of the test(s) described; and this despite the fact that it should not be too difficult to establish such statistics and that they would be meaningful even when based on small series. It may well be that the various schools have such statistics but are not publishing them for fear that a comparison of schools based on such statistics would be distorted by differences of level, duration and intensity of training and differences of evaluation criteria used in exams. I think however that it would be instructive if individual schools were to report, along with the particulars of their selection procedures and training courses – level, duration, intensity of instruction – the success rates at their entrance, final and any intermediate exams. This would show how well targeted each school's selection procedures are, at least by that school's own standards, and would give at least some indication of the risk of false negative results associated with that particular entrance test.

#### *Suggested research*

I suggest that those schools which are interested in a statistical comparison of entrance and final exam results should exchange data and perhaps go on from there to make a joint effort to improve their selection procedures. I think this kind of cooperation would be beneficial not only to the schools themselves but also to those giving the entrance tests in that it would enable them better to judge and counsel applicants.

### 3. Simultaneous interpretation into the B language

#### *Analysis*

The practice of simultaneous interpretation into the B language is widespread and some schools teach it. I think, however, that it poses a question of fundamental importance: is the trend toward interpretation into B helping or hurting the profession?

Different authors give different answers to this question. Feldweg (1989: 199) feels that interpretation into B is acceptable, especially into English with its high proportion of users who are non native speakers. "An English audience is very tolerant", says Feldweg (1989: 199). Snelling (1989: 141-142) and Stenzl (1989: 23-26) even consider that the practice is a service rendered to customers: "the interpreter has to be aware of the lowest common denominator of linguistic comprehension", says Snelling (1989: 142) for example. I myself on the other hand tend to feel that by taking this tack we are digging our own graves since lowest-common-denominator conference English is something virtually anyone can manage without our help. The trend at a growing number of conferences is to provide interpretation into English only or not at all; and I wonder if this is not a result of our own ill-advised actions (Déjean le Féal 1990: 154-160).

One's approach to interpretation into the B language will of course depend on how one feels about the loss of quality it entails. And here again there is a wide difference of opinion as published in the literature. All authors, with the exception of Denissenko (1989: 155-157), consider the quality of simultaneous interpretation into B to be lower than that of interpretation into A, but there is no agreement about how much lower it is, or how low is too low. Salevsky (1983), Dalitz (1983: 157-162), Cartellieri (1985: 252-254), Ilg (1989: 200), Stenzl (1989: 23-26), Snelling (1992) and Giambagli (1993: 81-93), for example, see the loss of quality as perfectly acceptable, whereas Seleskovitch/Lederer (1989), Thiéry (1989: 199) and Déjean le Féal (1981: 380-403) consider it so serious as to warrant inflicting the practice on users only when it cannot be avoided (as when the language is one that is rarely used in conferences so that interpreters into A do not exist).

Probably the reason opinion is so divided on the subject is that so few studies have been done to measure differences of quality of interpretation into A and into B, and to gauge how sensitive users are to these differences. The survey of users' expectations recently commissioned by AIIC hardly touched on the issue and the only research on the subject to date are studies by Pöchhacker (1995: 73-90) on prosodic and rhetorical aspects and Giambagli (1993: 81-93) on a number of lexicographic and syntactic points. Both authors, it should be noted, confirmed that quality differences exist with respect to the aspects they were studying.

*Suggested research*

Further studies are needed on potential loss of quality with respect to comprehensiveness, clarity and style. Cooperative studies would be useful here since, in view of the dearth of colleagues willing to participate in studies of this type (as pointed out by Gile 1990b: 227), they would enable us to obtain more reliable results in a shorter period of time.

At the same time it would be interesting to do a survey of users of a broad range of languages on both the institutional and the private market, to determine whether tolerance of interpretation into B does indeed differ from one language to another. A survey could also show whether the trend for interpretation to be considered as a luxury rather than as a necessity, especially on the private market where English is increasingly used as a lingua franca, does or does not increase the need for quality (Déjean le Féal 1996: 24-29).

Only when we are in a position to measure actual and perceived loss of quality of interpretation into B will we be in a position to judge whether the practice is beneficial or harmful to the profession. Belts are being tightened in many if not most countries and organisations, and the market is shrinking. We need to think about how to shore up our profession and avoid unnecessarily putting it at risk.

In conclusion I would again stress that my suggestions are made with a view to converting destructive conflict into constructive cooperation. At a time when we depend on each other more than ever we must work together to protect our profession from the effects of circumstances we cannot control.

## References

- Bowen D. & Bowen M. (1989): "Aptitude for Interpreting", in *The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation*. Ed. by L. Gran & J. Dodds, Udine, Campanotto, pp. 109-125.
- Cartellieri C. (1985): "Kurse zur Einführung ins Simultandolmetschen bei Intertext", *Fremdsprachen* 4, pp. 252-254.
- Dalitz G. (1983): "Deutsche erweiterte Attribute beim Simultandolmetschen", *Fremdsprachen* 3, pp. 157-162.
- Dejean le Féal K. (1981): "L'enseignement des méthodes d'interprétation", in *L'enseignement de l'interprétation et de la traduction*, Cahiers de traductologie 4. J. Delisle (éd.), Ottawa, Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, pp. 380-403.
- Dejean le Féal K. (1990): "Some Thoughts on the Evaluation of Simultaneous Interpretation", in *Interpreting - yesterday, today, and tomorrow*. Ed.

- by D. & M. Bowen, Binghamton, State University of New York, pp. 154-160.
- Dejean le Féal K. (1996): "Etre interprète de conférence, aujourd'hui", *La Tribune*, Nouvelle série, 19/5, pp. 24-29.
- Delisle J. (réd.) (1981): *L'enseignement de l'interprétation et de la traduction*, Cahiers de traductologie 4, Ottawa, Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa.
- Denissenko J. (1989): "Communicative and Interpretative Linguistics", in *The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation*. Ed. by L. Gran & J. Dodds, Udine, Campanotto, pp. 155-157.
- Dollerup C. & Loddegaard A. (eds.) (1992): *Teaching Translation and Interpreting*, Amsterdam-Philadelphia, Benjamins.
- Feldweg E. (1989): Discussion in *The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation*. Ed. by L. Gran & J. Dodds, Udine, Campanotto, p. 199.
- Giambagli A. (1993): "L'interprétation en relais: une perte d'information?", *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 5, pp. 81-93.
- Gile D. (1990a): "Scientific Research vs Personal Theories", in *Aspects of Applied and Experimental Research on Conference Interpretation*. Ed by L. Gran & C. Taylor, Udine, Campanotto, pp. 28-41.
- Gile D. (1990b): "Research Proposals for Interpreters", in *Aspects of Applied and Experimental Research on Conference Interpretation*. Ed by L. Gran & C. Taylor, Udine, Campanotto, pp. 226-236.
- Gran L. & Dodds J. (eds.) (1989): *The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation*, Udine, Campanotto.
- Gran L. & Taylor C. (eds.) (1990): *Aspects of Applied and Experimental Research on Conference Interpretation*, Udine, Campanotto.
- Harris B. (1992): "Teaching Interpreting: A Canadian Experience", in *Teaching Translation and Interpreting*. Ed. by C. Dollerup & A. Loddegaard, Amsterdam-Philadelphia, Benjamins, pp. 259-268).
- Ilg G. (1989): Discussion in *The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation*. Ed. by L. Gran & J. Dodds, Udine, Campanotto, p. 200.
- Kurz I. (1992): "Shadowing Exercises in Interpreter Training", in *Teaching Translation and Interpreting*. Ed by C. Dollerup & A. Loddegaard, Amsterdam-Philadelphia, Benjamins, pp. 245-250.
- Lederer M. (1981a): *Les fondements théoriques de la traduction simultanée*, Paris, Minard (Lettres Modernes).
- Lederer M. (1981b): "La pédagogie de la traduction simultanée", in *L'enseignement de l'interprétation et de la traduction*, Cahiers de

- traductologie 4. J. Delisle (éd.), Ottawa, Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, pp. 65-74.
- Longley P. (1989): "The Use of Aptitude Testing in the Selection of Students of Conference Interpretation Training", in *The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation*. Ed. by L. Gran & J. Dodds, Udine, Campanotto, pp. 105-108.
- Moser-Mercer B. (1983): "Testing Interpreting Aptitude", in *Die Theorie des Übersetzens und ihr Aufschlußwert für die Übersetzungs- und Dolmetschdidaktik*. Hrg. v. W. Wills & G. Thome, Tübingen, Narr, pp. 318-325.
- Neff J. (1989): Discussion in *The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation*. Ed. by L. Gran & J. Dodds, Udine, Campanotto, p. 127.
- Pöchhacker F. (1995): "Slips and Shifts in Simultaneous Interpreting", in *Topics in Interpreting Research*. Ed. by J. Tammola, Turku, Centre for Translation and Interpreting, pp. 73-90.
- Renfer C. (1992): "Translator and Interpreter Training: A Case for a Two-Tier System", in *Teaching Translation and Interpreting*. Ed. by C. Dollerup & A. Loddegaard, Amsterdam-Philadelphia, Benjamins, pp. 173-184.
- Salevsky H. (1983): *Allgemeine und spezielle Probleme des Simultan-dolmetschens als einer spezifischen Art der Redetätigkeit* (Dissertation), Berlin, Humboldt Universität.
- Seleskovitch D. (1975): *Langages, langues et mémoire*, Paris, Minard.
- Seleskovitch D. (1978): "Language and Cognition", in *Language Interpretation and Communication*. Ed. by D. Gerver & H.W. Sinaiko, New York-London, Plenum Press, pp. 333-341.
- Seleskovitch D. & Lederer M. (1989): *Pédagogie raisonnée de l'interprétation*, Paris, Didier Erudition.
- Snelling D. (1989): "A Typology of Interpretation for Teaching Purposes", in *The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation*. Ed. by L. Gran & J. Dodds, Udine, Campanotto, pp. 141-142.
- Snelling D. (1992): *Strategies for Simultaneous Interpreting*, Udine, Campanotto.
- Stenzl C. (1989): "From Theory to Practice and from Practice to Theory", in *The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation*. Ed. by L. Gran & J. Dodds, Udine, Campanotto, pp. 23-26.
- Thiéry C. (1989a): Letter to the Editors, *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 2, pp. 3-5.



- Thiéry C. (1989b): Discussion in *The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation*. Ed. by L. Gran & J. Dodds, Udine, Campanotto, p. 199.
- Van Dam I. (1990): Letter to the Editors, *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 3, pp. 5-6.
- Weber W. (1989): "Improved Ways of Teaching Consecutive Interpretation", in *The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation*. Ed. by L. Gran & J. Dodds, Udine, Campanotto, pp. 161-166.