

Consecutive Interpreting at a Literature Festival

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a descriptive focus on consecutive interpreting (CI) of interviews in English for an Italian-speaking audience at the annual Mantua Literature Festival in Italy. Introductory remarks on how this relates to more widely studied interpreting scenarios are followed by an overview of practical arrangements for CI at the Festival. Short extracts from interviews with authors are then examined, in each case comparing the English original with a transcription (and back-translation) of the Italian interpretation. A number of features are discussed (e.g. establishing a rapport with the audience, authors' views on their characters, emotional participation), with tentative conclusions about the interpreter's approach and priorities in such cases.

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on examples of consecutive interpreting (CI) from English into Italian at the annual Literature Festival held in Mantua (Italy), the aim being to illustrate the diversity of communicative situations and needs addressed by the interpreter in such settings. While thorough qualitative evaluation of the interpretations is beyond the scope of this chapter, some comments are made on their communicative effectiveness in relation to the original speeches. For example, features such as additions are singled out to indicate how the interpreter might use a non-literal approach with a view to maximizing impact. In the last part of the chapter, a number of issues which are raised by discussion of these points are briefly illustrated with reference to the views of various scholars in the field of interpreting.

2. THE DYNAMICS OF INTERPRETING FOR WRITERS

A useful starting point is a recent report by Marc Orlando (2011) on his experience of CI from French into English at the Auckland Writers' Festival. His perspective on the interpreter's role at such events is that it can be considered a distinct category of interpreting, for which he proposes the name "literary interpreting".

Orlando's paper is to be appreciated as a contribution to the growing awareness of working modalities and environments which do not fall neatly into the broad, conventional categories of interpreting. In such a perspective, studies of interpreters at work in settings such as literature festivals bring to mind Franz Pöchhacker's (2002) view that it is appropriate to situate different forms of interpreting along a "conceptual spectrum", rather than sort them into predictable and separate pigeonholes. Pöchhacker's "spectrum" model ranges from conference interpreting in an international setting to what could broadly be called community interpreting, within a given community, system or institution; however, the author recognizes the inevitably "fuzzy" nature of some distinctions and underlines that ultimately "interpreting as a socio-communicative practice can and should be seen as a unified concept" (2002: 96).

CI, the focus of this chapter, is a good example of the conceptual fuzziness described by Pöchhacker. As one of the classic modalities of conference interpreting, there might be the temptation to associate CI above all with the demands of protocol and diplomacy; but this would make no provision for its use (particularly with short turns and little, if any, note-taking) in contexts like mediation or court interpreting. Another important consideration for the purposes of this study is that pinning CI down too strictly as a form of conference interpreting

surely offers a restrictive and unrepresentative view of what happens when the consecutive interpreter spends an hour or so on stage alongside an author.

My own experience as an interpreter at a literature festival has spanned a period of more than ten years at the Mantua “Festivaletteratura”. From this perspective, the demands and dynamics of interpreting in such a setting can by no means always be readily identified with Orlando’s description of “literary interpreting”. Indeed, it often appears difficult to identify clear and consistent features which make interpreting for writers appreciably different from interpreting for personalities in other walks of life.

This view is prompted by two basic considerations concerning the interviews which might be interpreted at a writers’ festival: (1) at venues like the Mantua Festival, the writers are not necessarily literary authors, but in many cases historians, biographers, essayists, journalists, or experts in fields like economics or international affairs; (2) even when the writer is a novelist, poet or playwright, parts of the interview or presentation will often foreground topics or content not strictly related to literature (e.g. the writer’s perspective on politics or other topical issues, simple comments to help establish a rapport with the interviewer and audience).

3. INTERPRETING AT THE FESTIVAL: ORGANIZATION AND FORMAT

Before examining some brief extracts from interpretations recorded at Mantua, it is useful to give an overview of how interpreting is organized and carried out there. The Festival, which was first held in 1997 and runs for five days in early September, now comprises over 200 “events”. Many of these take place outdoors, usually in the courtyard of a historic building, either with overhead cover or with the possibility of moving indoors in the event of rain. In most cases the “event” is an interview, reading or presentation involving one or more authors, but there are also films and concerts; in addition, the programme is complemented by major authors’ press conferences. The writers involved are mostly Italian-speaking; for those who are not, interpretation is provided in order to ensure that they can be followed by a largely Italian-speaking audience. To give an idea of the extent to which interpreting is used, 88 of the 226 events at the 2010 edition were interpreted. Since these events occasionally featured more than one author, a total of 92 authors were actually interpreted, with the following language breakdown: 62 English, 15 French, six Spanish, two German, two Turkish, two Swedish, two Portuguese, and one Japanese. The numbers for some of these languages (particularly English and French) include authors using them as non-native speakers – examples of this will be found in the small sample of interpretations from earlier editions examined below. Finally, in addition to these events with interpretation,

a small number of interviews and readings at the 2010 Festival were conducted solely in the language of the author concerned and not interpreted into Italian.

The classic format for events with interpretation is a one-to-one interview with an author, lasting about an hour and a quarter. The interview is usually covered by a single interpreter, seated alongside the author; where several authors are involved, interpreters are added accordingly. Throughout the interview, the interpreter provides the author with whispered interpretation of questions asked in Italian by the interviewer or by members of the public, and then uses a microphone to interpret the author's answers consecutively into Italian. Each interpreter might work at up to three such events during a typical day and evening at the Festival.

Interviewers' comments and questions are ideally short and to the point, so as not to encroach on authors' microphone time, though not all interviewers are equally sensitive to this unwritten rule. A knowledgeable interviewer's comments can of course be greatly appreciated by the audience, as was the case in 2007 when Sicilian writer Vincenzo Consolo discussed the historical novel "A Sultan in Palermo" with its author Tariq Ali.

The interviewers and writers, like the audience, are generally perceptive of the interpreter's role in ensuring that those listening have access to the content and spirit of the interview. This makes them on the whole extremely cooperative in keeping authors' speech turns within a maximum duration of a few minutes – and often considerably less. Repeatedly alternating ten or so minutes of speaking time for the author and the interpreter in turn would detract from overall continuity, and almost certainly from the quality of interpreting too. On the other hand, very short turns with a sentence-by-sentence alternation of author and interpreter might sometimes prove successful but, on balance, would probably tend to curtail the rhythm of both if kept up for a long time.

In terms of credits, the interpreter's name is announced when s/he takes the stage with the interviewer and author, and is often acknowledged again at the end when thanks are expressed by the interviewer. It is also increasingly the practice that the Italian translator of the author's books is publicly acknowledged, particularly if s/he is present among the audience.

4. INTERPRETING AT THE FESTIVAL: EXAMPLES

Transcriptions of several brief extracts from interpreted interviews recorded at Mantua will now be examined. While there are elaborate and detailed systems of transcription covering a variety of speech features (e.g. pronunciation, intonation, false starts, pauses, precise timing of various points in the flow of speech, overlapping of turns in a dialogic setting), the focus in this case is on content and a simple verbatim transcription has thus been the preferred option. An impor-

tant point regarding the transcribed extracts is that, as samples of extemporaneous speech, they should not be judged according to the formal conventions of the written word. For this reason, the transcriptions are not punctuated or otherwise “polished” to the standards of carefully edited prose.

4.1. *Breaking the ice*

As explained above, the writer’s focus is often by no means literary during the hour and a quarter s/he is on stage. A first example of non-literary content is communication intended to establish a rapport with the audience, as at the beginning of an interview with English novelist Jonathan Coe during the 2007 Festival. After a brief overview of Coe’s work, the interviewer asks him to comment on the enigmatic title of his novel “The Rain Before It Falls”. As often in such cases, the author prefaces his answer with some words of appreciation for the welcome he has received at the Festival; he then elicits a delighted reaction from the audience by saying that he wants to photograph them with his mobile phone, as proof to friends in the U.K. that he has a growing following in Italy. The gesture of taking the photograph is accompanied by the remark: “so today I’m going to make some proof because everybody has been taking my photograph and now it’s your turn.” The Italian interpretation of this segment explicitly states that the photograph will be taken with a mobile phone, which Coe has mentioned a moment earlier but does not repeat here. This part of the message is thus rephrased as follows: “*permettete adesso che con il telefonino io capovolga i rapporti*” (literally “allow now that with the mobile phone I invert the [respective] positions”, freely translatable as “now let me use my mobile to turn the tables”), before conveying the request “*sono stato oggetto di fotografie adesso permettete che io vi faccia la foto*” (literally “I have been the object of photos now allow that I take a photo of you”). It is noticeable that, apart from the non-literal interpretation of “now it’s your turn”, the interpreter expresses the ideas in a slightly different order from the original. Probably this is because a short, humorous speech turn of this kind will tend to be interpreted from memory, not from notes, the priority being to convey the message’s gist, tone and impact, not the exact sequence of ideas. On the recording, it can be clearly heard that the interpreter is laughing as he relates this message – in other words, the author’s use of humour as an ice-breaker has involved not only the audience but also the interpreter in the light-hearted mood he creates to ensure a feeling of pleasure and participation for those attending.

4.2. *Talking about favourite characters*

Comments like Jonathan Coe’s in the extract described above are admittedly only a marginal part of the interview as a whole. However, even when the discussion

focuses on writing and books the writer's perspective and register are often not strictly literary. In genres such as the detective novel, the writer might be asked to comment on the characters s/he is most readily associated with. In such cases, the main concern will often be to discuss how characters fit into overall plot dynamics and into the reader's enjoyment of the book, rather than examine stylistic nuances.

An example of this can be seen in a 2006 interview in which crime writer P.D. James is asked why Inspector Dalglish, one of her best known detectives, is not accompanied by a slow-witted assistant like Conan Doyle's Dr. Watson. The writer's answer pinpoints the role of a Watson-like figure in a detective story as that of asking questions from an uninformed perspective similar to the reader's, and explains why this convention becomes superfluous in her novels:

[...] in the books there is a moment when the team come together to discuss the case so that in a sense if there are any questions to be asked they would be raised by the junior members of the team we don't really need a Watson.

The interpreter's task here is thus to convey information and a certain degree of explanation/argumentation. Interesting features of the Italian interpretation are the handling of the word "junior" and the final comment "we don't need a Watson". In the first case, Italian has different equivalents of "junior" according to the sense in which it is used – i.e. hierarchical inferiority, or (as in this case) limited experience. The interpreter accordingly opts for the expression "*di minor esperienza*" ("of lesser experience"). In the second case, the interpreter concludes with the impersonal expression "*quindi non serve un Watson*" (literally "thus is not necessary a Watson"). In the English original, the cause-effect relationship between the presence of junior detectives asking naïve questions and the possibility of dispensing with Watson can be understood from the simple juxtaposition of the two concepts and the speaker's intonation. The sense could be clearly expressed in the same way in Italian, but the inclusion of the consecutive "*quindi*" ("thus") reflects the frequent preference for explicit expression of cause-effect links in Italian discourse.

One finding of an empirical study of CIs from English into French by a small group of trainee interpreters in Canada is that "the interpreters' versions express coherence markers more explicitly than the original" (Bastin 2003: 182 – my translation from the French original). Since Bastin (*ibid.*: 178) clarifies that his working definition of coherence markers includes syntactic links like conjunctions, the interpreter's use of "*quindi*" in interpreting P.D. James' conclusion about Dr. Watson reflects the same tendency. The settings in the two cases differ in at least two respects (trainee vs. professional status of the interpreters, French vs. Italian as the target language), and in any case involve only a very small number of interpreters, but they do suggest the interest of further studies on how far the consecutive interpreter may introduce discourse markers not present in the original.

4.3. A broader perspective: theatrical traditions

In the setting of a literature festival, even where the focus of the author's comments becomes more literary, this does not always imply that the interpreter's job is to convey nuances of written style and expression. A good example of this occurs in a 2007 interview at Mantua with Nigerian Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, who speaks at one point about the commonalities of various apparently unrelated dramatic traditions such as classical Greek tragedy and the Yoruba theatre of his native country:

[...] the gods of Greece and Yoruba gods the Pantheon you find they are virtually the same mischief same rascalities same cruelties same beneficences.

The main point to be conveyed by the interpreter here is similarity in artistic diversity, expressed by reference to the two traditions taken as examples of this. Interestingly, in this case too the interpretation includes a small addition to the original – possibly to be considered a useful introductory gloss, but possibly a way of buying time to cover a lexical search for suitable ways of saying “mischief [...] rascalities [...] cruelties”. The item added by the interpreter, just before the translation of this sequence as “*la crudeltà la meschineria*” (“[the] cruelty [the] meanness”), is the statement “*ci sono sempre le stesse emozioni e motivazioni*” (literally, “there are always the same emotions and motives”). “Mischief” and “rascalities” are practically synonymous, and not necessarily “easy” words to find against the time constraints of interpretation; possibly the interpreter intends to convey them by the more general reference to “*emozioni e motivazioni*”, but while doing so hits on – and decides to include – the single equivalent “*meschineria*”. Whatever the reason, the interpreter's addition here can be seen as “punctuating” the development of ideas more fully than the original. As such, it goes in the same direction as the use of “*quindi*” in the previous example. That said, it is not my intention here to assess whether this is actually helpful to the listener.

4.4. Meanings and nuances

Even if comments focusing on features of literary language do not occur very often in my experience of interpreting for authors, metalinguistic comment is quite frequent. Unlike the situations described so far, this obviously does require the level of attention to words and nuances of which Marc Orlando speaks.

An example of this occurs in the interview with Soyinka, when a question about his idea of happiness prompts him to underline the distinction between “happiness” and the less emotively charged concept of “fulfilment”. The interpretation maintains the same separation, between “*felicità*” and “*realizzazione*” respectively. When Soyinka speaks of how a writer can go beyond artistic fulfilment and attain the rarer condition of true happiness, he comments:

[...] whether on the stage or isolated with your laptop or if you're still one of those old-fashioned people who refuse to recognize technology you know your pen pencil and rubber if during that process one were guaranteed the lack of unpleasant interruption like politics yes I think that'd be happiness.

The interpretation in this case has a number of interesting features. First, the expression “one of those old-fashioned people” is restrictively – but colourfully – interpreted as “*uno scrittore uno scriba vecchio stampo*” (literally “a writer a scribe old-style”). Second, the tools of the old-fashioned writer’s trade (“pen pencil and rubber”) are maintained literally as “*penna matita e gomma*”, preserving the visual detail of the original. More important, the prominence Soyinka gives to the word “happiness” by placing it in final position in this speech turn is reflected in the Italian: “*penso che quello per me costituirebbe la felicità*” (literally “I think that that for me would constitute [the] happiness”).

In terms of the interpreter’s role in the Soyinka interview, a distinctive feature of this event was that the author was interviewed by an English native speaker. This is a rare occurrence at the Festival and means that, instead of alternating whispered interpretation into English of questions in Italian with CI into Italian of the author’s answers, the interpreter provides CI into Italian of both questions and answers.

4.5. Conveying emotion

Some interviews present the interpreter with the challenge of conveying emotional intensity. This can be expressed in a variety of ways. Different degrees of emphasis, or of simplicity, can be equally effective means of communicating emotion, according to the speaker’s style and the context. A case in point, illustrating the emotional force of plain, relatively unadorned expression, is the 2007 interview with South African writer Antjie Krog. The focus of the event is Krog’s account of her experience as a journalist during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was responsible in the late 1990s for investigating the injustice and brutality of the South African apartheid regime. Linguistically, an interesting feature of the interview with Krog is that she is a native speaker of Afrikaans but on this occasion expresses herself through the medium of English. This may account for the plain, simple style she uses to telling effect when she comments on the horrors narrated to the Commission. For example, in describing the deposition of a man whose wife was shot, Krog is struck by his referring to the blood stain on the dying woman’s blouse as a red butterfly. Krog comments here on the importance of the man’s choice of expression:

[...] then his psychologist afterwards said it took him four years to arrive at the word butterfly and the moment he used the word butterfly she knew that he was on the road to recovery.

The interpretation of this segment is less concise than the original, for two reasons. First, “his psychologist” becomes “*la psicologa che si era occupata del caso*” (literally “the psychologist who had dealt with the case”) – an expansion which is possibly superfluous, but might be seen as well suited to the conventions of educated Italian speech. Interestingly (though this does not affect the length of the interpretation), the fact that the psychologist is a woman is necessarily specified in the feminine suffix of the Italian word “*psicologa*”, as opposed to the masculine form “*psicologo*”. A second reason for the length of the interpretation is that the interpreter does not maintain the almost naïve – but very effective – repetition of the short phrase “the word butterfly”, opting the second time for the formulation “*l’usava per descrivere questo momento di angoscia di orrore*” (“[he] used it to describe this moment of anguish of horror”). This direct, explicit reference to the feelings aroused is linguistically more elaborate than the simple repetition of the original speech, though it might not pack quite the same emotional impact.

Another example of how Antjie Krog strikes a strong note by stating her case very simply can be seen in the following extract:

[...] the mother whose child died fighting for apartheid was testifying next to the mother whose child died fighting against apartheid.

This part of the interview is given immense force by the repetition of the relative clause “whose child died fighting ...”, with the contrast between “for apartheid” and “against apartheid” underlining the one important difference between two families bonded by a tragic destiny. The interpreter in this case uses a near repetition, “*della madre che aveva perso un figlio che lottava a favore dell’apartheid [...] di un’altra madre che aveva perso il figlio combattendo contro l’apartheid*” (literally “of the mother who had lost a son who struggled in favour of apartheid [...] of another mother who had lost her son fighting against apartheid”). At the same time, the change of verb (“*lottava*” in the first case, “*combattendo*” in the second) marks a small variation not present in the original. This embellishment by the interpreter might be prompted by the general preference in educated Italian for synonyms rather than repetition of the same word or expression. As in the previous example, it is interesting here to think about whether the stylistic elaborateness of the interpretation is as effective as the simplicity of the original.

In the same interview, Krog speaks at length about the conciliatory attitude of South African blacks towards their former oppressors. She illustrates this by commenting on the attitude of Archbishop Tutu, the Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

[...] with us someone like Archbishop Tutu constantly didn’t make white people evil but said they are human beings like us what has happened to them that they have lost their humanity how can we change them into becoming human again.

The interpreter organizes the message here in a slightly different way from the original. First, he creates explicit continuity with the argument about separation of good and evil which leads up to the discussion of Tutu, by stating: “*l’arcivescovo Tutu non ha mai posto le cose in questi termini*” (“Archbishop Tutu never stated [the] things in these terms”). As in previous examples, this reflects a tendency to introduce explicit textual links which are not necessarily present in the original. A second feature of the interpretation is the management of the phrase “white people”, who the interpreter refers to as “*bianchi sudafricani*” (“South African whites”) – in other words, introducing a specification that is surely implied, but not stated, in the extremely general wording of the original. On the other hand, an important textual feature maintained in the interpretation is the use of direct speech to illustrate Tutu’s attitude to those guilty of violence and oppression:

[...] diceva sono esseri umani come noi che cosa è successo affinché a loro venisse a mancare la loro umanità che cosa possiamo fare per cambiare tutto questo per aiutarli a riacquisire l’umanità.

In this case, a literal back-translation of the interpreter’s words (“he said they are human beings like us what has happened so that to them came to lack their humanity what can we do to change all this to help them to reacquire humanity”) shows that he develops this part of the argumentation in exactly the same way as the speaker.

As specified at the beginning of this study, the intention is not to pass qualitative judgment on the above examples of how the interpreter addresses a variety of communicative situations at the Mantua Festival. To do so would, indeed, be a rather subjective exercise, as opinion on what makes a translation or interpretation successful is notoriously divided. One obvious consideration, usefully restated by Giuliana Garzone (2002: 109) in an overview of the concept of norms in interpreting, is the relative priority given to two divergent requirements – the interpreter’s fidelity to the source speech, and appropriate text function in the target culture. In this perspective, the above examples of how Antjie Krog’s comments are interpreted might be thought not to have conveyed the message in the same way as the original; at the same time, they might be considered well suited to a fairly widespread perception of how the message can be appropriately expressed in the target culture. Ultimately, surveys of audience response to interpretations would perhaps offer the best guide to their effectiveness and suitability in such cases.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Examining a number of extracts from CIs at the Mantua Literature Festival has made it possible to look at different communicative situations and priorities to be addressed by the interpreter. These entail some overlap with the situation described in Orlando's account of literary interpreting, but also reflect a range of speech styles and settings which are not necessarily specific to interviews with writers. The extracts discussed show that the aim, function and character of communication in such interviews can vary considerably – for example, from the phatic character of initial ice-breaking to metalinguistic commentary, analysis of the rationale for conventions of plot and character, and the writer's response to emotionally charged situations s/he has observed at first hand.

How the interpreter manages such a variety of communicative needs obviously depends on many variables. First, the **interpreting mode** can to a certain extent affect the interpreter's approach – most obviously, for example, simultaneous interpreting (SI) means tighter time constraints during production, while CI leaves more scope for additions (albeit recognizing the need to avoid excessive wordiness). During the first phase of CI, which consists of listening and note-taking, the interpreter may feel that time is tight – particularly if s/he is taking very detailed notes, and thus finding it hard to keep up with the speaker. But during the production phase, which consists of reformulating the speech in the target language with appropriate consultation of notes, it is the interpreter who sets the pace (Gile 2001). Even bearing in mind the classic recommendation that CI should be briefer than the original (Herbert 1952: 67-68; Palazzi 1999: 49), the consecutive interpreter is not under the same pressure to refrain from occasional expansion as is the case in the more or less "real time" dynamics of the simultaneous mode. The interpreter is thus more likely to maintain the brevity of a sober but emotionally charged original in SI, irrespective of the relative wordiness or concision of the target culture.

Whatever the implications for the interpreter, practical consideration of whether one mode offers advantages over the other for interpreting at a literature festival is likely to depend above all on organizational issues. Thus, CI has the disadvantage of taking more or less twice as long, limiting the amount that can be said in a given time slot at a festival. It should also be remembered that listeners who understand the source language might see CI as a needless, time-wasting imposition. However, many listeners actually enjoy the chance to hear both the original and the interpretation, which cannot be done satisfactorily with SI. The main organizational drawback of SI for a large public in an open-air venue, though, is the need to distribute headphones beforehand, collect them afterwards and inspect them before they are used again at the following event.

A second important factor affecting the interpreter's handling of different communicative needs is **language specificity**. At its most obvious, this involves

a greater or lesser degree of syntactic reworking to accommodate for changes in word order between languages, but the interpreter's perception of stylistic norms and preferences in the target language is also important. The examples seen above of the interpreter expanding on a concise original may, for instance, reflect a tendency to provide discourse markers in Italian even where they are absent from the original English. The same may be said of synonyms which the interpreter introduces in preference to the speaker's repetitions.

Finally, **experience and personal preference** are obviously essential factors in determining how the interpreter approaches the task and which strategies s/he favours. Familiarity with the demands of CI in front of a large and often very discerning audience, and of course with the author, can obviously bolster the interpreter's confidence. This in turn can help with ability to re-express ideas convincingly and appropriately.

Though my personal involvement in CI at a literature festival is limited to Mantua, my perception is that the "literary interpreting" genre is on the increase. Colleagues working in this field seem invariably to see it as one of the most stimulating challenges for the interpreter, and it is surely an area of great interest for research. For example, there is considerable scope for involving both interpreters and listeners in questionnaire-based surveys similar to those carried out in the conference interpreting field. Research of this kind would provide a sound basis for a better understanding of how far the interpreter's perception of the goal s/he should achieve coincides with the listener's expectations.

In conclusion, the essentially descriptive focus of this short chapter is intended as a starting point for more extensive study of recordings collected during my long-standing involvement in the "Festivaletteratura". The ultimate aim is to establish a broader sample of the varied communicative situations and priorities which the interpreter is called on to address. This should make it possible to consider to what extent recurring features of interpretation, such as additions, might be seen as reflecting priorities consistently pursued by the interpreter. Extending the analysis to a larger sample should also contribute to a fuller overall picture of the extremely varied interpreting scenarios and settings which make Pöchhacker's spectrum model relevant and appropriate to our profession today.

This variety, the spice of the interpreter's life, offers an exciting basis for research into how interpreting continues to evolve in response to the ever-increasing scope of contacts between different languages and cultures.

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