

## THE CASE FOR AN INSTITUTION-SPECIFIC COMPONENT IN INTERPRETING RESEARCH

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### 1. Introduction

Referring briefly to two recent product-oriented approaches to the study of interpreting (often referred to in literature as *Interpretation Research and Theory*, IRT) this paper will argue that they leave some scope for a further line of research, namely the systematic description of the institutional settings in which interpreting occurs, and the analysis of the way in which patterns of interaction within specific institutions, including prevailing text types and rhetorical purposes, affect the interpreting performance. Considerable attention has been devoted to interpreting in specific settings, such as courts of law, broadcast events, and situations involving immigrant communities (Berk-Seligson 1990, Alexieva 1997 and Carr *et al.* 1997 are examples of contributions in these fields); similarly, attempts have been made to establish typologies of conferences, speeches or speakers (see Pöchhacker 1994, ch. 4), or at least to make explicit the typologies intuitively adopted by practitioners or instructors, such as the one in Namy (1978).

The term 'institution' is used in this paper in a broad sense, to cover both

- a) the term's specialized meaning in sociology, subsequently adopted by some text linguists (see Renkema 1986: 219), referring to any organized human activity which is instrumental in establishing and upholding a society, or which is characteristic thereof. Institutions in this sense of the term, such as 'family' 'the law', 'education', 'health care' or 'politics' are crucial in establishing and maintaining the 'culture' referred to in expressions such as 'source culture' and 'target culture', now technical terms in translation studies;
- b) a meaning closer to that used in lay discourse, encompassing the individual organizational forms through which institutions are realized in different societies.

'Organization' would also seem an appropriate term for the (b) meaning. However, using 'institution' in both (a) and (b) reflects the fact that we are dealing here with two levels of generalization of the same issue: some of the norms regulating communication and interaction will be common to the institution 'law' or 'politics' in a relatively large cultural space, for instance the

industrialized world, whereas others will be specific to the way law and politics are realized in more limited environments, such as individual countries or a group of countries.

Pursuing this distinction, it may be desirable to investigate how the institutional setting affects the patterns of communication and in turn the interpreting performance for example in a court of law compared to a political negotiation;<sup>1</sup> this amounts therefore to asking how institutions in the sense sub (a) place different constraints and expectations on interpreting.

Existing research on court or community interpreting provides insight into the impact on interpreting of patterns of communication within institutions such as 'the law', 'administration', 'the media' or 'health care'; collating existing works could allow a comparative overview. It is striking, however, that no comparable attention has been directed towards interpreting within the institution 'politics', apart from anecdotal references to the by now commonplace subtleties and pitfalls of diplomatic language (as in Herbert 1978).

If a systematic appraisal of the features of the institution 'politics' is attempted, a heading such as 'political negotiation'<sup>2</sup> soon appears to be too broad to account for specific organizational and cultural constraints on interpreting; even within the limited scope of international relations in Europe, institutions such as those of the European Union, the Council of Europe, NATO or the OSCE display a wide range of statutory goals, memberships and organizational setups. Their impact on patterns of communication, on prevailing language functions and text types and in turn on interpreting (to which all of the cited organizations resort to some extent) deserves a more detailed and systematic analysis. Research seems therefore to be needed into the extent to which the specific organization and underlying cultural assumptions of institutions in the sense sub (b) put varying constraints on interpreting.

The above amounts to asking what constraints are put onto interpreting in a Common Law court compared to a continental one or an international tribunal, or, still within 'politics', in a meeting of GATT negotiators compared to a session of the Council of Ministers of the EU. The underlying assumption that

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1 Whereas it may obtain when cognitive processes are concerned, the usual distinction between conference- and other modes of interpreting would not be relevant in such a research.

2 The notion of 'political speech', which is often used to introduce drill or exam material to student interpreters, seems equally ambiguous. The argument that this term is frequently used in discourse analysis does not hold here, as discourse analysts mostly apply it to a precisely delimited context, i.e. texts addressed by politicians to lay audiences (in the study of political propaganda) or to other politicians *in the presence of an audience*, e.g. in television debates (see Livolsi-Volli 1995 for recent Italian examples).

specific institutional features *do* in fact pose different constraints on interpreting is warranted by the fact that

- variation in text production has long been related to contextual features such as register and text type within systemic-functional linguistics;<sup>3</sup>
- it is a productive hypothesis of descriptive translation studies that the system of cultural assumptions in which a translation is generated imposes conventions, norms, or indeed a *patronage*, on the output of translation.<sup>4</sup>

By analogy, the fact that interpreting is (a type of) text production and an act of Translation allows us to assume that contextual features, especially inasmuch as they are recurrent and institutionalized, do have some impact on interpreting. However, it is more interesting for IRT scholars to ask whether the impact of such differences in context is *far reaching enough*<sup>5</sup> to justify practical measures such as specialized or separate (in-house) training, or ad hoc recruitment procedures and evaluation criteria, as well as the suggestion of specific coping strategies to students and practitioners. Gile (1995a: 8) argues<sup>6</sup> for the hardly questionable need to optimize training programmes. Practical proposals for training optimization can however only be made on the basis of a systematic stocktaking of the distinctive features of conference interpreting as realized under different institutional setups.

Pending a larger-scale project, the last section of this paper will sketch a preliminary, experience-based description of the setting of interpreting at the

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3 See Hatim - Mason 1990, ch. 3-5, for a discussion of the notion of 'context' as relevant to translation studies.

4 See for an extreme example Lefevre's well known discussion of the 'neutralized' German translation of Anne Frank's Diary (1992: ch. 5). Schjoldager (1995: 42) argues for the possibility of "applying the concept of norms as a methodological tool to interpreting research", echoing those scholars collectively designated as the 'Manipulation School' of translation studies.

5 The profession is laden with intuitive assumptions to the effect that "working at [institutional setting *x*] is easier/more difficult/requires more/less preparation than working for [institutional setting *y*]". A legitimate aim of IRT seems then to try and corroborate or confound such assumptions in a rational way.

6 Gile's point of departure is an admittedly general comparison of in-house, on-the-job training as opposed to formal university training. Recent experience with the in-house training of Finnish and Swedish interpreters at the European Union institutions points out that there is room for optimization in in-house training too, at least if one has to judge by the results: Sunnari suggests that the first months in the European institutions were, as could be expected in view of the enormous task they had to cope with, less than flattering for the Finnish newcomers:

The first reactions of the audience could perhaps be summarized in a comment made by one Finnish MEP after the first six months: "We did receive a lot of speech via our earphones, but it was not really Finnish" (Sunnari 1997: 88).

European Parliament (EP), one of the largest employers of conference interpreters for several European languages, and put forward tentative hypotheses and possible directions for research.

## 2. General and specific concepts in IRT

It is customary in IRT to trace back the beginnings of the discipline to the first didactic-anecdotal writings by practitioners in the fifties, e.g. the *Manuel de l'interprète* by J. Herbert of Geneva (1952). The interest in interpreting on the part of the 'hard science' community has progressed together with the increasing use after WWII of the obviously less 'natural' and more technology-dependent mode, simultaneous, which keeps attracting much scholarly attention, especially in the process-oriented approaches.

In passing, the tendency to isolate an historically determined form of language mediation may well have contributed to exaggerating its relative importance as an object of investigation (and possibly as a professional activity) compared to other less 'prestigious' modes of language mediation, bringing about a certain scholarly neglect of modes such as liaison and community interpreting; a similar view was put forward a.o. in a recent, thought-provoking paper by A. Pym (1997). Some dogmatic undertones in the *théorie du sens* (Seleskovitch 1975) as noted by Gile (1990) suggest an assumption on the part of the author(s) that the professional attitudes and practices of high-level conference interpreters were to become *a priori* models, regardless of differences in language pair or setting.

The body of concepts and models that have emerged so far within IRT can be divided into two main layers:

- concepts which are general enough to be applicable to all modes of interpreting (and possibly translation) regardless of the language pair involved;
- concepts, models and interpreting strategies that are specifically relevant to a language pair or mode of interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

Research in the 'upper' layer of IRT has tried to model the process of (simultaneous) interpreting in various ways; well known, and competitive,<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The interplay of general and specific concepts in IRT suggests the didactic metaphor of a Russian doll, a *matrioska* with successive smaller-scale components appearing once the main one, the global model, is opened. As the dolls become smaller, it takes an ever closer look, or a more refined observation of empirical reality, to perceive differences in the dolls' decoration.

<sup>8</sup> Gile's critical remarks on the *théorie du sens* (1990) are largely of an epistemological nature and are addressed at unwarranted corollaries of the theory, such as the (claimed) totally language-independent nature of SI; the theory's main tenet, *deverbalization*,

global models have been exemplified by Seleskovitch's *théorie du sens*, centered on a notion of deep, *deverbalized* meaning, and Gile's *modèle d'effort*, focussed on the 'cost' of the various components in the interpreting process in terms of processing capacity.

In the 'lower' layer,<sup>9</sup> scholars have been specifically investigating interpreting in different contexts. Various distinctive dimensions have been studied: they include, as seen above, some of the individual situations where interpreting takes place, or concepts specific to a single mode of interpretation, i.e. simultaneous vs. consecutive (with a focus on memory and note-taking techniques) vs. other, non-conference modes. The language pair involved also appears to be a major determinant; substantial work has been done on transfer problems and strategies for (simultaneous) interpreting between individual language pairs: examples include the long-standing issue of how to cope with syntactical features of German (see for example Wills 1978) or the strategies suggested by Snelling for Romance languages into English (1992). Gringiani and Ross (both 1994) discussed actual and potential interpreting strategies for a pair of 'lesser-used' languages such as Dutch and Italian, whereas F. Straniero Sergio (1995), also in Trieste, has investigated, and argued for, training language-pair specific "transfer competence". Alexieva (1992) showed the productivity of comparing the cognitive mapping models according to which metaphorical and metonymic reference is produced across languages, enlarging the focus of language-specific research from contrastive morphology and syntax to semantics.

### 3. The 'external' contribution

Apart from general and specific concepts generated within IRT, one could identify a layer of concepts and methods generated in other disciplines such as translation studies, linguistics, neurology, psychology, the cognitive sciences, and subsequently used by interpreting scholars to account for some general aspects of the interpreting (and translating) activity. The focus at Trieste<sup>10</sup> on

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is in itself useful as a normative, didactic statement; it does not however warrant empirical conclusions as to *what actually happens* in the interpreter's mind.

9 'Lower' is of course referred here to a scale ranging from 'general/abstract' to 'specific/concrete', and by no means implies a hierarchy of scientific soundness.

10 Resuming a tradition dating back to the seventies, research on the neurophysiology of simultaneous interpreting was revived around 1985 in Trieste when SSLMIT staff began to cooperate with faculty members from medical departments. The results, as expounded in Gran (1992), include:

the neurophysiology of the interpreting process is an example of this productive 'import' of concepts and tools from other disciplines into a process-oriented approach.

The use of methods and concepts from distinct fields of research may be illustrated, without any claim to exhaustiveness, by two recent approaches centered on the product of simultaneous interpreting (SI) rather than the process. They are

- the use of concepts drawn from text linguistics in the analysis of source and target texts;
- the approach to interpreting from within a specific school of thought in translation studies, i.e. the *skopos* theory.

By analogy with early studies of written translation in the fifties and sixties, one could have expected early writings in IRT to be heavily influenced by structural contrastive linguistics, i.e. by the assumption that the main issue in interpreting was overcoming asymmetries between language systems, finding structural equivalents despite the varying syntactical and semantic organization of different languages (Hatim - Mason 1990: 21-35). Instead, the first influential 'school of thought' to emerge in IRT, the one centered at the Paris ESIT, was adamant in rejecting a structural linguistic approach to interpreting, and centered its *théorie du sens* on the all-pervading albeit empirically questionable concept of *deverbalized* meaning. Recent language-pair-specific works may effectively be claimed as the rediscovery of an otherwise neglected field of enquiry. As Straniero Sergio puts it:

The study of SI, focussing almost exclusively on the language-independent dimension, has long been marred by subjectivity and psychologism. Models put forward in this way are still lacking any feedback whatsoever from actual translational practice (1995: 33, my translation).

In fact, claiming that there is scope for a language-pair-specific, contrastive component in IRT and training seems absolutely justified, as long as this does

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- the study of interference between concurrent verbal and manual tasks confirmed SI as a complex cognitive activity, involving a deeper processing than, for example, the oral transcoding of isolated words;
  - subjects trained in SI were at first found to display less cerebral lateralization of language functions than non-polyglot, non-interpreter subjects. Today a less organic formulation is preferred, whereby SI is said to have an impact on subjects' cognitive and attentive strategies; i.e. training in SI increases involvement of both hemispheres in tasks which would otherwise be highly lateralized.

not result in rigid prescriptions that claim to be valid *a priori* across the board of registers, text types and communicative situations.

The lack of a solid footing in contrastive linguistics partly explains why, once the influence of the Paris school began to fade in the early eighties, IRT turned for inspiration to areas of the study of language more concerned with language-in-context, namely text linguistics and discourse analysis: concepts such as de Beaugrande and Dressler's *textuality* (1981) and their, or Halliday and Hasan's discussion of *cohesive devices* (1976) are by now familiar to interpreting scholars and, to the extent to which text analysis classes are a part of the training curriculum,<sup>11</sup> to the student interpreter.

The issue of cohesion is typical of how a concept drawn from a field other than IRT may then be used to analyze actual performances and formulate hypotheses concerning interpreting in general, as done by Shlesinger (1995a) for example.

Moving from the hypothesis that shifts in the distribution of cohesive devices from source to target texts occur in all forms of language mediation, Shlesinger examined the treatment of the 'standard' cohesive devices defined by Halliday and Hasan, such as reference, substitution, conjunction, reiteration and collocation, in one particular instance of SI. With all the caution imposed by the limited corpus, it may be said that the findings seem to substantiate the preliminary intuition (1995a: 195) that "texts hang on together differently after being interpreted"; the analysis showed that

- the target text displayed fewer occurrences of substitution and ellipsis, i.e. it tended to be more explicit, possibly beyond what would be expected in view of the conventions of the target language, thereby displaying a universal feature of *translationese* (Toury 1979, quoted in Shlesinger 1995a: 212);
- as far as devices of conjunction are concerned, omission was less frequent for causal and additive conjunctions than others such as temporal ones, possibly because the former are perceived as more crucial to the informative content of the text, or because they may be more easily retrieved by the interpreter from a cognitive *script* or *frame* matching the text type in question.

Shlesinger's study of cohesion exemplifies the necessary interaction between different layers of knowledge in IRT: hypotheses, or preliminary findings based on an external concept such as cohesion may be formulated independently from the language pair, mode or setting of interpreting, as in the case of the 'explicitation' hypothesis or the preference for maintaining causal rather than temporal conjunctions; however, the experimental setup or corpus will by

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11 Elsewhere I submit that further insight into the goal-oriented structure of texts across sentence boundaries can be drawn from modern informal logic and other approaches to the study of argumentation in natural language (Marzocchi 1997, 1998).

definition involve a specific language pair and direction of translation (English into Hebrew, in Shlesinger's study), as well as a given text type and situational context. This inevitably raises the question of how 'universal' the findings are, or of the extent to which they are affected by variables such as language pair or mode (as suggested by Shlesinger herself concerning the explicitation hypothesis, 1995a: 201) and, as is argued here, by the overall communicative situation.<sup>12</sup>

Ascertaining a decline in the use of cohesive devices in the target text also raises the question of how acceptable this is, especially if it were to be shown convincingly that it amounts to a decline in the text's overall communicative 'quality', intuitively defined as the adequacy of textual means to communicative goals. This is tantamount to asking whether there is scope for a normative component in IRT, an issue which would deserve a (collection of) paper(s) on its own.<sup>13</sup> It will only be noted in this context that examining the acceptability of an interpreting performance presupposes a context-specific approach, which should indicatively give consideration to (at least)

- subjectively elicited user needs and preferences, such as those discussed in Kurz (1993), *in conjunction with*<sup>14</sup>
- the communicative function of, or the purpose to be fulfilled by, the interpreted text, determined as objectively as possible.

A framework to analyze the product of interpreting under actual circumstances was put forward by Pöchhacker (1994, 1995), who in turn applied 'external' concepts drawn from the approach known as the *Skopostheorie* in translation studies.

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12 Similarly, Gringiani (1994) admits that further research would be needed into the variability according to language, mode and setting of some of the SI strategies elicited in her case study, i.e. nominalization, preference for paratactic structures, reversed-order presentation of lists, conceptual generalization. A further issue is the extent to which each occurrence of these strategies is acceptable in view of its effect on the global 'quality' of the target text.

13 However, since most IRT scholars are at the same time trainers, they must have at least a normative intuition concerning what constitutes an acceptable performance. Significantly, Gile's case study on in-classroom 'fidelity' assessment (1995b) provides insight into the rather narrow notion of fidelity upheld by a group of students.

14 To avoid falling into a form of relativism sometimes found among practitioners, whereby customer satisfaction amounts to the sole parameter of judgement. This stance appears logically and ethically untenable as soon as one considers how conference participants may have widely diverging needs, goals and expectations as to the proceedings of any particular conference (see Gile 1995a: 28-31).



In this approach, translated texts are best to be analyzed, and evaluated, in terms of the extent to which they conform to the purpose, the intended function assigned to the target text in the (commissioned) act of translation. This function is in turn constrained by the norms and conventions imposed on parallel texts by the target culture, so that one of the key issues in analyzing a translated text or an interpreting performance becomes the amount of cultural transfer involved. When applied to a corpus of SI performance (as in Pöchhacker 1994 and 1995, SI at a conference on small business) this framework raises interesting issues such as

- how to explicit a *skopos* for interpreting performance (and, arguably, how to cope with conflicting purposes on the part of the conference organizers vs. the various actors in communication);
- the extent to which the known constraints of time, linearity and shared knowledge obtaining in SI allow for effective cultural transfer; and, if cultural transfer is at all possible
- how to define the target culture in the case of interpreter mediated events.

The extreme cases in this respect would be a totally heterogeneous audience on the one side, where participants' attitudes and expectations are entirely determined by their 'national' or 'linguistic' background or allegiance (*paraculture*), and on the other side an audience whose attitude and expectations concerning that individual communicative event are made homogeneous by their past interaction, shared education and expertise (*diaculture*), and common interest in achieving the immediate goal of the communicative event; in other words, 'national' culture would not be absent in the audience, but it would not be relevant to the conference goals. Those obviously being the poles of a *continuum*, the degree of cultural transfer needed would increase the closer an audience is to the heterogeneous - *diaculture* - pole. Since, as shown by Pöchhacker in the case of humour, successful adaptation to the target culture may involve segmenting the source text in large units, which is at odds with the constraints of time and linearity in SI, the need for cultural transfer would probably exceed the boundary of the interpreter's processing capacity very soon. This would make an instrumental translation, geared at obtaining equivalent effect, virtually impossible in culturally heterogeneous settings.

Suggesting a solution to this theoretical and practical paradox, Pöchhacker rightly points out that in a conference such as the one he analyzed, participants' attitudes may be more determined by their shared *diaculture* than by their respective national or linguistic identity.

This probably holds true for the majority of one-off or non-institutionalized conferences in the business and technical spheres where interpreting services are offered; however, it may be argued that interpreting also takes place in contexts, mainly in institution 'politics', whose very institutional goal, as proclaimed in

media and public information, is to have those national identities come to the fore, interact and be confronted with one another. Tentatively, in some settings within an institution such as the EP, 'national' culture may prevail over *diaculture* when deeply-felt issues are at stake, notwithstanding the fact that the *diaculture* governing some meetings comprises firmly rooted elements such as adherence to one and the same political family. This would partly explain the highly emotional debates *within* political groups in the EP on non-violence vs. military intervention for humanitarian goals, neutrality, or, more recently, repression vs. tolerance of soft drugs.<sup>15</sup> At this stage, the idea of a prevailing national background in these instances will only be taken as pointing to the need for further detailed analysis of the contexts of interpreting, which is in line with past attempts at drawing up a typology of meetings. If substantiated, this hypothesis may also suggest a reassessment of the relationship between instrumental and documentary translational strategies (Pöchhacker 1995: 47): a documentary strategy may turn out to be a viable option in a context where cultural diversity is the very *raison d'être* of interaction.

#### 4. Interpreting at the European Parliament: A Preliminary Appraisal

##### 4.1. Some Facts and Figures

Before mentioning other aspects of interaction in the EP which could be investigated in terms of their impact on interpreting, some facts and figures may be appropriate. The service was established as a branch of the (then) Assembly's secretariat in 1971, and currently employs some 200 permanent staff interpreters,<sup>16</sup> i.e. 15-20 per language division plus some planning and management staff, largely trained interpreters themselves. The share of free-lance interpreters in serviced meetings can be estimated at 2/3, with peaks during the monthly plenary part-session, where most language divisions would typically have on duty all of their staff members plus at least an equal number of free-lances. The list of accredited free-lance interpreters partly overlaps with that held by the SCIC, although free-lances who regularly work for the EP can be estimated at a couple of hundred. Although the SCIC can boast a much higher

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15 Concerning the latter, on more than one occasion Swedish members faced, across political groups, their Dutch and German counterparts with arguments such as the desirability of a "drug-free society" and the "society's right to save the individual from self-destruction", countered by accusations of "lacking pragmatism" and striving towards an "*ethischer Staat*".

16 For comparison's sake, the European Commission's Interpreting Service (SCIC) employs over 400 staff interpreters, and draws from a list of some 1,600 accredited free-lances.

number of interpreter/days provided yearly, the EP Interpretation Directorate facilitates meetings with a wider coverage of the 11 official languages of the EU, including numerous meetings where all languages are covered by a team of 33 interpreters. Such meetings include the ordinary plenary assembly, held 11 or 12 times a year over 4 full days (plus 2 night sessions), additional plenaries 6 or 7 times a year for two half-days, and the 20 permanent committees, which usually meet for two-three days during one or two weeks every month (the actual frequency of individual committee meetings varies with the amount of legislative work pending).

These figures give an idea of the relative importance of the EP (and the EU institutions in general) as a purchaser of interpreting services. For some target languages and language pairs (Swedish into Greek, or Dutch into Italian for example) the EP Interpretation Directorate appears to be the largest or the second largest employer on a rather limited market. This is even more true of interpreters from one of the 'new' member States; as Sunnari vividly puts it

After the entry of three new member states, the Interpreting Services of both the European Parliament and the Commission had to find and recruit dozens of new interpreters, whose qualifications met their rather strict requirements [...]; in fact, there are now periods when *Finland is more or less cleaned out of experienced conference interpreters*. For example, the Parliament's monthly part-session in Strasbourg alone employs approximately 30 Finnish interpreters for one week. This figure can be placed in a better perspective with the earlier situation, when we remember that before the accession, there were about 20 active full-time or near full-time conference interpreters in Finland (1997: 87, my emphasis).

Even a cursory look at the importance of the EU institutions and the EP in particular as a user of interpreting services, together with the fact that the curricula of some teaching institutions are deliberately geared to cover the interpreting needs of international institutions such as the EP, reinforces the case for optimization of training programmes based on careful observation of specific settings.

#### 4.2. Dominant interpreting modes

One aspect of interpreting at the EP which is common across types of meetings is the prevalence of SI: consecutive is seldom used, except at face-to-face meetings or social occasions involving individual MEPs (usually the President) and guests on official visits. Visits by committees or delegations to member- or third countries are an exception, in that speeches by (for example)

local authorities are usually interpreted consecutively into either English or French, or the committee chairperson's language, the other languages needed usually being covered by whispered interpretation. Some dialogue interpreting may also be needed on such occasions, for example at question-and-answer sessions.

During the last half of the previous 5-year term one French interpreter was actually 'seconded' for virtually all of his on-duty time to provide dialogue or consecutive interpreting on all occasions involving the (then) German President. However, that practice was discontinued once an MEP with different language abilities and needs took on the President's office, and dialogue interpreting on occasions involving the President is now provided on a case-by-case basis.

The non-SI assignments described above amount in any case to a minor fraction of an average interpreter's work; the dominant mode of work at the EP appears to be SI. It is striking, however, that in a situation where non-SI assignments, if at all present, comprise a roughly equal share of consecutive on one side and whispered<sup>17</sup> and dialogue interpreting on the other side, the latter two modes seem to be neglected in both training<sup>18</sup> and selection. Instead, both free-lance accreditation tests and open competitions for staff recruitment insist on a full, 'school-style' consecutive. The assumption seems to be that whispered interpretation is nothing more than SI without equipment, and that if interpreters are proficient in SI and consecutive, they will *a fortiori* be able to perform well in the occasional dialogue interpreting. In other words, it is assumed that no different skills are at work in the whispered and dialogue modes; whereas it could be argued that the low frequency of non-SI assignments does not justify investment in specific training or selection procedures, it is submitted here that in order to validate these assumptions, a deeper analysis of skills in non-conference modes is needed, especially as they are sometimes considered to make the interpreter's role much more visible and exposed to criticism than is the case in SI.<sup>19</sup>

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17 Interpreters into less used languages are actually even less likely to work in consecutive, as they are usually expected to provide whispered interpretation in outside meetings where no SI equipment is available. It would be pointless to provide successive, full consecutive interpretations into Dutch, Portuguese and Italian of a speech given in Finnish by a local authority before MEPs who largely understand (some) English.

18 Training in dialogue interpreting has recently been introduced into the curriculum at SSLMIT in Trieste, for example.

19 This assumption may not be entirely warranted in a setting where individual interpreters have been known to their beneficiaries for years and sometimes decades.

As stated above, ordinary work at the EP means in essence SI at meetings of official bodies. Whereas non-SI assignments may involve working into one's B language, in ordinary SI settings the well-known 'mother tongue' principle is upheld; *retour* interpreting is restricted at the moment to Finnish interpreters, who render speeches by Finnish MEPs mostly into an English, German or French version to be relayed by other booths, where direct coverage of Finnish is virtually non-existent. However, use of *retour* may be expected to increase if the languages of the Central and Eastern European countries scheduled to begin accession negotiations with the EU are also to become working languages of the EP.

*Relay* is common: although most EP interpreters now work from at least 3-4 passive languages, it is almost impossible to dovetail individual language combinations so as to cover all languages in all booths.<sup>20</sup> Informal judgements on an interpreter's quality as *pivot* are an important factor of peer evaluation (in line with Gile's general observation in 1995a: 30) especially as - perhaps surprisingly - no formalized mechanism for quality assessment is in place. In addition, the demand for interpreters able to work from 'rare' languages<sup>21</sup> is such that the language combination may actually be a key factor in choosing between two equally proficient interpreters, for example when hiring free-lancers. Together with the *retour* issue, the importance of an interpreter's performance as *pivot* argues for a closer look at the skills involved and the relevant translational

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20 A state of affairs which sometimes gives rise to humorous misunderstandings in outside observers, men-in-the-street and respected members of academia alike; concluding a chapter devoted to *l'Union européenne et les langues*, D. Baggioni reports a rather peculiar view of relay:

Sans que cela soit dit, l'anglais sert le plus souvent de *lingua franca* intermédiaire entre les différentes autres langues européennes. La plupart du temps, c'est sur des versions anglaises non officielles que se font les traductions dans les dix autres langues, et les interprètes traduisant d'une "petite" langue vers une autre langue que l'anglais ont souvent la tentation de se brancher sur la version anglaise plutôt que de partir de l'original, énoncé dans une langue qu'ils comprennent mal ou pas du tout (Baggioni 1997: 357).

Leaving aside the many EP translators personally known to this writer as working directly from 'minor' languages, one pities the poor English interpreters, who cannot give in to the temptation *de se brancher sur la version anglaise* themselves, and are left alone to struggle with an original *qu'ils comprennent mal ou pas du tout*. Seriously, this shows that there is some need to elucidate how interpreting and translation are actually done in settings such as the European Union.

21 At the moment Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Portuguese, Greek and certainly Finnish are considered 'rare' languages for, say, an Italian interpreter. A demand for certain Slavic and Baltic languages as well as Hungarian might arise in the mid-term, depending on how accession negotiations with the relevant countries proceed.

strategies,<sup>22</sup> including language-pair components specifically geared to work into a non-A language.

#### 4.3. Main types of meeting

A way to sketch a description of the EP as a setting for interpreting is to rely on externally defined types of meeting, such as those established in the Rules of Procedure or in organizational practice. The advantage of using these types as the basis for preliminary observation instead of applying one of the typologies proposed in literature lies in the fact that procedurally defined types of meetings are established objectively, or at least inter-subjectively:<sup>23</sup> distinguishing between them does not involve measuring parameters chosen by the analyst, with the risk of an ad-hoc typology. Once preliminary observation has elicited testable hypotheses,<sup>24</sup> it will be possible to apply a set of analyst-defined parameters, possibly resulting in a regrouping of the original types of meetings.

The most frequent interpreter-mediated events in the EP are

- meetings of political groups;
- committee meetings;
- the plenary part session.

Together, they make up the bulk of probable assignments for the average interpreter. Other, less frequent assignments include

- delegation meetings with counterparts from third countries;
- internal bodies of the EP such as the conferences of group leaders and of committee chairpersons, or the questors in charge of administrative and disciplinary matters;

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22 Again, this raises the problem of how to treat cultural items, especially those typical of a 'peripheral' and by definition less known culture; a conflict may arise between the needs of the interpreter's direct listeners as opposed to colleagues working in relay, who may need a mediated, documentary translation rather than one fully adapted to the *pivot's* target audience (see also Sunnari 1997 on the experience of Finnish interpreters). Experience suggests that a highly idiomatic usage in the target language may not be appreciated by colleagues, the dilemma of course lying in the fact that a *pivot's* output is a service rendered to their listeners, and not primarily to relaying colleagues.

23 The choice of moving from the Rules of Procedure for a preliminary observation is to be found for example in Simmler's (1978) and Alhoff's (1975) analyses of text- and speech-types in the German *Bundestag* and the 1848-49 *Nationalversammlung* respectively.

24 The rationale for publishing this paper at such a preliminary stage is precisely to invite supplementary or contrary observations from scholars and practitioners, so as to discard, maintain or refine individual hypotheses for further study.

- occasional meetings of select EP delegations with the Commission and the Council of Ministers in what is known as a 'conciliation committee', in the last stage of controversial legislative processes;
- unofficial, cross-party 'intergroups' dealing with a wide range of specialized interests;
- the newly-introduced 'temporary committees of enquiry', usually in office for a few months; and
- the joint assembly with parliamentarians from partner countries of the African, Pacific and Caribbean group (ACP), held twice yearly;

MEPs are grouped across national origins<sup>25</sup> into **political groups** that roughly correspond with the main historical traditions in European politics, ranging from the two largest ones, the Socialist and the Christian Democratic group,<sup>26</sup> through the conservative UPE and the liberal ELDR to the Greens, the left-wing GUE, the radical ARE and the eurosceptic EDN group. A few members are non-attached, a fact which prevents them taking full advantage of Parliament's facilities, including language facilities; together with an obvious attempt to increase their negotiating power, this partly explains why national political parties actively seek to secure membership of a group for their members elected to the EP, with the related occasional 'migration' of MEPs from one group to another.

Since membership of a group may be partly motivated by tactical considerations, the range of political stances within a single group is not homogeneous. In addition, group meetings are the setting where legislative acts before Parliament are discussed at length and more freely, since subsequent rounds of discussion in committee are usually constrained by a draft report to be commented upon and amended; general debates are also held in group concerning questions such as the group's political priorities during each term of office, their response to the programme of each Presidency-in-office or their position on

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25 Requirements concerning the minimal number of members effectively discourage the setting up of groups comprising MEPs of a single nationality. This shows how, at least in the spirit of the 'founding fathers', *organizing the interaction* of different cultures is one of the institutional goals of the EP. Whether this happens successfully, and whether language mediation is instrumental in the success, lies beyond the scope of this paper.

26 In itself an exercise in 'intercultural terminology': the group's full name, *Groupe du Parti populaire européen - groupe démocrate-chrétien*, deliberately refers to *both* denominations used in recent history in different European countries by mass parties attached to Christian values. Similarly, it is not uncommon to hear German socialist and British Labour MEPs refer to their group as *wir Sozialdemokraten* and *we socialists* respectively, suggesting that translation may sometimes involve *deliberately establishing*, rather than seeking, equivalence.

major matters to appear on the agenda in the future, such as enlargement. Group meetings are therefore characterized at least as much by arguing and negotiating as by a more neutral flow of information, and can be highly confrontational at times. This certainly has an impact on interpreting in terms of the degree of planning of speeches,<sup>27</sup> register, rhetorical purpose of texts, prosody, non verbal communication and, on extreme occasions, the very voice quality of speakers. At times, the polarization around issues at stake in some meetings would suggest a parallel between interpreting at the EP and interpreting in some non-conference settings, such as in the cross-examination of witnesses in court.

A further organizational trait affecting communication is the fact that most political groups are related to a wider, often highly structured network (such as the Socialist or the Christian Democratic International) on the European and global level, which means that occasions for international contacts abound outside the institutional life of the EP itself. Together with the relatively long terms of office of MEPs, this accounts for the existence of a long history of interaction independently of interpreter-mediated occasions; in addition, communication in some *lingua franca* is not at all uncommon,<sup>28</sup> especially among EP staff, even when interpretation is provided. It is not clear whether this, together with shared political values and objectives, warrants the assumption of a prevailing *diaculture* above national background; on a more practical level, it accounts at least for a vast amount of shared knowledge which may not be accessible, or salient, to the interpreter, and for a rather informal tone in group meetings, at least when compared to the plenary. In fact, 'absolute' levels of formality seem to vary with the members' background, as appears from the different usage within two groups such as the Liberals and the Greens.<sup>29</sup> Reproducing different levels of formality does not seem to be a problem for interpreters, except for the occasional embarrassment at an outrageous expression (which seems then to be instinctively 'toned down', at least on its first

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27 'Speech' is used here with a rather broad, loosely defined meaning along the lines of 'intervention in a meeting' or 'speaking turn in conversation'. In fact, most speeches in group are not planned, formal 'speeches'.

28 Some MEPs are talented polyglots or indeed (in a couple of instances) trained translators themselves. However, there seems to have been no detailed study of the way foreign language skills are distributed in relation to, for example, age, country of origin, social background: this could show to what extent MEPs' participation in intercultural interaction actually *depends on*, and is limited to, interpreter-mediated situations.

29 As far as the latter are concerned, informal speech and behaviour may be deliberate: the German Greens' use of an informal style as a token of political identity when first winning seats in the *Bundestag* is well known.



occurrence);<sup>30</sup> the issue is rather the extent to which informality in address, lexical choices, idioms, together with the related departure from standard pronunciation, affects the interpreter's comprehension. It would also be interesting to investigate, on an appropriate corpus, if a degree of informality such as is reached in certain group meetings at the EP has a parallel in other interpreting settings, and which strategies practitioners use to cope with it.

Although legislative acts are formally voted on in plenary, the EP's substantial law-making work,<sup>31</sup> i.e. analyzing and amending proposals put forward by the European Commission, is done in the specialized permanent **committees**. As in other parliaments, incoming legislation is deferred to the committee responsible and possibly to one or more others for an opinion. Committee portfolios include Agriculture, Economic and Monetary Affairs, Legal Affairs and Citizens' Rights, Transport and Tourism, Institutional Affairs, Budgets. Committee work is essentially done discussing, amending and voting on a report drawn up by an MEP and expressing the position they recommend Parliament should take on the relevant piece of legislation.

An ordinary item on a committee agenda will therefore consist of the rapporteur's introduction to their report, possibly at an early stage of drafting or even before the report is actually drafted, followed by comments by committee members and by representatives from the European Commission. The long history of interaction between MEPs, noted earlier, applies equally to committee meetings. MEPs tend to sit on committees relevant to their background or constituency, and to the interests of their member countries: across terms of office, the same Dutch members, if re-elected, will be consistently found sitting on the Transport or the Women's Rights committee, or the same Spanish members on the Fisheries committee. In fact there seems to be a degree of familiarity, and related lack of formality in address, among the 'core' members of major committees irrespective of their political group membership. If this does not extend to the whole membership of any committee as seems to be the case in groups, the reason may lie in the sometimes occasional attendance, or the fact that committee meetings are normally held in public, and are attended by representatives of the Commission, the Council of Ministers as well as various staff. Awareness of the different goals and constraints of *negotiating* rather than

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30 As if the conventional idea as to which language use is admissible in a parliament exerted some *patronage* on the interpreter, or as if the interpreter took on responsibility for 'successful' communication, as observed by Wadensjö (1995) in a completely different setting. This is somehow at odds with the deontological commonplace concerning the 'invisible' interpreter.

31 This is of course a simplified account of the notoriously intricate legislative procedures in the EU, the purpose here being only to sketch a picture of EP bodies and meetings in terms of their impact on interpreting.

*discussing*<sup>32</sup> can also explain a generally less informal tone; interventions in committee also seem to display a higher degree of planning than in group.

A distinctive feature of committee meetings in terms of their impact on interpreting seems to be the fact that by the time a *dossier* reaches the committee stage it has already been spelled out in several documents (the original proposal, several more or less formalized drafts of the EP report, dozens of amendments). This means that at this stage interpreters can, at least in theory, make up for part of their deficit in terms of shared knowledge, at least inasmuch as this knowledge is formalized in writing in official discourse. Obstacles may be of a personal and organizational nature, such as lack of motivation, limited processing capacity, limited on-duty time devoted to preparation, and the fact that continuity, e.g. having the same interpreters consistently work on the various stages of the same *dossier*, apparently is not considered a reachable goal when planning assignments.

A further consequence of the amount of written documents at this stage is the fact that speakers in committee often refer to, and quote, parts of the texts. This is not unlike what happens in other negotiating settings, where texts written in one *lingua franca* may be substantially re-drafted in multilingual proceedings,<sup>33</sup> without particular problems due to the need for language mediation (a 'minimalist' translation strategy could be defined for such settings). Apart from the known problem of processing read-aloud texts or passages, a problem specific to the EP is that, whereas texts may only be available in one or two languages at an early stage, formal examination and voting in committee presuppose that all language versions have been made available. Apart from often criticizing the lack of translated documents, MEPs occasionally exert their right to halt the proceedings in the absence of their language version.

The above entails that at the final discussion and vote on reports and amendments MEPs will tend to follow the proceedings on documents in their own language. Apart from the obvious need to have them at hand in the booth, experience suggests that it takes some extra attention on the part of interpreters to keep consistency in terminology and usage with the written TL version of the documents irrespective of the SL they work from; a study of the cognitive processes at work would be needed to confirm whether successfully ensured consistency depends on the passages at stake being salient in the interpreter's

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32 If a typology of interpreter-mediated events is to be established on the basis of pragmatic parameters, some inspiration may be drawn from works in the field of informal logic, for example by D. Walton (see 1992 for a summary), where types of dialogue are distinguished according to the participants' goals.

33 For example, this seems to occupy a substantial part of the proceedings when ministerial officials meet in the specialized working groups of the EU Council of Ministers.

memory *in the TL version*. Experience further suggests that inconsistency is often cooperatively supplemented by listeners; however, this may not always be expected, and the interpreter's occasional failure to recognize that segments with little formal correspondence (in German and French, for instance) actually refer to the same passage in the written TL version may result in a breakdown of communication, obviously imputable to the interpreter. This justifies further research into processes at work and relevant coping strategies.

The apex of an interpreter's work at the EP, both in terms of peer recognition and in terms of effort, is the monthly **plenary assembly**,<sup>34</sup> although it is by no means the setting where a smooth, bi-directional flow of communication is most crucial. In plenary, the House regularly receives statements by the Commission, Council and other EU bodies and occasional addresses by eminent guests.<sup>35</sup> The more ordinary plenary work consists, for each piece of legislation pending before the House, of the discussion and vote on the report drawn up in the committee stage. The actual organization of proceedings provides for a brief introduction (5-6 minutes) by the main committee's rapporteur, followed by the rapporteurs for opinion from other committees and one or more MEPs for each political group; global speaking time for each day is allocated in proportion to group size, and then distributed internally to MEPs for individual items on the agenda, which results in one- or two-minute speaking times not being uncommon at all. The 'debate' on each item on the agenda ends with an intervention by a member of the European Commission, announcing that institution's stance on the EP's proposed amendments to the piece of legislation. Votes and declarations of vote for several items on the agenda are normally grouped together some time after the relevant debate.

Thus organized, plenary proceedings cannot display the same degree of open confrontation as other EP settings. Apart from the occasional controversy on

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34 In fact, a tacit hierarchy of meetings is in place, whereby being assigned to a plenary amounts to a recognition of at least reasonable proficiency. However, the 'prestige' of the assignment is generally accompanied by frustration at, or at least awareness of, the objective difficulty in providing an acceptable output.

35 This is probably the last remnant in the EP of what Namy (1978) named the "rhetorical" type of interpreter-mediated event, referring for example to the UN General Assembly and the Council of Europe. The term seems to carry some derogatory implications, and does not do justice to the way the very founding and shared values of a society are brought to the fore and manipulated on those occasions, so as to serve as justification for future action, as was shown by Perelman, whose use of the term "epideictic" seems more suitable ([1958]: 62-72). The evolution of the EP from a setting for mainly epideictic discourse to a forum for negotiation on actual legislation could be followed through from the House's verbatim reports through the years. Interestingly, comments to the effect that "eloquence has been lost" are sometimes heard among interpreters.

points of procedure or personal matters,<sup>36</sup> spontaneous discussion no longer takes place at this stage: floor-taking is scheduled well in advance, and speakers usually confine themselves to reading their prepared speeches; comments on points made by others, if made at all, are limited to sharp, non-scheduled punch-lines or requests for clarification by the Commission or Council. All of the above makes the plenary a much more formal setting than other meetings, and more like a review of each group's position than a forum where positions are taken, confronted or modified. The impact on interpreting is considerable, but somehow not as typical of the EP setting as is the case in a group meeting. In several other settings interpreters face problems related to

- the speed of delivery, as imposed here by the sometimes ridiculously short speaking times; and
- the oral delivery of written texts, with the specific prosody related to reading aloud, the lesser redundancy, and other obstacles due to the syntactic and semantic complexity of planned, written speech (see a.o. Alexieva 1992).<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, research on these topics does not necessarily need a setting-specific approach; however, the interpreter's occasional switching off the microphone during plenary suggests that both phenomena are so extreme in this setting, that the interpreter's intuitive, subjective limit of *what can actually be interpreted* is sometimes reached. The plenary seems therefore to provide suitable conditions for research in view of the very degree of intensity reached by such phenomena. A further point of interest is the extent to which these difficulties interact with the interpreter's grasp of the knowledge shared by speaker and audience. At this stage, it depends on availability of documents, as was seen with reference to committee meetings, and increasingly on previous exposure to other stages of the same *dossier*; exposure may date back several weeks or months, which hints at issues such as the activation of knowledge stored in long-term memory.<sup>38</sup>

What may be typical of the EP plenary meeting is a certain, indistinctly voiced frustration at the lack of actual debate or, worse, the sparse attendance, and the related feeling of working "in a void", without a clearly-defined expected audience. Whereas it is tempting to assume that this has an impact on performance, empirically substantiating this hypothesis seems more difficult, in view of the complex variables at play here.

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36 Leaving aside 'question time', held once during each plenary part-session, where MEPs often ask supplementary questions after the Council's or Commission's initial reply has been read out.

37 Practitioners often refer to speeches in plenary as exceptionally 'dense', a metaphor that probably covers some of these parameters.

38 This is valid for committee meetings as well, in that major issues will typically appear on a committee's agenda for at least two successive meetings.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper hopefully has gone some way towards showing that current trends in IRT both leave scope for, and to some extent presuppose, a closer look at the actual institutional setups affecting interpreting performance. An initial survey of the institutionalized forms of interaction at the European Parliament, a major user of interpreting services, has shown that interpreting takes place in a wide range of settings with contrasting statutory goals and patterns of communication, in terms of the degree of planning, openness of confrontation and formality of address. This raises several issues in areas of interest to both IRT (including non-conference interpreting modes) and translation studies. Possible research directions include, ranging from the more abstract to the more practical,

- *normatively* defining an overall translational strategy in line with the admitted goals of institutionalized communication, in terms, for example, of the known option between instrumental and documentary strategies;
- investigating how an institutional setting attributes different predominant rhetorical purposes to different interpreter-mediated events, and whether different strategies are applicable;
- investigating the way cultural items are and should be treated in a context where they may be much more relevant to the communicative situation than is the case in other usual settings for conference interpreting;
- examining the actual constraints institutional setups pose on the interpreting performance in terms of factors demanding processing capacity, as well as possible coping strategies.

Repeated intersubjective observation and better defined corpora and tools would be needed to analyze the settings of interpreting within the context of the EP in such a way that findings may make a stronger claim to rationality. This paper has only been able to hint at the intuitive productivity of such an approach, in the hope that scholars and practitioners alike will be encouraged to attempt deeper systematic analyses of other major settings of interpreting.

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