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The Ideal Interpreter: Didactic Perspectives, Practitioner’s Views and Client Expectations

Abstract: Translation and interpretation are essential in our multilingual and multicultural societies. In this context, the role of the interpreter becomes more vivid and frames its urgency despite the technological advance that shapes many spheres of our life. Thus, the present article, will look into the concept of ‘ideal interpreter’, what ‘ideal’ stands for and, most importantly, it will present a comparative approach to what is meant to be a skilled interpreter from three perspectives: the teacher involved in training and educating interpreters-to-be, the practitioner – actor of the realities of the process of interpretation, and the client – whose expectations sometimes reach the realm of utopia in relation to the interpreter’s aptitudes.

Keywords: Interpreting Competence, Interpreter’s Role, Didactic Perspective, Interpreter Practitioner, Client

Introduction

“There is no such thing as a perfect, ideal, or ‘correct’ translation. A translator is always trying to extend his knowledge and improve his means of expression; he is always pursuing facts and words” (Newmark 6)

According to Oxford Dictionary “ideal” refers to something “conceived or regarded as perfect or supremely excellent in its kind; answering to one’s highest conception”. Similarly, if we were to abide by Peter Newmark’s statement about translation then, most probably, applying the same

reasoning, it would be fair enough to say that there is no such thing as “ideal translator/interpreter” either. Maybe this is the truth indeed. Man is not flawless, and all his actions are looked at critically. But, at the same time, the human being is of such a nature that s/he constantly tends to perfection in order to become better, s/he wants more, strives for more and, with grand perseverance and effort s/he may attain a certain level of perfection.

And still, if there was such a thing as an “ideal translator/interpreter” it wouldn’t be easy to provide a clear-cut definition of the notion since the mere concept of “translation” has given some hard time to both researchers in the domain of translation studies and practitioners and the number of elements to consider in relation to qualifying adjectives “good”, “adequate”, “perfect”, “ideal” translator/interpreter add to the task. Thus, in this article, it will probably be suited and more appropriate to use the phrase “skilful interpreter” in order not to generate some heated debates.

We should state, from the very beginning, that the object of the present article, as suggested by the title, is the concept of interpreting and the interpreter. According to Routledge Encyclopaedia of Interpreting Studies:

The concept of interpreting as the act of rendering something comprehensible has presumably been rooted in human thought since ancient times, and long before writing in one language was translated into another. Unlike written translation, which attracts attention to the materiality of the text(s), the ephemeral act of interpreting foregrounds the human agent performing it. Thus, some of the oldest expressions used to refer to the concept of interpreting have through the ages also served as designations for the figure of the interpreter. (Pöchhacker, *Introducing Interpreting Studies* 198)

The article aims at answering the questions of “Who is the interpreter?”, What is the interpreter’s role related to the task s/he performs? and What makes a skilful interpreter? from a didactic perspective, from the practitioner’s point of view, and from the client’s standpoint.

By and large, answers to the above stated questions are offered by the degree of adequacy and correspondence between the speech delivered by the speaker and the message carried across by the interpreter, by the subsequent direct feedback the interpreter receives from the speaker and/or from the audience, by the skills s/he has in stock and applies at the time of performing an act of interpretation, and last but not least, through the appreciation they receive while and after fulfilling such a tremendous job.

“The criteria for deciding what or who is professional or not in interpreting are not always hard and fast, and the issue of the professional status of (various types of) interpreting and interpreters needs to be considered within the socio-cultural and institutional context in which the practice has evolved” (*Ibid.* 23).

Since I practice interpreting only occasionally, I find it more suitable to contribute to this paper with viewpoints of experienced conference and community interpreters worldwide who share their experiences online through interpretation blogs. On the other hand, I will express my opinion from the perspective of a student-interpreter trainer because this is what I basically do. From a didactic perspective, I intend to outline the interpreter’s role as viewed by my students as well as the skills a would-be-interpreter requires in order to practise this activity. The third aspect, which is related to the client expectations regarding a good or ideal interpretation will be mainly reflected through client requirements of an irrefutable product of interpreting.

Didactic perspectives

The Department of Translation, Interpretation and Applied Linguistics, within the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures from Moldova State University endeavours to train and educate future translators and interpreters during three years at bachelor level with a continuation of two year studies at master level.

During the first classes, as a teacher, I am usually curious to find out what are my students’ expectations regarding the choice they made in terms of their future career, so I ask them questions about what or who influenced or inspired them to opt for translation and interpreting. The answers that I receive are very diverse. Some of them hide a sense of drama, others – a sense of hope and many more – uncertainty. The more astonishing and sad is to let someone else decide for yourself. It is the case of those students who were “advised” by their parents, siblings or friends to pursue this specialty. Then, there are students who aspire to improve their linguistic knowledge for the sake of finding a different place to live, other than the Republic of Moldova. Fortunately these are rare cases. Then, there are many more who claim to have chosen translation and interpreting for communication and cultural purposes while the largest number of students assert that their dream is either to become proficient in-house translators and interpreters,

enjoy more freedom as freelancers or travel the world as interpreters and thus, combine work and pleasure.

Another question that I ask my first year students during classes of Introduction to Translation Studies is to state the role(s) of translators and interpreters and to enunciate some attributes a skilful translator and interpreter must have. Again, the replies range from the most general and technical ones like: “Translators and interpreters translate from one language into another one” or “Translators and interpreters aim at ensuring communication between people speaking different languages” to the more artistic and emotionally-coloured ones: “Translators and interpreters build and cross bridges in creating connections between languages and cultures” or “Translators and interpreters are like messengers of meaning”.

Regarding the abilities that an interpreter must possess, students mention, first and foremost the “linguistic abilities”. And indeed, in order to be able to transfer information from one language into another be it in written form or orally, one cannot do without perfect knowledge of the languages in contact. Nevertheless, students soon become aware of the fact that mastering the languages is by far not enough to become an interpreter and that the task requires much more than being linguistically adept. In this respect, in the article *Advice to Students wishing to become Conference Interpreters*, the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) enumerates a list of personal traits an interpreter needs. The list is presented as key skills that interpreters make use of at one time or another: polished command of their native language over a range of registers and domains, complete mastery of their non-native languages, familiarity with the cultures in the countries where their working languages are spoken, commitment to helping others communicate, interest in and understanding of current affairs, plus an insatiable curiosity, world experience away from home and school and a broad general education, good training (at least an undergraduate university degree), the ability to concentrate and focus as a discussion unfolds, pleasant speaking voice, friendly, collegial attitude, calm nerves, tact, judgment and a sense of humor, willingness to adhere to rules of conduct (e.g. confidentiality, dress code). Given their general character I am inclined to believe that these personal traits apply not only for interpreting in conference rooms, but also in public service interpreting.

The didactic approach to forming skills in classes of interpreting is to teach students understand what the speaker wants to say, to grasp what lies behind the speaker’s words, to keep the message in context, to convey

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it consecutively or simultaneously, to learn note-taking techniques, to practice concentration, discourse analysis and fast reaction, to build useful glossaries, to develop public speaking skills, to prepare for different types of assignments, to manage stressful situations, to observe a code of conduct, to prepare for entry into the profession.

Introducing and applying exercises specific to each category of skills required at any stage of teaching and learning consecutive or simultaneous interpretation is the cornerstone for good quality interpretation and skilful interpreters. The following exercises may be used in and/or outside classroom.

For developing oratorical skills, for example, students learn how to “build” their own discourses based on already existing speeches, adapting articles or preparing a speech backed up by facts and figures. Subsequently they deliver the speech (not read from paper!) in front of an audience: colleagues, friends, family, etc.

An efficient mnemonic and language enforcement exercise performed during classes or individually is to memorize each day of the week two or three lines extracted, preferably, from journals or magazines on any topic: business, finance, medicine, etc. and then to monitor to what extent the previous days’ lines have been memorized, then continuing with memorizing some new lines. This exercise is effective not only for improving memory skills but also for building a body of language that starts to appear in the person’s active use of that same language.

Analytical abilities, especially for consecutive interpreting, can be improved by using exercises intended to summarize the main ideas of the discourses that students listen to. Students may be asked to present brief summaries of the main ideas contained in the speech. Another exercise consists in putting back (i.e. explaining) the context of a piece of news based only on the news headline; this works well as an anticipation exercise. Another analytical exercise resides in removing all the paragraph marks in a text, then asking students to introduce the logical breaks back in the text, i.e. splitting the text into paragraphs, then observe to what extent they managed to correctly restructure the original text. An additional exercise in this category is mind mapping done by listening to a short discourse, accompanied by the drawing of a picture of the structure of the discourse with the aim of giving an overview of the speech. Andrew Gillies suggests that a mind map usually takes the form of an organic chart laid out on a large sheet of paper, depending on the length of the discourse. This form

of representing ideas is very useful in helping students with organizing and remembering information (Gillies, *Note-taking for Consecutive Interpreting* 31).

The application of the above mentioned and many more interpreting exercises is in line with developing proficient would-be-interpreters with careful attention to the labour market needs through their active involvement in translation and interpretation projects and internship activity.

Knowing one's personality characteristics before embarking on the long and assiduous journey of becoming an interpreter would be helpful to determine if one is really fitted for this activity. A modality to determine the personality characteristics of interpreter trainees is by using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (a standardized personality inventory). MBTI is an assessment tool that has become a standard in business, education, career counseling, and government agencies and it is also used by Nancy Schweda Nicholson to examine the personality characteristics of would-be-interpreters. It presents four bipolar scales: the Extraversion/Introversion scale, the Sensing/Intuition scale, the Thinking/Feeling scale and the Judgment/Perception scale. A short description of each scale can furtherly be read and analyzed in the study *Personality Characteristics of Interpreter Trainees: The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)* which revealed that the 'ideal' interpreter would be an extravert, an intuitive type, a thinking type and a mix of judgment and perception type.

Practitioner's standpoint

The world becomes more and more of a whole in terms of business, trade, politics, etc. due to globalization and communication across languages and cultures. Therefore, demand for high quality interpreting is the top priority for those looking for such services. "Most of the literature on interpreting presupposes a certain and rather high professional status of the activity and its practitioners. In other words, 'interpreting' often implies professional interpreting, and 'interpreters' are regarded as 'professionals' with special skills" (*Introducing Interpreting Studies* 22). Since interpreters are hired to exert their expertise in different settings, some of their role(s) also change depending on the environment they find themselves in. For the purpose of this aspect of the article we will depict the profile of conference and community interpreters.

The problematic nature of the interpreter's role is now a dominant theme of research. Understanding the role of the interpreter may also help understand interaction between people of different backgrounds and statuses within a single-language community.

In the article *The Right Stuff?*, conference interpreter Michelle Renée Hof questions whether there is such a thing as an ideal personality profile for interpreters. To answer the question she adopted an empirical approach, and looked out in the booth among her colleagues to see what types of personalities she would find. Since there were too many of "what an interpreter is" Michelle Renée Hof decided to adopt a reverse method and look for "what an interpreter is not". Finally she managed to determine two realities: first, that she has no colleagues who seem to be uninterested in the world, and second, that there is no one who cannot handle stress. In other words, interpreters are portrayed by Hof as insatiably curious about the world (possibly, the most important trait an interpreter can have) and not being the type of persons who deals poorly with stress.

In enunciating their qualities, interpreter, translator and teacher Holly Mikkelson adopts a large perspective, looking into interpreters' profile from the practitioner's standpoint and in connection with the setting they exert their job (in conference rooms or in the field). Mikkelson presents the following qualities identified by different authors as essential for good interpreting:

- Language skills are imperative for interpreters to interpret accurately.
- Analytical skills are so essential that they are considered an intrinsic part of the process of interpretation rather than an auxiliary tactic. In this respect, Roderick Jones stresses the importance of analyzing a speech before interpreting it.
- Listening and recall. Many authors like Roderick Jones, for example, define the specific kind of listening that interpreters perform as 'active listening', and that this active, attentive listening has to be learned by the interpreter. Danica Seleskovitch goes further, asserting that "in interpretation, memory and understanding are inseparable; the one is a function of the other" (34).
- Interpersonal skills are expected to be highly demanded, especially from medical and social service interpreters, who are in more direct personal contact with their clients than conference interpreters. But even conference interpreters, as Roderick Jones and Danica

Seleskovitch claim, are encouraged to develop these skills, as they may have a great deal of personal contact with delegates.

- Ethical behavior is of major consideration for all interpreters no matter when and where they perform their activity, either when working in medical settings where they must be particularly responsive to patient privacy issues or in conference rooms, where they are thoroughly required to understand their role and exercise good judgment.
- Speaking skills are indeed a key component in the training of all types of interpreters and they are mostly associated with appearances before large audiences at public events such as meetings, assemblies, congresses, or press conferences. However, Adolfo Gentile et al. point out that “Effective speaking skills range from quality of voice to choice of idiom, vocabulary, phrasing etc. So both what comes out of the mouth of the interpreter and the way it comes out are important in the overall effectiveness of the interpretation” (47).
- Cultural knowledge of the interpreter targets the bridging of the cultural and conceptual gaps that separate the participants in a meeting.
- Knowledge of the subject the discourse relates to is of particular importance in order to deliver a good quality interpreting. All experts on interpreting recognize the need to acquire technical terminology and content knowledge in relevant fields.

The traits enumerated above must be found, to a greater or lesser extent, in all interpreters, regardless of the time, setting and the public they interpret for.

Client requirements and expectations

From the client perspective, it is not easy to work out what skills the interpreter should have and it may be difficult to make certain the quality of the interpreter. In an article published on *Arc Communications* translation agency-blog the requirements for an ideal interpreter should mirror:

- Language and communication expertise. Besides an excellent sense of language, interpreters also need to have the ability “to read the situation” and translate even the thoughts the client has not been able to voice. According to this criterion, one cannot be a good

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interpreter if s/he has no communication skills, no matter how good their language skills are.

- A sense of understanding other cultures in a business setting. Business styles vary a lot from one country to another and thus, those who value conventions and etiquette may have a hard time to negotiate with business partners from other cultures. Under such circumstances, the interpreter's task is to fill in the gaps with the appropriate words and help to build relationships smoothly.
- Hospitality. Interpreting is not about substituting words mechanically. A good interpreting company will not only provide their client with an interpreter appropriate to the type of interpreting, languages they require and other criteria, but will also be committed to providing an attentive service that facilitates business and negotiations even in a high-pressure business setting.

Thus, it is important that interpreters were able to cover all the various tasks associated with interpreting and make use of their understanding of business and cultural backgrounds in their interpreting rather than translating words in a business-like manner.

Speaking about the client perspective of the ideal interpreter, the "Translation Times" blog dedicates an article to the question "What do clients want?" The attributes and characteristics that clients look for in interpreters go beyond actual interpreting skills. And thus, in any client's eyes an "ideal interpreter" should:

- have a professional presence and presentation which means that s/he is to be found on a website, has a business e-mail, etc;
- respond promptly. Answering emails the same day is preferable to answering the next week;
- send a professional price quote when the client asks, i.e. a document with terms and conditions, not only an e-mail with a rate, etc;
- know which questions to ask, for instance about the equipment, materials, or the setting, etc;
- make the client look good. This implies being professional at all times;
- solve problems quickly. A client will always look for interpreters who take quick action and solve problems as independently as they can;

- be positive and outgoing. The client will always look for interpreters who focus on the positive rather than things they can't control. Constant complaining at events looks bad and serves no purpose. Some situations might be less than ideal, but the interpreter has to roll with the punches;
- be on time, or early. Being late for the interpretation assignment may mean that the interpreter will not, most probably, work for the same client again. Having a history of being early is for the interpreter's own benefit;
- be approachable, avoid of the diva-like attitude;
- suppress personal emotions;
- be cultural sensitive.

Client testimonials enunciated in this paragraph draw our attention to the importance of the quality of services provided by the interpreter from three perspectives: communicative, cultural and social. In this regard, opting for a highly competent interpreter – even if s/he charges a little more – will lead to full success.

Conclusion

To conclude, the present article sought to emphasize the profile of interpreters starting with their academic training, continuing with the practitioners' activity and ending with the requirements demanded by the clients when looking for interpretation services.

Based on our findings we made the following observations:

1. The literature in the domain of interpreting studies reflects a good deal of coincidence in the skills required from an "ideal" or competent interpreter, in spite of whether they exert their activity as community or conference interpreters. At the same time, it is a general truth that practitioners of this profession in any setting and at any given moment of their training, perform the same service and should meet the same standards of competence.
2. A skilful interpreter is a combination of excellent interpreting competence, psycho-cognitive strength and "ideal" personality traits.
3. There is a switch of priorities as far as the person of the interpreter is concerned. In the academic training the focus is mainly on acquiring

interpreting skills (but students have a course of professional ethics in the third year of their studies too). When exercising their activity as practitioners, interpreters dedicate special attention to further professional and personal development. When looking for interpreting services the focus of the client is largely on the interpreters' attitude, behaviour, level of professionalism, etc. while the interpreting competence proper is something that interpreters must hold *a priori*.

4. The concepts of "ideal interpreting" and "ideal interpreter" are mostly used with reference to the clients' requirements.
5. From a socio-cultural perspective interpreters represent the bond between the speaker and the audience speaking and/or understanding different languages. Without interpreters, under these circumstances, the meaning and the value of the expressed ideas would not be understood. Interpreters constitute an integral part of the intercultural dialogue; they build confidence among cultures. That is how it happens that interpretation leads to the real global mutual understanding and communication among nations.

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