

THE INTERPRETER AS EDITOR

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Abstract: The paper will look into the tasks facing an interpreter working for the European Institutions when he/she has to interpret speeches that are read out rather than delivered freely. The paper will explore the structural differences between various types of speeches and reach the conclusion that the interpreter has to both interpret and edit a read-out speech to the best interest of the listeners, be they colleagues from the other booths or national delegates.

Keywords: interpreting, speech type, structural differences

1. Aim of the paper

In the activity of interpreting, there are two aspects that have a special significance: orality and interaction. The interpreter translates oral discourse (which may or may not have been prepared as written text) in various communicative situations, where messages are exchanged, through the interpreter, between people. The most striking difference between written and spoken language is the density with which the information is presented: lexical density is supposed to be about twice as high in written language as in speech. In spoken language there is a great deal of redundancy, speech is dynamic, it is impromptu and tentative, and can be rapidly adjusted as contexts change. Speech is characterized by brief silences, filled or unfilled pauses, hesitations, false starts, repetitions and parenthetical remarks. In contrast written language is “static, follows close-knit syntactic structures and develops an elaborate grammar” (Bühler 1990).

Since speech production has a rhythmic character, where periods of hesitancy alternate with periods of fluency, interpreters, following this rhythm as they go along with the speaker, can discern sense units that may serve as translation units, but, besides the verbal clues, interpreters shall also be aware of non-verbal (voice quality, pitch, loudness, timing, intonation) and non-vocal clues (visual signs, for instance).

Depending on the type of speech the interpreter has to translate, he/she will be in a position to sometimes edit quite a lot in the original text.

Our aim is to analyse what types of editing the interpreter resorts to, given the type of text he is in a position to interpret.

2. Types of speeches

In terms of the immediacy of planning, speaking types can be divided into four large categories, as follows:

- Impromptu speech, that is delivered spontaneously without prior preparation
- Extemporaneous, that is planned in advance but presented freely
- Memorized, that is carefully prepared, committed to memory and read by notes
- A manuscript delivery, that is a speech read from a written manuscript.

From a layman’s perspective, it would seem obvious that a conference interpreter, because of time constraints, will have to almost mechanically stick to the original speaker, more or less repeating what the speaker says, even if he does it in another language. Nevertheless, interpreters do intervene in the original speech, and there are several reasons for him to do so:

(a) oral proof-reading, especially when the speakers has false starts, mispronunciations or slips of the tongue, secondly there may be (b) a need to explain, to make something the speaker says more explicit in order for the target audience to understand or (c) a need to omit altogether information considered superfluous for the target audience.

The interpreter's task to edit the original is justified by the need to make the interpreted speech sound as natural and as fluent as possible, without damaging the style and the register of the original. With the first two types of speeches it should not be too difficult, they are in fact oral speeches that will have most of the features of orality - brief silences, filled or unfilled pauses, hesitations, false starts, repetitions and parenthetical remarks. All of these allow the interpreter to think and rephrase what he has just listened to make it sound natural in the TL. Even the third type of speech will have many of these features. Nevertheless, when the interpreter has to interpret a text that is read out, the situation changes dramatically, for a number of reasons:

- Syntax specific to written language – long sentences, complicated coordination, emphatic sentences, inversions, many passive structures (EN)
- Lexical choices, much more in keeping with the standards of written language – more formal, rare words, highly specialized terminology
- Very long text, sometimes a 10-12 page text
- Very rapid delivery pace, way above the average speech speed (1-minute speeches in the European Parliament, which generally cover 1 full page read out at light speed or the speeches delivered during the Catch-the-eye procedure when the MEPs catch the eye of the session president and deliver an already prepared speech on the topic that has been discussed in that part of the session)
- The complexity of the topic, the density of the information. In most of the cases, the topics are very technical, highly specialized, going into a wealth of details meant to illustrate the thoroughness of the analysis undertaken by the respective speaker, even if he/she is not that conversant with the topic
- The aim of the speech – to inform, to be expressive, to be operative, namely to induce action, behavioral responses (all three types are to be met in practice in the European Parliament)
- The delivery (voice quality, intonation, pronunciation, pitch). The delivery depends on whether the speaker is a native speaker of English or not. If this is the case, the speaker will be tempted to use all his knowledge of the language to impress the audience, he will speak very fast and even without breathing. Another difference comes from whether the speaker is British, Irish or Scottish.
- Direct delivery or mediated (relay taken from another booth). A mediated speech is sometimes a blessing because it has already been edited by the interpreter who has had direct contact with the speaker, on condition that the initial interpreter does a good job and does not botch it completely.
- Whether the speech is to be delivered into the mother tongue or is a retour (an interpretation of a speech delivered into the mother tongue of the interpreter that the interpreter has to deliver into his B language, namely the foreign language into which he is accredited to work).

In case the interpreter has to interpret such a speech and he is the first to hear it, there are some techniques he can use in order to make the speech more workable for both his clients and his colleagues in the other booths.

- Proper names and figures must be preserved as such without any alterations, they are important elements that the speaker included to make a point which must be made by the interpreted speech as well
- Of course there is something that each and every interpreter must master, namely the specialized terminology used by the speakers in the respective session, which is a major challenge when interpreting for the European Institutions as the range of topics tackled there is indeed very wide, going from medicine to nuclear science or very complicated financial processes.
- Series of examples having the same value (names of countries, names of materials, names of species, etc) may be shortened. Three to four examples out of several would be quite sufficient to make a point
- The main ideas must be rendered as such, in shorter and more synthetic sentences. It requires a huge effort of concentration and perfect knowledge of the language to allow the interpreter make use of the linguistic tools that will enable him to identify the main ideas and express them as correctly and as accurately as possible.
- Subordinate clauses may be turned into equivalent types of phrases (noun phrases, non-finite verb phrases, adverbial, adjectival and prepositional phrases)
- The basic structure of the sentence is what the interpreter has to aim for (Subject Verb Object) because it captures the essence of what the speaker meant to say in his speech.
- If several adjectives modify a noun, the interpreter may exercise his/her judgment and select only one or two of them, obviously, in case they are not all highly significant for the noun they modify
- Another important element that has to be taken into account is the colourful language that some speakers like to use. There are quite a large number of speakers who use jokes, puns, figurative and idiomatic speech, even slang sometimes, when things get more heated than normal. What can the interpreter do? His best. This is the only solution in such a case, because sometimes there is no equivalent in the target language. This is the moment when being an interpreter comes to acquire its real meaning, because the interpreter is expected to render concepts not words, so, if the concepts are clear in his mind he will be able to transfer them into the other language, but, if he gets stuck in the words, if the lexical level of the language entangles him, he will be irrevocably lost and the end product will not be acceptable.

In other words, what the interpreter has to go for are the bare bones of the speech, even if some flesh is left out, but under the pressure of time a choice has to be made between the basics of the information to be conveyed and the rhetorical qualities of the speaker. It may sound that the choice is to the detriment of the speaker which is not true since, as long as the message gets through accurately, clearly and coherently, the interpreter has done his job and the product of his work is workable.

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