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The Conventions, the Craft, and the Challenges of Diplomatic Interpreting. The Profession Today

El arte de la interpretación diplomática. Realidad y desafíos actuales de la profesión

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ABSTRACT: Diplomatic interpreting is often considered the pinnacle of the interpreting profession, and it is certainly one of its more challenging forms, due to its environment, and the associated risks and stress. And yet publicly available material for research remains scarce, and other traditionally defined modes of conference interpreting tend to eclipse diplomatic interpreting at international fora and in the world academic research. Which is why our main goal is to promote a better understanding of the founding principles and conventions of this unique branch of the interpreting profession, alongside the strategies used by those who practice it, the considerations they rely on, and the challenges they come to face.

KEYWORDS: conference interpreting; diplomatic interpreting; directionality; intercultural communication and mediation; professional ethics.

RESUMEN: La interpretación diplomática se considera generalmente el pináculo de la profesión de intérprete, y es sin duda una de sus formas más desafiantes, debido a su ambiente, así como a los riesgos y estrés asociados. Y sin embargo, el material público disponible para la investigación sigue siendo escaso, y otras modalidades de la interpretación de conferencias tienden a eclipsar a la interpretación diplomática en los foros internacionales y en la investigación académica. Por ello, nuestro principal objetivo es fomentar una mejor comprensión de los principios fundadores de esta rama tan singular de la profesión de intérprete y de sus convenciones, junto con las estrategias utilizadas por sus practicantes, las consideraciones en las que se basan y los retos a los que se enfrentan.

PALABRAS CLAVE: interpretación de conferencias; interpretación diplomática; direccionalidad; comunicación y mediación intercultural; ética profesional.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ever «since the times of ancient Greece and Rome, whenever nations met to talk or broker peace, there was always an interpreter present, standing right behind the general or the diplomat» (Keiser 2013, 15). That is where most conference and diplomatic interpreters remain, behind their speakers, or slightly to the side, hidden from the cameras or shielded by the soundproof glass of their booths, avoiding the media, most favouring the shadows. And even if present-day pressures of marketing and social media presence have contributed to a gradual shift in business management philosophy and related personal and professional decisions, the prevailing model remains unchanged. Just as the significance of their work stands without refute. Diplomatic interpreters thus find themselves struggling to balance the strict quality requirements of an environment where even the slightest mistake would be unacceptable (Roland 1999) with the often-overwhelming pressure from political forces at play and new technologies alike.

Diplomatic interpreters, especially those exposed to the press, have long been aware of the associated risks (Aslanyan 2021), and know all too well they are the ones likely to be assigned the blame for communication issues and breakdowns (IMT 1947; Berg-Seligson 1990; Baker 2006). However, over the course of the last decade, we have also observed a worrying trend of questioning the integrity of diplomatic interpreters, in certain cases almost to the point of interfering with their observing one of the most sacrosanct principles of the profession, the obligation of utmost discretion and the strictest secrecy, and reports of cases from the USA (Cochrane 2018; Matishak 2018; Frum 2019) and Poland (Kaschel 2019) are just a few of the more high-profile examples.

Traditionally defined modes of conference interpreting (consecutive as well as simultaneous) exercised in classic conference or institutional settings tend to eclipse diplomatic interpreting at international fora, and, despite it being one of the oldest settings (Thiéry 2015, 107), the overall perception of diplomatic interpreting often revolves around the developments brought on by the Nuremberg Trials (Gaiba 1998). It is our premise that this paper, aimed at highlighting the founding conventions of diplomatic interpreting, the strategies used by practicing interpreters to achieve required communication goals, and the challenges they come to face, will help shift the balance of forces in this equation. Despite being a relatively young discipline (Gile 1995), interpreting research is a fast-growing field (Baker 2008), and «any interpreting activity may be approached from a particular historical perspective, which is built socially but predicated individually» (Baigorri-Jalón, Fernández-Sánchez and Payà 2021, 9).

Previous publications have provided a solid foundation for the overall understanding of the main characteristics of this singular branch of conference interpreting (Thiéry 2015), even though significant secrecy surrounding diplomatic interpreting has resulted in there being «very limited publicly available material for research» (Olsen, Liu and Viaggio 2021, 67). Nonetheless, several biographies,

interviews with, and personal memoirs of diplomatic conference interpreters have been released over the years, including works by Andronikof (1962), Birse (1967), Kiriloff (2013), Korchilov (1999), Kusterer (2001), McLoughlin (2010), Obst (2010), Palazhchenko (2010, 2022), Ramler (2009), Sands (2014), Sonnenfeldt (2006), Thorgevsky (1992), Weiser (2023), and Widlund-Fantini (2007, 2022). These have proven to be indispensable for understanding the reality of the profession, even though the attitude towards these works within the broader interpreting community remains divided, in part because this profession «is one of humility [...] and putting the interpreter centre stage goes against our ethical principles. One of the best things that can happen to us is for our presence to go unnoticed —or be fast forgotten» (Thiéry 2024).

2. DIPLOMATIC INTERPRETING. MAIN MODES AND MODALITIES

Diplomatic interpreting, having been heavily influenced by its use in history and the environments where it has most commonly been requested and performed, can take place in a myriad of settings. One of its key concepts is that of the *principal*, that can be defined as the person the interpreter is to interpret, which, in turn, determines the directionality of interpreting. Experience and practice tend to indicate that, where working languages are concerned, diplomatic interpreters are usually expected to interpret into their *B language(s)*, or, in case of those fortunate to have more than one *A language*, into their second A, i.e. native, language. The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) defines a B language as «a language other than the interpreter's native language, of which she or he has a perfect command and into which she or he works from one of more of her or his other languages» (AIIC).

This approach to directionality, frequently cited among the identifying features of diplomatic interpreting, means the interpreter is expected to become the voice of their *principal*. For instance, the Office of Language Services at the United States Department of State outlines their mission to «serve as the ears, voice, and words in foreign languages of the President, the First Lady, the Vice President […] and other Cabinet officials» (Office of Language Services, US Department of State).

Routinely cited reasons for this include the need for interpreters to be well versed in the national context, have good institutional memory, and possess solid awareness of the goals of *their side*, including objectives set for the meeting to be interpreted. From a linguistic standpoint, these include perfect mastery of nuance in the original language, so as «not to miss a point» (Birse 1967, 108), and the ability to deal with any cultural references that may surface, including humour, irony, sarcasm, allusions, and metaphors: «in diplomacy, accuracy is key. Words, tone, facial expressions, and body language must convey the facts and your true intentions. Accuracy is the foundation for trust» (Penavic Marshall 2020, 97).

Other reasons for this choice of directionality may include optics and perception (Olsen, Liu and Viaggio 2021), and the matter of allegiance to country or, in cases where interpreters are employed by international bodies, loyalty to the employing organisation.

While intuitively obvious, the importance of abiding by this principle, together with that of observing strict professional secrecy, can be found reflected in standard contracts proposed by different international organisations: «the holder of the present contract is under the authority of, and answerable to […]. In discharging his or her duties, he or she must neither seek nor receive instructions from any government or other outside authority».

The incredibly diverse and highly versatile nature of settings that make use of diplomatic interpreting today means that the number of *principals* is not always limited to two, and set-ups vary from formal one-on-one bilateral meetings to state dinners, from field and humanitarian visits to survivors' interviews, from exhibition launches to theatre outings, from wine tastings to mountain hikes, and from formal receptions to friendly athletic competitions. A closer look at international fora such as the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the World Economic Forum (WEF), to name a few, clearly reveals that some of the biggest international conferences and international organisation plenary sessions can also be considered as meetings using some form of diplomatic interpreting.

As for the profile of diplomatic interpreters, they are, in an overwhelming majority of cases, independent contract interpreters with various backgrounds, that assume their diplomatic functions on an ad hoc basis, although some sovereign governments maintain teams of full-time diplomatic interpreters (Olsen, Liu and Viaggio 2021, 68-69). In certain countries diplomatic interpreters are regarded as (and have the corresponding rank of) staff diplomats (Palazhchenko 2022), which can also be the case for those employed by embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions. International organisations that rely on the services of diplomatic conference interpreters often do so via their extensive in-house interpreting services (Bailey-Ravet 2015; Graves, Pascual, Olaguíbel and Pearson 2021; Rosendo and Diur 2021), and tend to employ a mix of trusted staff and freelance interpreters, that may then be regarded as international civil servants in their own right, with certain implications for their loyalties (see above).

Incidentally, working for an international organisation or intergovernmental institution is one of the more notable exceptions to the rule of working into one's *second active language*. Here, the interpreter might be expected to interpret into their (primary) A language at a meeting involving a representative or a delegation of their A language country or countries, perhaps accompanied by their own interpreter(s). The requirements in this case will remain unchanged, and the same expectations of institutional memory and context awareness will apply. Another common exception can be observed if *the other side* decides to forego using their own interpreter(s), in which case the interpreter(s) present will be expected to interpret for both parties.

As far as modalities are concerned, *consecutive* interpreting, described by AIIC as «a versatile method where the interpreter listens to the speaker while taking notes and then conveys the message» in the other language, seems to be the more broadly used mode in diplomatic settings, even though *simultaneous* and *whispered* (or *chuchotage*) are also found in a variety of set-ups for numerous reasons, not all of them technical (Obst 2010, 56). And while it is true that consecutive interpretation is not as immediate as

simultaneous, it offers the advantage of being suited for a wide range of settings (AIIC), which is, perhaps, the leading rationale for its broad use in diplomacy. It is only natural that this remarkable diversity of means and modalities should translate into a requirement for considerable flexibility and greater resilience on behalf of those wishing to work in the field.

Cultural awareness, and knowing what to expect (Korchilov 1999; Kiriloff 2013; Setton and Dawrant 2016), what to accommodate, and when to elaborate, is also something that plays a major role in the decision-making process: «if your business success relies on your ability to work successfully with people from around the world, you need to have an appreciation for cultural differences as well as respect for individual differences» (Meyer 2014, 13).

The same is true for the world of diplomatic interpreting, and the differences between high-context and low-context cultures (Meyer 2014, 33-37) are only the tip of the iceberg. As interpreters work mainly with «aural symbols which convey a vastly greater range of meaning, especially emotional meaning, and are constantly evolving» (Nolan 2020, 56), carefully conveying feelings, emotions, and cultural nuance, is imperative. «As a visiting leader […] you get only one shot at making the right impression, one that lives on in the historical record» (Penavic Marshall 2020, 100), which is why there is considerable preparation involved in ensuring communication flows in a smooth and seemingly effortless fashion.

3. CURRENT CHALLENGES

Public interest in the work of diplomatic conference interpreters has gained momentum in recent years, with documentaries being produced (Arte and France Télévisions, among others), and politicians showing a more vested interest too, especially in Europe (Cosmai 2014; Nielsen 2022; Sheftalovich 2022) and North America (Robertson 2022). Not all attention has been positive (see above), but it has brought to light some of the challenges faced by the profession today, as well as the age-old debate regarding the role interpreters —heralded by some as «confidants, fact-checkers, and de facto diplomats» (Graham 2017)— should play in the communication process. To quote a diplomat interviewed as part of a research project at the University of Vienna, «in general, it is always good if the interpreter considers herself a communication element, and if she does so she will try to make sure communication moves in an area where communication is still possible and where you don't have to expect the other side to cease talks» (Kadrić, Rennert and Schäffner 2022, 133).

The results of our own doctoral research, dedicated to analysing the decision-making process in the act of interpreting, the strategies and the intercultural mediation considerations that factor into the process, revealed several noteworthy examples to that end. We cannot claim, yet, any statistically valid findings, as the research is still ongoing, but our goal was to build a better understanding of interpreting (Gile 2009; Kader and Seubert 2019) and intercultural mediation (Ladmiral and Lipiansky 2015) strategies, and to study their conscious use by practicing conference and diplomatic interpreters. We

were also interested in looking at specific challenges and determining recommendations, to provide for a more practical application of our research in the future, including in interpreter training. The corpus was built on a series of semi-structured interviews (Romealaer 2005; Quivy and Van Campenhoudt 2006), and linguistic and geographic representation was awarded careful consideration.

The importance of context in determining the right interpreting approach was one of the dominant threads that emerged, with context itself defined in the broadest sense possible, to include geopolitical factors, scheduling rationale, individual opinions and previously publicly expressed ideas, the profile of certain members of the audience and their very presence. Understanding *your side's* position also emerged as a major advantage of working out of your A language in this interpreting set-up. Context-relevant vocabulary including idioms and professional jargon, proclivity for jokes and quoting specific authors and public figures, as well as emotional context were also cited as common points for consideration.

Preparation —both short-term, i.e. preceding a particular meeting or assignment, and long-term, likened to a «life-long knowledge acquisition process» by one of the participants, and an «interpreter-specific way of life» by another— was also hailed as a key component to ensuring trust in interpretation (Bailey-Ravet 2015) and its overall success (Luccarelli 2016; De Rioja 2021).

The rise of new technologies, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, has primarily been observed through the application of RSI (Remote Simultaneous Interpretation) solutions to diplomatic settings (Kafatos 2021), but even this has been somewhat limited compared to the impact of distance interpreting (DI) on other forms of conference interpreting. In the age of CAI progress and AI inspired doubts about the future of the interpreting profession as a whole, and diplomatic interpreting in particular, the «human touch» maintained a consistently high presence throughout our interviews.

4. CONCLUSION

Diplomatic interpreting has come a long way as a calling, and a profession, and is now a fully-fledged branch of conference interpreting with its own requirements and expectations. Considered by some as the pinnacle of the interpreting profession, it remains one of its more challenging forms. Diplomatic interpreters need to be constantly alert, extremely flexible, and have acute linguistic abilities, emotional intelligence, and cultural knowledge, as they are there to foster communication and dialogue, not create extra barriers. But, according to practitioners, this is also one of the more rewarding fields, and it is our hope that it remains so, and continues to attract new interpreters and interpreting students.

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